



AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF IRAN AND ITS POSSIBLE PATHS

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INTRODUCTION

DEMOGRAPHY

As a result of its historical developments, the current Islamic Republic of Iran is a highly plural country from an ethnic perspective. Iranian peoples account for around 80% of the population, with Persians as the majority group (61%), followed by Kurds (10%), and, to a lesser extent, Gilaks, Mazandarani, Baluchi, and Lurs.

Regarding other groups, Turkic peoples are divided between Azeris, who represent 16% of the population, and Turkmens and Qashqais, who together make up around 2%. Finally, Semitic minorities—such as Arabs, Jews, and Assyrians—and Caucasian communities—comprising Armenians, and to a lesser extent Georgians and Circassians—complete Iran's ethnic mosaic.

From a religious standpoint, the country is more homogeneous, as 89% of its inhabitants practice Twelver Shi'ism, while another 9% follow Sunni Islam. The remaining population is divided among Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Bahá'ís. The first three enjoy state protection, whereas the Bahá'ís continue to suffer historical persecution resulting from the divisions generated by the emergence of this faith.

Although there are no updated linguistic censuses, it is estimated that of this wide range of peoples inhabiting Iran, only 58% of the population speaks Persian or one of its dialects, another 26% speaks Turkic languages, 9% speaks Kurdish, and the rest of the Iranians speak the languages of one of the multiple ethnic groups that make up the country.

This diversity, which allows a representative of the Azerbaijani minority, such as Ali Jamenei, to hold the head of state position, is not free from a historical repression of minority ethnic groups aimed at creating a homogeneous state from an ethnic and religious perspective.

This has given rise to multiple fragmenting tensions, such as the various attempts to form an independent state during the 20th century by the Arabs of Khuzestan and the struggle of two stateless Iranian peoples, the Kurds and the Baloch, to achieve independence from their occupiers and reunify into independent Kurdistan and Balochistan.

HISTORY OF IRAN

The Iranian people possess a rich history, dating back to their arrival within the present-day borders of the Islamic Republic of Iran approximately forty centuries ago from Central Asia. This migration gave rise to a succession of empires, culminating with Cyrus the Great, a military strategist and exceptional administrator, who established a state extending from Europe to the gates of India.

As is the case with all empires, they eventually decline. After a century of Greek occupation under Alexander the Great and his successors, the Persians regained control of their destiny under the Parthians and Sassanids, from the third century BCE until the advent of Islam in the region.

The incorporation of the Sassanid Empire into the Caliphate was not detrimental for the Persians; they were able to influence the development of the administrative framework of the emerging Muslim state, while continuing the scientific and literary production that they had cultivated since ancient times.

The Persian people fared worse with the Turkish and Mongol invasions in the subsequent centuries, which devastated the region and triggered massive migrations that demographically transformed the territory. It was not until another Persian dynasty, the Safavids, established an independent state from 1501, which endured for over two centuries.

The adoption of Shiism as the state religion by the Safavids led to a rupture with their Ottoman neighbors; however, it also enabled the Persians to establish diplomatic, political, and commercial relations with various European kingdoms, which lasted until the empire's implosion in the mid-eighteenth century.

The Safavid collapse ushered in a period of turmoil, from which the territory recovered only to find itself encircled by the British, who were consolidating control over India, and by the Russian Empire, which

approached its northern borders, introducing ideas alien to Iranian political tradition.

During the nineteenth century, the Iranian intelligentsia struggled unsuccessfully to demonstrate the benefits of a parliamentary democratic system, facing opposition from a monarchy and clergy unwilling to relinquish power. Ultimately, in 1906, the Constitutional Revolution took place, imposing, on his deathbed, upon Shah Mozaffareddin Qajar an Assembly and a constitution, which his son, Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar, immediately rejected upon ascending the throne.

The increasingly bitter confrontation between the Assembly and the Shah culminated in a bloody civil war that ended in 1909 with the victory of the constitutionalists and the replacement of the monarch by his twelve-year-old son, Ahmad, a king who supported the parliamentary system.

However, during the decade in which he ruled, no significant progress was made due to the resistance of conservative forces, generating frustration that ultimately led to a coup led by Reza Pahlavi in 1921, who finally overthrew Ahmad in 1925, bringing an end to the Qajar dynasty.

The new Shah initially gained the support of the constitutionalists due to his intention to implement the reforms approved in 1906; however, these transformations—including the renaming of the country from Persia to Iran in 1935—were not accompanied by an expansion of civil rights, which quickly earned him the enmity of democrats who approved of his deposition during World War II due to his pro-Nazi stance.

Succeeded by his son Mohammad Reza, he faced an unstable country from the very day he ascended the throne, marked by successive crises, the most serious being the removal of Prime Minister Mossadeq through a coup instigated by the British and Americans.

Consolidated on the throne after the coup, Mohammad Reza followed in his father's footsteps, implementing deep reforms that were not accompanied by democratic progress or measures to bridge the enormous gap between the elite and the overwhelmingly poor population, generating widespread social discontent that culminated in an open revolution in 1978 and his downfall in 1979.

VELAYAT E FAQIH

Unlike Sunni Islam, and as a consequence a factor in the division of Islam into three branches (the First Fitna), Shiism firmly holds that the Prophet Muhammad designated his cousin and son-in-law Ali as his successor both politically (as caliph) and spiritually (as imam), and that Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, and Uthman ibn Affan were usurpers.

The civil war over the caliphate succession ultimately favored the family of Uthman, the Umayyads, while the followers of Ali ibn Talib (Shia or Aliites) maintained that he and his descendants would retain spiritual leadership.

For a couple of centuries, the imams succeeded one another, maintaining more or less tense relations with the political authorities, until the twelfth imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi, was hidden by his closest followers to avoid assassination, under the promise that he would return alongside Jesus before the end of the world to liberate the planet from evil and establish justice.

Following the disappearance of the Mahdi, Shiite clerics declared themselves his representatives while he remained in occultation and began developing the concept of **Velayat e Faqih**, through which they positioned themselves as defenders of the most vulnerable sectors of society against the abuses of political power. Over time, the Shiite clergy initiated a process of hierarchy based on knowledge of Islamic law, establishing a series of religious offices at the apex of which stands the Grand Ayatollah, or **Marja'**, regarded as the only authority capable of interpreting Islamic jurisprudence.

In 1970, one of these Marja', Ruhollah Khomeini, published a book entitled *Hokūmat-i Eslāmī* (Islamic Government), in which he reinterpreted the concept of **Velayat e Faqih** to apply clerical oversight over the state, its institutions, and society as a whole until the return of the Mahdi.

This reformulation of the jurisconsult's guardianship marked a turning point in Shiite tradition, as the clergy had historically avoided political involvement beyond the individual positions of some of its members. Consequently, this new **Velayat e Faqih** provoked the rejection of prominent Shiite clerics both within Iran and abroad.

Nonetheless, this interpretation was ultimately imposed with the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, becoming a cornerstone of the Constitution of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran and enabling

Grand Ayatollah Khomeini to be proclaimed Supreme Leader with extensive powers over state affairs.

This constitution, approved in a referendum by the population, remained unchanged for a decade, until a serious crisis in the months preceding the death of Supreme Leader Khomeini necessitated a comprehensive reform to reinforce the political system.

The constitutional amendments introduced allowed individuals who did not hold the title of **Marja'** to assume the office of Supreme Leader, transferred the selection process from the sovereign people to a body called the **Assembly of Experts**, eliminated the possibility of creating a shared leadership body, and expanded the Leader's oversight over virtually all state institutions through the creation of new supervisory bodies, giving rise to what has become known as **Velayat e Motlaqe ye Faqih**, or Absolute Guardianship of the Jurisconsult.

Following this reform, the Supreme Leader holds extensive powers, theoretically overseen by the aforementioned Assembly of Experts, whose stated objective—ironically—is to defend the interests of the state even when such interests conflict with Islamic law, which over time has generated tensions with the higher religious hierarchy.

This power is exercised through the country's institutions, the control bodies established in the constitution, and the new bodies created by the 1989 amendments, such as the **Guardian Council** and the **Expediency Discernment Council**, which acts as a mediator between Parliament and the Guardian Council.

Above all, it is exercised through an unofficial entity, the **Office of the Supreme Leader**, which, through hundreds of representatives, transmits his directives to the press, the executive branch, the armed forces and security agencies, universities, cultural and religious organizations, and numerous other sectors.

Over the years, the excessive and malicious use of this instrument by Ali Jamenei, which approaches the limits of the Iranian constitution, has enabled the dismantling of all constitutional checks and balances, facilitating extreme centralization of power and the effective erosion of the real authority of state institutions.

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Following the fall of the Shah, a provisional government led by the liberal Mehdi Bazargan took control of the country and appeared poised to guide it toward a democratic government, albeit with clear religious influences. However, this executive was weak, as the legislature was in revolutionary hands and parts of the country were controlled by Kurdish and communist guerrillas.

Shortly thereafter, Bazargan faced a series of setbacks, including the declaration of the country as an Islamic Republic and the victory in the constituent elections of a party inspired by Khomeini. However, the seizure of the U.S. embassy by students sealed his fate, and his government fell in November, weeks before a referendum ratifying the constitution was held, which created the office of Supreme Leader, a position assumed by Khomeini.

In early 1980, the first presidential elections of the Islamic Republic took place, in which the reformist candidate linked to the **People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MeK)**, Bani Sadr, emerged victorious. This led to months of intense clashes between his supporters and the Revolutionary Guard, Bani Sadr's dismissal, and his replacement by Ali Khamenei following subsequent elections.

Almost simultaneously with this severe political crisis, the Iraqi army invaded the country, initiating a bloody war that bled the Islamic Republic, which lacked external support, in contrast to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Despite multiple Iranian attempts to achieve peace through international mediation, it was only possible once Iraq agreed to negotiate following its invasion of Kuwait and the impossibility of waging simultaneous wars against both the International Coalition and Iran.

With the economy devastated and heavy human losses from the conflicts that struck the country during its first decade, by the late 1980s a debate emerged over the need to seek international assistance to rebuild the country—a position supported by reformists and firmly opposed by conservatives.

The Supreme Leader's intervention in favor of conservative positions caused a deep division within the government and a chain of resignations among reformist leaders, including Ali Hossein Montazeri, who at the time was considered Khomeini's natural successor. Montazeri was ultimately

replaced as head of state by Ali Khamenei following Khomeini's death several months later.

In retrospect, this decision by the reformists proved to be a major mistake. Although they secured a qualified majority in the 1992 parliamentary elections and their presidential candidate, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, obtained 94.5% of the vote in the 1989 presidential election and 64% four years later, conservatives succeeded in 1994 in passing electoral legislation stipulating that a body, half of whose members were appointed by the Supreme Leader and the other half nominated by Parliament—the **Guardian Council**—would have the authority to determine which candidates could run for office.

Moreover, the economic measures adopted during this reformist period to attract foreign investment severely impacted the urban lower classes, resulting in a conservative victory in the 1996 legislative elections, which ultimately gave this political faction control over the Guardian Council.

Thus, although reformists continued to win presidential elections, the political noose was tightening—a reality Mohammed Khatami confronted during his presidency. Limiting the powers of the **Guardian Council** became one of his main objectives between 1997 and 2005, alongside the relaxation of laws on censorship, women's employment, and social conduct.

However, these reformist measures, desired by society, quickly encountered a wall composed of a conservative-controlled parliament and the maneuvers of Ali Khamenei's allies within governmental bodies. Soon, dismissals and judicial proceedings against politicians aligned with Khatami began, forcing him to moderate his positions.

Tensions ultimately erupted with the closure of a reformist newspaper and the brutal repression of popular protests following its shutdown, compounded by Mohammed Khatami's passivity—an inaction that earned him the distrust of political reform supporters.

These reformists achieved a sweeping victory in the 2000 parliamentary elections, yet their efforts were often hindered by institutions controlled by conservatives and the lack of support from Khatami, who spent much of his time apologizing for his limited maneuverability and hesitating over whether to run for reelection in 2001.

In light of their severe parliamentary defeat, conservatives opted not to field a serious candidate in the presidential elections, facilitating Khatami's easy reelection. They then sought to undermine reformists through the governmental bodies they controlled, particularly the **Guardian Council**, paralyzing legislative activity in parliament and conducting mass raids against reformists.

By late 2002, Khatami emerged from his political dormancy and proposed to parliament reducing the powers of conservative-controlled bodies and transferring them to the presidency or his executive offices. Parliament approved these measures and once again threatened mass resignations of reformist officials if the **Guardian Council** blocked the legislation, resulting in a prolonged political stalemate.

During this period, reformists fell into deep disillusionment, culminating in a call to boycott the 2004 parliamentary elections, which was largely followed by the movement except for Khatami supporters. This allowed conservatives to achieve a decisive victory in those elections.

Faced with the prospect of another presidential term with a conservative-controlled parliament, reformists selected a competent politician, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, as their candidate, and it seemed likely that he would return to office after winning the first round of the 2005 elections against several conservative candidates.

However, in a surprising turn during the second round, the radical candidate **Mahmud Ahmadinejad**, who had finished second in the first round, won 61.7% of the vote, becoming the first non-cleric president of the country since the brief tenure of Bani Sadr.

Ahmadinejad's rise represented a political earthquake with consequences extending to the present, as it broke the traditional dichotomy between conservatives and reformists to introduce a third path combining conservatism with strong nationalism and populism.

Although he received firm support from the Supreme Leader during 2005–2009 for his policies of confrontation with the West, purging reformists from institutions, persecuting dissent, and reviving the nuclear program initiated under the Shah, this relationship became considerably strained during his second term.

Economically, Ahmadinejad benefited from a sharp rise in oil prices, which allowed him to implement social programs aimed at alleviating poverty

among his electoral base. However, he did not take advantage of this situation to develop infrastructure or modernize the industrial sector, relying on the assumption that oil prices would remain high and that he could indefinitely subsidize his electoral base.

Nevertheless, economic sanctions resulting from his confrontational international policy, erratic management of revenues, and rampant inflation caused a significant decline in conservative popularity in the 2008 legislative elections. To further exacerbate the situation, oil prices plummeted in the months preceding the 2009 presidential elections, indicating that the winner would face a severe economic crisis.

Once two conservative candidates, including Ahmadinejad, and two reformists were authorized to run, the electoral campaign began in late May and unfolded amid continual accusations and disqualifications among candidates, as well as massive mobilizations of voters in both street protests and on social media.

Although at one point it appeared that reformist Mir Hossein Mousavi might win the presidency, Mahmud Ahmadinejad secured a clear victory, eliminating the need for a second round. Following the announcement of the results, progressive voters initiated a wave of protests that could not be quelled either by Ali Khamenei's calls to accept the results or by the extreme repression carried out by both security forces and allied militias, such as the **Basij**.

At one point, up to one million people demonstrated against electoral fraud in the streets of Tehran, and both the reformist candidates and the other conservative requested a recount and an investigation into detected irregularities.

Although Ali Khamenei initially agreed to an investigation, observing the level of polarization and street violence, he opted to move on, validating the results and threatening increased repression against those organizing or participating in protests. This allowed Ahmadinejad to assume the presidency once again, although protests continued intermittently until 2011.

During this second term, Ahmadinejad faced criticism both from the opposition and from within his own ranks due to a lack of political transparency, the centralization of power, restrictions on public freedoms, and ongoing confrontation with the international community.

To further exacerbate the situation, Ahmadinejad alienated one of his electoral bases, the **Revolutionary Guard**, by dismissing the Minister of Intelligence, who was also close to the Supreme Leader, ultimately leading both Ahmadinejad and followers of this faction into political ostracism.

Following Ahmadinejad's tumultuous presidency, a moderate candidate, **Hassan Rouhani**, supported by the reformist current, won the 2013 presidential election with the aim of negotiating with the West to lift sanctions on oil exports and secure revenues to revive the Iranian economy.

To achieve rapprochement with the international community, Rouhani agreed in 2015 to limit the country's nuclear program, a measure firmly opposed by conservatives who viewed it as a relinquishment of Iran's regional power status and potentially harmful to the country in the long term.

Domestically, Rouhani took steps to expand social and political rights, but all reforms were blocked by conservatives controlling key bodies, such as the **Guardian Council**, causing disillusionment among moderate and reformist bases.

Furthermore, during his second term, the economy failed to recover, forcing his government to withdraw numerous subsidies from the previous administration. This provoked massive protests against the government and the Supreme Leader, which were suppressed by state security at a level unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic.

Nevertheless, the population was not entirely silenced during his tenure, as Iranians again took to the streets to protest the government's attempt to evade responsibility for the downing of a Ukrainian plane that killed 176 passengers.

After Rouhani's moderate interlude, conservatives regained the presidency in 2021 with **Ebrahim Raisi**, a hardline politician linked to the mass executions of 1988, close to the Supreme Leader, and speculated to be his eventual successor.

Under Raisi, repression against the population increased, particularly following the 2022 citizen protests over the death of **Mahsa Amini**, who was beaten in a police station for wearing her hijab incorrectly, leading to an escalation of Western sanctions against Iran.

However, as a result of the bloc reconfiguration caused by the Russia–Ukraine war and the abandonment of the dollar by several countries in oil trade, the economic damage from sanctions was not as severe as expected.

In foreign policy, in addition to strengthening ties with Russia and China, Iran escalated tensions with Israel and increased support for allied governments and armed groups in the region. Nevertheless, following the conflict that began on October 7, 2023, in Gaza, many components of the so-called “**Axis of Resistance**” fell one by one.

Ebrahim Raisi could not witness this partial collapse of one of the fundamental pillars of Iranian foreign policy since the Ahmadinejad era, as he died alongside the Minister of Foreign Affairs in a helicopter crash in May 2024.

An impoverished Iranian society, fearful of increased repression in the context of a more or less direct confrontation with Israel, gave, in July 2024, a narrow victory to reformist candidate **Masoud Pezeshkian** in elections with turnout below 50%.

Elected to implement a series of political and liberalizing reforms in a context of economic collapse, environmental problems, and a likely direct war with Israel and/or the United States, he soon capitulated to the most radical factions of the conservatives, halting the introduction of the liberalizing measures outlined in his political program.

His political drift at the head of the country, which led to a dramatic drop in popularity, resulted in the exclusion of his political allies from government, adoption of ultra-conservative positions, and refusal to end the conflict with Israel through negotiations with it or the United States, as **Ali Khamenei** opposed such moves. This situation ultimately led to what has been referred to in Iran as the “**12-Day War**,” leaving the regime on the brink in June 2025.

POLITICAL ACTORS

Motivated by the complexity of its ethnic and cultural composition, as well as the political developments of the past century, the Iranian political landscape is highly fragmented into multiple factions and organizations, which can broadly be classified into four groups according to the scope of their political activity.

Thus, one can observe:

Internal Factions of the Regime

One of the defining features of the Islamic Republic of Iran is its unique hybrid political system, which combines traditional republican structures with religious ones, which in turn may be either popularly elected or appointed through political and/or religious channels.

In the early years, individuals and collectives with diverse political positions were distributed across the multiple organs of power, attempting to reach agreements with other factions to make their stance the official one; when this was not possible, the intervention of Supreme Leader Khomeini was the final authority in disputes. After his death, the situation became even more complicated.

This has made the study of the different political factions extremely complex. Over the years, scholars of the Islamic Republic of Iran have developed multiple classifications, some based on political axes and others combining ideology with religious factors.

Furthermore, the multiplicity of currents within a single faction and the ideological shifts of some groups make a definitive ideological categorization of the power-contending groups in Iran nearly impossible within the framework of the **Velayat e Faqih**.

Nonetheless, in broad terms, it is possible to identify distinct factions across the various political phases of the Islamic Republic. During the tumultuous early years of the regime, one can speak of a division between conservatives and liberals.

It should be noted, however, that this division is somewhat forced, as the traditional liberals gathered around **Bazargan** were eliminated from the political sphere during the Iran–Iraq war. From that point onward, the term “liberal” came to describe politicians with a more open approach to political, economic, and cultural issues, within the limits set by the **Velayat e Faqih**.

Over the years, this political division became more complex, and by the Reconstruction Era —symbolically beginning after Khomeini’s death— there were already up to four factions composed of multiple internal groups and currents that adhered to the foundational principles of the Islamic Republic.

Broadly speaking, these groups could be characterized as follows:

- **Traditional Conservatives:** advocated for a free-market economy, social and cultural conservatism, and maintained a limited relationship with the West while avoiding direct confrontations.
- **Moderates:** also supported the free market, although their approach emphasized privatizing the economy to attract foreign investment, and they were more permissive in social and cultural matters.
- **Leftists:** promoted an anti-Western foreign policy and an interventionist economy.
- **Authoritarian Currents:** difficult to classify by Western standards, at the time referred to by various labels such as Radical, Neoconservative, Traditional Left, or New Left. They were composed of militias defending the **Velayat e Faqih**, opposing in a radical manner any social and cultural liberalization, advocating strong economic intervention, and expressing outright hostility toward the West.

This four-faction division persisted during the **Reform Era**, which began with the election of **Mohammad Khatami** as president in 1997, although some of these currents had already modified their names and ideological orientation. The political spectrum was then divided into:

- **Conservatives:** a designation adopted by both traditional conservatives and radicals due to their opposition to the policies of the moderate Khatami. They shared a program of strict implementation of Islamic law and a deep skepticism toward the West.
- **Moderates:** as the central political bloc, holding the presidency, they sought to balance the maintenance of the existing constitutional framework with economic development, the restoration of diplomatic relations with the international community, and the introduction of modest political and social reforms.
- **Reformists:** a faction emerging from the abandonment by the Left of its traditional positions in favor of liberal principles regarding political pluralism and a more open cultural and social environment,

making them ideologically close to the Moderates.

A new shift in Iran's factional division began during the 2005 presidential campaign, which brought **Mahmud Ahmadinejad** to the presidency, and became fully evident during his tenure, with repercussions that continue to affect the country to this day.

After sixteen years away from the presidency, the conservatives deemed it necessary to implement changes to attract an electorate increasingly disillusioned with politics following the moderate-reformist period. To this end, they altered their image, rhetoric, and even their name, beginning to identify themselves as **Principalists**.

They had even selected the ideal candidate to reclaim the presidency: a moderate principalist named **Mohammad Qalibaf**. However, the memory of his recent involvement in the repression of protests led him to withdraw his candidacy, even after passing the **Guardian Council** filter.

Once the principalists were left without a candidate, they had no choice but to support a figure whom even the most radical political associations had not endorsed, whose presence on the ballot was largely due to prior efforts by the **Revolutionary Guard** and the **Basij** militia.

During the campaign and afterward, **Ahmadinejad's** rhetoric ran entirely counter to conservative principles, blending religious discourse with appeals to social justice and critiques of corruption entrenched in the Iranian political system.

Ahmadinejad won the election in the second round, and from the outset, traditional principalists maneuvered to steer his rhetoric or remove him as quickly as possible. Consequently, the newly inaugurated president increasingly consolidated ties with the civil service, the **Basij**, and the **Revolutionary Guard**, whose composition was secular but strongly influenced by religious sentiments.

From this point onward, an internal struggle began within the Principalist faction, in which **Ahmadinejad's** wing maneuvered to reduce the presence of clerics in political representative bodies, while traditional Principalists obstructed government initiatives and simultaneously forced the dismissal and prosecution of Ahmadinejad's inner circle, which came to be known as the **Deviated Current**. The political spectrum thus became divided and remains so to this day:

- **Traditional Principalists:** maintain their principles of economic freedom, social and cultural conservatism, and opposition to reaching agreements with the West.
- **Radical Principalists:** in addition to advocating strong economic intervention, they demand a return to the foundational values of the Islamic Republic following years of depoliticization of the **Velayat e Faqih** and the accommodating stance of system representatives.
- **Deviated Current:** shares some principles with the Radical Principalists, from whom it originates, while also advocating nationalist and populist positions. Although excluded from the system due to their opposition to the **Velayat e Faqih**, they continue to participate in the political process, attempting to have their members run in elections, as in the case of **Ahmadinejad** during the presidential elections of 2017, 2021, and 2024.
- **Moderates:** share principles with the Principalists in economic matters but are open to expanding social and cultural rights and negotiating with the West.
- **Reformists:** ideologically centrist or social-liberal, they seek to introduce changes within the political system from the inside. In foreign policy, they are the most inclined to reach agreements with the international community.

Internal Faction of the Opposition

Factionalism within the Iranian political system also extends to the internal opposition to the regime, which is divided into multiple parties representing different ideological currents operating clandestinely. These include nationalists, leftists, progressives, as well as individual figures.

Within the nationalist currents are political organizations such as the **National Front**, a party founded in 1949 that came to power under the leadership of **Mosaddegh**, and again under **Bazargan** after the overthrow of Shah Pahlavi in 1979.

Following the establishment of the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, this party was banned, and its members reestablished it in the mid-1990s, from which

point it has operated clandestinely alongside ideologically similar parties such as the **Party of the Iranian Nation**.

The Iranian left consists of parties with socialist and/or communist ideologies that supported the Islamists during the 1979 revolution and have since opposed the emerging system. Prominent examples include **Tudeh**, the **Left Party of Iran**, the **Communist Party of Iran (MLM)**, and the **Organization of Fedayines of the Iranian People (Majority)**.

Although these parties share broadly similar objectives, they are unable to present a united front due to strategic and ideological differences that they neither wish nor are able to overcome, even in contexts of severe economic crisis and strong police repression.

Finally, there are the **progressives**, a collection of groups ranging from social-liberals to reformists who, over time, realize that the political system is impossible to reform from within. This group includes individuals who have even served as prime minister of the Islamic Republic, such as **Mir Hussein Musavi**.

External Factions (Iranian Opposition in Exile)

Considering the location of their leadership and the majority of their supporters, external political actors include both the monarchists, supporters of the **Pahlavi dynasty**, and the **National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)**, which in reality functions as the political front of the **People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI or MeK, in Persian)**.

Regarding the monarchists, their essential and almost exclusive base consists of Iranians in the diaspora who had to leave the Islamic Republic of Iran during its early years to avoid reprisals from various revolutionary groups, due to real or perceived collaboration with the terror regime established by the **Pahlavis** and their secret police, the **SAVAK**.

Furthermore, they lack unity, being dispersed groups with no clear ideology, ranging from absolutists to those advocating the restoration of the 1906 constitution. Their only common point is the promotion of Persian identity based on a nation, language, and culture, which from the outset excludes a large portion of Iran's population.

Currently, they advocate for the restoration of the dynasty with **Reza Pahlavi** on the throne and maintain a significant presence on social media, from which they call on Iranians to rise and establish a "national and

democratic unity government.” However, they firmly reject that such a government establish a republic, and even more so that it recognize the right of minorities to self-govern through some degree of autonomy or a federal system.

The monarchists, lacking organization within the country, while calling for insurrection among followers they do not truly possess, also explore encouraging the military and militias loyal to the **Velayat e Faqih** to carry out a coup and voluntarily cede power.

To mitigate this lack of internal support, in 2023 **Reza Pahlavi** met with various opposition figures to create the **Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran (ADFI)**. Within months, however, the other members left the group due to the undemocratic behavior of the heir’s entourage.

Following their departure, these former ADFI members argued that it is difficult to build a united opposition with someone who has not distanced himself from his father’s authoritarian regime, and whose collaborators, imbued with a chauvinist ideology, refuse to recognize the rights of Iran’s minorities.

The **PMOI (MeK, hereafter)** is a movement that emerged in 1965, originally combining Marxism with Islamism. In 1971, it decided to employ armed struggle to overthrow the **Shah**, facing severe repression and the departure of its most leftist members during the period 1971–1977.

When the situation became unsustainable for the Shah, he was forced to empty the prisons, allowing the resurrection of a severely weakened organization. From that point, the MeK grew to the extent that one of its candidates won the first presidential elections after the Shah’s fall, becoming a serious threat to **Khomeini**.

Following the electoral victory, tensions between the MeK, led by **Masud Rajavi**, and Khomeini’s supporters escalated into street clashes in 1981, which ended with the military defeat of Rajavi’s followers and the flight of Rajavi and President **Bani Sadr** to Paris.

In France, the MeK allied with other opposition organizations to form the **NCRI**, although this union did not last long, and most groups gradually departed when Rajavi decided to collaborate with **Saddam Hussein** during the war Iraq waged against Iran.

From that moment, Rajavi, together with a militant of the organization whom he had recently married, transformed the MeK ideologically and organizationally, introducing a personality cult around the couple, turning the political-military group into a sect.

Over time, the Rajavis, **Masud and Maryam**, relocated to Iraq with thousands of followers to fight alongside the Iraqi army against Iranian forces and subsequently helped suppress a Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq, which damaged their credibility both with the internal opposition to the regime and with Iran's Kurdish population.

Considered traitors even by the Iranian opposition and by Western observers, in 1997 they were included on lists of **Foreign Terrorist Organizations** by the U.S. Department of State, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, only being removed a decade later.

Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the **International Coalition**, the MeK emerged as one of the most tenacious fighting forces until its base was captured by U.S. troops, marking the last time **Masud Rajavi** was seen alive.

After the sectarian nature of the group and the numerous abuses and torture suffered by members suspected of dissent or espionage for Iran were documented, thousands of MeK members and **Maryam Rajavi** were relocated to an organizational camp in **Albania**.

From **Albania**, MeK militants have spent over a decade financing conservative and ultra-conservative politicians in both the **United States** and **Europe**, aiming to influence their policies toward Iran so that the country's internal situation becomes unsustainable and ultimately leads to the collapse of the **Velayat e Faqih**.

Minorities

For many years, under the **Qajar dynasty**, Persia was a union of different ethnic kingdoms under the protection of a single sovereign, whose power was exercised directly in the country's major cities and through alliances with local power structures of these minorities in Iran's peripheral regions.

The situation changed with the accession of **Reza Pahlavi** to the throne, as his vision of a new, constitutional, and modern state did not include the country's various minorities. To enforce this vision, he banned writing in

any language other than Persian and deployed the army to subdue the other ethnic groups that made up Persia.

This campaign of repression continued under the reign of his son, **Mohammad Reza Pahlavi**, which prompted various armed ethnic groups to join the struggle to overthrow him, a goal that was achieved in 1979.

However, the establishment of the **Islamic Republic of Iran** initially did not bring significant improvement for these groups, as the existence of non-Persian and non-Shiite minorities represented an obstacle to creating a Shiite and Persian state. Consequently, the ethnic militias that had assisted in overthrowing the Shah were violently suppressed out of fear they might collaborate with external enemies.

Once the **Velayat e Fiqh** regime was stabilized, and especially following **Khomeini's** death, harsh repression ended, giving way to a period in which minority rights fluctuated depending on the faction occupying the presidency. Marginalization was more pronounced under conservative governments, while reformist administrations, such as that of **Jatami**, expanded rights, including political and administrative representation at local and provincial levels.

With the rise to power of **Ahmadinejad**, repression against minorities increased, particularly following the protests triggered by his 2009 re-election. This created a significant rift between these groups and the political system, which his successor, the reformist **Rohani**, was unable or unwilling to bridge, as he continued campaigns of arrests and executions in **Baluchistan, Kurdistan, and Ahwaz**.

This reformist abandonment of minorities during the 2013–2021 period demonstrated to these groups that the system was difficult to change from within, leading them to adopt a stance of **active abstention** in presidential elections that brought **Raisi** to power, and likely in 2024, judging by abstention rates and the low number of votes received by reformist **Pezeshkian**.

A key aspect of this historical marginalization is that it occurs on different scales depending on the ethnic group. Being from a Turkic Shiite community, such as the Azerbaijanis, is not the same as being a Sunni, such as the Baluchs, Kurds, or Arabs.

Indeed, while Azerbaijanis report feeling relatively integrated into Iranian society, with grievances mainly concerning the imposition of the Persian

language, the Baluchs face total economic neglect, no political representation, harsh repression against insurgent groups, and a disproportionately high number of executions

The presence of Arab populations within Iran's borders has historically been problematic for Tehran, particularly during the war with Iraq, even though the majority of the region's inhabitants remained loyal to the Islamic Republic despite being Sunni.

These tensions have led the Arab population to demand regional autonomy, mostly through peaceful means, which has been met by successive Tehran regimes with repression and an alleged plan to disperse the region's inhabitants across the country in 2005.

Regarding the Kurds, the fact that they are a people of tens of millions spread across four states, each with varying degrees of autonomy achieved through armed struggle, raises concerns over the flow of weapons and militants across these borders.

Iran fears that Kurds residing along its borders may seek an autonomous government similar to that established in Iraq and, more recently, in Syria. Such developments would undermine the process of centralization and Persianization initiated under the **Pahlavi** dynasty and continued under the Islamic Republic; consequently, periodic campaigns of repression against this minority are carried out.

Thus, we are confronted with a landscape of **systematic repression against minorities** by successive Iranian regimes, coupled with the silence of both reformists and various opposition groups in exile, who consider that supporting the minorities would run counter to Iran's national interests.

This abandonment by other organizations is generating a sense of **disaffection**, not toward the political system itself, but toward what Iran represents. Consequently, it drives minorities to embrace their own ethnic or cultural identity and to demand democratic reforms in coordination with other subjugated peoples.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, we are facing an ideology that was conceived with the intention of spreading throughout the Islamic world but has so far only been implemented in Iran, with strong supporters in the region and numerous

detractors within the country, including prominent political and religious figures. The reformulation of the **Velayat e Faqih** faced strong opposition from Shia scholars, both Iranian and from other countries, during the 1970s and 1980s, and even fifty years after the Islamic Revolution, it continues to generate resistance.

The political system allows the election of representatives who operate under the scrutiny of bodies that are not necessarily democratic, with a distinctly religious imprint, in which the reason of state takes precedence over Islamic precepts and which has supported multiple political and militant actors in the region regardless of their religious affiliation when it serves national interests.

Over time, the system has been reformed to introduce constitutional bodies meant to act as checks and balances, yet these have gradually been stripped of power by the head of state, consolidating authority in his hands, assisted by a clique that has not been legitimized through popular elections.

One of the most significant challenges to the continuity of the Islamic Republic is that the person exercising absolute control is 86 years old and has fragile health, making the designation of the next Supreme Leader a critical issue. Several candidates have been considered over the years, including **Mojtaba Jamenei**, the Supreme Leader's son, although his low religious standing and prior withdrawal of marja' status undermine his credibility. It also remains unclear whether Ali Jamenei intends to secure a future position of power for his son or something beyond that.

Other candidates included Ebrahim Raisi, whose career had shown that he did not hesitate to make tough decisions and who had held various public offices, including the presidency, although he had not reached the rank of ayatollah. However, his death in a helicopter accident in 2024 made succession impossible.

The third in the list of potential candidates was Sadiq Larijani, who combined loyalty to the system, especially to the Supreme Leader, with religious scholarship and experience in public office. Nevertheless, he is critical of the body responsible for selecting Ali Jamenei's successor.

After Raisi's death, Hassan Jomeini was also mentioned as a potential new Supreme Leader—a position first held by his grandfather—but his candidacy is weakened by his connections to reformists and by having previously been barred from standing in elections for the Guardian Council.

Whoever succeeds Ali Jamenei will inherit a country mired in a severe economic crisis, suffering the consequences of bombings by both the United States and Israel and, most importantly, facing an unprecedented lack of popular support in the history of the Islamic Republic. This deficit of legitimacy is the result of Jamenei's "forward march" approach, where, through his loyalists in the Guardian Council, he determines the degree of opposition tolerated in parliament depending on how threatened the regime feels during elections.

In favorable circumstances or when state interests require it, candidacies that seek to reform the regime are tolerated. In adverse circumstances, even candidates with proven loyalty who advocate small reforms to maintain the status quo are vetoed. This situation can be exploited by foreign powers, as well as by political actors both inside and outside Iran, to push for profound change or even the collapse of the Islamic Republic, potentially paving the way for a new political system and a new country.

However, achieving this is difficult because the first and most important obstacle is overcoming the resistance of the **Revolutionary Guard (IRGC)**, which under Ali Jamenei's rule has become an immensely powerful organization answering only to the Supreme Leader and is unwilling to yield easily.

The population, especially after the repression of demonstrations following the death of Mahsa Amini and the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, largely demands a change that entails the separation of religion and state, and public opinion has likely not shifted significantly following the bombings in recent months.

However, it is exceedingly difficult for any single political actor to overcome the regime's resistance and enforce political reform or the collapse of the Velayat e Fiqh, due to the profound division within the opposition, whether tolerated, clandestine, or in exile.

For instance, considering the Iranian opposition in exile, the monarchists present a divisive program, lack political support within the country, and moreover positioned themselves as the change endorsed by countries that have bombed Iran, while the MeK carried out horrific attacks for years, allied with the enemy in a brutal war, and now functions as a lobbying group for Western neoconservative politicians.

Regarding ethnic minorities, they do not constitute a population majority capable of enforcing change, nor would the Persian majority accept being

subjected to a government led by these coalitionized minorities, nor is it the will of these majorities to control the levers of a country that, over time, they have increasingly rejected as their own.

If we focus on the internal factions of the opposition, the fact that nationalists, leftists, and progressives have so far been unable to present a united front does not allow us to assume that they will be capable of creating a political instrument to lead the population toward change in the near future.

Finally, within the internal factions of the regime, only the reformists show a willingness to change the system, although their ranks are shrinking daily, as an increasing number of members move to the internal opposition due to the impossibility of reform. A clear example is former Prime Minister Musavi, who recently requested a referendum to establish a constitutional assembly aimed at reforming the system.

Therefore, for this change to occur, it is necessary to form an alliance of political actors, as was the case with the Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran in 2023, which must be capable of overcoming the flaws of the past that sank the ADFI shortly after its inception.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that such an alliance is extremely difficult due to the plurality of political actors, factionalism within each of them, and the impossibility of reconciling their interests when the proposals of some actors may be antagonistic.

A clear example of this antagonism is the position of the monarchists, whose vision for a new Iran opposes both the stances of the internal opposition and those of ethnic minorities regarding the form of the state. Likewise, the decentralizing aspirations of the periphery are not particularly welcomed by some political actors advocating change, to give just a few examples.

Furthermore, there remains uncertainty about the positions that both the moderate factions of the regime and the so-called *Corriente Desviada* would adopt in a scenario of reform in Iran, as the former desire only a limited opening in cultural and social matters, while the latter aim to reduce or eliminate the presence of the clergy within republican institutions, albeit from a relatively conservative standpoint.

In short, in the not-too-distant future, the Islamic Republic of Iran will face a crossroads in which the regime's supporters are engaged in a forward march from which it is very difficult to retreat, while the opposition remains fragmented and unwilling to discuss the scope of a potential reform.

A negotiated reform would represent the best option for the country, as some actors could control the extent of concessions to avoid losing their privileges in the new Iran, while others could transform the nation without resorting to a bloodbath that would leave wounds taking decades to heal.

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