The Iranian political elite, state and society relations, and foreign relations since the Islamic revolution

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Conclusion

This study analyzes the dynamics of factionalism among the political elite in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the approaches of the different political factions to economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy issues from the Islamic Revolution in 1979 until 2007.

The modern secular-authoritarian regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was overthrown in 1979 by a coalition of a wide range of secular and Islamic social forces. Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in establishing a semi-theocratic republic as a result of his ability to mobilize Shi’ite religious institutions and his focus on mass grievances against the Shah’s regime, as well as the failure of Mohammad Reza Shah to keep the support of the modern urban social forces he had created by rapid modernization from above in the 1960s and 1970s. The Islamic revolution caused a fundamental change in the composition of the political elite in Iran, whose secular oriented members were replaced by mainly clergies and religious laypersons. The nature of the political system of the IRI is unique as it is based on: a combination of state institutions that derive their legitimacy from Islamic law – the religious supervisory bodies (the Council of the Guardian [Majles-e Khouregan], the Expediency Council [Majma’-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam], and the Assembly of Experts [Shora-ye Maslahat-e Nezam]); republican institutions legitimized by the people (the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary); and major semi-governmental economic institutions (the religious foundations [bonyads]).

The basic principle of the political system is the velayat-e faqih (the Government of the Jurist) system, as developed by Ayatollah Khomeini, according to which the supreme leader (vali-e faqih) is the head of the political system. The supreme leader, who is not elected by the people, may overrule any bills passed by the legislative. The power of the supreme leader, however, is not absolute, but checked by the religious supervisory bodies. Together, the supreme leader and the religious supervisory bodies oversee the republican institutions. This creates a continuous tension between the supreme leader and the religious supervisory bodies on the one hand, and the republican institutions on the other.

Legal political parties do not exist in the IRI. Political factions represent the different approaches to economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy. The main political factions are the Conservative faction, the Pragmatist faction, and the Reformist faction. The political factions are not homogenous but loose coalitions of groups and individuals with similar views. They have no coherent organizational structure and no official program. Sometimes, different opinions within factions can even cause disruptions and result in alliances with other factions or the decline and emergence of new factions. The extent to which a political faction participates in policy formulation, or the political discourse depends, on what faction or alliance of factions control (semi-) governmental institutions in a certain period of time. However, though the domination of the republican
The Iranian political elite institutions has shifted between the factions several times, the religious supervisory bodies, the military, and the religious foundations have, since the Islamic revolution, been under control of the Conservative faction. That means, the Conservative faction has continuously ruled over key state institutions and, consequently, has had a decisive influence on economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy formulation.

The different approaches of the political factions to economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy issues have an ideological and a material component. Firstly, there are diverse opinions between and within factions on whether Islamic jurisprudence should be the only or main basis of the legal system in the IRI. The Conservative faction considers Islamic jurisprudence - with varying interpretations - an important constituent of the juridical system in Iran. For the Pragmatist faction, Islamic jurisprudence is of relevance on the socio-cultural level but less on the economic level. The Reformist faction considers Islamic jurisprudence insufficient to address all issues in the Iranian society. Secondly, the political factions defend the material interests of their members and of economic groups that support them. The Conservative faction represents the interests of the traditional economic sector (the bazaaris), as well as ultra-orthodox clergy, and the highly religious public. It receives its major income from official economic sources based on fiscal instruments (taxes, fees, and borrowings) and oil/gas revenues (sources of foreign currencies), as well as from religious sources (the mosques, the Shiite holy shrines and sites) and the religious foundations outside the fiscal instruments. The other two main factions, the Pragmatist and the Reformist factions, rely only on the official fiscal sources. The Pragmatist faction is supported by (religious) technocrats, parts of the middle class, and segments of liberal tendencies. The Reformist faction represents the interests of a wide range of (secular) social groups among which women, students, and intellectuals.

The Conservative faction is in favor of trade liberalization but objects to large-scale privatization policies, which could counter the interests of the traditional economic sector and the religious foundations. The Pragmatist and Reformist factions represent liberal tendencies or support economic liberalization policies with a limited role for the state. More recently, parts of the Reformist faction, among whom former President Khatami, have called for a reduction of power of the supreme leader in favor of the legislative. A reform of the political system, however, is neither in the interest of the supreme leader himself nor of the religious supervisory bodies, who would fear losing their influence on policy formulation and the support of the traditional economic groups and institutions.

With the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president the neo-Conservative faction (a minority-branch of the Conservative faction) has risen to power. This group became radicalized after the Iran-Iraq war when it was excluded from policy-making by the Pragmatist faction, the dominant faction at the time. Its members are younger ideologues closely connected to the revolutionary military forces. They see themselves as the true defenders of Khomeini’s Islamic ideology and argue that no government until
now has succeeded in establishing a “true Islamic state” in Iran. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represents segments within society, especially among the urban and rural poor, who seek to improve their economic situation, but at the same time are socio-culturally conservative. In the presidential elections of 2005 many of those urban and rural poor felt that their interests were best represented by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and voted for him, whereas reform minded Iranians, due to the lack of truly alternative candidates, did not participate in the elections.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, however, cannot undermine the gradual and increasing trend of public demands for political, economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy change. This has been shown on many occasions in parliamentary, presidential, and local council elections, which, several times, were won by the Pragmatist and Reformist factions. An important aspect of this trend towards reforms is that the composition of the Iranian population has changed significantly since the Islamic revolution. Iran’s population has more than doubled since before the Islamic revolution, with the number of young people under the age of 30 amounting to about 70 percent of the total population while the population of over 65 year olds is less than 5 percent. Young Iranians are frustrated with the poor economic prospects and socio-cultural restrictions in Iran. They are the children of the information age participating in discourses on world peace, human rights, and democracy on the World Wide Web. Another important aspect is the level of education of women. Though women have to experience great limitations to their private and public freedom in the IRI, the situation of female education has improved significantly compared to the Shah’s period. Today 50 percent of university students are women. Women are aware of their rights, much more than during the period of the Shah and organize themselves to defend these rights. Another important aspect worth mentioning is the discourse among clerical and (religious) intelligentsia that emerged after the death of Khomeini. Many of these intellectuals were passionate supporters of the Islamic revolution, but have turned into reformers and now belong to the greatest critics of the velayat-e faqih system. Their discourses involve issues such as the role of religion in politics and the extent to which the clergy should be involved in politics, and thus touch the very heart of the political system of the IRI.

Since the Islamic revolution, the political factions, especially the Conservative faction, have used foreign policy to cover up social and economic problems and challenges at home. For example, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) the Islamic regime was able to unite the political factions and the Iranian people against the aggressor Iraq and all Western countries that supported it and, therewith, divert interest from solving economic problems to foreign policy goals. In general, two main positions of the political factions on foreign policy can be distinguished: (1) The first group is represented mainly by the Conservative faction. It sees the Iranian society as part of the ummah (Islamic community) and emphasizes the identity of the Islamic revolution and the return to Islamic values. In order to reach these goals, the IRI has to have a good partnership
with Islamic countries, but not necessarily their governments, and also refrain from rapprochement with the United States (US). This position was dominated by the two main ideological foreign policy principles of the Islamic revolution: “Neither East nor West,” and the “Export of the Revolution” which were followed in the first ten years after the Islamic revolution. Today, due to the huge economic problems in Iran, segments of the Conservative faction have softened their position on these two foreign policy principles; (2) The second group is represented by the Pragmatist and Reformist factions. These factions are convinced that Iran has to play a key role in international relations, as international trade and international diplomatic relations are preconditions for economic development in Iran. Since the late 1980s the Pragmatist and Reformist factions have been the driving forces behind the IRI’s international economic policies and improvements in diplomatic relations with the Persian Gulf countries, European Union (EU), China, India, Central Eurasia, Russia, and, also, the US. Several events had a great impact on reversing the foreign policy approach: (1) The death of Ayatollah Khomeini; (2) The emergence of the Pragmatist faction into power in 1989; (3) The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988; (4) The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; (5) The larger US military presence in the Persian Gulf since the Kuwaiti crisis (1990-1991); and (6) the economic problems in the IRI.

Parts of the Conservative faction have complicated Iran’s foreign relations by: financially supporting subversive militant groups in Muslim countries; suppression of Iranians in exile; accusing western citizens of blasphemy; or by non-recognition of the state of Israel. Nevertheless, despite these different approaches to foreign policy also the Conservative faction also agrees that Iran should be a key player in international relations. Since 1989, this foreign policy goal has been more or less independent of what composition of factions controls the republican institutions and religious supervisory bodies in a certain period of time.

That means, in contrast to the economic and socio-cultural levels, factional rivalries are of less importance on the foreign policy level. The interaction with other countries and regions plays a much greater role in foreign policy formulation than factional rivalries. For example, the discussions on the nuclear issue in Iran cut across the different political factions. Some Conservatives are against the possession of nuclear weapons, while some Reformists argue that the development of nuclear weapons is Iran's right and a national security imperative. At the same time, the nuclear issue is a means for the Iranian regime to find legitimacy at home. Many Iranians believe that Iran has the right to possess nuclear technology. They believe that the control of nuclear weapons would grant the country respect internationally and would improve Iran’s international scientific status. However, this should not be at the expense of Iran’s international relations. Confrontation and international isolation do not solve the country’s economic problems. The Iranian government yet again fears that if it gives in on the nuclear issue, the EU and the US might have other demands in areas such as: human rights; terrorist groups; recognition of Israel; or, worst of all, regime change. Thus, for the Iranian
government, the nuclear issue is also a test case to prevent international interference in affairs at home.

The political regime in Iran so far has been stable despite the contradictions inherent to the political system of the IRI, which are: (1) The divisions of competencies between the supreme leader, the religious supervisory bodies, and the republican institutions; and (2) The political factions’ different approaches to economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy issues. The political regime has been stable in spite of the significant urge for political, socio-cultural, and economic reforms among large parts of the Iranian population. Nevertheless, the political factions, and especially the Conservative faction, are in a dilemma. If the Conservative faction gives in to the demands for reforms it will lose the support of the traditional economic groups and, therewith, an important base of power. If, in the long-term, it negates the longings for change, there is a possibility of an overthrow of the political regime from below. In that case, the cards of political power will be shuffled anew with a yet unclear outcome of what type of political regime might follow.