

The New Order of the Clerical Establishment

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Articles & Testimony

The following is the English-language abstract of an article originally published in Farsi. [Read \(http://www.fis-iran.org/fa/irannameh/volxxiv/orderofclericaestablishment\)](http://www.fis-iran.org/fa/irannameh/volxxiv/orderofclericaestablishment) the full text of this article in the original Farsi.

The Iranian clergy in contemporary Iran bears little, if any, similarity with its traditional counterpart known as "Ulama." The financial resources, social authority and networking, organizational features, and political status of the two are worlds apart. This article attempts to provide a historical explanation of the clergy's new order and its transformation from a traditional institution to a rationalized, modernized, and bureaucratized organization under the political rule of the "Supreme Shiite jurist."

Prior to the Islamic Revolution, the semi-independent clergy was perceived as the highest socioreligious authority in the land. The confluence of socioreligious and political authority after the 1979 revolution made the clerical establishment totally dependent on the government. Thus, Iran's supreme leader is not only the head of the judiciary and the intelligence services and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but also the head of the Iranian Shiite seminary. Despite the fact that clerics receive hefty regular stipends from the government and many ayatollahs have exclusive privileges for all sorts of profit-making transactions, they are no longer the exclusive "manager of the sacred affaires."

By making the clerical establishment the main ideological apparatus of the state, the government itself has officially become in charge of the "sacred." This explains why the Islamic government uses its political mechanisms to suppress both "popular Islam" and "religious intellectualism." "Popular Islam" and intellectuals' liberal democratic interpretation of Islam both threaten the "official Islam," since they extend the borders of the "sacred" far beyond what the Islamic Republic defines and implements as the only acceptable version of the religion.

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