

Iran's Debate about Weekends Highlights Tehran's Ideological Constraints

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The debate over making Saturday the official second day of the weekend nationwide instead of Thursday has become a hot topic in Iran in recent months, highlighting the clash between the the regime's ideology and the country's economic reality.

Over the past year, Iranian politicians have increasingly pushed the idea of switching Iran's weekend from its current Thursday-Friday model to a Friday-Saturday one instead. Iran's economic sector and most of its population prefer to have Saturdays off, arguing that this would better align Iran's economy with the rest of the world, where most countries observe Saturday-Sunday weekends and its neighboring countries observe Friday-Saturday weekends.

With Iran's financial system closed on Thursday and Friday, and global markets closed Saturday and Sunday, the country's financial institutions are disrupted for four consecutive days during the week. Proponents of changing the weekend see the current system as an unnecessary impediment to Iran's economic growth. On the other hand, conservative opponents of this idea argue that closing on Saturday, which they characterize as the Jewish Sabbath, goes against the constitution and Islamic principles. They reject the notion by pointing to Islamic teachings that discourage Muslims from following the practices of non-Muslims, which some consider to be religiously forbidden (*haram*).

After months of discussion, the parliament ultimately [approved](#) (<https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/966683/%252525D8%252525AA%252525D8%252525B9%252525D8%252525B7%252525DB%2525258C%252525D9%25252584%252525DB%252525D8%252525B4%252525D9%25252586%252525D8%252525A8%252525D9%25252587-%252525D9%25252587%252525D8%252525A7-%252525D8%252525AF%252525D8%252525B1-%252525D9%25252585%252525D8%252525AC%252525D9%25252584%252525D8%252525B3-%252525D8%252525AA%252525D8%252525B5%252525D9%25252588%252525DB%2525258C%252525D8%252525A8-%252525D8%252525B4%252525D8%252525AF>) the plan to make Friday and Saturday the official weekend on May 15, 2024. Yet the Guardian Council subsequently rejected this decision, stating that the proposal was against Islamic law and the constitution. The council, a high-level body comprising twelve members—six *mujtahids* and six lawyers appointed directly and indirectly by the Supreme Leader—plays a crucial role in the country's legislative process and is responsible for reviewing all parliamentary laws to ensure they align with sharia and the constitution.

Members of the parliament, however, are proving persistent; they are actively seeking appropriately qualified *ulema* (Islamic scholars) to issue a fatwa stating that closing on Saturdays is not against sharia. For example, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli (<https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/966693/%252525D9%25252586%252525D8%252525B8%252525D8%252525B1-%252525D8%252525A2%252525DB%2525258C%252525D8%252525AA-%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252584%252525D9%25252584%252525D9%25252587-%252525D8%252525AC%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525A7%252525D8%252525AF%252525DB%2525258C-%252525D8%252525A2%252525D9%25252585%252525D9%25252584%252525DB%2525258C-%252525D8%252525AF%252525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A8%252525D8%252525A7%252525D8%252525B1%252525D9%25252587-%252525D8%252525AA%252525D8%252525B9%252525D8%252525B7%252525DB%2525258C%252525D9%25252584%252525DB%2525258C-%252525D8%252525B1%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525B2-%252525D8%252525B4%252525D9%25252586%252525D8%252525A8%252525D9%25252587>) published a letter saying that if Saturday closings are done to coordinate with the global economy, solve economic problems, and curb inflation rather than to "resemble the infidel," there is no obstacle to shifting to a Friday-Saturday weekend. Missives from an ayatollah such as Amoli hold great sway and can provide religious legitimacy, but it is ultimately the word of Ayatollah Khomeini that matters in state affairs. However, other *ulema*, including Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani, have [criticized](#) (<https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/992727/%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252587-%252525D8%2525A2%2525DB%25258C%2525D8%2525AA%2525E2%252580%25258C%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587-%252525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525AD%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D9%252587-%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525DB%25258C%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252581-%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525B7%2525DB%25258C%2525D9%252584%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A8%2525D9%252587-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525AE%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252581-%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B3%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525AA>) the parliament for continuing to push this agenda despite the Guardian Council's rejection.

This debate has illuminated the impact of Iran's Islamic ideology in the country's day-to-day governance. The Islamic Republic is, first and foremost, an ideological regime. In contrast to many contemporary dictatorships that lack a guiding ideology and are ruled mainly by personal fiat, the Islamic Republic is closer to a totalitarian regime, where Islam is not only the official religion but the basis of a comprehensive ideology that guides policymaking and implementation.

The Islamic Republic's ideology is ultimately a combination of Shia Islamism and Third Worldism, which asserts the superiority of Islamic jurists as political leaders and aims to create a society guided by sharia via moral policing and law. It is also based on exporting revolution, supporting Islamist groups under its umbrella (the "axis of resistance"), and seeking the eradication of Israel. Under the influence of this brand of leftist ideology, Iranian ideology is also anti-American and challenges the international liberal order, labeling it unjust.

Since its establishment in 1979, both of the Islamic Republic's supreme leaders—Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei—have pushed to preserve this ideology as the core identity of their regime and have viewed it as an identity that must not be compromised. The state frequently attempts to impose its cultural and religious vision across all aspects of public and private life, seeking to educate and train a new generation of committed Muslim citizens molded to the Islamic Republic's specific vision of Islam and world politics. The two main drivers of the

regime’s regional and foreign policies remain the desire to eliminate Israel and the desire to confront the United States. Thus, even decisions that appear innocuous or are driven by a specific economic need—such as the discussion over Iran’s unusual weekend—are viewed with suspicion if they have the potential to touch on ideological sensitivities.

The Islamic Republic’s ideologically motivated decision-making has led to institutional stagnation and reduced state capacity; the government suffers from paralysis and an inability to implement rational and practical policies even when they would benefit the state. One striking example is Tehran’s inability to put an end to morality policing even after last year’s major protests, a decision that not only undermines the regime’s legitimacy but alienates millions of Iranians, especially young women. These ideological strictures can likewise be seen in its approach to normalizing relations with the United States, despite the severe economic consequences of Iran’s isolation.

The ideological nature of the Islamic Republic is also one of the main reasons for popular dissatisfaction. While overt expression of these views is potentially dangerous, there are myriad signs that many Iranians reject the state’s Islamic ideology and demand a normal life. Many Iranian youth, part of a post-ideological generation, are exhausted with the regime’s overtly ideological policies and seek a liberal secular government. Unless the regime abandons its inability to prioritize good governance at the expense of ideology, the structural problems that led to this dissatisfaction will continue, regardless of who is running the government.

Seen through this lens, the debate over adopting Saturday as part of Iran’s official weekend is a reflection of the broader struggle between economic necessity and ideological rigidity within the Islamic Republic. As Iran grapples with the issue of aligning its economy with global standards, such struggles will emerge again and again, each time continuing popular disaffection with a state that cannot put the needs of its citizens above its ideological strictures. Unless the regime finds a way to reconcile these competing priorities, the country may remain locked in this cycle of stagnation. The outcome of future debates like these will signal whether the Islamic Republic can adapt to the demands of a changing world. ❖

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