Chapter 5
Irishan Political System in Modern Times
CHAPTER V

IRANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM IN MODERN TIMES

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REFERENCES
IRAN:

**Official Name:** Islamic Republic of Iran (Theocratic Republic)

**Capital:** Tehran

**Population:** 68,278,826 (July 2003 est.)

**Independence:** 1 April 1979

**Chief of State:** Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hosseini – Khamenei
(Since 4 June, 1989)

**Head of Government:** President (Ali) Mohamad Khatami Ardakani
(Since 3 August, 1997)

**Languages:** Persian 58%, Turkic 26%, Kurdish 9%, Luri 2%, Balochi 1%, Arabic 1% and others 2%.

**Religions:** Shi'a Muslim 89%, Sunni Muslim 10%, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Baha'i 1%.
5.1 THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF IRAN:

Iran, called Persia until 1354/1935, was formerly a monarchy, ruled by a Shah (King/Emperor). In 1346/1927 Reza Khan, a Cossack Officer, Seized Power in a military coup, and was subsequently elected Shah, adopting the title Reza Shah Pahlavi. In 1360/1941 British and Soviet forces occupied Iran, and the Shah (who favoured Nazi Germany) was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. British and USA forces left Iran in 1365/1945, but Soviet forces remained in the north-west of the Country (Azerbaijan province) until 1366/1946. The United Kingdom retained considerable influence through the Anglo-Iranian oil Company, which controlled much of Iran's extensive petroleum reserves. In 1371/ March 1951, however the Majlis (National consultative Assembly) approved the nationalization of the Petroleum industry, despite British and other Western opposition. The leading advocate of nationalization, Dr. Muhammad Mussadeq, who became Prime Minister in 1371 /May 1951, was deposed in 1373/1953 in a military Coup d'état, engineered by the USA and British intelligence services.

The Shah gradually increased his personal control of government following the coup, assuming dictatorial powers in 1383/1963 with the so-called 'white revolution'. By the end of 1408/1987 anti-government protests were widespread, involving both left wing and liberal opponents of the Shah, as well as Islamist activists. The most effective opposition came from supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini. The growing unrest forced the Shah to leave Iran in 1400/January 1979. Imam Khomeini
arrived in Tehran and effectively took power 10 days later and on 1400/1 April, 1979 Iran was declared on Islamic Republic.

The first president of Iran, Abolhasan Bani-Sadr was elected in 1401/1980 and then his Prime Minister Muhammad Ali Rajaei became President and Muhammad Javad Bahonar became his Prime Minister and both of them were assassinated by a group of Mujahdin-e-Khalq.

For most of the 1401/1980s Iran’s domestic and Foreign policy was dominated by the war with Iraq. In September 1980, Iraqi forces invaded Iran along a 500-Km front, apparently anticipating a rapid military victory. The Iranian military offered strong resistance, and began a counter-offensive in early 1403/1982; by June Iraq had been forced to withdraw from Iranian territory, and Iranian troops subsequently entered Iraq. At last after 8 years conflict between two Islamic countries come to an end and on 1409/18 July 1988 Iran unexpectedly announced its unconditional acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution no. 598, adopted one year earlier. In those times Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei was president and Mir Husein Mousavi was Prime Minister and after Imam Khomeini’s death on 1410/3 June 1989, in an emergency session on 4th June the council of Experts elected president Khamenei to succeed Imam Khomeini as Iran’s spiritual leader (Wali Faqih), and Hashemi Rafsanjani became president for two period (8 years). In 1418/ March 1997 Rafsanjani was appointed Chairman of the Council to Determine the Expediency of the Islamic order (which arbitrates in disputes between the Majlis and the Council of Guardians). Sayed Mohammad Khatami (a presidential adviser and former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance) was elected as the
President as he was a strong contender, just prior to the election, dated 1418/1997.

Taking office in August 1997, President Khatami emphasized his commitment to fostering sustained and balanced growth in the political, economic, cultural and educational spheres, as well as freedom of and respect for. The individual and rights of the nation, in the context of the rule of law. Khatami has been reelected for second term of presidency till 1426/2005.

5.2 GOVERNMENT:

Legislative power is vested in the Islamic consultative Assembly (Majlis), with 290 members, the Chief executive of the administration is the President. The Majlis and the president are both elected by universal adult suffrage for a term of four years. A 12-member council of Guardians Supervises elections and ensures that legislation is in accordance with the constitution and with Islamic Precepts. The council to Determine the Expediency of the Islamic order, created in 1409/February 1988 and formally incorporated into the Constitution in 1410/July 1989, rules on legal and theological disputes, between the Majlis and council of Guardians. The executive, legislative and judicial wings of state power are subjected to the authority of the Wali Faqih (Supreme religious leader).

Iran is divided into 28 provinces, each with an appointed Governor⁴. population (official estimate at mid-year) 2003 was 66,479,838 and population of province capital, Tehran 11,912,221, estimated⁵.
5.3 THE MEANING OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN SHIA SYSTEM:

There is a very deliberate endeavor to rejuvenate shi’ism in politics. In this regard they underscore the importance of ‘Marja’yyat’ (source of emulation) and Wilayat (deputyship). There are two essays on the issue of the legitimacy of clerical involvement in politics that are particularly noteworthy. Morteza Motashari makes a polemical critique of the Akhbari School, using a very reformist and non-traditionalist language. He contends that Akhbarism was a movement against reason and that a very peculiar fanaticism and dogmatism dominated this school of thought. He even goes so far as to draw a parallel between the rise of Akhbaris in Iran and the sensationalist philosophy of the west. Motahhari here is setting the stage for a more unconventional interpretation of shi’ism and the concept of religious leadership.

Tabataba’i’s discussion of “Walayat va Zaamat” (Deputyship and leadership”), however, is a far more articulatd philosophical argument on the nature of Political theory and the rule of clerical leadership in Shi’ism. In this regard, Tabataba’i was the most prominent contemporary shi’i cleric to introduced the concept of Islamic government and the leadership of the faqih (jurisconsult). Therefore, in contrast to the view that he was opposed to the concept of the Wilayat-i-Faqih and the Islamic state is not correct, in fact, he is one of the earlier proponents of clerical rule. Tabataba’i’s discussion on “Walayat va Za’amat” is based on his belief in the natural and intrinsic need of every human being for guidance and supervision.
Each society, in order to endure, relies on a person or an official whose intelligence and will-power is superior to those who are ruled and who can control the will and mind of others and will safeguard and preserve the system that exists in the society… in a manner that a guardian is responsible for an orphan and the head of the family is responsible for the minor children of that family and the ministry of endowment administers the public endowment and the king or the president is presumed to rule among the people … this position according to which a person is appointed to take care of the affairs of others, as a real person administers his life, we call Wilayat.

The intervention of the Shi’i cleri’s in politics is rationalized on the basis of the belief that Islamic teaching is a comprehensive system of beliefs covering all aspects of life, promoting the spiritual and material well-being of the individual and society. Hence, there can not be a separation of religion from other aspects of life in Islam.

5.4 THE RANK OF ‘ULAMA’ IN THE POLITICAL ARENA IN IRAN FROM THE 1298/1880S TO 1400/1979:

The ‘ulama’ played a prominent part in the political arena in Iran from the 1880s, with renewed concern over their status and power in relation to the mounting intrusion into the Iranian economy and politics of the European powers and their banks and merchants. The first major episode in which the ulama realized their power was that of the Tobacco Regie in 1299/1881. The agitation which followed culminated in a ‘fatwa’ from the most senior ‘mujtahid’, Mirza Hassan Shirazi, resident in Najaf (Iraq), forbidding the consumption of tobacco on pain of eternal damnation. The successful boycott which followed ensured the
cancellation of the monopoly. Worries over the corrosion of the ulama’s influence and control over law and education by the incursion of modern forms associated with the European penetration may also have been a background factor at that point. Few in these constituencies understood what the constitution was about, except as a limitation on royal power and the transfer of powers to some kind of assembly in which, they assumed correctly, they would have representation. This instrumental attitude did not, however, apply to all the ulama: some understood the issues and were moved to find religious justifications and arguments to theorize and sustain the constitution. Prominent among those was Mirza Mohammad Husayn Na’ini, who wrote a book, Tanbih al-umma wa Tanzih al-Milla, published in 1327/1909. Theorizing the constitution. In the absence of Imam-ul-zaman, the Hidden Imam, he argued, it was incumbent on the community and its leaders to devise the means of just government. Government in accordance with law and by the representatives of the peoples was far superior, and more favourable to the rule of Islamic law than arbitrary tyranny. The main opponent of the constitution among the Ulama was Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri who argued that there is no room for legislation or legislatures in Islam, for whom divine law is the only law, with the ulama as its privileged guardians and interpreters. Although initially sympathetic to the Majlis and to legal limits on the powers of the monarch, he soon turned against the constitution and eventually became its principal clerical opponent and supporter of the shah’s attempt to restore absolutism, Nouri expressed strong doubts about the liberties and equalities specified in the constitution, such as freedom of expression which would include anti-religious expressions, compulsory education for girls and equality of non-Muslims with Muslims, all judged to be contrary to the Shari’a.
In 1347/1928 the Queen of Reza Shah, on a visit to the Shrine in Qom, unveiled her face during the proceedings, to general consternation. Ayatollah Bafqi, present at the shrine, sent a message to the Queen: ‘If you are not Muslim why did you come to the Shrine? If you are then why are you not veiled? When his message was ignored, Bafqi delivered a sermon denouncing the shah and inciting the crowd. In response, Reza shah personally went to Qom, entered the Shrine in his boots, horse whipped Bafqi and had him arrested.

Then Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in 1360/1941, when British and Russian forces occupied Iran and put an end to Reza’s attempted neutrality. He was succeeded by his young son, Mohammad Reza.

Any resistance or opposition from the clerics was forcibly repressed, with arrests and exile for recalcitrant clerks and the majority of the religious classes retired to passivity, watching developments with mounting alarm, but helpless to resist. In the end, it was Ayotollah Borujerdi who emerged in 1365/1946 after Reza Shah’s abdication as undisputed Chief Marja of Shi’i world, who worked out a Modus Vivendi with the state, based on the clergy keeping out of politics and opposition, but being assigned their niche in the religious institutions and general respect and dignity. In effect, the clergy under Ayatollah Borujerdi accepted the modern and secularized state and its culture, and the confinement of the religious sphere. Some, however, and certainly the then junior [Imam] Khomeini, were seething with resentment against secularization and the subordination of religion and the clergy, but biding their time and keeping within the confines of the Ayatollah Borujerdi regime.
The shrine cities in Iran and their ‘madrasa’ and religious culture continued to provide centers of autonomy for the ‘ulama’ and a means of perpetuating their institutions and discourses. The ‘ulama’ also found ready allies in the bazars (Markets), continued to pose challenges to the Pahlvis throughout their reign, despite repeated efforts to control and subordinate them. They were to be the major forces in the Revolution that ended that reign in 1400/1979.  

5.5 A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI:

Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini was born on 20 Jumada al-Thaniyah 1320/24 September 1902 in Khomein near Qom. He obtained religious education at Khamein. In early 1340/1921 he went to Arak for higher studies, and the following year the latter was invited to Qom to take charge of Madrasa-e-Fayziya. He completed his education by 1346/1927 and started teaching in the same madrasa.

Imam Khameini’s life can broadly be divided into two distinct phases:

(I) The first face starts with his stay at Qom upto the early 1380/1960s,

(II) the second dates from early 1960s until his death in 1410/1989.

In the first phase of his life he looks like a scholarly person whereas in the second phase he emerged as a political leader. His stay at Qom coincided with the rise of Reza Shah to the power which was not liked by the clergy. Reza Shah was viewed by the clergy as an enemy who wanted to curb the power and prestige of the clergy. Imam Khomeini’s family belonged to that section of the clergy who did not like the
modernization of policies by Reza Shah. The anti-clergy measures of Reza Shah further increased grievances of the clerical class. However, Imam Khomeini followed politically a quietist line and associated himself with Shaykh Abdol Karim Ha’eri-Yazdi who disapproved ulama’s active participation in political affairs and emphasized the need of clerical involvement in educational and religious reforms. It is said that Imam Khomeini campaigned for the candidacy of Ayatollah Borujerdi for the post of ‘marja’e taqlid’. Around this period, Imam Khomeini wrote Kashf al-Asrar which first appeared in 1360/1941. This book gives a clear picture of his thought of his period. In this book he attacked both the monarch and the modernist in strong terms.

Imam Khomeini was arrested on 1383/5 June 1963. This led to the most violent confrontation between the regime and the people. This is regarded as the turning point and the foundations tone of the revolution of 1400/1979. He was again arrested in 1384/1964 and exiled in Turkey and after one year came to Najaf (Iraq) where he stayed upto 1399/1978. He continued his opposition to the Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi from Najaf. During this period he came to be known as a leading marja-e taqlid. His most important work published under the title of Hokumat-e-Islami or Wilayat-i-Faqih. Then the Iraqi regime forced him to leave the country, so he went to Paris in 1399/October 1978 where he stayed till his triumphant return to Iran on 1 February 1979 to establish the first “Government of god on Earth”.

(a) **IMAM KHOMEINI AND WILAYAT I-FAQIHI:**

The concept of Wilayat i-faqih (guardianship of jurisconsult) as conceived by Imam Khomeini constitutes an important aspect of
contemporary shi'i religio-political thought. It served as a major ideological justification for the legitimacy of the attempt of clergy to overthrow the Pahlavi regime and capture power and thus establish a theoretic state. In his theory of Wilayat i-faqih Imam Khomeini discusses the sources of the fuqaha’s authority, their right and duties and their status and role in the society. The basic points of Imam Khomeini’s interpretation in this regard is as follows: The ‘faqaha’ of Islam are the rightful successors of the Hidden Imam; they are designated as the deputies and successors of the prophet and Imams; they are the proofs (hujja) of Islam: Therefore they are responsible for those acts and duties for which the Prophet and Imams were sent. As the Prophet and Imams were appointed by God’s will and to execute it on earth, the fuqaha are also entrusted with the same two-fold task. The fuqaha inherit everything from the Imams except, of course, the supernatural qualities. The government of afaqih-e-‘adel (“just faqih”) is the only legitimate government on earth and the ulama should strive to establish such a government by overthrowing all other tyrant and unjust governments.

The doctrine of Wilayat i-faqih is only plausible and thinkable in the nation-state when the community of believers can be conceptualized as the ‘nation’. The concept of the nation is tied to the concept of citizenship which, unlike the passive ‘subject’ of dynastic Kingdom, is active in deciding and shaping the destiny of the nation, through political action of reform and even revolution. Imam Khomeini believed that ‘The People’ were the natural allies of the clergy in the defence of Islam and the establishment of the law. If only they could be awakened by the clergy and their agents and alerted to the dangers posed to Islam by imperialists and tyrants, they would rise to its defence. Islamic
'revolution' would inaugurate an Islamic 'republic', all these concepts are clearly borrowed from modern political vocabularies.16

(b) THE PRINCIPLE OF WILAYAT I-FAQIHO:

The principle of Wilayat i-faqih and its application in government has important implications for the relationship of the ‘ulama’ to government. It gives almost absolute power to the ruling ‘faqih’ and clerical associates. Indeed, in the case of Islamic Republic, clerics have assumed power positions in all the institutions of the state and the society. What are the implications, however, for the autonomy of the Senior ‘Mujtahid’ or marja’s? We have seen that in the traditional system, each ‘mujtahid’ enjoyed undisputed authority over his followers who were free to choose which ‘marja’ to follow. The assumption of one senior cleric of state power, including that of legislation and ultimate ruling on any issue, puts the autonomy of what should be his peers in question. This was clearly perceived by the ‘ulama’, and many of them rejected the principle of Wilayat i-faqih, some, such as Ayatollah shari’atmadari, openly in the political arena, others quietly in their writing and teaching. Ayatollah Golpaygani (d.1414/1993) apparently wrote to Imam Khomeini to say that what had happened between him and Shari’atmadari was up to God and history to Judge, but that, that was no way to treat a renewable cleric and was a threat to the sanctity of religion. This is clearly the view of many senior clerics in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, most of whom keep their traditional authority over their followers, collect the religious dues from them, and run their own schools and institutions, but mostly keep quiet about the polities of the Islamic Republic.17
5.6 RELIGIOUS INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT IN IRAN:

The newly emerging trend of religious intellectualism led by Mohammad Mojtahid Shabestari and Abdolkarim Soroush, the pen-name for Hossein Dabbagh.

Between 1988-1990, Soroush published a series of articles on his Theory of "Contraction and expansion of Religious Knowledge" (Qabd va Bast-e-Te'urik-e Shari'at).

Arguing in this theory that any understanding of religious is human and thus time-bound, Soroush's theory successfully launched the thesis that no understanding of religion is ever sacred, absolute or final. Shabestari also has like this opinion. It laid the foundation of an epistemological pluralism that is the basis of any democratic pluralism. This theory and many related ideas written about and elaborated upon, became the turning point in the current religious discourse and nourished the mind and the language of the generation that was to bring about the political reform movement in the late 1990s. Religious intellectualism offers a non-ideological understanding of Islam that when translated into political discourse will only supported democracy and political pluralism.

The ideological discourse has a maximalist understanding of religion. It insists that the Shariah offers the comprehensive plan for felicity both in this life and the other including providing economic and political plans. The new discourse, however, has a minimalist understanding of religious laws pertaining to social life and questions the efficacy of the Shariah for governing the society. The new religious
discourse emphasizes the role of reason and rationality versus revolutionary emotionalism and blind imitation.

In the politically and ideologically charged atmosphere of the Islamic Republic of Iran, no one could put forward these during questions in a better and more effective manner than Soroush and Shabestari did.

The boost the religious reform movement received after Khatami's election was much expected. Khatami himself is among very few contemporary clerics who have shown an active interest in reconstructing religious though, and have contributed to the new religious intellectual movement.

Soroush argues that while Islam is based upon unchangeable principles, our interpretations of those principles can and must change from time to time. Therefore, no one can claim a monopoly over the "true" Islam. Thus, he has explicitly challenged the claim by the 'ulama' that they are in fact the guardians of the faith. Soroush advocates opening up the political process, maintaining that a true religious state is based on democracy. He insists that Islam can not and should not become an ideology serving the interest of a governing elite. Again, his proposition implicitly rejects the very notion of the Wilayat i-faqih, which is the foundation of the political system in Iran. Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari as a reformist is a cleric with a theological training background from the seminaries who gradually separated himself from the traditionalists and joined the religious modernists camp in the second half of the 1990s. Engaging in rational theological debates. He also published articles in "Kiyan" and "Aftab" on topics such as reason and
revelation. His hermeneutical ideas also supported the possibility of multiple understandings of Islam. Advocating rationalization of the political order as a necessary step towards modernity, he questioned the jurisprudential reading of Islam and making it the base of government. Although Shabestari has more or less followed the same line of arguments as Soroush and has become a popular figure of the religious intellectual movement the hard liners have not harassed him.

He has criticize "Wilayat-e-Faqih" theory really considerable. He believes that Faqih's can govern people like others due to the needs of society. But it is not appropriate for them to think that they can do whatever they believe or like and consider themselves Godlike. His opinion is based on the fact that it is people rights to make decisions. He believes that "Wilayat-e-Faqih" theory is debatable religious judgment (Fatva) that is formed its political validity with people's opinions. While the advocates of Wilayat-e-Faqih consider it as a religious theory which is not interpretative. They consider political Fiqh as a legislative and management beliefs without considering its in completeness in this age. They try to interpret Islamic constitutions on the base of Fiqh. They have set aside people's political, social rights. They have also abandoned the votes of the people.
REFERENCES


2. On Iranian date 22 Bahman 1357 and also these 10 days were called Dahe-ye-Fajr (decades of Victory).


5. Ibid, p. 2164.


8. Ibid, P. 41

9. Ali Mirsepassi, P. 86


11. Hazrat-e Masumeh


15. 15 Khordad 1341 A.H. Sh. (an Iranian date)


17. Ibid, pp. 196-197.


19. Ibid,
