

Why Iran Seems So Unpredictable

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During its quarter-century of existence, the Islamic Republic of Iran has never ceased to surprise political analysts, and thus has given the impression that it is an unpredictable regime. The election of Mohammad Khatami as an "accidental President" of the Republic in 1997 was one of the best-known events in this never-ending set of astonishments.¹ However, events like the unnoticed disempowerment of Ayatollah Montazeri, who once was the designated successor of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the survival of the regime after the death of its charismatic leader in 1989, could also be considered manifestations of the unpredictability of Iranian politics. This is not to mention Khatami's second election, the very heavy turnout in his two electoral victories in 1997 and 2001, and the not-so-low participation in the seventh parliamentary (*majles*) elections in 2004. The question is thus: Why does Iran seem so unpredictable? I will try to point out some essential factors that in the last 25 years have prevented Iran's political analysts from fully grasping the dynamism of Iran's political life. Its political culture, institutions, and second constitution will be discussed, and some conclusions will be drawn.

Iran's Political Life on the Eve of Revolution

In the winter of 1978, when the street protest movements began against the Shah's imperial regime, Iran's political culture was at its lowest level since the end of the 19th century. Except for one political party established by the Shah, Iran had no political parties, no free press, and no independent syndicates, student unions, or teachers' associations. During his more than three decades in power, Mohammed Reza Shah eliminated all of Iran's political organizations and transformed its loyal opposition into open adversaries. On the eve of the Revolution, few people in Iran believed that the political situation of the country could be improved without a radical change².

Backed by rising oil prices, the economic and political centralization of the imperial regime dramatically accelerated after 1973³. In 1975, the Shah, who acted more and more as an arbitrary ruler, issued an imperial decree abolishing all political parties, including *Iran Novin* (The New Iran), which once had his endorsement, and announced the establishment of a single party, *Rastakhiz* (The Resurrection Party). Every Iranian was supposed to join the party's ranks or leave the country. Seventy years after its Constitutional Revolution, Iran rejoined the long list of Middle Eastern

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¹ The author has not had an opportunity to update his piece, but the editors feel sure he would include the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005 to his list of "accidental presidents." See Shaul Bakhash, "Iran's Remarkable Election," *Journal of Democracy*, 9:1, 1998, pp. 80-94.

² Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982.

³ Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran, 1926-1979*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1981.

countries ruled in a totalitarian style. However, in less than two years, the architects of this last attempt at political networking admitted that the experience was a total failure⁴. It had become clear to everyone that the imperial regime was in deep political crisis.

The opposition to the regime was not in better shape. Traditional political parties had been banned in 1962, and the opposition to the Shah was led more and more by radical and ideological organizations and movements. At the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the young members of the National Front (a secular and democratic coalition that led the oil nationalization during the 1950s) adopted Marxism-Leninism as its ideology and the Cuban Revolution as its model, starting a guerrilla movement⁵. The nationalist-religious Liberation Movement of Iran (*Nehzat Azadi-ye Iran*), the other important “loyal” opposition⁶, also saw its younger members adopt radical ideologies and turn into guerrilla movements⁷. The political clergy that in 1953 feared a communist take-over and helped the Shah re-establish his power⁸ were now led by Ayatollah Khomeini, who from his exile in Najaf, Iraq, influenced a generation of revolutionary clerics to overthrow the regime⁹. Even Iran’s pro-Soviet communist party (*Hezbe Toudeh*), which acted as a loyal opposition party in the 1950s and participated in the *Ghavam Saltaneh* cabinet, now was displaced by Maoist groups who, following the experience of the Chinese Revolution, advocated revolution based on peasant mobilization¹⁰. It is no surprise that Iran after the fall of the Shah had only a handful of 60- and 70-year old men who had been out of the political scene and out of Iran for more than a decade. They returned to build from scratch a new political system that was supposed to be accepted by over 20 million young people who knew nothing about politics but destruction.

Moreover, among all the projections different groups were making for the direction Iran’s politics had to take, only a few were democratic. Concepts like tolerance and dialogue, and political values like multi-party participation and freedom of expression, although not absent in the discourse of political groups and associations, were not common currency. Analysts of Iran’s politics never took seriously the necessity of mapping the political distress of Iran in the first year of the Revolution. The very limited political capability of post-revolutionary Iranian society was accentuated by the fact that the few people in charge of routine politics had the task of making a new constitution.

It is a common assumption among historians and political analysts of the Islamic Republic that the rule of Jurisconsult (*Velayat-e Faghih*) was Ayatollah Khomeini’s political program. In fact, by seeing what emerged as the Islamic Republic’s constitution, it is easy to conclude that *Velayat-e Faghih* was a well-established political system, constructed in detail long before the success of the Revolution and ready to be applied as soon as the imperial regime was overthrown¹¹. The reality, however, is far from that. *Velayat-e Faghih*, as explained in Khomeini’s book on Islamic government,¹² is a theoretical discussion about the necessity for high-ranking clerics to intervene

⁴ Dariush Homayoun, *Dirooz, Emrooz, Farda* (Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow), published by the author, Paris, 1982.

⁵ Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels With a Cause, The Failure of Left in Iran*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1999.

⁶ Houshang. E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics, and Religious Modernism, The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini*, I. B. Tauris, London 1990.

⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: Iranian Mojahedin*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1989.

⁸ Hojatol-eslam Falsafi, *Khaterat va Mobarezat* (Memories and Struggles), Entesharat Markaz Assnad Enghelab Eslami, Tehran 1376 (1997).

⁹ Vanessa Martin, *Khomeiny, Building an Islamic State*, I.B.Tauris, London 2001.

¹⁰ Mehdi Khanbaba-tehrani, *Negahi az darun be jonbesh-e chap dar Iran* (A Look from Within at Iran’s Left Movement), Baztab Publication, Saarbrucken, 1989.

¹¹ This is the basic hypothesis of Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*. I.B.Tauris, London, 1998.

¹² Ruhollah Khomeini, *Hokumat-e Eslami*, n.d, n.p.

directly in politics. Interestingly enough, the few institutional details discussed in this text are in total contradiction with the system established by the 1980s Iranian Constitution. For example, the parliament, as defined in Khomeini's book, is an advisory board whose members are chosen directly by the *Faghih* and are responsible for helping the people in charge of organizing the day-to-day life of the country.

The reality is that the Islamic Republic's constitution is the result of very different points of view, each one backed by one or several political groups that joined efforts to end the imperial regime. These groups did not exhibit a high political culture. The most well-informed of them, the heirs of the National Front and Liberation Movement of Iran, could do no better than propose a text modeled on the 1958 Constitution of the French Fifth Republic as the draft constitution for the new Iranian government. Others proposed retaining the Imperial Constitution, but changing the office of the shah to president of the republic. The most exotic one, which was discussed at length during the sessions of the Constituent Assembly and even more in the press, was a Soviet-based model in which every office of the state was popularly elected, and councils in every area of society were in charge of the country's affairs.¹³

By recalling the existence of a multitude of unsophisticated constitutional projects, I do not aim to present the political map of early post-revolutionary Iran or to link each group and its political projects.¹⁴ Rather, two important realities of Iran's post-revolutionary political life are often forgotten: one is the severe poverty of Iranian political culture at that time, and the other is the heterogeneity of actors, ideas, and political programs that constituted the 1979 revolutionary movement and Iran's post-revolutionary society. The dynamism of Iran's political scene today is the result of these two realities.

Who Won the 1979 Iranian Revolution?

If the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) was the conclusive loser of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, its winner is less evident. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, like all other revolutions, was the result of several oppositional forces that joined together to overthrow a regime whose rule was considered the most important barrier for preventing the country from reaching its destiny. This destiny had yet to be defined, however. The relatively quick institutionalization of the new regime under the patronage of *Velayat-e Faghih*, the clashes between political forces that ended with the elimination of all political formations not showing total allegiance to the Revolution's leader, and the never-diminishing charisma of Ayatollah Khomeini, concealed for some time the heterogeneous character of the Iranian Revolution. As a result, the Iranian Revolution was labeled as the victory of traditionalism over modernism¹⁵ and the Islamic Republic as a traditional political system in complete contradistinction to any modern political one. Thus, while eyewitnesses of the revolutionary movement very often reported the heterogeneity of actors involved in the Iranian Revolution, the traditionalism and revivalism of a homogenous group called the radical clergy became the dominant framework for the analysis of Iran's political life.

This framework prevented political analysts from fully understanding the nature of the coalition that comprised the winning side of the Revolution. Although factions with diverse goals had been fully integrated into the new regime and emerged as the winners of the Revolution, their rivalries and the

¹³ Morad Saghafi, "Shoraha Mo'jezei ke nashod" (Establishment of councils: an unrealized miracle), *Goftogu Quarterly*, no.20, Summer 1377 (1999), pp. 7-23.

¹⁴ The book of Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran*, op. cit. is an important source.

¹⁵ See as example S.A. Arjomand, "Traditionalism in Twenty Century Iran", in *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*, Arjomand S. A. ed., State University of New York Press, Albany, 1984.

fact that they advocated very different programs was not understood. By comparison, the fate of political groups and associations that had openly opposed the new Islamic regime, its constitution, and its leader, and which were soon eliminated from the Iranian political scene, is much clearer. One had to wait until the early 1990s to witness the first studies that seriously questioned the so-called homogeneity of the new political rulers of Iran. In fact, it is only since the early 1990s that it has become evident that, despite the elimination of all forms of opposition, the “Reign of the Ayatollahs” was far from being a Soviet-style monolithic system with clear-cut policy in every social, economic and political area. The world was surprised to discover, as one scholar has noted, that “Iran’s rulers remained divided over fundamental issues of economic policy and social justice, war and export of the revolution, Islam and its various interpretations, civil liberties, and revolutionary justice.”¹⁶

Given this reality, the issue that should have been discussed was the coexistence of these different groups under the same regime. In fact, we should have been more sensitive to the modalities, institutions, and legal frameworks that have been used to allow the new rulers of Iran to live and work together. Looking back, one can see that the easy answer became the dominant explanation to the question of how did these disparate political factions cohabit in the new Islamic Republic of Iran. The generally accepted answer was that Khomeini’s unquestioned authority gave him the possibility of arbitrating between them and thus neutralizing disruptive forces that could emerge from these rivalries. However, this answer was only partly correct. The other reasons for this successful cohabitation could be found in the political institutions built by the new regime for managing its Islamic system. The importance of these political institutions and the way each one controlled the other becomes clear when one considers why the Islamic Republic did not collapse with the death of its singular and charismatic leader. Not only did the Islamic Republic survive after Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989, it became even more capable of handling the day-to-day needs of the country. Analysts who argued that the Iranian Islamic regime would prove dysfunctional after the Ayatollah’s death because of his unique role miscalculated the ability of the government to rebound. The speed with which the system recovered was the second time the Islamic regime surprised its critics and forced them to revise their theories.

Within two months, the Assembly of Experts (*Majles Khobregan*) voted in a new constitution and elected a new leader. Two months before his death, Ayatollah Khomeini had ordered the establishment of the Assembly for the Reappraisal of the Constitution (*Shoray-e Baznegari-ye Ghoanoon-e Assasi*)¹⁷ and directed it to look for ways the executive branch could better manage and administer the country.¹⁸ Referring to the existence of parallel systems of decision-making, Khomeini especially emphasized the country’s need for better administrative discipline and systematic order.¹⁹ The end of the war with Iraq, the death of the charismatic leader, and the reconstruction program presented by the newly-elected president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, overshadowed the importance of the constitutional change and its effect on the political organization of the country. Rafsanjani’s five-year plan, which was approved by the Parliament in January 1990, became the sole subject of discussion regarding the political future of Iran. By pointing to its less ideological and more liberal side—its call to privatize state-owned industries, downsize government, reduce dependence on oil revenues, unify foreign exchange, and attract foreign investments—analysts equated his rise to power with the end of the ideological phase of Iran’s politics.²⁰ Other analysts, however, saw the rise of Rafsanjani as

¹⁶ Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs; Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, (Basic Books, New York, 1986), p. 266.

¹⁷ *Ettelaat* (Daily newspapers), April 26, 1989

¹⁸ For discussion on the Assembly for the Reappraisal of the Constitution, see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, (Syracuse University Press, New York, 2002), pp. 78-103.

¹⁹ *Etelaat*, April 27, 1989

²⁰ Olivier Roy, *L’echec de l’Islam politique*, Seuil, Paris, 1992.

strengthening the role of the state in Iran.²¹ Actually, neither of these two phenomenon happened. Had Iran's political analysts taken the direction set by the constitutional change of 1989 more into account, they could have evaluated more accurately the dominant tendencies in Iranian society and politics.

The importance of the constitutional change of 1989 only became clear when Mohammad Khatami was elected President of the Republic in 1997 and began a real program of de-ideologization of Iranian politics. Only then did it become clear that the success of Rafsanjani's economic plan was directly linked to its refusal to challenge the new directions set by the constitutional change of 1989. In fact, Rafsanjani's economic plan was accepted by the new government only and as far as its actions reinforced the new institutions defined by the new constitution. Rafsanjani did not represent the transition of Iranian politics from an ideological period to a more rational phase. Rather, he was the person who made the transition between the first and the second constitution. The changes introduced by the new constitution of 1989 are fundamental to understanding the dynamism of the period and will be discussed in the next part of this paper through the two most important characteristics that define the Islamic Republic of Iran: the distribution of executive power and the basis for regime legitimacy.

The Second Constitution and the Distribution of Power

The constitution written by the first government of the Islamic Republic was modeled on the Constitution of the French Fifth Republic. It defined two offices for the executive branch: that of president and prime minister. Very soon tension emerged between the president and the prime minister. Although the tension was always present, it never reached a breaking point while Ayatollah Khomeini lived. It has been said that one of the reasons for the amendment of the constitution and the abolition of the office of prime minister in 1989 was to put an end to this tension.²² Amir Arjomand points out, however, that the change "created another problem, or, rather, shifted the same problem upward. The problem soon resurfaced as tension between the popularly-elected President and the clerically-selected Leader of the Islamic Republic."²³ To help the Leader assume his executive tasks, "the amendment of 1989 also recognized the Expediency Council (*majma'-e tashkhis-e maslahat-e nezam*) as an advisory board to the Leader, and empowered it to determine, among other things, the general policies of the Islamic Republic."²⁴ Thus, with the constitutional changes of 1989, the Expediency Council, which was already part of the legislative branch, also acquired executive duties.

The Expediency Council did not take up its expanded duties until 1997. During Rafsanjani's two terms as president, the Expediency Council continued to play the role originally intended for it by Khomeini, which was to break any deadlock between the Parliament and the Guardian Council (*Shora-ye Negahban*). The Guardian Council is a twelve-member body in charge of assuring that laws passed by Parliament are in accordance with the constitution and Islam. It was only with the election of Khatami as president in 1997, however, that the real purpose of the 1989 constitution was institutionalized. In fact, soon after Khatami's election, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Leader, reconfigured the Expediency Council, asked it to assume its function of defining the major policies of the regime, and appointed as its chair Hashemi Rafsanjani, the outgoing president. Experts first

²¹ Jean-Francois Bayard, "Thermidor en Iran", in Fariba Adelkhah, Jean Francois Bayard, Olivier Roy, *Thermidor en Iran*, Seuil, 1994, pp. 10-21.

²² Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*. I.B.Tauris, London, 1998.

²³ Said Amir Arjomand, "Civil Society and the Rule of Law in the Constitutional Politics of Iran under Khatami," *Social Research*, Vol. 67, No. 2, Summer 2000, p. 285.

²⁴ Idem.

analyzed the increased power of the Expediency Council as a reflection of the rivalry between clerical and secular authority,²⁵ with the government representing the latter, and the Expediency Council the former. The rivalry was also described as a reflection of the tension between elected and non-elected bodies in the Islamic Republic of Iran's political life. While it is true that all Expediency Council members are selected by the Leader and that the majority are clerics, the number of non-clerics is not negligible. Moreover, the members of the Expediency Council are chosen so as to represent all the political sensitivities of the Islamic regime. Iran's wartime prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who experienced a very difficult coexistence with the president and the Leader, is a member of the Expediency Council. Clerical members include Abdollah Nouri, who was jailed for his harsh critique of the regime, and Mousavi Khoeyniha, the well-known editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Salam*, which was shut down by the Special Court for Clerics because of its zealous defense of freedom of press.

The real damage done to Iran's politics by the enhancement of the Expediency Council's power does not stem from the fact that it is one more tool in the hands of clerics to control non-clerics. Nor does it emerge from the fact that it is one more non-elected political body opposed to the elected ones. The real damage is that the Expediency Council plays exactly the opposite role of what it was intended to do. Its power was strengthened in theory to ease the work of the executive branch of the government. In reality, however, it became a parallel government without bureaucratic capabilities, thereby preventing the development of the executive branch.

The Second Constitution and the Legitimacy Issue

Today, it is widely accepted that the legitimacy of power in the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on republicanism (the popular vote) and Islamic guidance. What is less evident is the way this cohabitation is managed. The reason for the lack of clarity is simple—the two sources of legitimacy contradict one another fundamentally and profoundly. The republican basis of legitimacy is founded upon the concept of the equality of citizens, while the Islamic basis (especially in Shi'ite Islam) is founded upon the fundamental Islamic distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims and the Shi'ite distinction between the masses and the “source of emulation,” the *marja' taghlid*. The *marja' taghlid* is any one of the few most senior clergy with the highest level of seminary education and the right and knowledge to give religious direction to the mass of followers. He is the “source of emulation,” and they are the emulators (*moghalled*).

One would have thought that these two sources of legitimacy would generate a political crisis in the newly established regime. The first crisis regarding this subject, however, centered on the question of who is responsible for maintaining the Islamic legitimacy of the regime. The constitution set the initial rules. It specified that candidates for government office should be Muslim and faithful to the Islamic Republic's constitution. To the question of who decides who is Muslim, the first constitutionalists responded by creating the office of the Guardian Council, which was also charged with confirming the compliance of parliamentary-approved bills both with the constitution and with Islamic precepts. Ayatollah Khomeini was widely accepted as the most important source of emulation of his time, a fact that was also specified in the first constitution of the Islamic Republic. Thus, he was able to intervene when the Guardian Council exaggerated the application of its duties²⁶.

The 1989 constitution did not require the *Vali-ye Faghih* to be a source of emulation. Moreover, after Khomeini died, Ayatollah Araki was chosen as the highest source of emulation, taking from newly elected Leader Ali Khamenei the authority to overrule the Guardian Council's decisions. After the

²⁵ Ibid, p. 285.

²⁶ For examples of Khomeini's intervention, see Asghar Schirazi, *op.cit.*

death of Ayatollah Araki, in order to prevent the rivalry between the office of the Leader and the office of the highest source of emulation, Ayatollah Khamenei was declared leading the two offices. This political decision, the content of which was only later revealed by Ayatollah Azari Ghomi, did not prevent the Guardian Council from considering itself the sole office in charge of defending the Islamic legitimacy of the regime.

By taking the guardianship of Iran's Islamic legitimacy from the office of the Leader, the 1989 constitution pushed the Islamic Republic one more step toward secularization. It also diminished the power of the executive branch by augmenting the responsibilities of the Leader in policy-making matters. These fundamental changes have been unnoticed by Iran's political analysts, who insist on thinking about Iran in terms of "clerics vs. non-clerics" and "elected offices versus selected ones." It is not difficult to imagine that Iran's political events will once again be surprising and make Iran seem unpredictable.

Conclusion

From its very first day of existence, the regime established by the 1979 Iranian Revolution interested political analysts. More than a thousand articles, books, and research projects have been dedicated to the subject. Thanks to this interesting body of work, we are today much more aware of both the internal dynamism of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its external sensitivities. Because of these studies, it is possible to link Iran's contemporary history with the advent of the 1979 Revolution, thereby integrating the Islamic Republic's experience with the history of Iran. Seen this way, it was not an exceptional event. We are able to understand how religious beliefs can be a source of aspiration for harsh and radical political actions as well as those that are democratic and tolerant. We can see how a Middle Eastern society, despite its serious political and economic limitations, can create a large movement of democratic reform and force the state to accept it as a serious partner. We now know that what was once considered as the most closed system of thought, i.e., religion, can be the subject of drastic transformation and renovation.

However, it seems to me that we still have trouble eliminating the dichotomous concepts that we use to understand historical and social phenomenon in general and Iranian political reality in particular. States are totalitarian or democratic; political regimes are ideological or rational; societies are traditional or modern; political leaders are elected or selected; constitutions are good or bad; people follow a leader or are critically-minded; leaders may be more important than institutions because they are based on a cult of personality, charisma, or autocratic tendencies, or institutions may be more important than the individuals who create and serve them. While these dichotomies give us the possibility of rapid judgment, they also place severe limitations on understanding the social and political changes occurring in Iran, the reasons why these changes happen, and the way they happen. The Iranian experience has shown once again that organized life, be it political, cultural, or social, is far richer than these concepts can address.

Is Iran unpredictable? Or is there a way to approach Iranian politics that could prevent us from being surprised once more about the direction Iranian politics can take in the future. There are a few precautions we can take while analyzing the Islamic Republic of Iran's politics. Four precautions seem to me the most important ones.

- ***The Islamic Republic is seen more as a political experiment than as a theoretically and practically well-established political system.*** The fact that its leaders describe it as a sacred system does not rule out their readiness to reform it. Important amendments introduced by the second constitution show that the architects of the Islamic Republic are ready to reform the system *if they conclude that changes are*

necessary for the survival of the regime. The experimental character of the Islamic Republic inclines us to consider that at every moment of its existence, its functioning is determined by its constitutional framework and by the power struggles between its different factions. Iran's political factions and leaders are living a daily experiment that affects their political points of view and attitudes.

- ***The architects of the Islamic Republic justify their actions in terms of Islamic history.*** However, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a pure invention; it has no predecessor. Actions, policies, decisions, and events are justified as being in continuity or conformity with the past, but in reality they are a break with the past. {Editor's Note: Iran's leaders justify their goal of acquiring nuclear technology as a decision originating with the Shah.} Decisions—whether conformist or reactionary—are made in the name of Islam and loudly declared to be determinant and fundamental characteristics of the Islamic system, yet they generate peripheral effects that are a complete rupture with Iran's Islamic tradition. In the past 25 years, some of these peripheral effects have become more important and central to the process. For example, elections were not part of the original *Velayat-e Faghih* system²⁷. They became a part of the Islamic Republic as the means for the religious element of the Revolution to mobilize popular support. Khomeini used elections effectively to bolster the Revolution's populist and Jacobin politics, outmaneuver his political opponents, and give the Islamic Republic its theocratic constitution.²⁸ His successors and eminent political figures insist that every election symbolizes the unity of the nation. In this regard, the number of voters is more a source for the popular legitimacy of the system than a source of power for the candidate. Successful candidates often thank the people not only for having chosen them but also for demonstrating their faith in the regime by voting. Any election is considered a plebiscite for the regime.²⁹ Elections may not yet have a central role in Iranian politics, but some scholars note that “the practice of voting has produced a distinct political momentum, a set of institutional practices and modes of political behavior which . . . have to become important to its functioning”.³⁰ The same could be said regarding the role of civil society, economic well-being, Islamic democracy, and many other phenomena that were once considered peripheral but have taken on central importance.
- ***The political culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran is limited.*** It has been incapable of allowing free elections; its constitution is open to contradictory interpretations; its political institutions, created to assure checks and balances, often block the political system. However, it has shown two capabilities: first, it has revealed a tremendous talent in smoothly managing the question of succession; and second, it has been able to overcome political crises through internally generated solutions. Succession and internal conflict historically were the weakest points of

²⁷ In general, the Shi'ite political system is very suspicious about voting. Many Shi'ites believe that the voting process was responsible for taking the caliphate from Ali bin Abu Talib (the first Shi'ite imam) after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

²⁸ Ali Ghieissari and Vali Nasr, “Iran's Democracy Debate,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XI, No.32, Summer 2004, pp. 94-106.

²⁹ Morad Saghafi, “The Eight Presidential Elections: Another Election without Choice?” in *An Assessment of the Iranian Presidential Election*, Haleh Esfandiari ed., The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, The Middle East Project, Washington D.C., 2002.

³⁰ Ali Ghieissari and Vali Nasr, op. cit.

Iran's political culture since the rise of the Qajar dynasty in the beginning of the 19th century. Wars generated by the problem of succession are part of Iran's national trauma, while the inability to resolve internal political crises is Iran's national frustration. One should never underestimate the will of Iran's political and economic elite to give the rulers of the Islamic Republic the chance to find solutions to overcome its crises.

- ***We Iranians live two parallel histories in a very special way: a mythological long-term history and a purely rational short-term one.*** The more the short-term history runs against our will, the more we take refuge in the mythological one. Yet, the mythological approach is not completely void of rationality. It has been the way we have found to keep up our pride and survive as a nation. One should never overlook the fact that through the government's ability to mobilize the masses to defend Iran's geographical integrity and win back Khoramshahr in the war with Iraq, the Islamic Republic contributed to Iranian national pride. We are proud of Iran to the point of nonsense. If anyone, be he a tribal chief, a king, a leader, or a foreign government, is able to acknowledge this self-respect, he can see the best in us: our patriotism, our sense of brotherhood, our hospitality, and our peace-loving character. However, if any one, be he a king, a Guardian Council, or a foreign government humiliates Iran by pushing it too far with arrogance, he will see Iranians opposing him, no matter how high the price to be paid.