

# Iranian Clergy Versus Democracy

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Mar 29, 2018

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Articles & Testimony

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## With neither reform nor revolution likely to succeed in the near future, the Islamic Republic's essential flaws may become fatal.

**E**ven the Iranian government authorities do not deny people's eagerness for substantial change. At the same time, the Islamic Republic's hardcore is determined to curtail any serious effort to reform the system as it is unwilling to properly address people's political, economic and cultural needs. What role does religion play in the interaction between the popular desire for change and the regime's determination to prevent it?

The Islamic Republic, as a semi-authoritarian regime, systematically turns off the public sphere's lights, weakens the civil institutions, controls and pressures every single self-organized group or community (even apolitical and peaceful communities like Sufis and Bahais), dominates professional syndicates and associations and kills the possibility of forming independent effective social networks.

Because of the government's instrumentalization of Shiite Islam in its own service, and the clergy's unique discriminatory political and economic advantages, traditional forms of religiosity gradually disappear as the government's ideological agenda for imposing religious conformism hopelessly fails, backfiring dramatically. Compared to the pre-revolution era, clerics enjoy much greater political power and wealth, which cost them dependence on the state and unpopularity in society.

Iran is the cradle of not only a pivotal civilization but also many world religions, from Zoroastrianism to the Bahai faith. Having such a deep-rooted religious character, Iranian spirit reacted to inefficient traditions and extortionist enforcement of religious ideology by inventing new forms of religiosity, customizing it by choosing an eclectic approach to the traditional religious mandates and leaving its unfitting elements to the modern life, or creating heretic interpretations and narratives that recognize modern man's needs and aspirations. Ironically, re-fashioning religion by individuals cannot take place outside the traditional religious framework and isolated from clergy. The

steady and colossal growth in number of Iranian pilgrims to Shiite or Islamic sites in Iran, like Mashhad, and abroad, like Mecca, expansion of mosques, rise of new or modified old rituals, emergence of spreading luxurious style of religious practices and performances are revealing evidences.

The spiritual exhaustion of Shiism in Iran, which is mainly caused by its tyrannical use by the government, has arguably damaged the clergy's prestige and intensified people's mistrust toward Shiite leadership's claim for absolute authority. Notwithstanding, not only government's support but also people's constant religious ferments and inevitable modernization of religion played a substantial role in empowering Shiism and its social incarnations. Consequently, it is safe to claim that in today's Iran, as in yesterday's religion, particularly Twelver Shiism, benefit from financial/human resources, a broad social network and traditionally legitimate entities which are unparalleled and far outdistance any competitor. Imagine if one day the Iranian government decides to encumber combinations between citizens by disconnecting phone and internet, the real on the ground—not virtual—social network remains the only hope for reconnecting people. Such physical network is owned and run by religious authorities. More than seventy thousands mosque, controlled by clerics-imams and custodians, accommodating a basic militia next door, bridges upper class residents of north of Tehran to deprived villagers in remote border areas. Shiism's spatial hegemony offer it a unique dynamism and unmatched capability for organizing and mobilizing the mass. Since the early 20th century, all mass movements in Iran—be it the 1906 constitution movement, the 1951-53 oil nationalization, and 1979 revolution—were inescapably in need of this precious irreplaceable social capital. Without at least partial involvement of clerical and religious figures and forces, none of those popular movements could have succeeded. While secular elites do not share the religious mindset and practice, those elites found it necessary to make Shiite authorities approvingly accompany them.

Today's Shiite clergy, inside and outside Iran, might find the current political, social and economic situations unfavorable as much as ordinary people or secular elites do—though for different reasons. Nevertheless, even clerical critics of Islamic Republic—some of whom reject the legitimacy of guardianship of jurist and some disapprove Khamenei's leadership qualifications—are deeply concerned about a drastic change in the political system no matter under the name of reform or revolution. In all successful Iranian mass movements, clergy and religious elites envisioned themselves as special beneficiaries who benefit from distinct exclusive advantages and privileges. For the first time in the modern history of Iran, they cannot imagine a safe place for themselves in the aftermath of radical political change, because unlike past turning-points, any meaningful reform, which requires through revision of the current constitution, or changes caused by revolution or coup, would most probably deprive them from their traditional and modern discriminatory benefits. A democratic Iran, produced by genuine reform or subversive developments, would abolish exclusive rights and authorities, and reinvent the government based on liberal democratic notions and values. In a private meeting, responding to his Iranian guest's question on why did he refused to support 2009 green movement to address expectation of thousands of his followers who participated in it, Ayatollah Ali Sistani the world known Shiite authority said he is doubtful about the ultimate goal of protesters: "are you sure that if these street protesters succeed to overthrow the regime, they turn their back against religiously commented green leaders and look for establishment of a secular government?"

Besides, a militarist regime led by IRGC replacing Khamenei is a plausible possibility. IRGC's dominate desire has already made it a gigantic socio-political rival for clergy. IRGC claim is that not only politically but also religiously, it represents the ideals of Islam and Islamic Republic and sacrificed for its protection more than any other political spectrum. The clergy's great loss in this scenario seems obvious.

Here is clergy's new situation: despite its unique social capital, material resources and networks, it is quite self-conscious about its incapability to use them for initiating a new mass movement aspiring to form a different model of religious government. But at the same time, it may be able to block other socio-economic forces who seek to replace

Islamic republic either by an authoritarian militarism or liberal democracy. The material and symbolic dynamism of Almighty Shiism devastatingly stop or slow down country's shift toward that direction. For instance, not only Islamic Republic's constitution but also 1906's constitution was both an exception among Muslim countries' constitutions in making not Islam but rather Twelver Shiism as the country's official religion. This clearly create a legal basis for clergy's supervision on legislation process and law enforcement procedures. To maintain the Shiite nature of the political system, even pro government Ayatollahs warned presidents (Khatami and Rouhani) about appointing Sunnis in key positions. While it is legally groundless to prevent Sunnis from taking high-ranking government jobs, except for supreme leader and president, there are very few Sunnis in such posts.

Considering the weakness of civil society and clergy's refusal to support subversive initiatives, protests may continue but probably remain scattered, leaderless, without a precise plan or vision. A colorful blending of motivations generates spontaneously unrest which increasingly discredit the regime but does not subvert it.

With neither reform nor revolution likely to succeed in the Islamic Republic in the near future, its essential flaws may become fatal. The Shiite religious class is struggling to maintain its discriminatory anti-liberal and anti-democratic privileges and positions. No matter how far Tehran's regime is from a Shiite utopia, Islamic Republic is clergy's last hope in modern world.

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