

supposedly autonomous, these foundations are directed by clerics appointed personally by the Leader. According to some estimates, their annual income may be as much as half that of the government.⁸ They are exempt from state taxes and are allocated foreign currencies, especially U.S. dollars, at highly favorable exchange rates subsidized by the oil revenues. Most of their assets are property confiscated from the old elite.

The largest of these institutions, the Foundation for the Oppressed, administers over 140 factories, 120 mines, 470 agribusinesses, and 100 construction companies. It also owns the country's two leading newspapers, *Ettela'at* and *Kayhan*. The Martyrs Foundation, in charge of helping war veterans, controls confiscated property that was not handed over to the Foundation for the Oppressed. It also receives an annual subsidy from the government. These foundations together control \$12 billion in assets and employ over 400,000 people. They are clerical domains favored by the Leader. The recent moves to "privatize" state enterprises have tended to strengthen these foundations since these semipublic organizations are well placed and well enough financed to be able to buy shares in these new companies. Their main competitors in winning government contracts and buying privatized enterprises have been the Revolutionary Guards.

The Policy-Making Process

Policy-making in Iran is highly complex in part because of the cumbersome constitution and in part because factionalism within the ruling clergy has resulted in more amendments, which have made the original constitution even more complicated. Laws can originate in diverse places, and they can be modified by pressures from numerous directions. They can also be blocked by a wide variety of state institutions. In short, the policy-making process is highly fluid and diffuse, often reflecting the regime's factional divisions.

The clerics who destroyed Iran's old order remained united while building the new one. They were convinced that they alone had the divine mandate to govern. They followed the same leader, admired the same texts, cited the same potent symbols, remembered the same real and imaginary indignations under the shah, and, most important, shared the same vested interest in preserving the Islamic Republic. Moreover, most had studied at the same seminaries and came from the same lower-middle-class backgrounds. Some were even related to each other through marriage and blood ties.

But once the constitution was in place, the same clerics drifted into two loose but identifiable blocs: the Society (*Majmu'eh*) of the Militant Clergy, and the Association (*Jam'eh*) of the Militant Clergy. The former can be described as statist reformers or populists, and the latter as laissez-faire (free-market) conservatives. The reformers hoped to consolidate lower-class support by using state power for redistributing wealth, eradicating unemployment, nationalizing enterprises, confiscating large estates, financing social programs, rationing and subsidizing essential goods, and placing price ceilings on essential consumer goods. In short, they espoused the creation of a comprehensive welfare state. The conservatives hoped to retain middle-class support, especially in the bazaars, by removing price controls, lowering business taxes, cutting red tape, encouraging private entrepreneurs, and balancing the budget, even at the cost of sacrificing subsidies and social programs. In recent years, the statist reformers have begun to emphasize the democratic over the theocratic features of the constitution, stressing the importance of

THE U.S. CONNECTION



Conservatives versus Liberals

Iran and the United States have more in common than either would admit. In both, the conservatives—calling themselves “compassionate conservatives” in the United States and “principalists” in Iran—have a core base limited to less than 30 percent of the electorate. To win national elections, they have to reach out to others while continuing to energize their supporters to vote. To reach out, they both resort to patriotic and populist language—stressing “national security,” accusing “weak-kneed liberals” for not standing up to foreign enemies, claiming to represent

the “ordinary folks” and appealing to cultural values. In 2005, Ahmadinejad won the presidential elections in part because he presented himself as a “man of the people.” He also won partly because his liberal opposition was badly divided. But the biggest reason for the conservative victory was probably because he projected himself as a tough patriot who could better defend the nation from foreign threats—especially after President Bush named Iran as a member of the “Axis of Evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address.

individual rights, the rule of law, and government accountability to the electorate. In many ways, they have become like social democrats such as those in Britain’s Labour Party.

The conservatives were originally labeled middle-of-the-roaders and traditionalists. The statist were labeled progressives, seekers of new ideas, and Followers of the Imam’s Line. The former liked to denounce the latter as extremists, leftists, and pro-Soviet Muslims. The latter denounced the free-marketers as medievalists, rightists, capitalists, mafia bazaaris, and pro-American Muslims. Both could bolster their arguments with apt quotes from Khomeini.

This polarization created a major constitutional gridlock, since the early Islamic *Majles* was dominated by the reformers, whereas the Guardian Council was controlled by the conservatives appointed by Khomeini. Between 1981 and 1987, over one hundred bills passed by the reformer-dominated *Majles* were vetoed by the Guardian Council on the grounds that they violated the *shari’a*, especially the sanctity of private property. The vetoed legislation included a labor law, land reform, nationalization of foreign trade, a progressive income tax, control over urban real estate transactions, and confiscation of the property of émigrés whom the courts had not yet found guilty of counterrevolutionary activities. Introduced by individual deputies or cabinet ministers, these bills had received quick passage because reformers controlled the crucial *Majles* committees and held a comfortable majority on the *Majles* floor. Some ultraconservatives had countered by encouraging the faithful not to pay taxes and instead to contribute to the grand ayatollahs of their choice. After all, they argued, one could find no mention of income tax anywhere in the *shari’a*.

Both sides cited the Islamic constitution to support their positions. The conservative free-marketers referred to the long list of clauses protecting private property, promising balanced budgets, and placing agriculture, small industry, and retail trade in the private sector. The reformers referred to an even longer list promising education, medicine, jobs, low-income housing, unemployment benefits, disability pay, interest-free loans, and the predominance of the public sector in the economy.

To break the constitutional gridlock, Khomeini boldly introduced into Shi’ism the Sunni Islamic concept of *maslahat*—that is, “public interest” and “reasons

maslahat

Arabic term for “expediency,” “prudence,” or “advisability,” now used in Iran to refer to reasons of state or what is best for the Islamic Republic.

of state.” Over the centuries, Shi’i clerics had denounced this as a Sunni notion designed to bolster illegitimate rulers. Khomeini now claimed that a truly Islamic state could safeguard the public interest by suspending important religious rulings, even over prayer, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. He declared public interest to be a primary ruling and the others mere secondary rulings. In other words, the state could overrule the views of the highest-ranking clerics. In the name of public interest, it could destroy mosques, confiscate private property, and cancel religious obligations. Khomeini added that the Islamic state had absolute authority, since the Prophet Muhammad had exercised absolute (*motalaq*) power, which he had passed on to the Imams and thus eventually to the Islamic Republic. Never before had a Shi’i religious leader claimed such powers for the state, especially at the expense of fellow clerics.

As a follow-up, Khomeini set up a new institution named the Expediency Council for Determining the Public Interest of the Islamic Order—known as the Expediency Council. He entrusted it with the task of resolving conflicts between the Islamic *Majles* and the Guardian Council. He packed it with thirteen clerics, including the president, the chief judge, the Speaker of the *Majles*, and six jurists from the Guardian Council. The Expediency Council eventually passed some of the more moderate bills favored by the reformers. These included a new income tax, banking legislation, and a much-disputed labor law providing workers in large factories with a minimum wage and some semblance of job security.

Constitutional amendments introduced after Khomeini’s death institutionalized the Expediency Council. The new Leader could now not only name its members but also determine its tenure and jurisdiction. Not surprisingly, Khomeini’s successor as Leader, Khamenei, packed it with his supporters—none of them prominent grand ayatollahs. He also made its meetings secret and allowed it to promulgate new laws rather than restrict itself to resolving legislative differences between the Guardian Council and the *Majles*. The Expediency Council is now a secretive body that is accountable only to the Leader. It stands above the constitution. In this sense, it has become a powerful policy-making body rivaling the Islamic *Majles*, even though it did not exist in the original constitution.

There are thirty-four members of the Expediency Council. These included the president; chief judge; Speaker of the *Majles*; ministers of intelligence, oil, culture, and foreign affairs; chief of the General Staff; commander of the Revolutionary Guards; jurists from the Guardian Council; directors of radio and television as well as of the Central Bank, Atomic Energy Organization, and National Oil Company; heads of the main religious foundations; chairman of the Chamber of Commerce; and editors of the main conservative newspapers. Seventeen were clerics. These thirty-four can be considered the inner circle of Iran’s policy-making elite.

Summary

The clergy exercise authority over elected officials in three separate ways: the Leader, a cleric, supervises the three branches of government; the Guardian Council can veto legislation passed by parliament; and the same Council can vet all candidates running for high office. Despite these restrictions, the constitution—in theory—has the possibility of moving away from theocracy toward democracy. After all, the constitution enshrines the public’s right to elect parliament, president, and even the Leader. The constitution even endows the public with the authority to amend the constitution. The main obstacle to democracy is the vetting process, which grants ultimate power to the Leader, not the constitution itself.

REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

4 SECTION

Focus Questions

What are the powers and limitations of Iran's parliament?

What role do political parties and elections play within Iran's theocratic state?

What social groups are most likely and least likely to support the Islamic Republic?

Do discontent and protest necessarily have to take a revolutionary rather than a reform course in the Islamic Republic?

Although the Islamic Republic is a theocracy, some claim that it also has features of a democracy. According to the constitution, the voters directly choose the president and the Assembly of Experts, which in turn chooses the Leader. What is more, the elected legislature, the *Majles*, exercises considerable power. According to one of the founders of the regime, the *Majles* is the centerpiece of the Islamic constitution.⁹ Another architect of the constitution has argued that the people, by carrying out the Islamic Revolution, implicitly favored a type of democracy confined within the boundaries of Islam and the guardianship of the jurist.¹⁰ But another declared that if he had to choose between the democracy and power of the clergy as specified in the concept of jurist's guardianship, he would not hesitate to choose the latter, since it came directly from God.¹¹ On the eve of the initial referendum, Khomeini himself declared: "This constitution, which the people will ratify, in no way contradicts democracy. Since the people love the clergy, have faith in the clergy, want to be guided by the clergy, it is only right that the supreme religious authority oversee the work of the [government] ministers to ensure that they don't make mistakes or go against the Qur'an."¹²

The Legislature

According to Iran's constitution, the *Majles* "represents the nation" and possesses many powers, including making or changing ordinary laws (with the approval of the Guardian Council), investigating and supervising all affairs of state, and approving or ousting the cabinet ministers. In describing this branch of government, the constitution uses the term *qanun* (statutes) rather than *shari'a* (divine law) so as to gloss over the fundamental question of whether legislation passed by the *Majles* is derived from God or the people. It accepts the reasoning that God creates divine law (*shari'a*) but elected representatives can draw up worldly statutes (*qanuns*).

The *Majles* has 290 members and is elected by citizens over the age of eighteen. It can pass *qanuns* as long as the Guardian Council deems them compatible with the *shari'a* and the constitution. It can choose, from a list drawn up by the chief judge, six of the twelve-man Guardian Council. It can investigate at will cabinet ministers, affairs of state, and public complaints against the executive and the judiciary. It can remove cabinet members—with the exception of the president—through a parliamentary vote of no confidence. It can withhold approval for government budgets, foreign loans, international treaties, and cabinet appointments. It can hold closed debates, provide members with immunity from arrest, and regulate its own internal workings, especially the committee system.

The *Majles* plays an important role in everyday politics. It has changed government budgets, criticized cabinet policies, modified development plans, and forced the president to replace some of his ministers. In 1992, 217 deputies circulated an open letter that explicitly emphasized the powers of the *Majles* and thereby implicitly downplayed those of the Leader. Likewise, the Speaker of the House in 2002 threatened to close down the whole *Majles* if the judiciary violated parliamentary immunity and arrested one of the liberal deputies.

Political Parties and the Party System

Iran's constitution guarantees citizens the right to organize, and a 1980 law permits the Interior Ministry to issue licenses to parties. But political parties were not encouraged until Khatami was elected president in 1997. Since then, three parties have been active: the Islamic Iran Participation Front and the Islamic Labor Party, both formed by Khatami reformist supporters, and the more centrist Servants of Reconstruction created by *Hojjat al-Islam* Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president and now chairman of the Expediency Council.

In general, formal parties are less important in Iranian politics than reformist and conservative coalitions and groups that form along ideological and policy lines. For example, the current president, Ahmadinejad, has his power base in the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, a coalition of several conservative political parties and organizations that delivered votes very effectively in recent local (2003), parliamentary (2004), and presidential (2005) elections.

According to the Interior Ministry, licenses have been granted to some seven hundred political, social, and cultural organizations, but all are led by people considered politically acceptable by the regime. Real political opposition has been forced into exile, mostly in Europe. The most important opposition groups are:

- **The Liberation Movement.** Established in 1961 by Mehdi Bazargan, the Islamic Republic's first prime minister. Bazargan had been appointed premier in February 1979 by Khomeini himself, but had resigned in disgust ten months later when the Revolutionary Guards had permitted students to take over the U.S. embassy. The Liberation Movement is a moderate Islamic party. Despite its religious orientation, it is secular and favors the strict separation of mosque from state.
- **The National Front.** Originating in the campaign to nationalize the country's oil resources in the early 1950s, the National Front remains committed to nationalism and secularism, the political ideals of Muhammad Mosaddeq, the prime minister who was overthrown in the CIA-supported coup in 1953. Because the conservative clergy feel threatened by the National Front's potential appeal, they have banned it.
- **The Mojahedin.** Formed in 1971 as a guerrilla organization to fight the shah's regime, the Mojahedin tried to synthesize Marxism and Islam. It interpreted Shi'i Islam as a radical religion favoring equality, social justice, martyrdom, and redistribution of wealth. Immediately after the revolution, the Mojahedin opposed the clerical regime and attracted a large following among students. The regime retaliated with mass executions forcing the Mojahedin to move their base of operations to Iraq. Not unexpectedly, the Mojahedin became associated with a national enemy and thereby lost much of its appeal.
- **The Fedayin.** Also formed in 1971, the Fedayin modeled itself after the Marxist guerrilla movements of the 1960s in Latin America, especially those inspired by Che Guevara and the Cuban revolution. Losing more fighters than any other organization in the struggle against the shah, the Fedayin came out of the revolution with great mystique and popular urban support. But it soon lost much of its strength because of massive government repression and a series of internal splits.
- **The Tudeh (Party of the Masses).** Established in 1941, the Tudeh is a mainstream, formerly pro-Soviet communist party. Although the Tudeh initially supported the Islamic Republic as a "popular anti-imperialist state," it was banned, and most of its organizers were executed during the 1980s.

Elections

The constitution promises free elections. In practice, however, *Majles* elections, which are held every four years, have varied from relatively free but disorderly in the early days of the Islamic Republic to controlled and highly unfair in the middle years; back to relatively free, but orderly in the late 1990s; and back again to highly controlled—even rigged—in 2009. If the latter is a sign of things to come, one can safely predict that the republic's democratic features have been sacrificed for its theocratic, authoritarian ones, in which case, the Islamic Republic has lost a major component of its legitimacy.

In the 1980s, ballot boxes were placed in mosques with Revolutionary Guards supervising the voting. Neighborhood clerics were on hand to help illiterates complete their ballots. Club-wielding gangs assaulted regime opponents. Now electoral freedom is restricted by the government-controlled radio-television network, the main source of information for the vast majority of citizens. The Interior Ministry can ban dissident organizations, especially their newspapers on the grounds they are anti-Islamic. Moreover, the electoral law, based on a winner-take-all majority system rather than on proportional representation, is designed to minimize the voice of the opposition.

But the main obstacle to fair elections has been the Guardian Council with its powers to approve all candidates. For example, the Council excluded some 3500 candidates (nearly half of the total) from running in the parliamentary elections of 2004 by questioning their loyalty to the concept of jurist's guardianship. The purge of reformers was facilitated both by President Bush's labeling of Iran as a member of the global "Axis of Evil" in 2002 and by the American military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. Reluctant to rock the boat at a time of apparent and imminent "national danger," most reformers restrained themselves and withdrew from active politics. Not surprisingly, the conservatives won a hollow victory in the 2004 *Majles* elections. They received a clear majority of the seats, but the voter turnout was less than 51 percent, and in Tehran only 28 percent. This was the worst showing since 1979. For a regime that liked to boast about mass participation, this was seen as a major setback—even as a crisis of legitimacy. There was a bit of an upturn, to about 60 percent, in the turnout in both rounds of the presidential election of 2005. Still this was a sharp downturn from the more than 80 percent that had voted in the 1997 presidential contest that brought the reformist Khatami to power. The 2009 elections, by reactivating the reform movement, may well have produced another record turnout, but because of government interference in tallying the vote, the facts are still unclear.

Political Culture, Citizenship, and Identity

In theory, the Islamic Republic of Iran should be a highly viable state. After all, Shi'ism is the religion of both the state and the vast majority of the population. Shi'ism is the central component of Iranian popular culture. Also, the constitution guarantees basic rights to religious minorities as well as to individual citizens. All citizens, regardless of race, language, or religion, are promised the rights of free expression, worship, and organization. They are guaranteed freedom from arbitrary arrest, torture, and police surveillance.

The constitution extends additional rights to the recognized religious minorities: Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Although Christians (Armenians

and Assyrians), Jews, and Zoroastrians form just 1 percent of the total population, they are allocated five *Majles* seats. They are permitted their own community organizations, including schools, their own places of worship, and their own family laws. The constitution, however, is ominously silent about Sunnis and Baha'is. Sunni Muslims are treated in theory as full citizens, but their actual status is not spelled out. Believers in Baha'ism, a monotheistic religion founded in nineteenth-century Persia that emphasizes the spiritual unity of all humankind, are considered heretics because their founder had proclaimed his own teachings to supersede that of not only the Old and New Testaments but also of the Qur'an and the Shi'i Imams. Moreover, some ultraconservative Shi'is deem Baha'is to be part of the "international Zionist conspiracy" on the grounds their main shrine is located in modern-day Israel.

The constitution also gives guarantees to non-Persian speakers. Although 83 percent of the population understands Persian, thanks to the educational system, over 50 percent continue to speak non-Persian languages at home—languages such as Azeri, Kurdish, Turkic, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Arabic, and Baluchi. The constitution promises them rights unprecedented in Iranian history. It states that "local and native languages can be used in the press, media, and schools." It also states that local populations have the right to elect provincial, town, and village councils. These councils can watch over the governors-general and the town mayors, as well as their educational, cultural, and social programs.

These generous promises have often been honored more in theory than in practice. The local councils—the chief institution that protected minorities—were not held until twenty years after the revolution. Subsidies to non-Persian publications and radio stations remain meager. Jews have been so harassed as "pro-Israeli Zionists" that more than half—40,000 out of 80,000—have left the country since the revolution. Armenian Christians had to end coeducational classes, adopt the government curriculum, and abide by Muslim dress codes, including the veil. The Christian population has declined from over 300,000 to fewer than 200,000.

The Baha'is, however, have borne the brunt of religious persecution. Their leaders have been executed as "heretics" and "imperialist spies." Adherents have been fired from their jobs, had their property confiscated, and been imprisoned and tortured to pressure them to convert to Islam. Their schools have been closed, their community property expropriated, and their shrines and cemeteries bulldozed. It is estimated that since the revolution, one-third of the 300,000 Baha'is have left Iran. The Baha'is, like the Jews and Armenians, have migrated mostly to Canada and the United States.

The Sunni population, which forms as much as 10 percent of the total, has its own reasons for being alienated from Iran's Islamic Republic. The state religion is Shi'ism, and high officials have to be Shi'i. Citizens must abide by Khomeini's concept of jurists' guardianship, a notion derived from Shi'ism. Few institutions cater to Sunni needs. There is not a single Sunni mosque in the whole of Tehran. Iran's Kurds, Turkmans, Arabs, and Baluchis are also Sunnis, and it is no accident that immediately after the 1979 revolution, the new regime faced its most serious challenges in precisely the areas of the country where these linguistic and religious minorities lived. It crushed these revolts by sending in Revolutionary Guards from the Persian Shi'i heartland of Isfahan, Shiraz, and Qom.

Azeris, who are Shi'i but not Persian speakers, are well integrated into Iran. In the past, the Azeris, who form 24 percent of the population and dwarf the other minorities, have not posed a serious problem to the state. They are part of the Shi'i community, and have prominent figures in the Shi'i hierarchy—most notably the current

Leader, Khamenei. What is more, many Azeri merchants, professionals, and workers live and work throughout Iran.

But the 1991 creation of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Iran's northeastern border following the disintegration of the Soviet Union has raised new concerns, since some Azeris on both sides of the border have begun to talk of establishing a larger unified Azerbaijan. It is no accident that in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the early 1990s, Iran favored the latter. So far, the concept of a unified Azerbaijan appears to have limited appeal among Iranian Azeris.

Interests, Social Movements, and Protest

In the first two decades after its founding, the government of the Islamic Republic often violated its own constitution. It closed down newspapers, professional associations, labor unions, and political parties. It banned demonstrations and public meetings. It imprisoned tens of thousands without due process. It systematically tortured prisoners to extract false confessions and public recantations. And it executed some 25,000 political prisoners, most of them without due process of law. The United Nations, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch all took Iran to task for violating the UN Human Rights Charter as well its own Islamic constitution. Most victims were Kurds, military officers from the old regime, and leftists, especially members of the Mojahedin and Fedayin.

Although the violation of individual liberties affected the whole population, it aroused special resentment among three social groups: the modern middle class, educated women, and organized labor. The modern middle class, especially the intelligentsia, has been secular and even anticlerical ever since the 1905 revolution. Little



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Executions in Kurdistan, 1979.

Source: Jahangir Razmi

love is lost between it and the Islamic Republic. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of those executed in the 1980s were teachers, engineers, professionals, and college students.

Youth, especially college students, are a force to be reckoned with: Over half the current population was born after 1979 and as many as 1.15 million are enrolled in higher education. In 1999, eighteen different campuses, including Tehran University, erupted into mass demonstrations against the chief judge, who had closed down a reformist newspaper. Revolutionary Guards promptly occupied the campuses, killing or seriously injuring an unknown number of students. Again in late 2002, thousands of students protested the death sentence handed down to a reformist academic accused of insulting Islam. But in 2004, when the Guardian Council barred thousands of reformers from the parliamentary elections, the campuses remained quiet, partly out of fear, partly out of disenchantment with the reformers for failing to deliver on their promises, and partly because of the concern about the looming danger from the United States military presence in Iraq. Students, however, returned to active politics in large numbers during the 2009 presidential elections between Ahmadinejad and the reform candidates, and even more so in the mass demonstrations protesting these contested elections.

Educated women in Iran also harbor numerous grievances against the conservative clerics in the regime, especially in the judiciary. Although the Western press often dwells on the head-scarf, Iranian women consider the veil one of their less important problems. Given a choice, most would probably continue to wear it out of personal habit and national tradition. More important are work-related grievances: job security, pay scales, promotions, maternity leave, and access to prestigious professions. Despite patriarchal attitudes held by the conservative clergy, educated women have become a major factor in Iranian society. They now form 54 percent of college students, 45 percent of doctors, 25 percent of government employees, and 30 percent of the general labor force, up from 8 percent in the 1980s. They have established their own organizations and journals reinterpreting Islam to conform to modern notions of gender equality. Their main organization is known as the Women's One Million Signature Campaign. Women do serve in the *Majles* (there are ten in the current parliament, 2.8 percent of the total) and on local councils. One grand ayatollah has even argued that they should be able to hold any job, including president, court judge, and even Leader.

Factory workers in Iran are another significant social group with serious grievances. Their concerns deal mostly with high unemployment, low wages, declining incomes, lack of decent housing, and an unsatisfactory labor law, which, while giving them mandatory holidays and some semblance of job security, denies them the right to call strikes and organize independent unions. Since 1979, wage earners have had a Workers' House—a government-influenced organization—and its affiliated newspaper, *Kar va Kargar* (*Work and Worker*), and since 1999 the Islamic Labor Party has represented their interests. In most years, the Workers' House flexes its political muscle by holding a May Day rally. In 1999, the rally began peacefully with a greeting from a woman reform deputy who had received the second-most votes in the 1996 Tehran municipal elections. But the rally turned into a protest when workers began to march to parliament denouncing conservatives who had spoken in favor of further watering down of the Labor Law. On May Day 2006, an estimated 10,000 workers marched to demand that the labor minister resign. Bus drivers in Tehran, who had been active in earlier protests, went on strike in January 2006 to protest the arrest and maltreatment of one of their leaders. Workers also protested the contested presidential elections of 2009 by participating in the mass demonstrations.

Summary

The Bush administration liked to denounce Iran as a “totalitarian state” tyrannized by unelected unpopular leaders. While Iran is no liberal democracy, it hardly fits the “totalitarian” category. The clergy, despite opposition from the intelligentsia, continue to rule in part because they still enjoy some legitimacy—especially among the bazaars, rural population, and urban poor; in part because they have brought economic benefits to the wider population; and in part because they have left some room for civil society and have permitted interest groups to function so long as they do not violate red lines and directly question the clergy’s legitimacy. They have also been greatly helped by the perceived notion that the nation is under siege—even under imminent threat—from the United States. The 2009 electoral rigging was a major blow to democracy, but, despite this, one should not write an obituary for democracy in Iran. Because of the long tradition of mass participation in politics, the democratic impulse remains there—however stifled at present.

IRANIAN POLITICS IN TRANSITION

SECTION 5

The mass demonstrations that brought down the presidents of both Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 had repercussions in Iran. The Leader praised them claiming they replicated the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran. The Iranian reform movement countered that these demonstrations were inspired by the 2009 protests against the rigged elections and that they showed such protests—if continued for length of time—could bring down autocratic regimes. The Leader categorized Mubarek of Egypt and Bin Ali of Tunisia as versions of the Shah of Iran who was deposed by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The reformers categorized Mubarek and Bin Ali as their version of current Iranian president, Ahmadinejad. Despite these polemics, there were major differences. Mubarek and Bin Ali, as well as the shah, ultimately fell from power because of the defection of their armed forces. Ahmadinejad and the Leader have survived because they have so far retained the support of critical elements of the armed forces.

Focus Questions

What are the most important political challenges that now face Iran?

What are some of the ways in which Iran is different from other developing countries?

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Political Challenges and Changing Agendas

Contemporary Iran faces two major challenges—one internal, the other external. Internally, the Islamic Republic continues to struggle with the troubling question of how to combine theocracy with democracy, and clerical authority with mass participation. After several years when Iran’s reformers seemed to be on the political rise, the conservative clerics and their supporters, who already controlled the judiciary, took over the *Majles* in 2004. In June 2005 they took over the executive as well with the election of Ahmadinejad as president. They held on to the executive in 2009 only through massive electoral rigging.

Many observers think that even though the conservatives appear to have gained the upper hand politically, they have lost touch with the grassroots of Iranian society since their political base is less than 20–25 percent of the electorate. It is estimated that over 70 percent of the public favors the reformers, and that much of this majority,