

Shiite Clerical Establishment Supports Khamenei

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

While a handful of marginal clerics and religious groups dispute the official result of Iran's recent presidential election, the Shiite clerical establishment as a whole currently supports Iran's top leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Although this support has been demonstrated through silence, the fact that most Shiite clerics have not intervened in the public debate over the election or the government's use of force against protesters has been particularly effective in strengthening Khamenei's position.

The Establishment

Iran's clerical establishment consists of about 200,000 members, and its hierarchy includes many midlevel clerics called *hojjat ol-eslam* ("proof of Islam") and around a thousand *ayatollahs* ("sign of God"), who are leaders recognized for their scholarship. Ranking above *ayatollahs* are roughly fifteen grand *ayatollahs*, who are revered as sources of emulation, or as religious guides, for many followers.

Khamenei was a mere *hojjat ol-eslam* when he was elevated to the rank of *ayatollah*, in a controversial move aimed at making him constitutionally fit to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, as Iran's principal leader. Khamenei's authority stems from the principal of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which combines political and religious power into one supreme authority.

Dissent Only from the Margins

The *ayatollahs* in Qom and Isfahan who have criticized the recent presidential election are isolated, with no significant role in the clerical establishment; they lack both financial resources and religious popularity. Although these *ayatollahs* held key political and juridical positions during the first decades of the Islamic Republic, they were sidelined first by Khomeini and then later by Khamenei.

A small marginal group, the Association of Researchers and Teachers of Qom Seminary, is the only clerical group that has explicitly referred to the presidential election as illegitimate. The association was founded in 1998, and its central council consists of eighteen midranking clerics and one *ayatollah*. This group plays no role in the administration of the clerical establishment, and none of its members are considered to be sources of emulation. The association was originally created to support former president Muhammad Khatami, but its support has remained symbolic rather than practical. The group's secretary, the controversial Seyyed Hossein Moussavi Tabrizi,

was involved in the execution of many of the regime's opponents and political prisoners while he was the general prosecutor of the Revolutionary Court during the first decade of Islamic Republic,

Coopting the Clerical Establishment

Iran's current clerical establishment has little similarity to what it was prior to 1979 Islamic Revolution. Historically, the clerical class was a semiautonomous political institution with independent financial resources from religious taxes collected directly from followers. But after the revolution, and especially since Khamenei became leader twenty years ago, the establishment became totally dependent on the government's financial resources, social authority, networking, organization, and political status. Iran's leader is not only the head of the judiciary, intelligence services, and the armed forces, he is also the head of Iran's Shiite clerics.

Clerics receive hefty regular stipends from the government, and many ayatollahs have exclusive privileges for numerous profit-making transactions. The government has modernized and bureaucratized the clerical establishment by creating the Center for Seminary Management, which is under direct supervision of Khamenei and is in full control of clerical finances, the seminary's educational system, and the political direction of the establishment. Even Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, along with other influential Shiite leaders, allegedly runs his offices within the framework of the Center.

To control clerics politically, the government created the Special Court of Clerics -- an organization that works outside the judiciary branch of government and is headed by an appointee of Khamenei -- to deal with dissenting clerics. This independent court does not operate within the country's legal system; it has own set of procedures and maintains its own prisons in most Iranian cities.

Politically defiant clerics who oppose certain government decisions work outside the clerical establishment and usually have a track record of supporting Iran's reform movement. Although several prominent reformist figures, such as former president Muhammad Khatami and former speaker of the Iranian parliament Mehdi Karrubi, are clerics, their words and actions have little or no impact on the clerical establishment and pose no threat of causing political splits.

Conclusion

The Shiite clerical establishment, which stretches across the Middle East, is highly unlikely to initiate any sort of opposition to Khamenei's authority. Various Shiite leaders may not be happy with the Iranian government's policies, but publicizing their differences might jeopardize the social, political, and financial advantages they now receive from Iran. For example, during his Friday sermon immediately after the Iranian election, Seyyed Mohammad Hossein Fazlallah, a prominent Shiite ayatollah in Lebanon, stated his support for the government's official result and voiced his admiration of the Iranian people for their participation in the election. In Iraq, al-Sistani kept silent about the election result and has not reacted to the postelection crisis. Both ayatollahs have offices in Qom and benefit from the support of the Iranian government.

Inside Iran, support for Khamenei, although mostly silent, is also evident. Morteza Moqtadai, the head of Center for Seminary Management, announced that the election result was approved by "God and the Hidden Imam," and stated that Khamenei's words are the "Hidden Imam's words; when he says there was no manipulation in the election, he should be heard as the ultimate arbiter."

Khamenei -- for the moment -- is in a strong position. The clerical establishment's prevailing silence, however, could eventually work against him. If the political tide begins to turn, the establishment could be rendered powerless and its support ineffective, leaving Khamenei and his followers in a vulnerable position.

Mehdi Khalaji, who trained as a cleric in Qom, Iran for fourteen years, is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute,

focusing on Iranian politics and the politics of Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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