

# The Islamic Republic of Iran and Its Opposition

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## A Stylized Fact of Iranian Politics

This essay takes a stylized paradoxical fact of Iranian politics under the Islamic Republic of Iran as its starting point: the stark confusion between the position and a good portion of the opposition.<sup>1</sup> Such a blurred frontier between “position” and “opposition” did not exist during the shah’s regime.

Without the decisive support of non-Islamic organizations, secular intellectuals, and political forces on the ground, the creation of a theocratic regime in Iran and its consolidation could not be realized. The theocrats gained the hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of the word, by winning the support of nonclerics. Antonio Gramsci’s concern with the Catholic Church and fascism’s popular appeal in the civil society led him to stress the importance of the cultural dimension of political struggle in then Italy. In that sense, hegemony is not a question of conquering the coercive arm of the state (political society) through a war of position. Rather, it is a matter of winning the “cultural” battle in civil society through a war of attrition. To put it in Gramsci’s own words, “It should be remembered that the general notion of state includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that state = political society + civil society), in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, the Iranian Shiite clergy first gained hegemony in the civil society and then conquered the coercive apparatus of the state.

Now on the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Republic, the open opposition of many influential clerics toward how the government is run under the present supreme leader and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad provides a new episode of “opposition” within the theocrats’ circles. One of the latest salient illustrations is the accusations against the instigators of “soft” or “velvet” revolution in Iran in the aftermath of the so-called presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> The

Mehrdad Vahabi thanks the participants of the international conference “Retreat of the Secular? Challenges of Religious Fundamentalism” (1–3 May 2009, York University, Toronto) for their constructive and useful comments on his preliminary reflection about this issue, in his paper “Islamic Republic of Iran, Clerics, and Non-Clerics: Who Is the Opposition?” ([www.yorksecularism.com/](http://www.yorksecularism.com/)).

*of Capital*, ed. Friedrich Lutz and Douglas Hague (London: Macmillan, 1961), 177–222.

2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1980), 263.

3. The electoral fraud of June 2009, orchestrated mainly by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) and the Basijis paramilitary volunteer force, was massive, as demonstrated in two recent statistical reports: Ali Ansari, Daniel Berman, and Thomas Rintoul, *Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran’s 2009 Presidential Election* (London: Chatham House and the Institute of Iranian Studies, University of St. Andrews, 21 June 2009), and

1. The term *stylized facts* was coined by the economist Nicholas Kaldor in the context of a debate on economic growth. A stylized fact is a simplified presentation of an empirical relationship that lasts for a certain period of time. See Nicholas Kaldor, “Capital Accumulation and Economic Growth,” in *The Theory*

list of “instigators” is long: Mir Hossein Mousavi (the prime minister during Sayyed Ali Khomeini’s presidency [1985–89]), Mehdi Karubi (the spokesman of the sixth parliament), Mohammad Khatami (the president from 1997 to 2005), Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (the president during 1989–97 and until recently the chair of the Assembly of Experts and the Council of Expediency),<sup>4</sup> and all the political formations with ties to the above mentioned figures. In fact, a good number of eminent political figures of the thirty years of the Islamic Republic are now considered renegades. Conversely, one wonders whether Ahmadinejad and the major political force behind him, namely, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC), are not replacing the Islamic Republic for an Islamic military government.

To put this paradoxical fact differently, it should be emphasized that no regime in Iran’s modern history has produced so much “opposition” within its own ranks and enjoyed the loyalty of its “oppositions” at the same time. How could this paradox be explained?

### Emergence of Shiism as a Political Force

It was with the rise of Shah Isma’il I (1501–24) and the foundation of the Safavid Empire that the Ithna ‘Ashari, or “Twelver,” form of Shiism was established as the state religion in Iran.<sup>5</sup> Facing a predominantly Sunni society, the new rulers had to import Shiite theologians from other Islamic lands to spread the new creed and lay the juridical foundation of the emerging state. The accomplishment of this mission in a span of two hundred years brought into existence an entirely new social strata in the Iranian society, that of the ulema, the Iranian Shiite clergy.

The downfall of the Safavid Empire (1722) and the disintegration of central power did not result in the dissolution of the Iran’s Shiite clergy. They survived anarchy and resisted the animosity of Nader Shah, the founder of

the Afsharid dynasty (1736–60), who discarded Shiism as the state religion and adopted Sunni Islam. They also survived the anticlerical policy of Karim Khan Zand (1705–79), who demanded their participation in productive processes.

The advent of the Qajars (1796) was a turning point in the social existence of the Iranian Shiite clergy. Besides the madrassas (traditional schools), an array of judicial and legal functions as well as charity endowments were administered by the ulema.<sup>6</sup> Their cooperation with the state during the first Perso-Russian war of 1804–13 improved their ranks in the sociopolitical structure.<sup>7</sup> Their all-out participation in the civil war against the Babi movement (1848–50) raised them to prominence.<sup>8</sup> As Said Amir Arjomand correctly states:

From the last decades of the eighteenth century onward, the autonomy of the Shi’ite hierocracy made an alliance with civil society—with urban guildsmen, merchants and shopkeepers—possible and likely. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, an enduring alliance against the state between mosque and bazaar came into being. Against the background of noticeable growth of the economic power of civil society, this alliance was cemented by the common opposition of the two parties to foreign penetration that resulted from the political privileges and economic concessions granted to imperialist powers by a servile state.<sup>9</sup>

As such, long before the conquest of *state* power, these forces were influential in the *public* arena and instrumental in the precapitalist segment of the civil society. The main issue is then to grasp the role of the Shiite hierocracy as a source of social integration.

### Religious Hierarchy and Polanyi’s Triad

Karl Polanyi’s triad regarding various forms of social integration, namely, reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange, might be an appropri-

Walter R. Mebane, *Note on the Presidential Election in Iran, June 2009* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 29 June 2009). A somewhat similar massive electoral fraud occurred during the ninth presidential elections in June 2005 and the eight parliamentary elections in March 2008. See Ali Alfoneh, “Iran’s Parliamentary Elections and the Revolutionary Guards’ Creeping Coup d’Etat,” *AEI Middle Eastern Outlook*, no. 2 (2008), 1–7. Massive electoral fraud is an appropriate barometer of the increasing influential role of the IRGC and Basijis.

4. On March 8, 2011, during the production process of this article, Rafsanjani had to resign from this position and was replaced by Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani.

5. Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (1980, repr.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 2.

6. Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

7. Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

8. Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

9. Arjomand, *Turban for the Crown*, 15.

ate venue to tackle this problem.<sup>10</sup> Compared to other theoretical frameworks in which productive logic occupies pride of place, Polanyi's "transaction modes" are more appealing in comprehending Iranian contemporary history, given the importance of the rentier state based on petrol revenue and authoritarian institutions.<sup>11</sup> The underdeveloped character of the industrial or productive sector has accordingly been related to the "Dutch Disease."

Polanyi's three main typical or ideal forms of social integration can be summarized as follows.

1. *Reciprocity* relates to an overarching social pattern and differs from the modern usage of the term that refers to bilateral interaction. It assumes another specific institution as background, namely, symmetrically arranged groupings such as a kinship system. Individuals as members of a tribe, clan, family, or religious community often identify themselves with the group, and their adherence to rules constitutes the code of honor.
2. *Redistribution* hinges on the presence of some measures of centrality in the group such as the state or religious hierarchy and designates movements of appropriations toward a center and away from it.
3. *Exchange* requires a specific institution, namely, archaic markets or a system of modern price-making markets.

It becomes clear that religious hierarchy has played an important role in both reciprocity and redistribution. For instance, the religious hierarchy in ancient Egypt constituted a center through which the redistributive mechanism became functional in fields such as social insurance, education, and social obedience. Similarly, the Christian Roman Church provided a central bureaucracy, a hierarchical educational system, and social insurance in the midst of a fragmented political order in Western Europe. It was not by accident that on the old continent,

the secular movement advocated both the separation of the state from the church and the separation of the education and health systems, the two important institutions of the civil society, from the church. The Christian Church as a mega institution has contributed extensively to another form of social integration, namely, reciprocity through the internalization of informal rules of conduct, traditions, and customs.

### The Shiite Hierarchy and the Central State

Unlike the Christian Roman Church, the Shiite hierarchy in Iran was not a source of unified central administration. The central government played a primary role in originating certain social classes and safeguarding property relations. Yet the modernization of state apparatus and the transformation of the traditional army into a standing army came gradually during the period (1796–1925), as the ulema, a faction of the courtiers, the nobility, and tribal lords resisted any radical change.<sup>12</sup> Their resistance and outright rejection of any measure toward modernization and capitalist development retarded the growth of the bourgeoisie, which had to face the challenge of foreign capital at the same instance. The dwindling economic power of the latter and the increasing dependency of the corrupt, arbitrary, and tyrannical state on czarist Russia and Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth century changed the configuration of forces on the ground. Resentment against Muzaffar al-Din Shah's (1905–6) autocratic rule reached a point where an amalgam of premodern and modern forces joined ranks.

The constitutional revolution (1905–9) created the Majlis (parliament), introduced legislation, ratified the constitution, instigated a form of parliamentary democracy, and curtailed the power and authority of the monarch. Yet its supplementary laws (Article 1) stipulated that "the official religion of Iran is Islam of Twelver Shi'i and that the king must be a be-

10. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944); Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi*, ed. George Dalton (New York: Doubleday, 1968).

11. Nazih N. Ayubi's description of the Arab state and the Middle East politics and society is a good illustration of Marxist analysis in terms of modes of production. See Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995). For a study of the sources of despotism in Iran, see Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926–1979* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

12. See Stephanie Cronin, *The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1910–1926* (London: Taurus Academic Studies, 1997).

liever in this religion and propagator of it.” Moreover, article 2 of the constitution concedes “that no law can be ratified if in disagreement with Islam.”<sup>13</sup> To insure this, article 2 of the supplementary laws also calls “for the formation of a permanent council of five *mujtaheds* [doctors of jurisprudence] to review all laws before their passage.”<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that the emphasis on Shiite Islam and the role of the *mujtahids* in overseeing legislation did not appease the Islamic fundamentalists, who opposed the very principle of the constitution and called for the implementation of the Sharia (the sacred law). The intrigues of courtiers against the nascent order under the auspices of Mohammad Ali Shah; the bombardment of the Majlis by the shah’s private Russian-led army, the Cossacks (1908); and the restoration of autocracy could not come without the active support of the most eminent *mujtahid* of Tehran, Sheikh Fazlullah Nouri, and his followers.

#### Absence of a Secular Discourse

“The constitution of 1906 and the Supplementary Constitutional Laws of 1907 . . . established the principle of the sovereignty of the nation, but the Majlis was unable to institute the separation of religion and state. Instead the new supplementary laws became a vehicle through which the Shi’ite ‘ulama safeguarded their institutional and ideological domination within the new political order” that was established after the armed insurrection of the constitutionalists, the deposition of Mohammad Ali Shah, and the crowning of Ahmad, his twelve-year-old son.<sup>15</sup>

The question is then why the secular intelligentsia and the nonreligious party could not develop a secular discourse, why they shied away from disengaging the Sharia from the constitution of a modern state in a multireligious society and did not fight for the separation of religion and state. Unlike European and Ameri-

can enlightened intellectuals, Iran’s progressive forces argued for the compatibility of the principles of Modernity (Reason, Science, progress, liberty, and modern democracy) with the Sharia. As in Latin Europe, in Iran radical elements of the intelligentsia waged a vehement struggle against the clergy. Led by Ali Akbar Dehkhoda and the journal *Sur-e Israfil*, they were labeled *ulama-ye su* (false ulema) or *tojjar-e din* (traders in religion), “who have no other purpose than the cult of the self and love of leadership.” But even Dehkhoda, when attacked by the reactionary forces, took refuge in religion, proclaiming that “true Islam” is totally different from that of the ulema, who have obscured the true spirit of Islam and created a theology that is nothing more than a concoction of “Greek, Indian, Chaldean, and Jewish nonsense.”<sup>16</sup>

#### Secularism from Above

The British-backed coup d’état of February 1921, the rise to power of the Cossack army commander Reza Khan and his eventual coronation in October 1925, and the dethronement of Ahmad Shah and the fall of the Qajar dynasty paved the way for the rapid implementation of a modernization program long desired by progressive constitutionalists.<sup>17</sup> The modernization model designed by a new generation of young Western-educated intelligentsia along with a few pragmatic veterans of the constitutionalist movement had at its core the formation of a modern unified army, the creation of a central government and an efficient bureaucracy, the expansion of new educational facilities, the settlement of nomadic tribes and their transformation to farmers, and the construction of an infrastructure conducive to the capitalist development of the country. The “new order” which rejected the republic, democracy, free circulation of information, freedom of expression, critical thought, and religious reformation was initially blessed by the ulema.

13. *Iranian Constitution, Supplementary Laws* (7 October 1907), translated into Persian by Edward Brown, *The Persian Revolution 1905–1909* (Washington, DC: Mage, 1995), App. 4, 372.

14. Mangol Bayat, *Iran’s First Revolution: Shi’ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 262.

15. Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 89.

16. Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, *Sur-e Israfil*, No. 4, 20 June 1907.

17. On the British-backed coup d’état, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796–1925* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1999); and Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah: From Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000). As to the way in which the 1921 coup occurred and the modernization path pursued by Reza Shah, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

Soon after the consolidation of Reza Shah Pahlavi at the top of the power pyramid, constitutional monarchy gave way to absolute monarchy and a new autocracy. Determined to implement the pseudomodernist program with the iron fist of the state, Reza Shah wrested control of public education and the administration of justice and legal matters from the clergy, placing it in the hands of the state. His limited, piecemeal secularism from above was accompanied by neither an anticlerical campaign nor the disentanglement of the sacred from the profane, “the religious and the temporal.”<sup>18</sup>

The invasion of Iran in August 1941, the forced abdication of Reza Shah by the Allies, the enthronement of young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the collapse of the old order and the growing involvement of all classes in the political process, and the restoration of democracy, civil rights and sociopolitical freedoms ushered in a new era. Frightened by the “spectre of communism,” the court embarked upon supporting religious institutions in its “Crusade” against a spectrum of “infidels.”<sup>19</sup> Faced with the growing threat of a new dictatorship, the democratic forces forged an alliance against the Islamists, who finally changed camp and supported Mohammad Reza Shah in the August 1953 coup d’état backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) against the government of Mohammad Mosaddeq.<sup>20</sup>

The holy alliance against the Mosaddeqists and the pro-Soviet Stalinist Tudeh Party did not last long. They were warned to stay away from the political process and banished to seminaries. The increasing dependency of Mohammad Reza Shah on the United States, the entrenchment of Iran in the capitalist world system and its responsiveness to the directives of its leading institutions, the necessities of capitalist development and the need to undertake preventive measures against the possibility of a Communist-led revolution persuaded the shah to launch the White Revolution, the kernel of

which was the land reform program. Mohammad Reza Shah’s agrarian reforms led to the massive urbanization of peasants, making them the labor force of the pseudomodernization program crowned by Reza Shah and now continued by his son.

The sidelining of the Shiite clerics, dispossessed of their last prerogative—religious endowments—once again threw the clergy into the ranks of the opposition. Making his rendezvous with history, Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini led the revolt of the precapitalist social classes that conceived the White Revolution as their death nail. The 5 June 1963 uprising of the traditional urban petite-bourgeoisie, bazaar merchants, declassified city dwellers, and the lumpen-bourgeoisie, backed by ex-landowners and disgruntled members of the old ruling class, changed the image of the Shiite clergy in the eyes of the progressive opposition and dissident intellectuals in the struggle against an omnipotent Western-oriented autocracy.<sup>21</sup> The remnants of the national bourgeoisie and the traditional bazaar merchants needed Islamic clerics in opposing foreign capital and restraining the power of a despotic monarch. Hence in Iranian modern history, Shiite Islam represented anticommunism, anticolonialism, and, later on, anti-imperialism in the name of religion and tradition. An examination of the relationship among the clergy, nationalists, and the Left movement in almost all decisive periods of struggle against monarchical rule shows that the nonclerical forces have retreated from secular demands in the name of “unity” with “progressive” and /or “anti-imperialist militant Islam” in fear of losing the support of people. In this respect, years before Michel Foucault’s fascination with Khomeini, intellectuals such as Jalal al-Ahmad praised the Shiite clerics for defending authentic Iranian nativism against the penetration and prevalence of Western cultural values.<sup>22</sup> Thus the weakness of the national and industrial bourgeoisie and the dependency of the authoritarian regime on the United States

18. Bayat, *Iran’s First Revolution*, 9.

19. Nasser Mohajer, “The Stabbing to Death of Dr. Berjis,” *Baran: A Persian Quarterly on Culture, Literature, History and Politics* (Stockholm), nos. 19–20 (2008), 10–24.

20. Nasser Mohajer, “Yesterday and Today,” *Azadi: A Persian Language Quarterly on Politics, History and Culture* (London), nos. 26–27 (2005), 365–71.

21. Nasser Mohajer, “Towards Power,” *Nogtheh: A Persian Language Quarterly on Politics, History and Culture* (Paris), nos. 4–5 (1996), 91–95.

22. See Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

led to the reproduction of a *limited, piecemeal secularism from above*, leaving Islamists to reemerge as a hegemonic force in the public life. As mentioned earlier, despite pockets of secular circles, *there has never been a truly secular movement in recent Iranian history*. Their ever-increasing “anti-imperialist” slogans were welcomed by al-Ahmad, the leading intellectual of the time, and many leaders of the National Front and the Tudeh Party. The imprisonment and forced exile of Khomeini strengthened the position of the emerging “militant clergy” in a society in crisis and in need of a fundamental change.

### Parallel Institutions and Destructive Coordination

The conquest of political power by a political bloc led by a clique of Shiite clerics was a new phase in the religious hierarchy’s role in social integration and/or disintegration in Iran. Although, according to Polanyi, “redistribution” could be managed by either a central state authority or a religious hierarchy, the traditional Shiite religious structure could not be a source of centralization in postrevolutionary Iran.

The Shiite traditional hierarchy is polycentric. The principle of *ijtihad* (the competence of the jurists to derive new legal norms from the sources of the “sacred law”) associated with the Shiite Twelvers’ jurisprudence connotes the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the Koran and the Sunna (prophetic tradition). The opposite of *ijtihad* is *taqlid*, or “imitation.” The masses of the community of believers should imitate a *marja’-e taqlid* (literally “source of emulation”). Because the free interpretation of legal sources is permissible, Shiism acknowledges many sources of emulation. Every Shiite has the freedom to choose his or her own *marja’-e taqlid*.<sup>23</sup>

This leads to a polycentric hierarchy, which is a structural hindrance to a unified state religion and a centralized state hierarchy.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, from its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded on an antagonistic relationship between a centralized bureaucratic and military state apparatus and the traditional Shiite hierarchy. The outcome was a system of *parallel institutions* that pervaded all aspects of social life—political, economic, and cultural. The overarching character of parallel institutions is a salient symptom of state failure, which provides the ground for the foundation of destructive coordination.

Following Polanyi’s triad, Mehrdad Vahabi identifies a new, or fourth, type of social integration that he dubs integration through coercion or destructive coordination.<sup>25</sup> A simple illustration of destructive coordination, compared with other forms of social integration, is the way different types of prisons are coordinated.<sup>26</sup>

- *Redistribution (bureaucratic coordination)* is common in military prisons for *national* soldiers and officers charged with misconduct. In this type of prison, the relationships among prisoners and between prisoners and guards are regulated by official prescriptions and strict administrative regulations.
- *Reciprocity* usually prevails in political prisons under authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Political prisoners look after one another, particularly when one falls ill or is severely tortured. Prisoners act collectively to display their distinct identity as “political” opponents of the regime and boost their morale against prison authorities who continuously try to crush their resistance.<sup>27</sup>
- *Exchange (market coordination)* is used in case of affluent or renowned prisoners (e.g., Paris Hilton) in ordinary or criminal prisons who can bargain for special treatment

23. See Linda S. Walbridge, ed., *The Most Learned of the Shi’a: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

24. It is noteworthy that nationality is not a criterion in choosing a source of emulation. This premodern cosmopolitanism is in tune with the ambition of the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran to expand and export the Islamic revolution. However, this contradicts the requirement of national identity for ruling within a state.

25. For a theoretical formulation of this concept, see Mehrdad Vahabi, “An Introduction to Destructive Coordination,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 68 (2009): 353–86. For an application of the concept to Iran and other countries, see Mehrdad Vahabi, “Between Social Order and Disorder: The Destructive Mode of Coordination,” working paper, *Munich Personal RePEc Archive* (2006), [mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/](http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/); and Vahabi, “Ordres contradictoires et coordination destructive: Le malaise iranien” (“Contradictory Orders and Destructive Coordination: The Iranian Disease”), *Revue Canadienne d’Etudes du Développement* 30 (2010): 503–34.

26. For a formalized version of this example in terms of game theory and a detailed discussion of other illustrations of destructive coordination (e.g., traffic circles and blood transfusion), see Vahabi, “Introduction to Destructive Coordination.”

27. Nasser Mohajer, ed., *The Book of Prison: An Anthology of Prison Life in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, CA: Noghteh Books, 1998, 2001).

and protection with guardians against monetary rewards. Privatization of prisons or their management can strengthen this kind of coordination.<sup>28</sup>

- *Destructive coordination* is the dominant form of coordination in many criminal public prisons throughout the world. A more general philosophical reflection concerning the modern “prison” as the continuation of the medieval dungeon for “surveillance and punishment” reveals the destructive nature of the institution in itself.<sup>29</sup>

One can hardly argue with Foucault and Gilles Deleuze in their description of the destructive dimensions of prison. Yet we refer to destructive coordination in a more specific way. It is based on the predominance of violence in the relationship between guards and prisoners as well as among prisoners themselves. Accordingly, the “law of the jungle” reigns among the various gangs of prisoners, particularly when governors and guards start mistreating them. While the practices employed in Guantanamo are considered illegal on U.S. soil, they were authorized by an appeal to a “state of emergency,” yet the results of detailed investigations on prisons in the United States and France reveal that “every prison has its own Guantanamo.”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the “jungle” has its own “codes and laws,” and one of its inviolable articles is what we find among the Mafia: “It is a fundamental rule for every man of honor never to report a theft or crime to the police.”<sup>31</sup>

In the absence of “public” protection, aggressive behavior permeates all relationships among prisoners. Even an inmate confronted by an aggressive prisoner is advised to act aggressively and accept the cost of giving a “signal” for not being considered a coward. Everyone

fares better in seeking “private” protection by joining a “gang.” Thus retaliation emerges as a way to regulate conflicts. Costly “signaling” and creating the “reputation” of a “tough guy” is a prerequisite of rendering one’s threat credible. Peace between prisoners is then nothing but a “balance of terror.”

In the above-mentioned example, destructive coordination is closely linked to the nature of the prison as a social institution that destroys the vital space of individuals. Apart from this fundamental institutional failure, the lack of “public” *protection* and the need for “private” *protection* nurture destructive coordination. Thus the perpetuation of this type of coordination is related to state failure within prisons. It justifies the existence of gangs and guarantees compliance of the “parallel” codes of prisoners. It also requires the permanent use of direct coercive means to guarantee the unstable dominance of one powerful group over others. It achieves coordination through intimidation, threat, and coercion. This type of coordination is located between social order and anarchy. The social order under the Islamic Republic of Iran is emblematic of destructive coordination.<sup>32</sup>

### Constitutional and Military Theocracy

The seizure of power by theocrats has led to major changes in the Shiite traditional hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> First of all, the control of theocrats over a rentier state warrants their financial independence from their traditional sources of revenue (*khums* and *zekat*).<sup>34</sup> Thus they not only have become financially independent but also have created new praetorian layers under their patronage. The jurisconsult of the supreme leader (*velayat-e faqih*) forms a state religion in which

28. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories, 2003).

29. On the modern prison, see Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir (Discipline and Punish)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); and Gilles Deleuze, “Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle” (“Post-scriptum on the societies of control”), in *Pourparlers (Negotiations)* (Paris: Minuit, 1996), 240–47. There are also situations in which a mixture of different modes of coordination is at work in prisons. In the absence of a political prison, for example, political prisoners as well as military convicts are kept in jail with delinquents under military supervision. See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The House of the Dead* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); originally published 1861–62.

30. Laurent Mouloud, “Chaque prison a son petit Guantanamo . . .” (“Every Prison Has Its Little Guantanamo,” *L’Humanité*, 21 December 2006. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

31. Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 119.

32. As many authors note, Islamic prisons reflect the ideal social order that leaders of the Islamic Republic endeavor to build. See, e.g., Mohammad Reza Nikfar, “Elahyat shekanjeh” (“Theology of Torture”), 2 September 2009, www.akhbar-rooz.com.

33. Mehdi Khalaji, “The New Order of Clerical Establishment in Iran,” *Iran Nameh* 24 (2008): 305–38.

34. *Khums* is the Arabic word for one fifth (1/5). According to Shi’i Islamic legal precepts, it means the one fifth of certain items which a person acquires as wealth and which must be paid as an Islamic tax. *Khums* is particularly taken on spoils of war. *Zakat* or “alms giving,” is one of the duties of Muslims to give 2.5 per cent of their surplus wealth (added value) to charity, especially to the poor and needy.

political considerations over religious priorities are sealed under the title of absolute power of the jurisconsult.<sup>35</sup> This new authority leans more on its new military power than on the clergy.

The natural evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran embraces two apparently opposing but complementary tendencies: a praetorian theocracy and a constitutional theocracy. The first has increasingly relied on the ascending military-industrial complex managed by the IRGC and the paramilitary Basijis in consultation with the supreme leader. This tendency insists on “Islamic governance” and discards its “republican” aspect. The second tendency is supported by some of the old guards and close disciples of Khomeini, now in opposition, who draw their legitimacy from the polycentric Shiite traditional hierarchy as well as the “Islamic civil society.”

Interestingly enough, the concept of civil society reintroduced into the lexicon of political scientists in the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of prodemocracy movements in Eastern Europe was borrowed by the Islamic reformists in Iran after the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88). It was the reformer Islamic philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush who coined the controversial and convoluted concept of “Islamic civil society” under Rafsanjani’s presidency.<sup>36</sup> The idea was turned into a working project by the ex–security chief Saeed Hajarian and his team (most are in prison after the rigged election of June 2009) at the Center of Strategic Studies with the aim of reconstructing the hegemony of the Islamic forces in the civil society. Instead of reducing the Islamic state to its violent coercive apparatus, this project promoted Islamic women, teachers’ and students’ associations, Islamic workers’ and peasants’ organizations, and a variety of nongovernmental organizations to build new bridges with the civil

society. “Islamic civil society” was envisaged to lengthen the life expectancy of the regime as a constitutional theocracy.

In this spirit, partisans of military theocracy are at times depicted as an opposition force against the old guard, whereas the old guard are portrayed as an opposition force against the absolute power of the supreme leader. A constitutional theocracy is then presented as the formal opposition to military theocracy. Advocates of constitutional theocracy vindicate the “Islamic Republic” as it was during the supreme guardianship of Khomeini and argue against either reducing it to a form of “Islamic governance” or transforming it into a “republic.”

As Mousavi, the ex–prime minister and thwarted presidential candidate in the recent fraudulent election, reminded street demonstrators in Tehran on 1 August 2009: “We want [an] ‘Islamic Republic,’ nothing less, nothing more.” He thus repeated the slogan of Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, on the morrow of the Iranian revolution of 1979.

But what is meant by “republic” in the constitution of Iran’s Islamic Republic? If by “republic,” one means a modern democratic form of state based on the sovereignty of people, universal suffrage, and separation of executive, legislative, and juridical powers, then “Islamic Republic” is obviously an oxymoron.<sup>37</sup> However, if “republic” is understood in the premodern sense of the term as a council-based as opposed to a monarchical government, then using the term *Islamic Republic of Iran* to depict a pluralist decision-making system within the partisans of *velayat-e faqih* is justified.<sup>38</sup> This oligarchic pluralism is compatible with the traditional Shiite polycentric structure.

The active intervention of the IRGC and the Basijis in Iran’s economy and politics undermines the notion of “republic” in the lim-

35. The institution of *velayat-e faqih*, or “guardianship of the jurisconsult,” is Khomeini’s legacy to Shiite political theory and praxis. “The jurisconsult, or Supreme Leader, is a highly esteemed cleric chosen by his peers on the eighty-six-member Assembly of Experts in recognition of his knowledge of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, and his other religiopolitical credentials. The Supreme Leader’s role is to guide Iranians (and, in theory, other Muslims) toward the just government of God. His powers are wide ranging. He is the commander-in-chief of Iran’s armed forces,

may veto the president’s decisions, and is charged with protecting the government’s Islamic character.” Bahman Baktiari, “Dilemmas of Reform and Democracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 114.

36. For a more detailed discussion regarding Islamic political notions and civil society, see Sohail H. Hashmi, ed., *Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism, and Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univer-

sity Press, 2002); and Mohammed Hashim Kamali, “Civil Society and Islam: A Sociological Perspective,” *European Journal of Sociology* 42 (2001): 457–82.

37. Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997).

38. William R. Everdell, *The End of Kings: A History of Republics and Republicans* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).



ited premodern sense of the word. When the rentier position of the Shiite oligarchy's major representatives such as Rafsanjani, Abbas Vaez Tabasi, and their cronies is menaced by the ascending position of the IRGC, and when the rivalry among different factions of the Islamic Republic is not decided through electoral means, inevitably the pillars of the "Islamic Republic" are pushed into "opposition."<sup>39</sup>

This conflict's economic aspect in particular should be stressed, since the allocation of resources in destructive coordination is based on appropriative or predatory activities. Traditional merchants and the petite-bourgeoisie (*bazaaris*) were the lifeblood of the Shiite clergy before the 1979 revolution. After the revolution, the Shiite clergy's hegemonic position in the state led to the formation of *bonyads* (Islamic economic foundations). Postrevolutionary Iran has been witnessing the dominance of destructive coordination with *bonyads* as its particular economic institution.

*Bonyads* are regarded as "paragovernmental" or "parastatal" foundations."<sup>40</sup> There exists a great variety of *bonyads*, among which Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan (BMJ; Foundation of the Oppressed and Self-Sacrificers) and Bonyad-e Shahid (Martyrs' Foundation) are the most prominent. The BMJ was set up after the assets of the late Mohammad Reza Shah and fifty-three industrialists were confiscated in the aftermath of the revolution. This seizure conformed with Khomeini's injunction that categorized these assets as "spoils" and his insistence that "they must be kept and controlled separately from state properties."<sup>41</sup>

The size and scope of the BMJ is similar to that of the state. With holdings worth U.S.\$12 billion, the BMJ constitutes the largest nonstate sector in the economy, second in size only to the National Iranian Oil Company. Although there is no accurate information about the BMJ's ac-

tivities, a result of its total opacity, the recent economic report of the French Embassy in Tehran estimates that its different branches contribute 7–10 percent of the Iranian gross domestic product.<sup>42</sup> The BMJ operates like a holding, with many enterprises extending into almost all sectors of the economy, such as mining, housing, manufacturing, trade, shipping, transportation, the airline, tourism, agriculture, and the food and beverage industries. Recently, the BMJ has been strengthening its position in the energy and communication sectors.<sup>43</sup>

At the outset, the *bonyads* were acting mainly as the authoritative financial resources of the Shiite clergy and bazaar merchants. But not long after the Iran-Iraq war, the IRGC also began its industrial and profit-making undertakings. In fact, Rafsanjani's government encouraged the IRGC to engage in economic activities to bolster its budget. The corps took control of several confiscated factories and established the *moavenat khod-kafae* (headquarters of self-sufficiency) and *moavenat bazsazi* (headquarters of reconstruction). In 1990 the headquarters became the famous firm Khatam al-Anbia. The firm has been awarded more than 750 contracts in various construction, infrastructure, oil, and gas projects. Apart from its declared enterprises, the IRGC is reported to control an underground shadow economy of black-market goods, smuggled into Iran via illegal jetties and other entry points under its sole control. The new IRGC economic empire aspires to pry loose the clergy's grip on the Iranian economy and dominate the *bonyads*.

The transformation of the Islamic Republic into a military theocracy requires the end of limited oligarchic pluralism and its Shiite Akhabari principle, namely, *ijtihad*. This will lead perhaps to the victory of the supreme leader and state religion over the polycentric Shiite structure. But in such a circumstance,

39. See Frederic Wehrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Alireza Nader, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, and S. R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009); and Ray Takeyeh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

40. Ali Saeidi, "The Accountability of Paragovernmental Organizations (Bonyads): The Case of Iranian Foundations," *Iranian Studies* 37 (2004): 479–98. Suzanne Maloney, "Agents or Obstacles? Parastatal Foundations and Challenges for Iranian Development," in *The Economy of Iran: The Dilemma of an Islamic State*, ed. Parvin Alizadeh (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 145–76.

41. Saeidi, "Accountability of Para-governmental Organizations," 484.

42. French Embassy in Iran, *Bonyad Mostazafan: La Fondation des déshérités en Iran (Bonyad Mostazafan: The Foundation of the Oppressed in Iran)*, fiche de synthèse (report) (Tehran: Fiche de Synthèse, Mission Economique, 20 June 2006).

43. See Vahabi, "Between Social Order and Disorder"; and Vahabi, "Ordres contradictoires et coordination destructive."

who will really be in command of the state machine: the supreme leader or the IRGC and Basijis? Will the heir of the Islamic revolution be its gravedigger?

### **Conclusion**

The 12 June 2009 presidential election, the nationwide protest movement against its fraudulent outcome and the official results, the open defiance of defeated candidates and the resistance of the entire reform camp to the dictates of the supreme leader, and the worldwide solidarity for the “Iranian opposition” have created an unprecedented crisis for the regime in power. The brutal crackdown of the protest movement(s); the imprisonment, torture, and forced confessions of the “outlaws,” some of the founding fathers of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and fear of the IRGC’s takeover of the state have seen the reform camp drift to the center of Iranian opposition.

The nascent secular movement, in spite of its numerical force and untapped capacity, has been unable to play its own independent role in the ongoing show of force as of now. The question is: will pragmatism triumph over ideology once again and this time with the real prospect of the IRGC’s taking both the state and the economy, or will the secular current stand out and regain its rightful place in the struggle against theocracy and for democracy? The deadlock of Iranian politics is closely linked to the absence of a strong secular and democratic voice independent of the “Islamic civil society.” S