

Configuration of Political Elites in Post-revolutionary Iran

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INTRODUCTION

IN IRAN, POWER RELATIONS AND competition among elites, both of which have evolved in the 36 years since the 1979 Revolution, have helped shape different policies. Three major groups of political elites have formed since the revolution: the clergy, the military/security forces, and the technocrats. Three forms of alliances have arisen from these groups' interactions with each other: the clergy-military, the clergy-technocrats, and the military-technocrats. While the clergy-Revolutionary Guard axis was dominant in the political regime during the first decade after the Revolution, the clergy-technocrats alliance became more influential as a group in the second decade. Power relations then shifted in favor of the military-clergy alliance in the third decade. With the victory of Hassan Rouhani, political power has shifted in favor of the clergy-technocrats alliance once again. Understanding the configuration of elites is vital for understanding both Iran's domestic and international policies and the future of the Islamic Republic.

281

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1979–1988: ELITE COMPETITION UNDER KHOMEINI

After the 1979 Revolution and the consolidation of the Islamic regime, the clergy seized control of Iran and its political machinery, effectively transforming itself into the most prominent group of political elites in the state. According to the newly approved constitution of 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, became *Vali-e-Faqih* (Guardian Jurist), the highest position in the political structure. Clergymen began entering all levels of the political sphere to which they previously did not have access, including Parliament, the Guardian Council, and the Assembly of Experts. In the parliamentary elections of 1980 and 1984, respectively, 61 percent and 57 percent of the Members of Parliament elected were members of the clergy.¹ During this period, both significant factions of the political elite were clerical groups. These groups were known as the Association of Militant Clerics (*Majmae Rohaniyoone Mobarez*), the left wing of the clergy that advocated for an influential state and a state-controlled economy, and the Society of Militant Clerics (*Jamae Rohanyete Mobarez*), the right-wing clergy group in favor of a small state, privatization, and free-market economics.²

282

To further consolidate their political hegemony and neutralize potential coups against the newly established regime, the clergy weakened Iran's army by purging its personnel and appointing clergymen to new political directorates set up within every branch of the military to monitor and control the army staff and enforce sharia Islam in the army.³ The clergy also supported the formation

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of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which helped them suppress dissidents and opposition and consolidate their power. The IRGC was created on 5 May 1979 to support the clergy and defend the newly formed

Islamic regime against any coups from the untrusted conventional military force. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) served as an opportunity for the IRGC to expand its branches, play a major role in Iranian politics, and become one of the most influential groups in Iran.

The clergy and revolutionary guards shaped a strong alliance in which the clergy has the upper hand and the IRGC submits to the clergy. Both groups perceived the many technocrats and bureaucrats who actively supported the

Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979) as people who destroyed Iran’s economy “by subjugating Iran to the whims and aims of the American imperialist agenda.”⁴ As a result, the revolution catalyzed a period of de-bureaucratization, during which many technocrats were fired, and many formerly bureaucratic functions were transferred to the clergy and revolutionary youth.⁵ Young revolutionaries without any previous experience acquired positions in the state bureaucracy and thus gradually shaped a new religious technocratic elite.⁶ Civil servants and managers were prejudicially hired or promoted on the basis of their *taabbod* (ideological commitments) instead of their *takhassoos* (technical expertise). Meritocracy consequently fell to the wayside because new religious technocrats in the decade following the revolution were inexperienced and completely under the control of the clergy and revolutionary guards. The revolutionaries also created several revolutionary institutions to replace the state bureaucracy—for example, *Jihad-e Sazandegi* (Construction Jihad), an organization of the revolution, was established to replace the inefficient bureaucratic organizations responsible for developing rural areas neglected during the monarchy.⁷ It took a few years before the revolutionary regime understood the importance of state bureaucracy, but even after 1983—when the needs of a growing and developing state forced the regime to reconsider its hostility toward red tape—the system attempted to hire more ideological followers as its new public servants.

283

1989–1997: ELITE COMPETITION IN THE ERA OF RECONSTRUCTION

The end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 and Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989 marked a shift in the elites’ configuration, this time in favor of the technocrats as they gradually became the most prominent political elites in Iran. As a result of the eight years of war and isolation from prospective allies, the country’s infrastructure was damaged, and consequently, Iran entered a state of economic despair.⁸ In this situation, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, serving as the newly elected president, sought to develop the country’s economy through reconstruction of Iran’s infrastructure, such as transportation and communication. To do so, he tried to normalize Iran’s foreign and domestic policy by departing from the radical and revolutionary ideology dominant in the 1980s. In fact, during the Rafsanjani presidency (1989–1997), the country underwent a period of political reconstruction in which political elites less influenced by ideology took power while radical elites were marginalized.

Rafsanjani primarily de-ideologized the machinery of government and lessened the ideological pressure on Iranian society by prioritizing the concept of

takhasoos rather than taahod.⁹ This shift led to the rehiring of some technocrats fired in the first decade after the Revolution. During this time, the leaders of the various and newly streamlined bureaucratic and technological organizations began to emerge as powerful political elites. The trend continued with the victory of many technocrats in the 1992 parliamentary election. The fourth Parliament “was seen by many as the ‘technocrat Parliament.’”¹⁰ Rafsanjani’s cabinet was mainly composed of religious technocratic personalities who joined the state bureaucracy after the revolution and later created the *Hezbe Kargozarane Sazandegi* (Executives of Construction of Iran Party), a right-wing technocrat party that won a substantial number of seats in the 1996 parliamentary election.¹¹

As a result of Rafsanjani’s economic policy, a new social class of the mercantile bourgeoisie with new values and priorities emerged.¹² With the rise of this new class that benefited from Rafsanjani’s open door economy arose a new collection of values, which contradicted the revolutionary values that had dominated Iran after the Revolution, such as poverty and contentment. The new class instead exaggeratedly tried to show off their wealth.¹³ In fact, the Rafsanjani economic policy precipitated a change in the priority of people’s values from a revolutionary mindset to a less ideological and more materialist one.¹⁴ While the poor were labeled as pious, and thus of value, during the first decade after the Revolution, the second decade labeled poverty as a negative characteristic, pushing people to overtly portray their wealth in public.

Because of these changes in public values and the decline of the clergy’s involvement in the economy, clergymen gradually began to lose their popular-

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ity. As a result, clergymen’s representation in elected institutions such as Parliament decreased: in parliamentary elections after 1988, the number of clergy elected dropped from 30 in 1988 to 25 in 1992 and

finally to 19 in 1996. The number of clergy ministers in the Rafsanjani Cabinet declined from four in the first cabinet (1989–1992) to two during his second cabinet (1993–1997).

The importance of the IRGC also declined during the Rafsanjani presidency, when he tried to depoliticize its leadership. The Ministry of the IRGC was dissolved in 1998, and a new military structure was imposed over the IRGC. In another initiative, Rafsanjani appointed a civilian technocrat, Akbar Turkan,

as the Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics.¹⁵ Starting in 1998, Rafsanjani also tried to depoliticize the IRGC and encourage them and other Iranian military and security forces to become involved in economic and business transactions to generate independent income. This also pushed them away from politics. This policy was welcomed by the IRGC as well as other security and military organizations. Eventually, the IRGC economic foundation *Bonyad-e Taavon-e Sepah* (IRGC Cooperative Foundation) was established in 1991.

In brief, under Rafsanjani, a new alliance took shape between the clergy and the technocrats, in which the clergy had the upper hand compared to the clergy-revolutionary guard alliance in the 1980s. With these transformations, the IRGC became marginalized and technocrats got the upper hand and became the most influential group of political elites—as opposed to the clergy in the 1980s.¹⁶

1997–2005: ELITE COMPETITION IN THE REFORM ERA

This situation continued in the first period of the Khatami presidency from 1997–2001. The only difference was that in the alliance between the clergy-technocrats, technocrats claimed the upper hand. In fact, the Executives of Construction of Iran Party was one of the main groups behind Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's election as president (1997–2005). This period is known as the Reform Era and was notably marked by technocrats maintaining their importance as political elites. This was demonstrated, for example, by the influence of the Islamic Participation Front, a reformist political group consisting of mostly leftist religious technocrats. With the expansion of technocrats' power in the Khatami administration, Iran's domestic and foreign policy became less ideological and more pragmatic.

The Reform Era was also characterized by the clergy continuing to lose its popularity and clout in elected institutions. The number of clergymen in Parliament decreased from 19 in 1996 to 12 in 2000. Many of the clerics in the administration and bureaucracy were replaced by a new generation of technocrats. According to Deputy Minister of Interior Mostafa Tajzadeh, many provincial governors and city executives—most of whom were clergymen—were replaced by bureaucrats from the Ministry of Education.¹⁷ In addition to his replacement of clerics with bureaucrats, Khatami enacted social, cultural, and liberal policies, which undermined Islamic values and norms of religion, alienating a majority of clergy and seminary schools. In Qom, for example, hardliner clerics frequently demonstrated against the Khatami administration's policies and canceled classes.

During the Khatami presidency, the IRGC became active in politics with

the support of Iran's Supreme Leader, who wanted to block reform in Iran, especially following student protests in July 1999. With the expansion of student protests and radicalization of students, which insulated Iran's Supreme Leader, 24 IRGC commanders demanded Khatami take immediate action to quell student revolts or risk the revolutionary guards taking matters into their own hands.

Between 2001 and 2005, in the second period of the Khatami presidency, the IRGC completely controlled and contained the reformist faction. The IRGC became increasingly involved in politics by supporting hardliners who formed a political group called the Coalition of Builders of Islamic Iran during the municipal elections in 2003. These technocrats—conservatives with academic credentials—were mainly former IRGC members or associates.¹⁸ They won a majority of seats on many political councils, eventually leading to the appointment of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a Basij militia member with close ties to the IRGC, as mayor of Tehran.¹⁹ With conservatives ascendant on city and village councils, Ahmadinejad appointed several IRGC members and affiliates as mayors for 22 districts within Tehran. IRGC veterans also won a substantial number of seats in the 2004 parliamentary elections, reinforcing their growing involvement in politics.²⁰

286

By the end of Khatami's presidency, the IRGC had become so powerful that they took control of the newest and largest Iranian airport, the Imam Khomeini Airport, by force. When Iran's Minister of Transportation signed a contract with a Turkish company to run the airport, the IRGC forced the government to cancel the contract and took control of it. The parliament, dominated by IRGC members, also impeached the Minister of Transportation for his resistance to the IRGC.²¹

In brief, though the technocrat-cleric alliance had the upper hand in the first term of the Khatami presidency, the IRGC gradually took more power, emerging as the most influential group by 2005. The result was the ascendance of a hardliner to power in 2005.

2005–2013: ELITE COMPETITION IN THE HARDLINER ERA

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in the 2005 presidential election. Other presidential candidates, skeptical of the victory, blamed the IRGC and the Basij for their organizational support of Ahmadinejad.²² The IRGC and the Basij had become more powerful and politically active after 2000, which helped Ahmadinejad emerge as the new president. As Ahmadinejad had special ties to the IRGC, his presidency facilitated the IRGC's increasing power and involve-

ment in social, political, and economic aspects of Iran.

Ahmadinejad's cabinet and administration were also dominated by IRGC and Basij veterans. According to a reformist, the Ministry of Interior was so dominated by the IRGC that it slowly became a military garrison.²³ This secured

victory for many IRGC members in the 2008 parliamentary elections and the selection of the former IRGC commander, Ali Larijani, as the Speaker of Parliament. The IRGC became

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even more dominant during Ahmadinejad's second presidential term. From 2009 through 2012, IRGC commanders took control of several ministries. As a result, the influence of the IRGC in Iran's economy also increased, and the organization was handed many Iranian economic projects in the oil, gas, and telecommunications sectors.²⁴

Ahmadinejad's relationship with the clergy, meanwhile, can be broken down analytically into two phases. In the first phase, he had a close relationship with clergymen and seminary schools. In the early years of his presidency, Ahmadinejad was supported by hardliner clergy members, including Iran's Supreme Leader and Ayatollahs Mesbah-Yazdi and Ahmad Janati. In response, his government sharply increased the seminary budget and supported the expansion of seminary schools throughout Iran. The ideological gap between the clergy and Ahmadinejad, however, became so apparent that it pushed a majority of clergy elites, especially in the city of Qom, to become vocally critical of the president and his populist policies—such as supporting the right for Iranian women to enter athletic stadiums and attend sporting events.²⁵ These policies were seen as anti-Islamic and deviant. For Ahmadinejad, the result was the loss of clergy members' support. By deepening the gap between himself and the clergy, Ahmadinejad became closer to the *maddahan* or religious singers and eulogists. The maddahan became noticeably more popular among young Iranian conservatives than the clergy, who began to lose their popularity. Therefore, the competition between religious singers and clerics resulted in an angry response from the clergy with complaints that singers with “no religious training are gradually replacing members of the clergy and are enjoying the social status that was previously reserved for the latter.”²⁶ Moreover, Ahmadinejad's messianic view of Shia Islam led him to believe in the idea of “Islam minus the clergy,” which emphasizes independent investigation of the truth.²⁷ All in all, the gap between Ahmadinejad and clerics expanded in his second term and only grew

as he challenged the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and refused to obey his orders—such as when the Supreme Leader ordered Ahmadinejad to remove his vice president or to not replace his minister of intelligence and security.²⁸

As a populist, Ahmadinejad did not believe in bureaucracy or technocrats, a belief particularly apparent in the first term of his presidency (2005–2009). During his electoral campaign, Ahmadinejad criticized the red tape associated with Iran's massive bureaucratic state and the economic philosophy of state-centrism. He promised people that he would “put the oil money on everyone's dinner table.”²⁹ He also claimed he would end what he termed the “oil mafia,” referring to state bureaucracy, corrupt clergy, and technocrats.³⁰

In fact, Ahmadinejad attempted to dismantle many aspects of the bureaucracy during his presidency to implement his populist policies without opposition. He was critical of the government's five-year economic and development plans, which he believed to be fruitless and inherited from the monarchy.³¹ The Management and Planning Organization (MPO), formerly known as the Plan and Budget Organization, was the highest bureaucratic office responsible for evaluating available resources and preparing long-term development policies and annual budgets. It was dismantled in 2007, under Ahmadinejad's presidency, to allow him more direct control over the budget.³² The dissolution of the MPO was criticized by his finance minister, Davood Danesh-Jafari, who labeled this order as “uncalculated, and [bringing] nothing but defeat and hopelessness to the employees of this great institution,” and led to his resignation.³³

Despite his efforts to change the outward appearance of the bureaucracy by dismantling organizations like the MPO, Ahmadinejad sought to recruit more people to work in the bureaucratic apparatus during his second term.

To use the bureaucracy to his advantage, Ahmadinejad began to fill various bureaus with a new class of public-sector employees known for their loyalty to him and his policies.

To use the bureaucracy to his advantage, he began to fill various bureaus with a new class of public-sector employees known for their loyalty to him and his policies.³⁴ This may have been the catalyst for his long-lasting impact on Iranian

policy. Prominent members of the IRGC also continued their rise to power, such as Brigadier General Mohammad Qalibaf, the commander of the IRGC Air Force who was appointed Mayor of Tehran in 2005. In summary, the power relations between political elites shifted again during the Ahmadinejad era, in which the IRGC became the most important political elite compared to the

Khatami and Rafsanjani eras, during which technocrats were the most prominent political elites.

In fact, the emergence of Ahmadinejad was a result of the IRGC-clergy alliance, in which the IRGC had the upper hand compared to 1980, when the clergy was the dominant group. His radical domestic and provocative foreign policies can be understood through this alliance. However, Ahmadinejad lost the clergy's support after 2011. At the end, therefore, his administration was dominated by IRGC and the Basij.

2013–2016: ELITES UNDER ROUHANI AND CONTINUING COMPETITION

The victory of Hassan Rouhani in the 2013 presidential election has precipitated another shift in the elites' configuration. Given Rouhani's membership in the pragmatist clergy, his victory was seen as an opportunity for the clerics and technocrats to regain the power which they had lost much of under Ahmadinejad.³⁵ Many of the Grand Ayatollahs, or *Marija-e Taqlid* (Sources of Emulation), supported the election of Rouhani based on his clerical background.³⁶

He also attempted to de-racialize public administration and normalize Iran's domestic and foreign policies. To do that, he selected a cabinet bolstered by religious technocrats. This is a point demonstrated in part by the fact that the Rouhani Cabinet has more PhDs from U.S. universities than the Obama Cabinet.³⁷ Rouhani, a technocrat himself, was expected by cabinet members to rehabilitate Iran's crippled economy, which had suffered from banking and economic sanctions. To do so, Rouhani selected people such as Javad Zarif, a University of Denver alumnus and former Ambassador to the UN, as Iran's foreign minister. Zarif's selection was intended to assist with the management of Iran's nuclear programs and to ease sanctions placed on Iran by the UN, United States, and many European countries. Relying on technocrats, and with the support of Iran's Supreme Leader, Rouhani was able to sign a nuclear deal with the P5+1 (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, and the United States) in July 2015.³⁸ Rouhani also revived Iran's MPO, which, as previously described had been hastily dissolved by Ahmadinejad.³⁹

It is widely believed that Rouhani has been more supportive of the *Artesh* (army) than the IRGC during the Iran–Iraq War.⁴⁰ Since taking office in 2013, Rouhani has thus tried to limit the IRGC's involvement in Iran's economy and politics by replacing IRGC personnel with technocrats at the bureaucratic and provincial levels. As a result, many of the IRGC commanders appointed as provincial governors during Ahmadinejad's presidency have been replaced by

technocrats and bureaucrats. Rouhani has also replaced the IRGC's economic powerhouse—the construction conglomerate *Khatam al-Anbiya*—with international companies with respect to the signing of new contracts.⁴¹ In a speech, Rouhani praised the army as opposed to the IRGC, claiming that Iran's army “has protected the country “without requesting its share from the nation and the elected government.”⁴² Rouhani's comments were an apparent reference to the IRGC's consistent desire to be involved in Iran's economy and politics. The gap between Rouhani and the IRGC has deepened since then. From the Guard commanders' perspective, Rouhani and his administration should be contained. That is why the IRGC, as well as other hardliners, have undermined Rouhani's domestic and international policies since 2015, just as in the Reform Era. It seems that the IRGC has been able to block Rouhani's efforts to normalize Iranian policies.

CONCLUSION

Although the configuration of Iran's elites has evolved since the Islamic Revolution, it continues to consist of three main groups: the clergy, the military/security forces (e.g., the IRGC), and technocrats. The relationships between these three political groups have led to the emergence of new alliances. Three forms of alliances have emerged: the clergy-military, the clergy-technocrats, and the technocrat-military. In the 1980s, the clergy-military alliance was the dominant axis, and the clergy had the upper hand therein. In the 1990s, power shifted in favor of the technocrats and against the Revolutionary Guard. During the Hashmi period (1989–1996), the clergy-technocrats alliance was dominant, and the clerics had more weight. However, during Khatami's presidency, this alliance changed to a technocrat-clergy alliance in which the bureaucrats had the upper hand. The power shifted again under Ahmadinejad as the IRGC-clergy alliance became the most important group and base of the hardliner administration (2005–2012). Currently, under Rouhani's presidency, technocrats have returned to power, and they are responsible for shaping government policy. Some politicians are close to the clerical establishment (*Howzeh*), while others are close to the bureaucracy and military. For example, Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, is closer to the alliance of the clergy and the military (IRGC), while President Rouhani identifies more with the axes of the clergy and the bureaucracy. Examples of figures known to be closer to the axes of military and bureaucracy include Ali Larijani, Speaker of Parliament, and Mohammad Qalibaf, the Mayor of Tehran. These three axes, the clergy-military, the clergy-technocrats, and the

technocrat-military, have different political, social, cultural, and even economic orientations, so the dominance of one group over another has a crucial impact on Iran's domestic and foreign policies. The future of the Islamic Republic will be shaped by the abilities of these axes to influence elections, the selection of the next president, and most importantly, the appointment of the next Supreme Leader. The leaders who are affiliated with the clergy-military can move Iran in a different direction, possibly toward a more militaristic regime, compared to leaders who are closer to the clergy-technocrats axis. 

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