



IRANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM: “MULLOCRACY?”

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ABSTRACT

The definition of the Iranian political system which was structured after the 1979 Iranian Revolution has long been a matter of controversy among the political scientists. Although Iran is a self-declared Islamic Republic, scholars used or coined various terms such as democratic theocracy, oligarchic theocracy, and religious tyranny to define it. Iran has democratic institutions such as parliament and constitution, but the configuration of them does not make up a liberal democracy. This article analyzes Iranian political system by using the terms of comparative political science and seeks to define it. It examines major Iranian political institutions established after the 1979 Revolution and eventually concludes that the sui generis Iranian political system can be best defined with the term “mullocracy (government of the mullahs)” as the mullahs hold the ultimate political power in the country.

Key Words: Political System, Iran, Theocracy, Mullocracy, 1979 Revolution

JEL Classification: Z0

İRAN SİYASİ SİSTEMİ: “MOLLAKRASI?”

ÖZ

1979 İslam Devrimi'nden sonra kurulan İran siyasi sisteminin tanımı siyaset bilimciler arasında söz konusu devrimden bugüne tartışma konusu olagelmıştır. İran kendisini bir İslam Cumhuriyeti olarak tanımlasa da araştırmacılar İran siyasi sistemini tanımlamak için demokratik teokrasi, oligarşik teokrasi ve dini tiranlık gibi çeşitli terimler kullanmışlar veya üretmişlerdir. İran'da parlamento ve anayasa gibi demokratik kurumlar bulunmaktadır ancak bu siyasi kurumların kurgulanışı bir liberal demokrasi oluşturacak şekilde değildir. Bu makale İran siyasi sistemini karşılaştırmalı siyaset biliminin terimlerini kullanarak analiz etmekte ve tanımlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, 1979 Devrimi'nden sonra kurulmuş olan başlıca İran siyasi kurumlarını incelemekte ve netice olarak, ülkede mollalar nihai siyasi gücü ellerinde bulundurdukları için, İran'ın nevi şahsına münhasır siyasi sisteminin en iyi şekilde “mollakrasi (mollalar yönetimi)” terimiyle tanımlanabileceği sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyasi Sistem, İran, Teokrasi, Mollakrasi, 1979 Devrimi

Jel Kodu: Z0

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1. INTRODUCTION

The political system which was instituted in Iran after the 1979 Revolution has been a matter of controversy among the political scientists. Although Iran is a self-declared Islamic Republic, scholars used or coined various terms such as democratic theocracy, oligarchic theocracy, religious tyranny and mullocracy to define it. Iran has democratic institutions such as parliament and constitution, but the configuration of them does not make up a liberal democracy. Prior to the 1979 Revolution, the classification of the Iranian political system was simple; it was a classical monarchy. But the post-revolutionary Iran needs a closer look.

In this study, Iran's geo-political history, economy, and foreign policy are briefly examined in the first chapter with a special emphasis on how they might influence the development of a political system. After this preliminary information, in the second chapter, the Iranian political system is analyzed in its entirety. Questions of how to define the Iranian regime, how its political institutions including its constitution are formed and function, how its governmental and electoral systems work are handled in this chapter. As a political system is not only a matter on paper (i.e., on constitution) but also a matter of functioning, and as the issue of the openness of a political regime is best understood by looking at its human rights record in today's world, Iran's human rights record is critically investigated in the third chapter. Since political parties are the *sine qua nons* of a liberal democracy, I have dwelt briefly upon the Iranian political parties in this chapter as well. This study ends with a conclusion on how to best define the peculiar political system of Iran.

2. IRAN'S GEO-POLITICAL HISTORY, ECONOMY, AND FOREIGN POLICY

The first political entity that was founded in the antiquity over what has traditionally been defined as Persia was the Kingdom of Elamite, the origin of whose society is uncertain. Lasted between 3200–2800 BC, it was succeeded by the Median Empire in 678 BC. After approximately a century, in 550 BC, the Achaemenid Empire assembled the Persians under one dynasty, thereby establishing the first Persian state which was also, in terms of territory, the biggest empire that the world had seen till then. The Achaemenid Empire was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 330 BC, and the Persian lands came under the Greek rule up until 224 BC (Curtis & Simpson, 2010) when the Greek hegemony was terminated by the Persians, and the Sassanid Empire, whose peoples' religions were Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, was founded (Roskin, 2009: 675).

Soon after the advent of Islam in Mecca, Muslims under the rule of second caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab destroyed the Sassanid Empire, conquered the Persian lands in 663, and almost all Persians converted to Islam over the following decades (Pourshariati, 2008: 219, 281-285). Subsequent to the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, Ali ibn Abi Talib became the fourth caliph. In the face of severe opposition in Hijaz which had till then become the administrative center of the Islamic

Empire, Ali went to Qufa to set up a new administrative center there to rule the Empire (i.e., the Rashidun Caliphate), but soon he was faced with a rebellion from Damascus where Muawiya was the governor of the city. A war took place between the two rivals, giving birth to Kharijites, an extremist Islamic sect, who would later murder Ali in Qufa (Donner, 2010: 166).

In this tumultuous milieu, the Persians sided with Ali and his son, Hussein, who continued his bid on the caliphate vis-a-vis de facto caliph Muawiya, and Hussein was murdered by the successor of Muawiya, namely Yazid, in Karbala—an event that would pave the way for the formation of the Shia sect in Islam. Since the Persians sided with Ali and his son who were the losers in the power strife between the ruling elite, they were oppressed by the Umayyad dynasty between 661 and 750. During this time, the Umayyad dynasty followed a policy of Arabization and collected *jizya* (a tax only collected from non-Muslims according to classical Islamic law) from Shi'a Muslims, the bulk of which are Persians. The marginalization of Persians within the *umma* and the construction of their collective psychology under the impact of Ali's and his supporters' agony in Karbala occurred during this time. A few decades later, as Shia Muslims argue, when their last *Imam* got lost, a millennialist expectation for the *Savior Imam* would be added to their collective identity (Roskin, 2009: 676-678; Aykaç & Durgun, 2012: 529-538).

The Umayyad dynasty was succeeded by that of the Abbasid in 750. For about two centuries during the Abbasid rule, the Persian lands were offered more independence, and semi-independent Persian governments emerged hand in hand with numerous scientific and literary endeavors. Also during that time, the Persian and Shia Muslim identity burgeoned by means of the richness of cultural activities. Al-Biruni, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, and Firdawsi were the primary scientific and literary figures of this period. Starting from the 10th century, the Turkic people of Central Asia emigrated into Persia and founded a couple of Turco-Persian states, the most notable of which is the Selchuk Empire. Subsequently, Mongolians raided into Persia, leaving behind millions of dead in the 13th and 14th centuries (Aykaç & Durgun, 2012: 521-525).

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the Persian lands were under the rule of the Safavid dynasty that followed a policy of the "Shi'aization" of Persia, thereby triggering several wars with the adjacent Ottoman Empire. Beginning from the 18th century, the Turkic dynasties ruled the Persian lands along with some nascent Western influence. The colonialization attempts of Britain and Russia started in the early 19th century, and many economic privileges were granted to them, which would result in mass protests culminating in the 1905 Constitutional Revolution. During the First World War, Britain and Russia occupied parts of Iran. In 1921, Prime Minister Reza Khan overthrew the Turkic Qajar dynasty and declared himself the "Shah," the traditional Iranian monarch, making Iran a monarchy. In 1941, Mohammad Reza Pahlawi became his successor. When Mohammad Mosaddeq became prime minister and attempted to nationalize the petroleum industry, he was ousted by a CIA-backed coup in 1953 (Marlowe, 1963: 52-68).

After the coup against Mosaddeq, the Shah became more autocratic and oppositional sentiments began to sprout among the Iranians. The secret police, SAVAK, was accused of torturing prisoners, some of which were the critics of the regime (Abrahamian, 2008: 123-131). Religious leaders including Ayatollah Khomeini began criticizing the regime's brutality and the Western influence in Iran. Khomeini was put behind bars several times in 1962 and then was exiled. In 1970s, the number and impact of anti-regime protests increased even more. At the same time, Khomeini's cassettes criticizing the regime were being passed from hand to hand in the *bazaars*, gradually undermining the legitimacy of the Shah. Secular and democratic institutions also lost their legitimacy in the public eye (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, 1994: 78) and anti-Shah religious leaders, by means of the Shi'a culture of "emulation (*marja'a taqlid*)," increased their influence on their followers (Amuzegar, 2003: 137). Approaching to late 1970s, there were bloody protests in major cities of Iran; economy almost stopped under the impact of political violence. People shouted on the rooftops: "Death to the dictator!" since regime forces opened fire on those in the streets (Taheri, 2009: 298), which would later cause the revolution to be called the "Rooftop Revolution"—a unique event in the world political history. Eventually, in late 1978, succumbing to the public pressure, the Shah left the country, and Khomeini, surrounded by a cheerful 33-kilometres-long crowd, returned to Iran in January 1979 (Erkilet, 2010: 370). In April 1979, Islamic Republic of Iran was declared.

In 1970s, before the Revolution, many observers did not anticipate such an event in Iran as the Shah enjoyed all the modern apparatuses to suppress any political dissidence but as Kuran duly argues (2013: 42, 307-313), when the "secret public opinion" is extremely anti-regime in a country, any political dissidence in that country, despite being small, may trigger an avalanche-like collapse of the regime. The Shi'a political culture with the politico-religious tenet that all political authorities are illegitimate in the absence of the *Imam*, as well as encouraging opposition against "unrighteousness," also helped the Revolution succeed (Skocpol, 1982: 275). At the end of the day, when the regime collapsed in a couple of months, many observers became perplexed (Bayat, 1998: 136).

Ashraf argues (1990: 178) that the ages of leaders of a revolution are an important determinant of the type of the regime that will be founded after a revolution; the younger the leaders are, the more radical revolutions they make. However, the 1979 Revolution is a diversion from this pattern. Although Khomeini and other high-level clergy-politicians after the Revolution were mostly over their 70s, they proved to be remarkably radical in their post-revolution policies. Other revolutionaries in Iran such as communists were fiercely eliminated; rebellions against the new republic in ethnically diverse provinces were crushed with violence; and foreign policy changed radically in months. Khomeini followed an hostile policy against the West (Taheri, 2006: 21) and declared that the Islamic Revolution should be spread to other Muslim countries. The overpoliticization of the Iranian society during and after the Revolution (Chehabi, no date: 49) also played a role in that policy's survival, at least until Khomeini's demise in 1989. Meanwhile, the Iran-Iraq War fought between 1980 and 1988 resulted in huge

economic losses. The charisma of Khomeini as well as of the Revolution itself routinized. Secular, pragmatic power politics steadily developed among the ruling elite, and several political factions appeared (Zubaida, 2000: 60). In 1997, Mohammad Khatami, a reformist Islamist, was stunningly elected president, and a new relatively reformist era which would last until 2005 began (Arjomand, 2009; Chehabi, no date: 65). Two scholars called this era the “Third Republic (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 495).”

In the 2005 Presidential Election, among the hopes of many Western liberal democrat observers, a radical conservatist, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected, and the relations with the West soured again. Nuclear weapon and war threats were hurled from both sides (Taheri, 2009: 293). Nevertheless, in the 2013 Presidential Election, Hassan Rouhani, a moderate, was elected, and the discourse of a rapprochement between Iran and the Western countries reappeared. Bilateral relations between Iran and Western countries hitherto developed as expected, and even a nuclear agreement, the Joint Plan of Action, was reached in Geneva in November 2013.

3. THE IRANIAN ECONOMY AND FOREIGN POLICY

The Iranian economy is to much extent statist and mainly based on oil and gas incomes. More than 70% of government budget is based on crude-oil exports (Amuzegar, 2003: 145). After the 1979 Revolution, the economy was severely affected by the eight-year-long war with Iraq. The US’s pressure on the Western and other states to comply with the sanctions which were put on Iran due to its nuclear plan resulted in the decrease of the Iranian oil exports in recent years, which worsened its economy further although after the Joint Plan of Action agreement in November 2013 sanctions are promised to be terminated over time if Iran complies with the articles of the agreement (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2015). Iranian charitable trusts, *Bonyads*, which control about 20% of the Iranian economy, are badly administered. Today, 60% of the Iranian economy is controlled by various state institutions, which means that the Iranian economy is very far from free market capitalism. Corruption in Iran is a major problem as well (Roskin, 2009: 702-703).

There are exhaustive restrictions in banking and finance. Constantly changing regulations, poor protection of private property, high trade barriers, and all other credentials that curb private enterprise and innovation cost Iranian economy any promising development. Revolution’s principle to be able to be economically self-dependent and self-sufficient made the economy cumbersome. Although Iran has 1% of the worlds population, its foreign trade is only about 0.03% of the total global trade. Iran ranks the 38th in terms of GDP among 140 countries. *Economist Intelligence Unit’s* report in 2002 listed Iran and Nigeria as the world’s two least hospitable economies. In the entire 1990s, total amount of foreign investments in Iran was less than \$1 billion. Some analysts claim that the productivity of state employees is only 24 minutes in one working day which is eight hours. Iran enjoys 34 official holidays per year. The official statistics of unemployment shows that 3.2 million or 14% of the total labor force are

unemployed but the private estimates are even higher. Despite the pervasive discourse on Islamic social justice, the income gap between the poor and the rich is wide open in Iran; while the bottom 10% of the population holds only about 1% of the national income, the top 10% holds 30% of it (Amuzegar, 2003: 145-149; Green et al.: 2009: 15-23). That said, it should also be noted that, since the end of Iran-Iraq War in 1988, it is claimed that the Iranian economy has been relatively opened itself to the outside (Chehabi, no date: 61). However, it is also claimed that there is broad dissatisfaction among the Iranian workers about their life standards (Rigi, 2012: 141).

As for foreign policy, Khomeini tried the strategy of advance and retreat, in particular toward the West. Taheri (2006: 21-22) calls the hostile attitude Iran had toward the West until the demise of Khomeini “unprecedented.” Meanwhile, Iran was fighting with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, having sour relations with the Sunni oil-monarchies of the Gulf and with Saudi Arabia due to its policy of regime export. After the death of Khomeini, the Iranian foreign policy discourse has mildened a little but still was aggressive. The presidency of Khatami in 1997 heralded a new era of relatively moderate foreign policy. There was some rapprochement between the West and Iran for 8 years until 2005 when Ahmadinejad, a radical conservatist, was elected president (Green et al., 2009: 33-39). Ahmadinejad’s tenure, between 2005–2013 was an era of reciprocal threats with the West – sentences such as “Israel will be wiped off the map,” “America is the Satan” filled the speeches of Ahmadinejad (Hunter, 2010). On the other side of the medallion, Ahmadinejad had relatively good relations with Turkey, but, to much extent, due to the zero-problem policy of Ahmet Davutoğlu, at least until the Arab Spring. The UN’s trial for imposing more economic sanctions on Iran was obstructed by the Turkish and Brazilian vetoes at that time. When Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013, a new era of relatively good relations resumed. Although the West and Iran cannot compromise on what to do related to the Syrian Civil War, they reached a historic agreement on Iran’s nuclear proliferation in Geneva talks in November 2013. Iranian foreign policy seems to go milder towards the West in the middle term due to the exhausting effect of the economic sanctions.

After a short sketch of the geo-political history of Iran, the Iranian economy, and the Iranian foreign policy, now the *sui generis* political system of Iran can be analyzed from the perspective of comparative political science.

4. IRANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

“Islamic Republic of Iran,” which is the official name of Iran, is a puzzle for many scholars, yet many political scientists opine that Iranian political system is a theocracy (Roskin, 2009: 684; Amuzegar, 2003: 135). Other terms used to describe the Iranian political system are religious tyranny (Behbudi, 2014: 24), *mullocracy*, *clerisy* (Chehabi, no date: 52), and theocratic oligarchy (Amuzegar, 2003: 139). According to its Constitution, Iran is an Islamic republic and a unitary state, where state

power is divided into three main branches; namely the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary (Constitute Project, 2016).

4.1. Nine Basic Political Institutions

Iran has basically nine political institutions which make its political system what it currently is, as of 2017. The first of these nine institutions is the Assembly of Experts (مجلس خبرگان رهبری) which consists of 88 *mujtahids* and *ayatollahs*. Although woman *mujtahid* is *de jure* possible, so far this case has never been seen. They are elected directly by the public for a term of eight years. There are no conditions clarified in the Constitution for nomination for this post. Members of the Assembly have to be experts in Islamic jurisprudence according to a law decreed by the Iranian Parliament. Assembly meets at least two times a week, and these experts elect the Supreme Leader and take him out of office. Yet, they have never overtly resisted to any of the decisions of the Supreme Leader so far, let alone taking him out. Lastly, the minutes of the Assembly are deemed secret documents (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 505).

The Iranian Parliament, the “Islamic Parliament of Consultation” in its original Farsi name (مجلس شورای اسلامی), is unicameral and composed of 290 deputies. According to the Iranian Constitution (Constitute Project, 2016), the Parliament is the legislative body and legislates in all matters within the context of the Constitution. It approves all international treaties, agreements, and cabinet ministers nominated by the President. It has the power to impeach the cabinet ministers and the president. For the impeachment of the president, one third of the votes of the Parliament members (PM) are required. After this requirement met, one more voting is conducted, and if two thirds of the PMs vote for the impeachment of the president, the case is taken to the Supreme leader (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 505).

Third institution is the Supreme Leadership (رهبر ایران) who is the head of the state and the highest religious and political authority. The institution, the Governance of the Jurist, *Vilaya-te Faqih* (ولایت فقیه) in Farsi, has the crux of the mentality of the Iranian political system. Khomeini articulated his political ideas in his book titled *Islamic Government* (1970), arguing that the Supreme Leader is to guide the Islamic community (*umma*) until the twelfth *Imam* emerge on earth and take his political and religious role. Till then, governments would be regarded illegitimate (Khomeini, 1979). In this sense, he thinks that there is no division whatsoever between religion and politics (Aykaç & Durgun, 2012: 564-568).

The Supreme Leader is elected by the Assembly of Experts for eight years and can be elected again without any limit. Compared to the president, he has more authority and is more respected, appointing many high-level bureaucrats in the military, the judiciary, and the government. He can put impeachment on the president with the two out of three members of the Assembly of Experts. He appoints the head of the judiciary for eight years, the members of the Expediency Council for five years,

six out of the twelve members of the Guardian Council for six years, the head of the state radio and television channel, the Friday prayer *Imams* of each province for a lifelong term, all the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, the General Directorate of Security, and the head of the Intelligence Unit (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 505). According to the Iranian Constitution, the Supreme leader must be an Islamic scholar who is just, pious, brave, genius in social and political matters, having common sense, foresight, administrative and leadership features. That is, Khomeini seems to have imagined the Supreme Leader as Plato (2003) imagined the philosopher-king in his book *The Republic*. He is chosen by the Assembly of the Experts from among those who have the required characteristics. If the members of the Assembly may reach no agreement as to who to elect as the Supreme Leader, the Assembly choose someone among its own members. Hitherto, there have been two Supreme leaders, Ruhollah Khomeini being the first between 1970-1989 and Sayyid Ali Khamenei being the second since 1989.

The fourth major institution is the Guardian Council (شورای نگهبان قانون اساسی) which is vested with the authority to make guardianship for the principles of Islam as well as being responsible for the interpretation of the Iranian Constitution. It also supervises elections in the Assembly of Experts, and presidential and parliamentary elections. It reviews all the laws passed by the Parliament and can veto laws if it finds them contradictory to the Constitution (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 505). According to the Article 91 of the Constitution, it has 12 members, half of which are appointed by the Supreme Leader, and other half of which are nominated by the judiciary and later approved by the Parliament (Constitute Project, 2016). However, although its members are not elected, it has the power to supervise directly any law enacted in the Parliament by the elected PMs. It traditionally vetoes many laws regarding women rights, election reforms, ratification of international agreements on human rights, ban on the torture etc. It can also veto the nomination of any candidate in elections and increases the role of the military in the daily life (Takeyh, 2009: 118-125). With this extended powers, the Council traditionally vetoes the candidacy of the reformist figures in both the parliamentary and the general elections. For instance, the Council vetoed the candidacies of 1006 out of 1014 candidates, thereby narrowing the figure to eight politicians in the 2005 Presidential Election (Takeyh, 2009: 230). Since the Council similarly vetoes the reformist candidates in parliamentary elections, the majority of the Iranian Parliament is traditionally held by the conservative Islamists, and these conservative Islamists in turn nominate half of the members of the Council usually from among the conservative members of the judiciary. Due to this vicious circle, the Parliament was kept at a certain distance from the popular will in favor of the official ideology, and thus the conservative Islamist character of the Parliament and of the laws are sustained. Only the change of the Supreme Leader may bring about considerable change in the Council as the Supreme Leader appoints half of the members of the Council. Hence, the Council is widely and duly criticized to pose a hinder before the democratization process in Iran (William, 2001; Naini, 2006).

The Presidency is the fifth major political institution in Iran. The president is the highest elected Iranian political authority. He is elected by single majority in general elections for a term of four years and could not serve more than two terms. Being responsible to the Supreme Leader, he makes agreements with other countries and international organizations, ratifies the budget, appoints the vice presidents, and the cabinet ministers but the appointments of cabinet ministers must be approved by the Parliament. The president is not the ultimate authority as to the Armed Forces, foreign policy, and the policy of nuclear energy; the Supreme Leader is the ultimate authority on these crucial matters. He is the head of the cabinet, the deputy commander-in-chief, the head of the National Security Council and of the Cultural Revolution Council. Being vested with the power to suspend all the laws and declare martial law, he may declare war (Aykaç & Durgun, 2012: 577-579). According to the Iranian Constitution, the president must be of Iranian origin, Iranian citizen, having the feature of leadership, having a clear account of history, trustworthy and pious, believing in the basic principals of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in the official sect of the state which is Shi'a Islam.

The sixth institution is the cabinet that has 22 ministries but no prime minister as the president is the head of it. Therefore, ministers are directly responsible to the president, yet they could be deprived of their ministry with no-confidence vote of the Parliament and with the will of the president (Aykaç & Durgun, 2012: 579).

The seventh major institution is the Expediency Council whose task is to determine Iran's interests where the Parliament and the Guardian Council cannot agree. It also works as a consultative body for the Supreme Leader about the general policies of the regime (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 505).

The eighth institution is the head of the judiciary. This institution is different from a ministry of justice since the Iranian judiciary system is based on Shi'a Islamic law, and thus, there is a senior cleric on the top of the judiciary system, appointed directly by the Supreme Leader for a five-year term. He nominates the minister of the justice to the president and the six non-clerical members of the Guardian Council to the parliament as well as appointing many high-level bureaucrats related to the judicial affairs (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 506).

The last major political institution in Iran is the Armed Forces which is composed of two parts as the Revolutionary Guards and the Republican Army. The Revolutionary Guards are directly under the Supreme Leader to prevent any possible coup attempt from the ordinary army (Aykaç & Durgun, 2012: 579) and hence wields remarkable influence on the security bureaucracy of the state (Harris, 2014: 164).

It is obvious that the Iranian political institutions do not have much semblance with a liberal democracy although, *prima facie*, there is a parliament, a cabinet, a president, and so on. Yet they do not make up a tyrannical rule either for there is a peculiar kind of equilibrium between them. Although Khomeini's tenure was a one-man rule due to his charismatic figure and to the significant role he played

during the 1979 Revolution, after his demise in 1989, the regime became a bizarre combination of oligarchic, theocratic, and democratic elements. But still, the Supreme Leader is above all the institutions and responsible to no-one since he is regarded as unmistaken and holy. A high-level Iranian bureaucrat even argued that the Assembly of Experts does not elect the Supreme Leader but they “discover” him (Amuzegar, 2003: 140). Therefore, the lack of cohesion between the state institutions is the fundamental problem for the current functioning of the Iranian regime. Therefore, it is argued that post-revolutionary Iran is institutionally Balkanized. The dual institutions whose functions overlap each other cause a “suspended equilibrium” in the regime (Kamrava & Hassan-Yari, 2004: 496). This situation is called as “dissonant institutionalization” of the state (Chehabi, no date: 50). Functional overlapping of the institutions results in their being “interdependent” on each other, and thus, power games start; institutions may work to undermine each other’s influence in the political arena, which led to the development of miscellaneous political fractions. The ruling elite is said to have four factions as traditional right, radical right, modern right, and the left. Kamrava & Hassan-Yari writes (2004: 514):

“The traditional right is made-up of ultra-conservative clerics who oppose all forms of secularism in policy. By contrast, most members of radical right tends to be non-clerics, although they are mostly also virulently anti-Western, oppose capitalism and staunchly resist all attempts to deviate from what they consider to be Khomeini’s pure vision of Islamic revolution. The modern right is generally less radical, includes educated professionals, and its members can be found in most of the institutions of the state. Nevertheless it still resist what is seen as deviation from the original essence of the revolution. As importantly, it opposes the ideologically motivated interpretations of Islam popular with the Left. ... For its part, the Left is comparatively less fractious, although it’s lack of access to the state’s most powerful institutions – especially the judiciary, the Leadership, the Guardian’s Council, and the Expediency Council – has kept it at a relative disadvantage vis-a-vis the Right.”

However, following Khomeini’s death in 1989, Iranian political regime transformed remarkably (Roy, 2005: 233). When a revolution is no longer seen as a revolution, the regime starts to change. This phenomenon is called “Thermidor” in the political science literature (Abrahamian, 2008: 182). Population growth was 3.5% in Iran throughout 1980s—one of the highest numbers in the world—but it turned out to be 0.86 in 2005, which is close to the world average. These figures demonstrate that 1979 Iranian Revolution lost its fever as all revolutions do over time (Roskin, 2009: 704). Iranian politicians are no longer following aggressive and purely ideological foreign policies, except the notorious Syrian policy of Iran since the start of the Arab Spring. Secular power politics is on rise, which is another indication of the exhaustion of the Revolution. In this sense, there has been a number of structural changes within the Iranian political regime. Firstly, the figure of “maximum leader” was replaced by the figure of the “first among equals (*primus inter pares*),” which was a transformation from paternalism to presidentialism. Secondly, the regime shifted its ideology of Islamic totalitarianism to pragmatic Islamism, the most important result of which has been the marginalization of the Islamist extremist groups in the country. Thirdly, there has been a major transformation in the regime’s official ideology from universal Islamism to nationalist Islamism. Thus, the 1979 Revolution has evolved from

the *Umma* Revolution to the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Lastly, technocratic ministers replace the ideological ministers more and more. In this sense, the de-clericalization of the Iranian cabinet is underway. All these changes and transformations show that the Iranian political regime is *structurally* no longer the same with the one that was created after the Revolution (Mozaffari, 1993: 611-617).

4.2. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Iranian Constitution starts with a pompous, five-page long preamble in which the regime's religious vision is frequently stressed. It asserts that the state has an official ideology which is genuinely Islamic. It defines the Iranian society as a "Muslim nation" under the guidance of "militant ulama" and the Supreme Leader. Later, the preamble gives a bombastic narration of the the 1979 Revolution and calls it an enlightenment and a rebellion against the "American conspiracy and world imperialism," probably with direct effect of Khomeini's anti-imperialist ideas (Black, 2010: 464). The Constitution accepts that the 1979 Revolution is not only the fruit of pious men, but of all segments of society including the left and the women. There are numerous turgid expressions such as "the wrath of the people" and "continuous and unrelenting struggle" scattered in the last pages of the preamble where the form of government in Islam, according to Khomeini, is elaborated. The text mentions about "the impurities of the past," thereby having an anti-traditional religious stance reminding of Ali Shari'ati who has often been regarded as the ideologue of the 1979 Revolution (Constitute Project, 2016).[†]

The constitution has conspicuous totalitarian sentiments since it claims to establish an ideal and model society and, as aforementioned, declares an official ideology. It says that the Iranian state will strive to construct a worldwide *umma* and help "the deprived (محرومون)" and "the downtrodden (مصطضعفون)" in their struggle for liberation. Some Qur'anic verses are also mentioned. The preamble includes a separate title for women and the ideological army, as well as various ideological terms such as the "Islamic justice," "extending the sovereignty of God throughout the world," "ideological mission of jihad in God's way," "consumerism and exploitation of women," "human rights and creation of an Islamic society." Under the title "Mass-Communication Media," it is written that "mass communication must serve the diffusion of Islamic culture." The preamble finishes with the sentence that "this century will witness the establishment of a universal holy government and the downfall of others." In effect, this preamble gives a short account of the worldview of the founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, of Khomeini in particular (Constitute Project, 2016).

After the preamble, Article 1 of the Iranian Constitution states that the form of government is Islamic Republic. Article 2 declares that sovereignty belongs exclusively to God and writes "*La ilaha illallah* (There is no God except Allah)." It also says that the supreme leadership and guidance is

[†] For some of Ali Shari'ati's significant works, see Ali Şeriatî (2014). *Dine Karşı Din: Anne Baba Biz Suçluyuz*. Ankara: Fecr Yayınları; Ali Şeriatî (2016). *Dünya Görüşü ve İdeoloji*. Ankara: Fecr Yayınları; Ali Şeriatî (2016). *Kendini Devrimci Yetiştirmek*. Ankara: Fecr Yayınları.

perpetual. Article 3 lists goals of the regime. Looking at those goals, one can conclude that Iranian regime is, again, totalitarian, somewhat socialist, clearly anti-imperialist, irredentist, *ummatist*, and collectivist. Article 11 says that all Muslims naturally form a single nation. The first reference to the Shi'a sect of Islam is made in Article 12 which runs "the official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari School" adding that "other schools are accorded full respect and can perform their religious rites." Article 13 mentions the officially recognized minorities: Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians (without mentioning Baha'i sect of Islam, which is generally seen as heretic by the Shi'i Muslims) who are free to perform their religion. Article 15 declares that Farsi is the official language of Iran but any language could be used in press and mass media. Education of Arabic language in the primary and secondary schools are compulsory since Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, says Article 16. The official calendar is the *Hijri* Calendar, and weekly holiday is Friday. Article 57 says that three branches of state power, namely the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary, are independent of each other (Constitute Project, 2016).

4. 3. Government and Electoral System

The Iranian Parliament which has 290 deputies is unicameral as aforementioned. The head of the executive is the president and the Supreme Leader. There is no prime minister but the president functions as the de facto prime minister. Therefore, the political system is a hybrid of parliamentary and presidential systems. It has presidential characteristics since the president is popularly elected and does not have to be the leader of any political bloc in the Parliament. At this point, it is noteworthy that there is such a balance among the institutions that no-one or no institution can resist the authority of the Supreme Leader. Iran's political system also resembles the parliamentary system since the president as well as the cabinet ministers are responsible to the Parliament, and the Parliament can ask the president to attend its sessions and can ask him questions. Moreover, the parliament can take the ministers out of office with no-confidence vote. The president has no authority to veto the laws enacted by the Parliament, and he is not the head of the armed forces either (Constitute Project, 2016).

In Iran, there are also local governments which functions as the administrative bodies of the provinces. A law enacted in 1997 with the name "decentralization law" enhanced the powers of the local governments and committees; nonetheless, they are still weak vis-a-vis their equivalents in liberal democracies (Tajbakhsh, 2000: 377).

Iran's population is about 75 million and the electorate is nearly 50 million, 60% of whom are living in the cities. One out of three of the Iranian population is under 30 years old, which means that around a third of the Iranian society was born after the 1979 Revolution (Aykaç & Durgun, 2012: 591-595).

Elections in Iran are extremely unfree. The Guardian Council nullifies candidacy of many candidates if it thinks a candidate is not loyal to the regime. In the presidential elections, two-round

majority election system is applied. In the general elections that are held once in four years, the system of the single-member district is implemented. Five seats are allocated for the religious minorities in the Parliament: one for the Zoroastrians, one for the Jews, one for the Assyrian and the Chaldean Christians, one for the northern Armenian Christians, and one for the southern Armenian Christians. Local elections are held once in every four year. There are five administrative entities as village, urban area, little province, province, and county, all of which have their own local parliaments (Roskin, 2009: 685).

5. POLITICAL OPENNESS IN IRAN: HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

The Iranian regime is notorious with its human rights record. Freedom House (FH) reports steadily show that Iran is one of the most unfree countries. In FH's 2003 Annual Report, Iran stands as the sixth the least free country out of seven. In 2016 GH Annual Report titled "Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom under Pressure," Iran stands not free again (Freedom House, 2016). According to another report, Iran ranks the 122nd out of 139 states in terms of freedom of the press. Even during Khatami's relatively reformist term that lasted for five years, more than 90 newspapers and other publications were banned. Many deputies, university professors, journalists, writers, and other important public figures were put into jail for political reasons (Amuzegar, 2003: 142). The UN General Assembly condemned Iran many times by majority vote due to her poor human rights record that is characterized by executions, restrictions on the press, inhuman punishments of convicted offenders, oppression of dissent, and discrimination against minorities (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2009). Iranian governments steadily answers these charges by claiming that human rights in Islam are different from those of the West, and therefore their conduct should be judged according to the Islamic concepts (Amuzegar, 2003: 150).

As for political parties, although there are many political parties in Iran, political fractions are more important since the regime does not allow the individual parties to function normally. Therefore, four basic fractions emerged in the political arena even though there are tens of political parties ranging from radical revolutionary Islamists to communists. Those four fractions are (1) the radical Islamists, (2) the conservatives, (3) the reformists, and (4) the liberals (Roskin, 2009: 688). In Iran, currently there is a de facto one and half party system, the one being the conservative Islamists and the half being the reformist Islamists. Except a few leftists and liberals, the political arena is completely occupied by miscellaneous patterns of Shia Islamism.

6. PROJECTION INTO THE FUTURE

Political scientists are generally expecting a change in the Iranian political regime considering the unsustainable condition of the Iranian economy. Since the oil-income is wasted (Behbudi, 2014: 24), and the etatist development policy, economically speaking, is not functioning well, it is reasonable to expect that something of considerable political import will happen in Iran. The change could come in a number of ways.

Firstly, Iran may democratize itself at the hands of the relatively liberal new generation who are tired of the lack of freedoms in the country. Amuzegar predicts (2003: 151-152) that the new generation who are idealistic, awakened by the internet and cyberspace but disenchanting and politically naive, whom he calls “the third force,” will compel the entrenched Islamist fundamentalists to transform the political system into a more democratic one. According to him, the theocratic oligarchy is bound to expire, and the future will be in the hands of this new generation. Likewise, Roskin argues (2009: 710) that Iran’s political future will be shaped by the new generation of liberals. Secondly, Taheri argues (2006: 26) that the Iranian theocracy is like a volcano to explode; therefore a revolution may be simmering beneath the peaceful façade, yet he gives no certain date for the alleged collapse of the regime. Thirdly, Taheri argues (2006: 24) that the US has two options to choose as to how to behave toward Iran: the do-nothing option and the change-the-regime option. If he picks the second one, there can be a US-backed regime change in Iran—either with bloody hard power or with a sophisticated strategy of soft power. Lastly, Amuzegar predicts (2004: 496) that the Iranian regime may get even more authoritarian to maintain the status quo. All in all, the near future of Iran seems doomed.

7. CONCLUSION

From a political angle, Iran stands as one of the most bizarre countries in the world if not the most bizarre one. With a long history, an ethnically diverse population, a considerably politicized society, it became the scene of a religious revolution that shocked the world in 1979. The Islamic Republic that was declared just after the revolution formed its own political regime and political rationale.

Iranian political system is extraordinarily elusive for the political scientist. Democratic theocracy, theocratic oligarchy, religious tyranny, Islamic republic, mullocracy, and several other terms are used to define it. Considering the fact that it has modern political institutions like presidency, a parliament, and a constitution, it resembles a democracy. Considering the omnipotent, omniscient Supreme Leader and the fact that there is an official ideology (Islamism) mentioned in the Iranian Constitution, among others, Iranian political regime is authoritarian and totalitarian. The rule of the Shi’a clergy renders it akin to an oligarchy as well. Therefore, I would argue that the Iranian political system is a *sui generis* one; thus, it can be best understood not with the classical political science terms but as “the government of the *mullas*,” and it should hence be called “mullocracy.”

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