

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTIONS IN IRAN: BALANCE AND CONFLICTS

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Annotation: *This article analyzes the complex and dynamic relationship between religious and secular institutions in Iran. The establishment of the Iranian political system on religious foundations after the 1979 Islamic Revolution determined the dominant role of the clergy in state governance. At the same time, the presence of electoral institutions in the country - the president and the parliament - also forms secular elements based on a certain level of popular participation. This article examines the balance and emerging conflicts between religious and secular institutions from a political, social, and ideological perspective.*

Keywords: *Iran, religious institutions, world institutions, political system, balance, contradictions, Islamic republic.*

Introduction: The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the few political systems in which religious power is combined with public administration in modern times. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a new political model was formed in the country based on the principle of provincial-e faqih (faqih administration). At the same time, the highest political leadership belonged to the religious jurisprudence - a jurisprudence, which strengthened the control of the religion over politics. At the same time, the Iranian Constitution also included world institutions formed through popular elections, such as the president and parliament. The article focuses on the interaction, competition and complex balance between these two forces - religious and world institutions⁶.

The Islamic Republic of Iran stands out among contemporary political systems for its unique governance model rooted in religious ideology. By the mid-20th century, Iran, under the Pahlavi dynasty, pursued a secular, Western-oriented political path. However, this approach provoked discontent among religious circles, clerics, and traditional forces within society. The weakening of Islamic values, economic inequality, and restrictions on political freedoms fueled widespread dissatisfaction. In 1979, under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Revolution overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy and established a new political order based on the concept of "Islamic Republic."

⁶ Schirazi, Asghar. The Constitution of Iran. 1997, p-14.

Following the revolution, a referendum led to the adoption of a new constitution, which defined Iran as an “Islamic Republic”—a hybrid system that was neither fully democratic nor fully theocratic. Nevertheless, in practice, religious institutions quickly assumed dominance over the newly established state apparatus. At the heart of this new political framework lies the principle of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which has defined the political trajectory of Iran ever since.

Velayat-e Faqih is the central principle of Iran’s political theory. Rooted in Shi’a jurisprudence, it holds that during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the most qualified Islamic jurist (faqih) should exercise political leadership. Khomeini elaborated on this idea in his seminal work *Hukumat-e Islami* (Islamic Government), laying the groundwork for religious rule in contemporary times.

According to Articles 5 and 110 of the Iranian Constitution, the Supreme Leader (Rahbar-e Moazzam), chosen based on this doctrine, holds the highest authority in the country. His powers include:

- Acting as the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC);
- Appointing or approving key positions, including the head of the judiciary, the national broadcasting authority, and the president (indirectly);
- Deciding foreign policy and national security matters;
- Supervising and appointing members of key oversight bodies.

The Supreme Leader is not elected by popular vote but is selected by the Assembly of Experts, a body composed of Islamic scholars. This structure ensures that religious authority supersedes electoral legitimacy in Iran’s political system.

Several powerful religious institutions support and extend the authority of the Supreme Leader within the Iranian political structure:

a) Guardian Council (Shura-ye Negahban)

The Guardian Council consists of 12 members—6 appointed by the Supreme Leader and 6 nominated by the judiciary and approved by the parliament. Its main functions are to ensure that legislation passed by the parliament conforms to Islamic law and the Constitution, and to approve or disqualify electoral candidates based on religious and ideological criteria⁷.

Through this council, the Supreme Leader effectively controls both the legislative process and the electoral arena. Reformist and secular candidates are frequently barred from participating in elections.

b) Assembly of Experts (Majles-e Khobregan)

This body is elected every eight years and consists of Islamic scholars. Its official role is to select or remove the Supreme Leader. However, in practice, the Assembly is

⁷ Keddie, Nikki R. *Modern Iran*, p-249-251.

aligned with the Supreme Leader and rarely exercises its oversight power independently.

c) The Clerical Judiciary and Special Courts

Iran's judiciary operates within a religious framework. Special courts for the clergy prosecute cases involving religious figures and ensure internal discipline among clerics. Additionally, regular courts handle criminal, civil, and family law based on Islamic sharia principles.

Religious institutions in Iran exercise power not only through formal constitutional structures but also via ideological and social control. The state media, educational system, religious centers, and mosques are all managed in alignment with official religious ideology.

Organizations such as the Basij (a volunteer militia) play a significant role in maintaining social order and promoting ideological conformity. They monitor societal behavior and serve as instruments of moral enforcement, particularly among the youth. Iran's political system represents a unique fusion of theocracy and republicanism. While democratic structures such as elections, a president, and a parliament exist on paper, their powers are significantly limited by religious institutions. The Supreme Leader, supported by the Guardian Council and other clerical bodies, exercises de facto control over all branches of government. This dominance of religious authority fundamentally distinguishes Iran's political system from conventional democratic models. To fully understand Iranian politics, one must analyze not only its institutional framework but also the religious doctrines and jurisprudential theories that sustain it. The central role of Velayat-e Faqih and clerical oversight shapes the trajectory of governance, making religious institutions the true center of power in the Islamic Republic.

According to the Iranian constitution, presidential and parliamentary elections are held every four years. Although the president is the head of the executive branch of the state, his decisions are often limited by religious institutions, especially the Supreme Leader and the Shura Council. The parliament (Majlis) acts as the legislative body, but any law it approves must first be approved by the Shura Council. This situation indicates that despite the formal democratic structure of the Iranian political system, real political power is in the hands of the clergy. Despite the imbalance, certain areas demonstrate practical cooperation and mutual dependency between secular and religious institutions⁸.

Conflicts between secular and religious institutions often emerge in the following areas:

a) Political Reforms vs. Religious Conservatism:

⁸ Iran Constitution (1979), Article 5, 107.

Presidents such as Mohammad Khatami or Hassan Rouhani have attempted political liberalization, promoting civic freedoms and open society. However, these initiatives have been viewed as threats by religious elites and the Supreme Leader, leading to pushback.

Example: Many reform bills passed during Khatami's presidency (1997–2005) were blocked or nullified by the Guardian Council.

b) Candidate Restrictions:

Reformist or independent candidates are frequently disqualified by the Guardian Council, limiting democratic participation and undermining the authority of secular institutions.

c) Media and Cultural Policy:

While secular bodies aim to promote cultural pluralism and modern values, religious institutions impose strict censorship on the basis of protecting "Islamic morals."

d) Civil Society Restrictions:

NGOs, women's rights advocates, and legal activists are often accused by religious authorities of "Western influence" or "threatening national security," leading to arrests and suppression.

In addition, Iran's political system is a hybrid model combining elements of republicanism and theocracy. Yet, instead of a true balance, the dominance of religious authorities restricts the scope and influence of secular bodies. As a result, political reforms, civil liberties, and institutional independence are significantly limited. Secular institutions tend to reflect the demands and needs of the people but are structurally prevented from making autonomous decisions. This imbalance remains a constant source of internal friction within the regime⁹.

Conclusion. The relationship between Iran's religious and secular institutions is defined by a complex interplay of cooperation and conflict. While institutional frameworks suggest a dual system, in reality, religious dominance shapes the entire political structure, leaving secular bodies with limited and conditional authority.

Understanding this dynamic is essential for analyzing Iran's domestic politics and long-term stability. The ongoing imbalance and ideological conflict between these two poles suggest that the Iranian political system is less a partnership and more a hierarchy, where real power rests with the unelected religious elite.

⁹ Keddie, Nikki R. *Modern Iran*, p-256

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