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The Rise of “Bonapartism” in Iran

by [Mehdi Khalaji](#)

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Brief Analysis

Interest in a strong military president is growing in unexpected sectors, but such an outcome is more likely to strengthen Khamenei’s power than drastically reform the system.

To paraphrase *The Communist Manifesto*, a specter is haunting Iran: the specter of Bonapartism, an ideology that harkens back to the reign of Napoleon by advocating a centralized military dictatorship with a charismatic strongman as the head of government. As an Islamic Republic, Iran already has its “Supreme Leader”—Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Yet much speculation has emerged that he and various elements within the regime are looking for a strong military man to succeed President Hassan Rouhani in the June 18 election. Perhaps less well known is the fact that Bonapartism is becoming a popular political ideology even among Iranians who have little or no relation to the country’s military and security bodies.

What Is Bonapartism in the Iranian Context?

In describing his ideal president, Khamenei frequently refers to a younger candidate who is a “hezbollahi”—literally a “member of God’s party,” and in practical terms someone who is utterly loyal to the Supreme Leader and among the regime’s most devoted supporters. This label is usually reserved for individuals who have some sort of affiliation with the intelligence, military, or security apparatus. Yet Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are not the only ones who dream of a “hezbollahi” president with a military background—this Bonapartist sentiment has strong roots in Iranian history, including before the Islamic Revolution.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Reza Shah Pahlavi was the Bonapartists' hope for the creation of a modern Iranian state after years of political inefficiency and social instability. He rose from humble roots through his military service, building a social power base not only among his "absolutist" friends (see below), but also among former secular constitutionalists, liberal democratic intellectuals, traditional clergy, and ordinary citizens. He was widely regarded as the only person who could end the national chaos and address the growing problems of poverty and insecurity.

Once he ascended to power, he wound up heading a violent dictatorship, but judgments about his record became much more positive in the decades after he was forced out by invading British and Soviet forces. In 2005, for example, presidential candidate Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf reportedly described himself as "Reza Shah Hezbollahi" while on the campaign trail, but rather than recoil from the sobriquet, many Iranians rejected him for not being up to the late dictator's caliber.

During Reza Shah's lifetime, the terms "enlightened despotism" and "absolutism" were used to espouse the same ideas as Bonapartism. For Iranian secular intellectuals and officials in powerful foreign countries like France, Reza Shah represented the only hope for continued modernization in Iran. European absolutist leaders sought to reform bureaucracy, promote religious tolerance, and advance economic development, but at the same time avoid any changes that might undermine their despotic sovereignty. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was seen as leading that kind of modernization in Turkey. In Iran, intellectuals such as Ali Dashti and Sayyed Hassan Taghizadeh supported Reza Shah's ascendancy with the same goals in mind.

In theory, the idea of the "benevolent absolutist" or "just despot" can also be justified by Islamic religious principles, where the priority is the people's security and prosperity. For years, *velayat-e faqih*—the doctrine under which Supreme Leaders have claimed absolute authority in post-revolutionary Iran as ruling clerics—was controversial among the religious establishment. Yet few openly question the doctrine's legitimacy today, indicating that many Shia Muslim theologians have implicitly returned to their sect's traditional political theory in which a despotic ruler is acceptable if he is just and protects the Shia community's interests and territorial borders.

The resurgence of absolutism/Bonapartism as a utopian goal in Iran is hardly surprising given widespread public frustration with the current political elite, whom many blame for failing to fix structural problems, reform the existing regime, or lead another successful revolution. Bringing a military man to power as a strong, competent president is not some semi-covert plan hatched by Khamenei—it is an increasingly popular Bonapartist fantasy among frustrated masses and political factions who have not previously identified with the IRGC.

For example, some members of the technocratic Kargozaran-e Sazandegi (Executives of Construction) Party have expressed their inclination toward having an authoritarian military president govern the country for at least the next ten years. Party member Saeed Leilaz espoused this idea explicitly in a January interview, implying that it was the only way to fix the problems of corruption, inefficiency, and disintegrating state institutions. He elaborated on what this would mean: "We see on the political horizon of Iran the rise of a Bonaparte for a transitional period, not permanently...The same Reza Shah that both regime opponents and people inside the government have talked about. Since the IRGC is the most integrated military and political organization, the future of Iran should and will go through militarism so that we can solve at least two of our problems: inefficiency and lack of integrity."

Likewise, former vice president Ataollah Mohajerani has frequently tweeted that he prefers a military leader for the next president. He too is affiliated with Kargozaran, which has always been defined as a technocratic, bureaucratic faction with few anti-Western ideological tendencies—in fact, it is often identified in the West as a "moderate" faction close to Rouhani and the late president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

The populist faction led by former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is advocating Bonapartism as well, despite

being the polar opposite of the technocratic Kargozaran on most issues. According to Abdolreza Davari, his former presidential advisor and current unofficial spokesman, Ahmadinejad now believes that “the Islamic Republic will collapse after Khamenei’s demise,” and that Bonapartism is the best solution for the country’s various crises.

For his part, Khamenei seems to mistrust the clergy and politicians with fulfilling his goals for Iran after he leaves the scene—in his view, only the IRGC is uniquely qualified for that mission. This may be [Russia’s preference as well](#), if one can believe the account given by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a recently leaked interview.

Conclusion

Henry Kissinger famously stated that the Islamic Republic needs to decide if it is a country or a cause. Khamenei’s track record confirms that diagnosis, since his thirty years of rule have exacerbated and recycled the nation’s political, diplomatic, and socioeconomic crises. He now seems to regard IRGC control as the only way to preserve the revolution, while many elites and citizens who do not share the IRGC’s ideology nevertheless see military rule as the only hope for changing the regime’s broken decisionmaking patterns and deep-rooted sclerosis.

Ultimately, however, Iran does not need to elect a military president to become a Bonapartist state. The regime is already more or less militarist, led by the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (Khamenei) and his military-minded directives. Yet unlike what many Bonapartists wish to see, the Supreme Leader is obviously not some reform-minded strongman out to modernize the country. Thus, even if a military man wins the presidency, the regime’s decisionmaking process will not drastically change so long as Khamenei remains in power—the Supreme Leader will simply use such a president as his executive agent to further implement his agenda.

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