

Iran should be attributed less to anything intrinsic in Islam than to the combination of crises between 1979 and 1981 that allowed a particular group of clerics to come to power. Whether they remain in power depends not so much on Islamic values but on how they handle socioeconomic problems, especially the demands for public participation.

Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran is sharply divided over the question of how to govern an economy beset by rising demands, wildly fluctuating petroleum revenues, and the nightmarish prospect that in the next two generations, the oil wells will run dry. Most clerics favor a rather conventional capitalist road to development, hoping to liberalize the market, privatize industry, attract foreign capital, and encourage the propertied classes to invest. Others envisage an equally conventional statist road to development, favoring central planning, government industries, price controls, high taxes, state subsidies, national self-reliance, and ambitious programs to eliminate poverty, illiteracy, slums, and unemployment. Some are hoping to find a third way, combining elements of state intervention with free enterprise that is similar to the social democracy favored, for example, by the Labour Party in Britain.

Economic problems like those that undermined the monarchy could well undermine the Islamic Republic, particularly if there was another sharp drop in oil prices. The country's collective identity has also come under great strain in recent years. The emphasis on Shi'ism has antagonized Iran's Sunnis as well as its non-Muslim citizens. The emphasis on clerical Shi'ism has further alienated all secularists, including lay liberals and moderate nationalists, to say nothing of a large majority of Iranians who live abroad. Furthermore, the official emphasis on Khomeini's brand of Shi'ism has alienated those Shi'is who reject the whole notion of jurist's guardianship. The elevation of Khamenei as the Leader has also antagonized many early proponents of jurist's guardianship on the grounds that he lacks the scholarly qualifications to hold the position that embodies the sacred and secular power of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's ruling clerical regime has gradually eroded the broad social base that brought it to power in the Islamic Revolution nearly three decades ago. Growing discontent may be expressed through apolitical channels, such as apathy, emigration, inward-looking religion, or even drug addiction. There is also a possibility that those seeking change may turn to radical action if they cannot attain their goals through legal reformist movement. Those who want to understand the possibilities for political change in Iran would do well to remember that the country produced two popular upheavals in the twentieth century that fundamentally transformed the political system: the constitutional (1905) and the Islamic (1979) revolutions.

Summary

To predict the future is a hazardous task. Iran could meet its internal challenge by becoming more flexible, liberalizing, giving greater scope to civil society, and allowing more public participation and competitive elections—in short, strengthening the democratic as opposed to the theocratic features of the constitution. If it did so, it would transform itself closer to democracy. If it does not, it could freeze up, alienate the public, lose legitimacy, and thereby make itself vulnerable to destruction. Iran could also meet its external challenge by following a cautious foreign policy, going slow on its nuclear program, providing verifiable guarantees that it was not building nuclear weapons, toning down its rhetoric, and assuring its neighbors as well as the United States that it was a “normal state” uninterested in exporting revolution. If it does not, it could well end up with a confrontation with the United States—a confrontation that would be disastrous for both countries.

Key Terms

ayatollah	bazaar	dual society
civil society	fundamentalism	OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries)
theocracy	political Islam	resource curse
<i>Majles</i>	jurist's guardianship	Expediency Council
Guardian Council	<i>pasdaran</i>	Imam Jum'ehs
Leader/Supreme Leader	Assembly of Experts	Foundation of the Oppressed
Farsi	Hezbollahis	<i>maslahat</i>
People of the Book	<i>hojjat al-Islam</i>	
Qur'an	laissez-faire	
<i>shari'a</i>	Islamism	
coup d'état	rentier state	

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China

William A. Joseph

SECTION 1 The Making of the Modern Chinese State

SECTION 2 Political Economy and Development

SECTION 3 Governance and Policy-Making

SECTION 4 Representation and Participation

SECTION 5 Chinese Politics in Transition



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Official Name: People's Republic of China (Zhonghua Remin Gongheguo)

Location: East Asia

Capital City: Beijing

Population (2010): 1.3 billion

Size: 9,596,960 sq. km.; slightly smaller than the United States



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