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**The Path Dependent Nature of  
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Post-Khomeini Iran**

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# The Path Dependent Nature of Factionalism in Post-Khomeini Iran

Dr Ariabarzan Mohammadi

## Abstract

The main claim of this paper is that the anti-party system in Iran, or what is known as factionalism, is subject to a path dependent process. The political system in post-Khomeini Iran is not based on political parties. The authoritarian regime in Iran has not developed into a ruling party system as in Egypt under Mubarak. Instead, through its different stages of institutionalisation, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has gradually degenerated from what looked like a single party system during the ascendancy of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) in the first and second Majlis (the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran), to an anti-party, factional system that has continued to the present. My contention is that the institutionalisation of a 'factional system' in Iran is subject to 'path dependency' and consequently difficult to undo due to a self-reinforcing feedback loop which is in place and because of the considerable amount of money, as well as other resources, invested on the path of factionalism over an extended period of time.

## Introduction

This paper contends that contingent events on the eve of the revolution and some choices made by IRI leaders in the infancy of the state set a convention (path dependence) which, after a while, became hard to break, not because of dogma or the conservativeness of the leaders per se, but because those events and policies triggered a self-reinforcing dynamic that led to a long-lasting 'inertia'<sup>1</sup> in the system. Although most of the substantial literature on post-Khomeini Iran deals with the notion of factionalism in the IRI,<sup>2</sup> an institutionalist approach to the problem of factionalism in



Iran has yet to receive the attention it deserves. The literature on factionalism focuses predominantly on descriptive accounts of the views and affiliations of the factions, the growing conflict between traditional and modern forces, analysis of parliamentary politics and struggles over the definition (as well as control) of the state between proponents of religious values, populist principles, and revolutionary doctrine. Whereas this literature informs my project, it is insufficient in explaining why the ideological conflicts within the IRI have taken the shape of factional conflicts rather than party conflicts. Moreover, this literature does not consider institutionalist perspectives, including path dependency, as a way to understand the persistence of factionalism in Iran. Most general approaches to understanding institutions treat the origins, persistence and demise of institutions as being derived from a single causal process. Path dependence perspectives, by contrast, emphasise some contingency at the genesis of an institution and suggest that “factors responsible for the reproduction of an institution may be quite different from those that account for the existence of the institution in the first place”.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the Islamic Republic, factors contributing to the genesis of factionalism appear to be different from those that explain the reproduction of the system.

To address the shortfall of research on this important subject, this study adopts an analytical framework which uses Mahoney’s (2000)<sup>4</sup> and Pierson’s (2004)<sup>5</sup> contributions to institutional analysis, grounded in an historical, path dependent methodology, as a starting point to analyse the trajectory of IRI history. In so doing, it investigates whether the anti-party system in Iran, or what is known as factionalism, is subject to a path dependent process. To study the instances and/or possibilities of change in the factional system that would not require institutional breakdown, this project will draw on Thelen’s (2003)<sup>6</sup> work on path dependency theory. Furthermore, it examines the various aspects of factionalism in post-Khomeini Iran by drawing on a number of research streams such as work by Keshavarzian (2005)<sup>7</sup>, Moslem (2002)<sup>8</sup>, Bakhtiari (1996)<sup>9</sup> and Alamdari (2005).<sup>10</sup>

### **Path Dependency**

‘Path dependency’ (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2004)<sup>11</sup> holds that institutions become increasingly dependent on the paths chosen during the ‘critical junctures’ of their institutionalisation history. The path that has been chosen at a critical juncture from among other possible alternatives will be difficult to undo (long lasting ‘inertia’ in the system) if a self-reinforcing ‘positive feedback’ loop is in place and if a considerable amount of money and other resources are invested on the path over an extended



period of time. As a result, the institution becomes less dependent on human agency and more suggestive of ‘autopilot’ status. The longer the process is in place, the more complicated the reversing operation becomes.<sup>12</sup>

### **Critical Junctures**

Critical junctures, as Pierson explains, “are brief moments in which opportunities for major institutional reforms appear, followed by long stretches of institutional stability.”<sup>13</sup> They are those historical windows during which opportunities for new institutional arrangements become available, albeit for a limited time only. Path dependent processes begin by adopting a particular institutional arrangement from among two or more available alternatives present at these moments. As James Mahoney points out, “These junctures are ‘critical’ because once a particular option is selected it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available”.<sup>14</sup>

Critical junctures correspond with periods of institutional genesis and the selection process during critical junctures is specified by contingency.<sup>15</sup> However, to argue that an event is contingent is not to suggest that it is random or without previous causes. What is meant by contingency in the path dependent context is that the factors responsible for the genesis of an institution may be quite different from those that account for the reproduction of the institution. As Mahoney insinuates, contingent events include “both small events that are too specific to be accommodated by prevailing social theories, such as the assassination of a political leader or the specific choices and ‘agency’ of particular individuals, and large, seemingly random processes such as natural disasters or sudden market fluctuation”.<sup>16</sup>

### **Positive Feedback**

‘Positive feedback’ (or ‘self-reinforcement sequences’)<sup>17</sup> in institutions is another characteristic feature of path dependent processes. Positive feedback, or as economists call it ‘increasing returns’, explains institutional persistence in path dependent patterns. In Mahoney’s words, “[w]ith increasing returns, an institutional pattern, once adopted delivers increasing benefits with its continued adoption, and thus over time it becomes more and more difficult to transform the pattern or select previously available options, even if these alternative options would have been more ‘efficient’”.<sup>18</sup> An option selected during a critical juncture may result in a path dependent institutional pattern if a positive feedback loop is established generating



increasing benefits which feed back into the institution as a benefactor, which in turn reinforces the favoured option.

Positive feedback dynamics capture two key elements central to most analysts' intuitive sense of path dependence. First, they clearly reveal how the costs of switching from one alternative to another will, in certain social contexts, increase markedly over time. Second, and related, they draw attention to issues of timing and sequence, distinguishing formative moments or conjunctures from the periods that reinforce divergent paths. In a process involving positive feedback, it is not just a question of what happens, but of when it happens. Issues of temporality are at the heart of the analysis.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, it could be argued that the contingent events which occurred in the first two years after the revolution, such as the assassination of IRP leaders, put the country on the path of factionalism, which could have been altered with fewer costs at the beginning of those processes than at a later stage when more resources had been invested and positive feedback processes had been initiated. Changing the course of factionalism at such a late stage would be very difficult, unless another critical juncture were to arise at some point.

### **Timing and Sequence (Temporality) in Path Dependent Patterns**

In historical institutionalisation, what happens, when, and in what order, are of utmost importance. As Paul Pierson notes, in a path dependent pattern “earlier parts of a sequence matter much more than later parts, an event that happens ‘too late’ may have no effect, although it might have been of great consequence if the timing had been different”.<sup>20</sup> The order of things is vitally significant in path dependent patterns. A major contingent event happening too early or too late might not contribute to the emergence of a path dependent pattern at all. This could be proven by considering an alternative sequence of events and then imagining whether a completely different set of outcomes were possible.<sup>21</sup> According to the cookery analogy adopted by Pierson,<sup>22</sup> if the critical junctures make the ingredients of the path dependency dish, the timing and sequence are the order of things in the recipe. An ingredient added too early or too late in the cooking process may result in a vastly different cuisine. Therefore, as Pierson puts it, “The analysis of temporal ordering is central to the claim that ‘history matters’, but this claim will be more convincing and will provide a better foundation for cumulative research if analysts focus more explicitly on where, when and how causally significant sequences come into play”.<sup>23</sup> By the same token, in the context of this study, a historical narrative of major developments in the IRI will help us better



understand where, when and how the causally significant events have influenced the course of factionalism in Iran.

Pierson's summary of 'path dependency' in politics is quoted below:

To summarise briefly, in settings where self-reinforcing processes are at work political life is likely to be marked by four features:

1. Multiple *equilibria*. Under a set of initial conditions conducive to positive feedback, a range of outcomes is generally possible.
2. *Contingency*. Relatively small events, if occurring at the right moment, can have large and enduring consequences.
3. A critical role for *timing* and *sequencing*. In these path-dependent processes, when an event occurs may be crucial. Because early parts of a sequence matter much more than later parts, an event that happens "too late" may have no effect although it might have been of great consequence if the timing had been different.
4. *Inertia*. Once such a process has been established, positive feedback will generally lead to a single equilibrium. This equilibrium will in turn be resistant to change.<sup>24</sup>

Path dependency's main claim is that, once solidified, institutions will have a life of their own that is somehow independent from the actors' short-term aims and deliberations.

## **The Context**

### ***The first Majlis (1980-84): The era of the single party system***

Although there were many irregularities in the first parliamentary election after the revolution, to this date the first Majlis remains the most pluralistic parliament in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this election the Grand Coalition that was sanctioned by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and comprised the Islamic Republic Party and its satellite cabals won a relative majority with 83 out of a total 270; 115 MPs claimed to be non-partisan but most of them later joined the Khomeinists. President Abolhassan Banisadr's supporters obtained 33 seats whereas the Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI) won only 20 seats.<sup>25</sup>

As the first parliament after the revolution, the first Majlis was never able to assume a normal legislative mandate; it had to respond to grave issues such as armed opposition





groups, the Iran-Iraq war, the hostage crisis and last but not least the conflict between President Banisadr and the IRP. On 21 June 1981, President Banisadr was impeached by the first Majlis, accused of an act of conspiracy against the regime. He was later removed by Khomeini and political power became consolidated in the hands of the Khomeinists. On 28 June 1981, a bomb took the life of Ayatollah Mohammad Hossein Beheshti (the founding father of the IRP) along with more than 70 members of his party. On 24 July, Mohammad Ali Rajaei was elected the President of Iran. Shortly after he assumed office he was assassinated, together with his Prime Minister, Hojatoleslam Mohammad Javad Bahonar (the IRP's second director general). Ali Khamenei, the IRP's third director general, was elected President on 13 October 1981. Khamenei's first choice for Prime Minister was rejected by the Majlis. Subsequently, he put forward Mir-Hossein Mousavi as a compromise candidate. Mousavi's nomination was narrowly approved by the Majlis on 31 October 1981.

By 1983, the very last lingering opposition groups such as the Tudeh Party (Party of the Masses of Iran) had been crushed and their offices closed down. With no opposition party left to challenge their rule, members of the IRP felt safe enough to publicly express some of their own intra-party factional differences. Gradually, the victorious IRP elites who felt no threat from the *ghir-e khodiha* (outsiders), started to turn against each other but not in the same vicious manner that they had dealt with 'outsider' opposition. The party's left wing, known for their dynamic (flexible) interpretation of Shia *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and radical state-socialist policies, came to conflict with members of the right wing of the party who were in favour of the traditional Shia *fiqh* and keen on protecting the interests of bazaaris. The left wing (*Maktabi*) faction's endorsement of the dynamic *fiqh* was in fact a tactic to give Khomeini an open hand in issuing unorthodox religious rulings that justified state intervention in every aspect of public life, from the economy to culture to politics. The right wing, or the conservatives, although generally supporting the idea of an authoritative Islamic state, did not want state intervention in the economy to include the areas traditionally controlled by the bazaar.

These internal disputes are partly to blame for the later dissolution of the party.<sup>26</sup> However, it must be noted that these internal conflicts were not deemed to be of sufficient magnitude to outweigh the need for ruling party machinery; even if we accept that intra-party conflict alone caused the termination of the IRP, this supposed conclusion cannot answer the more important question of why the conflict did not result in dividing the IRP into smaller parties instead of abandoning the party model altogether and adopting a factional system. Abandoning the party system in the IRI



came as a result of a confluence of a number of trajectories and contingent events which is dealt with in the following sections.

### ***The second Majlis (1984-1988): The end of the party era***

By the time the second Majlis was convened, nearly all opposition groups were illegal and underground; yet, ironically, the demise of these competitors marked the beginning of the end for the IRP itself. The rivalry between the Maktabi and the conservative wings of the party was reflected in the Majlis. President Khamenei, Ayatollah Azari-Qomi and the *Motalefeh* bloc were advocates of the traditional or *sonati* school of jurisprudence, which was in congruence with their economic policies, whereas Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and many of the younger IRP MPs endorsed what was known as the *pouya* or dynamic school of jurisprudence and were committed to protecting the interests of the poorer sectors of society through the state-controlled economy. The Speaker of the Majlis, Hashemi Rafsanjani, despite being a conservative figure, managed to establish himself as a mediator between the two factions.

Khomeini constantly shifted his position between the two factions to establish some kind of balance between his two blocs of followers and to keep the system functioning. However, it was no secret that his personal inclination was towards the Maktabi faction. This left the conservatives in a humiliating situation since none of them wanted to be marred by the accusation of not following the ‘Imam’s line’. Yet, what was most appalling for President Khamenei and his conservative allies was the fact that the president’s role was reduced to that of overseeing foreign affairs, with some very limited domestic responsibilities. It was difficult for the pro-Khomeini clerics (who, during Banisadr’s term in office, strongly advocated an interpretation of the IRI’s constitution that gave most executive responsibilities to the prime minister) to make a U-turn when one of their own was elected president. Therefore, Khamenei was left with limited input in choosing the cabinet ministers.

With regard to the IRP, the intra-party conflict reached its peak in 1985 when Khamenei, who was elected president for the second time, strongly opposed Mir-Hossein Mousavi’s nomination for the office of prime minister. IRP-affiliated MPs were divided over who to support as the next prime minister and a stalemate was created. Finally, Ayatollah Khomeini intervened in favour of Mousavi and Ali Khamenei had no choice but to obey the command of the Supreme Leader. However, this intervention and Khamenei’s dissatisfaction with the Imam’s decision left an open



wound in the party that has never been healed. The damage this incident caused to the already shattered party was fatal. In 1987, Khamenei and Hashemi Rafsanjani convinced Ayatollah Khomeini to wind down all of the IRP's activities.

The dissolution of the IRP could be seen as a critical juncture, arising out of the conjunction of a causally-linked trajectory and a number of contingent events including the assassination of two IRP Directors General. The trajectory started with the revolution's period of euphoria, during which numerous political parties, groups and societies emerged. This was followed by a reign of terror that resulted in the ousting of all non-Khomeinist parties and then by a brief era of single-party rule and the emergence of intra-party rivalry in the IRP. The IRP was dissolved mainly because of the leadership vacuum caused by the assassinations of its 'charismatic' founder Ayatollah Beheshti and, shortly after, his successor Hojjatolesalm Bahonar. In the absence of these strong figures, the factional dispute in the party grew to the extent that Hojjatolesalm Khamenei, the third and last IRP Director General, pleaded with Ayatollah Khomeini for the termination of the organisation and the party was consequently dissolved. It could be argued that Ayatollah Beheshti's assassination was an important contingent event, a critical juncture, during which a particular option (factional system) was selected. With increasing benefits, as we explain in this paper, a self-reinforcing feedback loop was created which has repeatedly strengthened this option (factionalism) and has eventually led to the institutionalisation of a factional system instead of a multi-party system or single-party rule in Iran. In support of the claim that the assassination of Ayatollah Beheshti was a critical juncture, we can imagine a scenario under which the selection of an alternative option at that time would have resulted in a dramatically different final outcome.

### ***The third Majlis (1988-1992): The departure of Khomeini and the positive feedback of factionalism***

Although in 1988 the Maktabis won a majority in the legislative body, by the end of its term they had lost the political battle to the conservatives. The war with Iraq was taking its toll on Prime Minister Mousavi: supplies of food and goods were rationed; Iraq's missiles and chemical weapons inspired panic in Tehran and on the battlefields and the naval clash between Iranian and American forces had destroyed half of the IRI's naval power. The public support for the 'sacred defence' was diminishing and with it the popularity of the Maktabis as well. On 16 November 1987, Ayatollah Montazeri, the spiritual father of the Maktabis who had been the strongest critic of the conservatives, was removed from his post as successor to the Leader after he



criticised Ayatollah Khomeini for his alleged role in the controversial trials that sentenced hundreds of political prisoners to death. The post of vice-regent was later eliminated under Iran's revised constitution. However, the preparation for Montazeri's isolation had been ongoing since 1986, when individuals close to Montazeri disclosed the top-secret Iran-Contra affair.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, a triangle consisting of Ahmad Khomeini, President Khamenei and Hashemi Rafsanjani worked tirelessly to drive out Montazeri from his position as successor and convince Khomeini to change the constitution by eliminating the post of prime minister, increasing the powers of the Leader and the president at the expense of the Majlis. In April 1989, a month before his death, Khomeini issued a decree convening the Assembly of Revising the Constitution. The assembly's amendments dropped the requirement of *marja'iyat* for becoming Leader, gave greater authority to the supreme jurist (Article 57), eliminated the position of prime minister and legalised the status of the Expediency Council.

Khomeini's death in June 1989 fell like a thunderbolt on the Maktabi faction, depriving them of their greatest patron. Khomeini's successor, Khamenei, was a prominent ideologue of the conservative faction. Unsurprisingly, he broke away from Khomeini's tradition of maintaining a balance between the two factions and started visibly to side with the conservative faction. In addition, he publicly supported Hashemi Rafsanjani's bid for presidency, which meant that the executive branch was falling into the hands of the conservatives. Rafsanjani's election as President in August 1989 was not the end of the misery for the Maktabis. The worst was yet to come; he had advocated an interpretation of article 99 that gave the Guardian Council an open hand in disqualifying certain candidates for Majlis elections. With the Leadership, the Presidency and the Guardian Council in conservative control, the Maktabis were soon to be excluded from the centres of political power.<sup>28</sup>

The fourth Majlis election (1992) was held while many prominent Maktabis were barred from standing by the Guardian Council. The conservatives won the majority with about 50% of the seats and the once powerful Maktabi faction was reduced to a small minority of around 40 MPs.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the fourth Majlis, the title *maktabis* became less common to describe the radicals of the Majlis. The IRP held the majority and the Maktabi MPs represented there were a faction within the IRP. After the dissolution of the IRP, however, the opposition in the Majlis now comprised both those who did not have any IRP background as well as the former IRP members from the Maktabi faction. Therefore, the press simply chose the name 'left-current' to refer to the loyal opposition. The former Maktabis who were now part of the left-current



lost the fourth Majlis election for several reasons. First, many of their candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council. Second, a number of their prominent figures were discredited by the conservatives' negative campaigning. Third, they had lost much of their popularity because people no longer supported their restricted cultural views and their confrontational behaviour with regard to the private sector. Fourth, President Hashemi Rafsanjani's promises of post-war reconstruction, rapprochement with the West and economic liberalisation had won the hearts and minds of the middle-class electorate. Therefore, many silent middle-class Iranians who refrained from voting in the previous elections for the reason that they found no programme that met their expectations decided to vote for President Rafsanjani's supporters (i.e. the conservatives) in the hope that a pro-Rafsanjani Majlis would help the president implement his plans.

By 1992 the left-current (formerly known as Maktabis) were pushed to the outer edges of the IRI's political scene. They were first expelled from the judiciary and then squeezed out of other offices such as the Assembly of Experts. Eventually, the conservatives were able to seize the legislature after many of the left-current MPs in the third Majlis (1988-92) were disqualified from standing for the fourth Majlis.<sup>30</sup> However, the regime did not go as far as to suffocate the left-current and eliminate them from the political scene altogether. The Presidential Centre for Strategic Research (PCSR) was one of the important sanctuaries where the left-current elites would congregate and had a chance to flourish intellectually and endure financially. This centre was established by Rafsanjani in 1992 to facilitate political reforms in accordance with his economic adjustment programme. A board of directors ran the centre and its inaugural manager was the left-current's godfather Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha. The centre's most influential personalities, who were actively pursuing the project of political reform, were Sa'id Hajjarian, Alireza Alavi-Tabar, Abbas Abdi and Majid Mohammadi, all of whom belonged to the left-current faction.<sup>31</sup> For these conquered but not destroyed leftist elites the above-mentioned venue acted as an intellectual academy for interaction and contemplation. This unwanted banishment provided them with an opportunity for self-criticism and self-reflection. In addition, most of these people decided to use their free time to continue their studies in human sciences. During these years of academic education and intellectual deliberation, the previously-labelled radicals in the Iranian political spectrum modified their views and, little by little, went from zealous defenders of state socialism to advocates of democracy and personal liberties and became known as reformists.



Khomeini's contingent death pushed the left-current faction out of the government. This important development could have worked as a catalyst to force the left-current into forming an opposition party in order to maximise their chances of survival outside the parliament and to utilise their political power. However, instead of establishing an opposition party the left-current resumed operating as a faction within the IRI's factional system. One factor that could have played an important role in discouraging the left-current from forming a party was the fact that at that time party politics as a concept had lost its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of many in Iran; after the troublesome experience of the party system in the beginning of the revolution, the credibility of political parties came under question by IRI leaders and the masses that supported them; parties were regarded as unnecessary organs that divided the nation and created conflict. Having said that, had it not been for Rafsanjani's decision to co-opt the left-current and include them in such parallel organisations as the PCSR, the launch of a left-current political party was a move that the left-current might have made. However, given the negative view of parties held by many Iranians at the time, the success and endurance of such party would have been highly uncertain. The case mentioned above is an example of a positive feedback process that has reinforced the factional system adopted after the dissolution of the IRP. With its enduring adoption, the factional system delivers positive feedback (increasing benefits) for those who abide by its rules; thus, the costs of switching to an alternative (party) system increase over time and it becomes more and more difficult to transform the factional pattern.

#### ***The fourth Majlis (1992-1994): Kargozaran – a faction in party's clothing***

Rafsanjani's cabinet was dominated by technocrats who held impressive university degrees but few revolutionary credentials. While introducing his cabinet to the third Majlis, in response to those who criticised the absence of prominent politicians in his team, President Rafsanjani stated, "I myself am political as much as you need... in the era of reconstruction we need a government of hard work".<sup>32</sup> Foreign borrowing and increased public spending were at the heart of Rafsanjani's economic plans. In his domestic policies the President pursued selective economic liberalisation and limited socio-cultural reforms. With regard to foreign policy, Rafsanjani sought to normalise relations with the West; he tried to distance himself from the revolutionary rhetoric of the previous administrations, focusing instead on a pragmatic approach in foreign affairs.



In the first months of the new Majlis it appeared that Rafsanjani had the full backing of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Speaker of the Majlis, Ali-Akbar Nategh-Noori. However, it soon became clear that no one should ever take such alliances for granted. The conservative MPs, whose main slogan in the election was *Eta'at az rahbari, hemayat az hashemi* (obeying the leadership, supporting Hashemi), started to work against the very person who had helped them get elected in the first place. Yet, in their opposition to Rafsanjani, the conservatives were very careful not to give the left-current any advantage. As the conservatives identified with the economic policies of the president, they concentrated their criticism of Rafsanjani on his partial socio-cultural reforms, especially those masterminded by the Minister of Culture, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami,<sup>33</sup> whereas the left-current, who benefited from the relative opening up of society, focused its attack on the government's economic policies.

By the time of Rafsanjani's second term in office, the combination of the president's liberal economic policies, injection of liquidity into the market and excessive foreign borrowing when oil prices were decreasing had created an inflation rate of 50%.<sup>34</sup> This made him lose much of his popularity in the Majlis and MPs across the left-right political spectrum started to echo their constituents' concerns about the soaring prices of basic commodities and services, as well as the rapidly increasing cost of living. Yet, for Rafsanjani, what was even more worrying than the conservatives' change of tune was the fact that Ayatollah Khamenei started to side with the critics. Rafsanjani was re-elected as president in June 1993 with 63% of the votes cast. This was a sharp decrease from 1989 when he had received 94.5% of the votes. This made him appear weaker in front of the Majlis conservatives who began working together with Khamenei to limit his powers. Unable to rely on the conservative supporters of the Leader, he decided to organise his own technocrat supporters in a new formation named *Kargozaran-e sazandegi* (Executives of Construction).

It is important to note that *Kargozaran* as an entity was formed in 1996, just a few months before the fifth Majlis election. However, it was not until 1999 that *Kargozaran* could secure a licence from the interior ministry to become officially recognised as a political party. Yet it lacked organisational capabilities; the so-called party was only active during election periods (introducing candidates and engaging in election campaigns). Once elections were over, there remained little sign of *Kargozaran* as an organisation. Although it carried the name of a party, it was in fact another faction added to the factional map of the IRI, thus reinforcing the adopted pattern of factionalism.



### *The fifth and sixth Majlis (1996-2004): Khatami's presidency and the lost opportunity for party making*

Despite *Kargozaran's* remarkable campaign, the conservatives retained their majority in the fifth Majlis. Yet, *Kargozaran* was able to put up an influential minority caucus and form an alliance with the left-current MPs in order to smooth the progress of Rafsanjani's policies. The second year of the fifth Majlis coincided with the seventh IRI presidential election. According to the Iranian constitution, Rafsanjani could not serve more than two consecutive terms. At first, *Kargozaran* MPs tried to push forward a proposal for amending the constitution to allow Rafsanjani's multiple elections. However, the Speaker of the Majlis, Hojatoleslam Nategh-Noori, who was a presidential hopeful himself, strongly opposed this plan and stated that "[w]e have more qualified people than Mr Rafsanjani to fill the post".<sup>35</sup> *Kargozaran* elites were running out of time and could not find a strong candidate to replace Rafsanjani as the next president. Thus, they ultimately decided to go for a consensual candidate with the left-current. The move was widely seen as a last-minute effort by *Kargozaran* and the left-current to emerge as a vibrant opposition capable of challenging the conservatives. However, neither the left-current-*Kargozaran* coalition, nor the conservatives, could have imagined that the former Minister of Culture, Sayyed Mohammad Khatami would become the Islamic Republic's seventh president. His victory was particularly notable because the establishment's preferred candidate was the fifth Speaker of the Majlis, the leader of the conservative camp, the *de facto* leader of the Combatant Clergy Association (CCA) and the former interior minister, Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Nategh-Noori, who reportedly enjoyed the endorsement of the IRI's Leader, Ali Khamenei.<sup>36</sup>

In the course of the 1990s, the left-current went through an ideological revolution and many of the political current's once radical elites abandoned, or at least softened, the edges of their radical positions regarding support for state-controlled economy and anti-American dogma. This is why, at the critical juncture of 1997, the left was ideologically ready to forge an alliance with the modern conservatives (i.e., *Kargozaran*) and was prepared to run a joint campaign for Khatami. On the other hand, *Kargozaran* entered the alliance for three main reasons:

1. *Kargozaran* could not reach a similar deal with the traditional conservatives, mainly because the conservatives were confident of winning with or without help from the 'modern right' (*Kargozaran's* title in the Iranian press).





2. *Kargozaran* MPs in the fifth Majlis failed to pave the way for another term of Rafsanjani's presidency. It looked as if *Kargozaran* had entered the alliance with the left, including CCL, MIRO and students of the Office of Unity, to secure their posts in the post-Hashemi government.
3. The technocrat elites of *Kargozaran* wanted to see a continuation of Hashemi Rafsanjani's economic adjustment policies known as *Ta'dil eghtesadi* (economic adjustment).

Khatami won the election on a platform that emphasised *Jame'ie Madani* – literally 'civil society' – and a commitment to the rule of law and the constitution.<sup>37</sup> It was clear that, for Khatami, the political opening of the Iranian system had precedence over its economic liberalisation, whereas *Kargozaran*'s priority was 'Rafsanjani-branded' economic reform. It was evident that in order for the President to implement his political agenda a political organisation that was closer to his vision was needed; *Kargozaran*'s priority was economic liberalisation. The left-current's traditional organisations such as the Association of Combatant Clerics and the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organisation (MIRO) lacked the organisational efficiency to act as vehicles for the implementation of Khatami's agenda. Therefore, a number of Khatami's supporters who contributed to the monthlies *Kiyan* and *Aeen* and were prominent in the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organisation formed a 'reformist' party, *Hezb-e Jebheye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami* (the Islamic Iran Participation Front Party). Although formed in 1998 and still in its incipient stage, *Mosharekat* won the majority of Tehran city council seats in 1999 and the sixth Majlis seats in the 2000 elections. The rapid electoral success of *Mosharekat* coincided with five main developments within its environment:

1. The reformists' newspapers were successful in bringing nationwide attention to the significance of reformism, civil society and democracy.
2. At the time of the sixth Majlis election, President Khatami was at the peak of his popularity. The fact that President Mohammad Khatami's brother was the leader of *Mosharekat* helped the party gain more votes.
3. The Interior Ministry – in charge of running the elections – was in the hands of the reformist cleric Mousavi-Lari. Therefore, it was not possible for the conservatives to use this organisation for their own benefit.
4. As the conservative-dominated Guardian Council had not yet recovered from the shock of Khatami's 1997 victory, they did not move to block reformist candidates.



5. The Guardian Council tried to suspend the announcement of results, hoping that the election would be called off, but after three months of uncertainty, Ayatollah Khamenei asked the Guardian Council to recognise the results.

Altogether, the reformist candidates won about 200 seats from the total of 290 in the sixth Majlis. The share of the *Mosharekat* faction in the sixth Majlis reformist bloc was more than 120 MPs,<sup>38</sup> although we have to keep in mind that many of those elected with *Mosharekat*'s backing, especially in the smaller cities, were not members of the party.<sup>39</sup> The reformist era was marked by a relative political development and a boom in party registration. In addition, considerable government financial assistance was directed towards political parties; in 2002, the first year of the funding programme, between 600 and 800 million *tomans* (\$600,000-800,000) was distributed among more than 70 registered political parties.<sup>40</sup> However, most of these parties existed only on paper. Just a few, such as *Mosharekat*, MIRO and Motalefeh had the minimum requirements for being a political party. The majority of these so-called parties were too loosely assembled to be called an organisation, let alone a political party. These 'paper' parties were acting as a banner under which short-term election-time alliances were forged. The endurance of these paper parties was directly related to the life of the election alliance, which in most cases was very short. Despite the fact that much of the state funding was wasted on these paper parties, the subsidy that went to genuine parties such as *Mosharekat* further enhanced their position as an influential political organisation in the public office. However, state assistance comes with a price; when a party receives regular financial support from the state, it automatically becomes less reliant on grassroots financial contributions, thus losing interest in expanding its grassroots outreach.

By the year 2000, nearly all *Mosharekat* Central Council members were engaged in state organisations, from city councils to the Majlis to the cabinet itself, thus leaving no one behind to take care of the institutionalisation of the party in the headquarters and at the grassroots level.<sup>41</sup> As a result, little was achieved in terms of enhancing civil society, including party-building, despite being one of the main slogans of the reformist camp before the elections. The reformists were handicapped by the lack of nationwide organisation. This weakness was recognised by the conservatives who seized the opportunity by gathering their most steadfast elements inside and outside the Majlis in a formation later nicknamed *Setade Zedde Eslahat* or the Counter-Reform Headquarter (CRH)<sup>42</sup> to coordinate all efforts aimed at bringing the reformists to a standstill. This headquarter included Majlis deputies, such as Mohammad Reza Bahonar; high profile members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, such as



Major-General Rahim Safavi; high ranking officials from the Office of Supreme Leader like Sardar Vahid; powerful judges, such as Golam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejeie; and, last but not least, fundamentalist clerics, such as Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. This new breed of conservatives chose the title *Osoulgarayan* (principalists) to distinguish themselves from the traditional conservatives who preferred a more cautious approach in dealing with the reformists.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is thought to be the offshoot of the principalists. Many believe that his triumph in the 2005 presidential election was the product of more than six years of anti-reformist practice instructed by CRH leaders. Therefore, once in power, it was not surprising at all to see him reverse every advancement made during Khatami's period in office. Many took the name '*Osoulgarayan*' literally and thought that they sought a return to the principles and values of the Islamic revolution. Nonetheless, this was a narrow description of who they really were. The Ahmadinejad-type of principalists, or Ahmadinejadists, were comprised of a group of low-ranking conservatives who saw the opportunity offered by the CRH and seized it. The Ahmadinejad-type of principalists had three main features:

1. They were low to middle rank laymen and clerics who established themselves on the regime's periphery. They had spent more than two decades serving the conservative elites, waiting for the right moment to take on a leading role.
2. Rather than embracing any strong ideology, the Ahmadinejadists were demagogues, many of whom seemed concerned with acquiring personal wealth and power.
3. They did not share with the established conservative elites their sense of job security, which made it difficult for them to conceal their longing for power and wealth. Ahmadinejad's close friend and advisor, Sadegh Mahsouli (Minister of Interior 2008-2009 and Minister of Welfare 2009-2011) is a classic example of this new type of Iranian politician. He was the first top IRI politician to admit openly that he was a billionaire. In November 2008, when questioned by the eighth Majlis about his wealth, Mahsouli replied "[m]y assets are worth about 160 billion *tomans* [about US\$160 million at the time] most of which I made in recent years by developing old houses and then selling them". He added, "[w]hat Imam Khomeini prohibited was the palace lifestyle and not the palace ownership, I am ready to spend all my wealth for the ideals of the revolution".<sup>43</sup>



Ahmadinejad and his close circle strongly rejected the idea of party politics; they insisted that parties were Western products and, in an Islamic country, mosques function better than political parties. This was most obvious in the words of Hussein Saffar Harandi, the minister of culture and Islamic guidance, who maintained that “[i]n a country where party system was not a successful experiment, another organisation must protect the people; the clergy had so far accepted part of responsibility, the *Basij* has done its part. However, many are still outside these ranges.”<sup>44</sup> Yet, not all conservatives agreed with such remarks. Indeed, many prominent ones, including Aliakbar Nategh-Nouri<sup>45</sup> and Ali Lajani,<sup>46</sup> started distancing themselves from the kind of anti-party doctrine that was expressed by people like Saffar Harandi and began to advocate political parties. Having said that, to this day these moderate conservatives have not become successful in bringing a change in Iran’s anti-party system.

### ***The seventh Majlis (2004-2008): Further reinforcement of the factional system***

In the final days of the sixth Majlis, the Guardian Council disqualified most reformist MPs from running for the seventh Majlis elections. In the absence of serious contenders, while the reformists were suppressed and their newspapers shut down, a coalition consisting of the principalists and traditional conservatives under the name *E’telaf-e Abadgaran-e Iran-e Eslami* or the Islamic Iran Developers’ Coalition dominated for the seventh Majlis.<sup>47</sup> The principalists tolerated the final year of Khatami’s presidency, as he did not constitute a threat to their increasing power. A presidential election was held in 2005 and, as in 1997, a surprise candidate won. Only this time the victorious candidate didn’t even touch on the political reform agenda; Ahmadinejad’s campaign pledges were based on his famous slogan of “bringing oil money to people’s tables”.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, Dr Mostafa Moein, who was the top reformist candidate, did not pay enough attention to economic issues. He came fifth, while Mehdi Karroubi, who made the famous promise of giving \$50 to every Iranian, came third in the race.

After Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005, the assumption was that the principalist/conservative-dominated Majlis would be in total harmony with the principalist president. Yet, as in the case of Rafsanjani and the fourth Majlis, almost immediately after Ahmadinejad was sworn in as president, the seventh Majlis started challenging him. The first signs of confrontation appeared over Ahmadinejad’s proposed cabinet. Most of the 21 candidates that Ahmadinejad introduced to the Majlis were unknown even to the principalist MPs;<sup>49</sup> therefore, the Majlis rejected



four of Ahmadinejad's candidates and, in the case of the oil ministry, the president's two following nominees were also rejected for lack of experience until finally his fourth choice, Mr Hamaneh, received the seal of approval. In the latter part of the seventh Majlis, the disagreements with the President reached a critical stage; the President's rebuff of one of the Majlis legislations was viewed by the majority of the parliament as an utter disregard for the constitution. This forced the Speaker of the Majlis, Mr Hadad-Adel, to write a letter to Khamenei asking for his guidance. Khamenei's answer was short but precise: "the legislations passed by the Majlis according to the legal procedure mentioned in the constitution are obligatory for all the branches".<sup>50</sup> However, Ahmadinejad continued his defiance by stating that he rejected those acts because they were unconstitutional.<sup>51</sup>

Ahmadinejad appealed to the working class in his first term and tried to find a social base among them in his second. Nonetheless, he largely ignored the fact that without a strong political party his social base could not be mobilised effectively. Such a political party could have had a dramatic impact on the outcome of the Majlis elections. It could have institutionalised the president's agenda and integrated all his supporters under its umbrella and even put up a credible challenge to the Supreme Leader. Ahmadinejad missed his chances for party-building. That said, even if he attempted to build a party, he was going to face strong resistance from the path dependent dynamics of an anti-party political system.

### ***The eighth Majlis (2008-2012): The Green Movement and the deficit of grassroots organisation***

In the 2007 city council election, Ahmadinejad loyalists decided to contest the election as a single entity under the name *Rayehi-e Khosh-e Khedmat* or the Pleasant Scent of Servitude. They were confident that Ahmadinejad's popularity and the backing they received from his government's apparatus would be sufficient to guarantee them an easy victory over other competing factions; thus, they felt no need to form an alliance with the other conservatives. Contrary to what they thought would be a landslide victory, their election performance was very poor. This bitter defeat made them revise their election tactics; ahead of the eighth Majlis election, Ahmadinejad loyalists negotiated a deal with the other principalists and conservatives to join a grand election alliance in return for an allocated number of seats. This election front was named *Jebhe Mottahed-e Osoulgarayan* (JMO) or the United Front of Principalists. In the eighth Majlis Ahmadinejad's supporters won 60 seats, the other conservatives/principalists gained about 140 seats and the reformists' share of MPs in



the parliament increased from 30 in the seventh Majlis to 60 in the eighth. A few months after the eighth Majlis was convened, Ahmadinejad suffered a blow when his interior minister, Ali Kordan was forced to resign after his ‘doctorate degree’ from Oxford University turned out to be faked.<sup>52</sup> However, as the presidential election was approaching, the Majlis decided to postpone its rivalry with the president for a while.

Iran’s tenth presidential election on 12 June 2009 saw the incumbent, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad face off against Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and the secretary of the Expediency Council, Mohsen Rezaei. Millions of Iranians cast their votes in an extraordinarily cheerful atmosphere that was further heated by a number of television debates involving the four candidates. But, this initial festive mood was short lived and gave way to widespread resentment; in an exceptionally fast count of handwritten ballots, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was announced as the winner. Mir Hossein Mousavi rejected the results and urged backers to resist a government based on “lies and dictatorship”.<sup>53</sup> The day after the results were announced, Mousavi supporters took to the streets to call for a recount and were met with harsh security crackdowns. This was the start of months of mass protests, which came to be known as the Green Movement.

Despite the initial speculations that the regime would surrender to public demands, the IRI regime intensified its repressive tactics, particularly the use of paramilitary forces against the demonstrators, imprisonment of Green Movement activists and the shutting down of reformist newspapers and parties. The regime was able to bring the protests to a halt mainly because:

1. The middle-class, who were the backbone of the Green Movement, failed to build a broader network of support across different levels of society in Iran.
2. When in government, the reformists did not pay the necessary attention to developing their grassroots. For the reformist parties of *Mosharekat* and MIRO, the main objective was to be present in public office (e.g. the Cabinet, Majlis, and city councils); thus, the countrywide expansion of the grassroots section of the party was largely neglected. During the events that followed the June 2009 election, the absence of a strong nationwide organisation that could reach every corner of the country, maintain the demonstrations and organise the masses to challenge the regime made it easier for the security apparatus of the IRI regime to bring the Green Movement to a standstill.
3. The standard slogans adopted by the Green Movement such as ‘death to the dictator’, ‘neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I give my life to Iran’ and



‘independence, freedom, the Iranian Republic’ exposed the wide gap between the discourse of the leaders of the Green Movement and the protesters’ discourse of liberty, nationalism and democracy. Mir-Hossein Mousavi’s persistence on remaining faithful to the ideals of Ayatollah Khomeini and his emphasis on the “Golden Age of Imam Khomeini”,<sup>54</sup> meant that he did not understand the avant-garde character of the Green Movement. At the grassroots level the Green Movement supporters did not see so much difference between the Khomeini and the Khamenei eras; they wanted to break free from both and start a new era of democracy and freedom.

4. The Iranian regime employed sophisticated and multi-layered tactics to curb the protests. For instance, in less than a month the regime arrested and detained most of the pro-Green Movement strategists (people like Saied Hajarian, Mohsen Mirdamadi, Behzad Nabavi, Mostafa Tajzadeh and Mohammad-Reza Tajik). Consequently, Mousavi and Karroubi were deprived of the counsel of their wise men; this added to their isolation, caused primarily by the *de facto* house arrest and made it very difficult for them to respond rapidly and calculatedly to the fast-changing developments on the ground.

The regime was successful in crushing the demonstrations. However, the great price it had to pay for suppressing millions of pro-democracy Iranians was that it could no longer claim electoral/legal legitimacy. Ahmadinejad experimented with the idea that he could benefit from this weak spot and blackmail the system. Therefore, shortly after his presidency was ratified by Ayatollah Khamenei he appointed Esfandiyar Rahim-Mashaei, a man who seriously challenged the authority of the senior clergy, as his vice president. What followed proved how wrong Ahmadinejad was in his assumptions. When behind-the-scenes talks could not convince Ahmadinejad to change his mind, Ayatollah Khamenei wrote a classified letter to the president asking him to remove Mashaei from the vice presidency, to which Ahmadinejad acted as if he had not seen the letter at all. Nevertheless, and to his surprise, Ayatollah Khamenei disclosed his classified letter to the public. Finally Rahim-Mashaei tendered his resignation to save his loyal friend the humiliation of having to discharge him. This was the start of a series of measures by Ayatollah Khamenei aimed at confining Ahmadinejad’s surprising tactics. Khamenei used the judiciary and the IRGC, in addition to his loyal MPs in the eighth Majlis, in order to control the president.

### ***The ninth Majlis: The consolidation of factionalism***

The first round of parliamentary elections for the ninth Majlis was held on 2 March 2012 and a second round of voting took place on 4 May 2012 for the remaining 65



seats in the 290-seat Majlis. After the final results of Iran's 2012 Majlis election were announced, many commentators and analysts concluded that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's support in Iran's Majlis had crumbled as the results showed rival principalists consolidating their hold on the legislative body. The faction that declared victory was a newly reshuffled front by the name of *Jebhe Mottahed-e Osoulgarayan* (JMO) or the United Front of Principalists, an alliance comprised of major pro-Khamenei principalists/conservatives led by Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, a prominent traditionalist conservative and chairman of the Assembly of Experts since 2011. The JMO was restored a few months before the election to foster unity among all principalists for the parliamentary election, a task it could not accomplish; a competing front led by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi came second in the election. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi is the spiritual leader of the second largest group in the Majlis, *Jebhe Paydari Enghelab-e Eslami* (JPEE) or the Steadfast Front of the Islamic Revolution. The front is comprised of a mixture of Ahmadinejad supporters and Mesbah loyalists and a number of ex-ministers and officials from the first Ahmadinejad administration. The JPEE refrained from joining the JMO, accusing it of remaining silent in the face of *Fetnehgaran* or seditionists – those who contested positions against *Jebhe Towhid va Edalat* (JTE) or the Monotheism and Justice Front, a front associated with Rahim-Mashaei, who is regarded by many conservatives as the leader of the 'deviant current' or *Jaryan-e enherafi*.<sup>55</sup> Mashaei and his followers, labelled as the deviant current, are calling for, among other things, some degree of secularisation, disregard for the political role of the Shiite clergy and emphasis on the 'Iranian school of Islam'.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, they are accused of claiming direct connection with the Shiites' hidden Imam, Imam Mahdi. Such alleged 'association', by definition, overrides any need to take orders from Mahdi's, namely Ayatollah Khamenei. In other words, those who claim to be connected to the hidden Imam do not need to take orders from Khamenei. It is worth mentioning that Rahim-Mashaei's loyal group, the JTE, lost substantially in the election, ending up with only 17 out of the 290 seats in the Majlis. From the total of 290 elected members in the ninth Majlis, 65 belong exclusively to the JMO list, 22 to JPEE, 61 members' names were mentioned in both JMO and JPEE lists, 22 are reformists, 17 belong to the MJF and 105 are supposedly independents.<sup>57</sup>

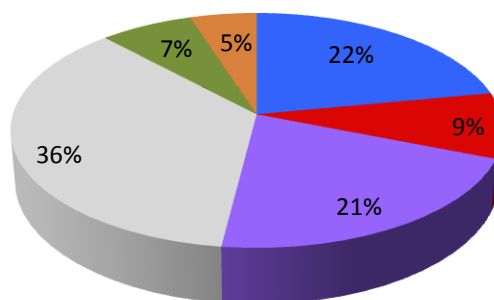




## The Composition of the Ninth IRI Majlis According to Election Lists

Source: *Jam-e-jam*, May 06, 2012

■ JMO ■ JPEE ■ JMO & JPEE ■ Independents ■ Reformists ■ Other Principalists



It is important to note that in each parliamentary election since the revolution, around half of the Majlis MPs have changed. It is interesting that the observations of Maurice Duverger, written many years ago, about countries with weakly-institutionalised party systems, correspond well to the case of the current Iran.

In countries in which democracy has been newly implanted, in which parties have not yet taken strong roots, it is characteristic of elections that there are considerable variations from one ballot to the next, and this weakens the regime.<sup>58</sup>

Lack of stability and continuity in the Iranian legislative body is mainly due to the deficiencies of the institutionalised parties. Without strong parties and in the absence of an effective party whip system, it is difficult to discipline the opportunist elements of any given faction. During the seventh and eighth Majlises, Ahmadinejad's ministers survived several interpolations mainly by promising 'pork barrel' spending to the opportunist MPs. Occasionally, when the Majlis stood firm against the president, a clear go-ahead signal by the office of the Leader was involved. Iran's Majlis is not an autonomous legislative body, as the Guardian Council can veto bills passed by it. In addition, since the exclusion of the prominent reformists from elections in 2004, the parliament in Iran has lost much of its previous influence.

Nowadays, the Majlis members do not possess the will or the power to challenge any decision made by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This was evident from the dispute over Ahmadinejad's decision to dismiss the intelligence minister,



Hojatoleslam Heidar Moslehi. The majority of the pro-Ahmadinejad MPs decided to turn their back on their patron and back the Supreme Leader instead, perhaps because they realised that Ahmadinejad would only be president for a few years, whereas Khamenei is a lifelong Leader with greater authority than the president. In his turn, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad played a double game with the Majlis. On the one hand, he tried to increase the number of MPs loyal to him in parliament; on the other, he exploited the fact that since 2004 the Majlis had lost much of its credibility as a representative institution. He mocked and ignored many Majlis legislations that he did not approve of. His administration reduced the number of pages in the annual budget plans from about 1,000 pages during Khatami's period in office to the size of a small booklet. These shrunken proposals deliberately omitted many important details and allowed room for arbitrary interpretation by Ahmadinejad. To make matters even more complicated, the president usually procrastinated over the delivery of these already vague proposals, denying parliament the very time it needed to fully discuss the budget before putting it to the vote. President Ahmadinejad did not even take his interpolation seriously, which was a first in IRI history;<sup>59</sup> his use of slang, jokes and proverbs during the questioning sessions infuriated many parliamentarians. Yet, the Majlis could not take the interpolation any further without the agreement of the Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei did not want the conflict between Ahmadinejad and the Majlis to spread into the public arena. The Leader's ideal scenario was one in which he decided when it was time to face up to the President and to what degree. Obviously, Khamenei did not intend to be seen as the one pulling down the curtain on a president whose government he once praised as "the best from the Constitutional Revolution to date".<sup>60</sup>

### **Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi: Expanding his Powers**

Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi is a hardline Iranian cleric and politician who was widely seen as President Ahmadinejad's spiritual advisor. Mesbah is also a member of the Assembly of Experts, the body responsible for choosing the Supreme Leader, where he heads a minority ultra-conservative faction. The Leader has a high regard for Mesbah and once compared him with the late Ayatollah Motahari (Ayatollah Khomeini's brightest student and one of the influential leaders in the Islamic Revolution) who was assassinated in May 1979. Ayatollah Mesbah is also highly respected among IRGC commanders, many of whom regularly attend his speeches and sermons in Qom where he heads the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, an institution with generous state funding that is in charge of training the future cadres of the regime.



Despite his prominent status as the spiritual leader of the ultra-conservatives, until recently Ayatollah Mesbah did not play a direct role in the partisan/factional politics of the Majlis. When Ahmadinejad was first elected president in 2005, the initial cordial affection between the two men made everyone believe that all of Mesbah's objectives would be achieved by Ahmadinejad. However, the breach of trust that occurred between the two as a result of the president's refusal to distance himself from Rahim-Mashaei convinced the ambitious Ayatollah to distance himself from Ahmadinejad and seek out a new political arrangement. The radical Ayatollah's new scheme came in the form of establishing the JPEE, a political front that Mesbah hoped to be more reliable than the president. However, in 2013, when a serious dispute arose between the Isfahan and Tehran branches of the JPEE concerning whom to support as presidential candidate – Saeed Jalili or Bagher Lankarani – and Mesbah's personal preference (Lankarani) was ultimately abandoned by the members of the faction, it became clear how shaky the organisation of the JPEE was.

### **The Revolutionary Guards and the Ninth Majlis**

In the first days of the run-up to the election, the IRGC seemed puzzled as to what to do and whose side to take in the ninth legislative election. Nonetheless, when IRGC top commanders started defining the 'criteria' for regime loyalty, their position vis-à-vis different factions became clearer. In an interview conducted by Fars News Agency in February 2012, a few weeks before the election, the deputy chairman of Iran's Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brigadier General Massoud Jazayeri asserted that those who were silent in the face of the *Fetneh* (a code name for the Green Movement) and the members of the "deviant-current" did not have the credibility to enter the Majlis.<sup>61</sup> The expression "those who were silent in the face of the *Fetneh*" is sometimes used to describe members of the JMO and "the deviant-current" is a clear reference to the JTE. Thus, Jazayeri's comments could be interpreted as the IRGC's siding with the JPEE.

Days after the ninth Majlis was convened, Ali Motahari, a principalist MP, son of the late Ayatollah Motahari and one of President Ahmadinejad's most vocal critics, accused the IRGC of "openly endorsing their preferred candidates" in the election.<sup>62</sup> After Ali Motahari's accusations against IRGC, the Guards were quick to reject his statements, warning that such allegations could be subject to prosecution.<sup>63</sup> However, the way in which both the Speaker of the Majlis and the head of the judiciary reacted to the issue was noteworthy since they both tried to indicate that although the IRGC



did not systematically meddle in the election, there were nevertheless some levels of intervention by individual commanders. For example, the Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, addressing members of parliament on the event of Khoramshahr's liberation commemoration, turned to the issue of Motahari's accusations against the IRGC and stated that,

The esteemed colleagues while expressing their concerns must take into consideration the significance of the country's institutions that are built by the blood of Hezbollahi combatants and act in a way so that the dignity of the Revolutionary Guards is preserved in the society. In addition they should respect the officials who are serving in the three branches. If the content of your speech involves criticism, in the current situation it is best to express it in a dignified manner.<sup>64</sup>

Correspondingly, the head of the judiciary and Ali Larijani's brother, Ayatollah Sadegh Amoli Larijani, addressed the issue in a similar fashion, "If some within IRGC have committed a felony, it does not concern IRGC itself. The same goes for wrongdoings in the Majlis or the Judiciary".<sup>65</sup> In its turn, the absence of the IRGC commander-in-chief General Jafari at the opening ceremony of the ninth Majlis was broadly perceived as a sign of the Revolutionary Guards' disappointment over the way in which the whole matter was dealt with by the Larijani brothers and a clear indication that the quarrel between the Guards and the Majlis was far from over.

According to the Iranian constitution, the Revolutionary Guards are not allowed to interfere in politics or elections. Although their interference in the previous elections had been denounced by opposition and reformist groups, this was the first time that conservative figures in the Majlis confirmed it.<sup>66</sup> The IRGC's position in the power structure of the Islamic Republic is best explained in the following excerpt from the informed Rand publication.

The IRGC's presence is particularly powerful in Iran's highly factionalised political system, in which the president, much of the cabinet, many members of parliament, and a range of other provincial and local administrators hail from the ranks of the IRGC. Outside the political realm, the IRGC oversees a robust apparatus of media resources, training activities, and education programs designed to bolster loyalty to the regime, prepare the citizenry for homeland defense, and burnish its own institutional credibility vis-à-vis other factional actors. It is in the economic sphere, however, that the IRGC has seen the greatest growth and diversification—strategic industries and commercial services ranging from dam and pipeline construction to automobile manufacturing and laser eye surgery have fallen under its sway, along with a number of illicit smuggling and black-market enterprises.<sup>67</sup>



It is important to note that the IRGC is not operating like a military junta; instead, it uses the factional system in order to participate in the political process, thus further reinforcing the factional system even further.

### **The 2013 Presidential Election**

In the months preceding the 2013 presidential election, the marginalised reformists who were desperate to come back into mainstream Iranian politics launched a campaign pleading with Khatami to nominate himself for the presidency. The former president refused to run and announced his support for Rafsanjani. However, the Guardian Council barred Rafsanjani from entering the election, thus disappointing many Iranians who saw in him a saviour who could extricate Iran from its economic difficulties. The reformist camp was not alone in receiving a hurtful blow from the Guardian Council; Ahmadinejad's Putin/Medvedev style plan for a power grab was shattered after the Guardian Council disqualified the President's protégé, Esfandiyar Rahim Mashaie.

In the absence of strong contenders from either the reformists or the 'deviant current', the principalist/conservative candidates perceived the 2013 election as an in-house competition among the larger principalist/conservative family. With Tehran mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf representing the modern principalists, Saeed Jalili then chief nuclear negotiator, Hadad-Adel the former Speaker of the Majlis representing the hardliners and the former foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati the conservatives' candidate, the election setting seemed to provide the voters with enough options to choose from, yet to keep the office of president in the principalists' hands. The two remaining pro-reform candidates, Mohammad Reza Aref and Hassan Rouhani, were never thought to pose a serious challenge to the top principalist contenders; they were second-rate pro-reform candidates who did not yet have the consensus of the reformist camp. Nevertheless, a series of events took place in the run-up to the election that proved all predictions wrong and ended in the victory of Hassan Rouhani, who became president in the first round with more than 18 million votes.

1. To everyone's surprise, Ayatollah Khamenei stayed neutral during the election period and did not endorse any particular candidate or current. This convinced many sceptical citizens that this time the election would be conducted fairly.
2. The televised debates helped heat up the election, created a wave of hope among many Iranians and inspired many undecided citizens to vote.



3. The principalist candidates who were supposed to be in coalition (Ghalibaf, Velayati, Hadad-Adel) criticised and discredited each other's records in the debates. This had a negative impact on their electability and divided the principalists' votes.
4. Khatami and Rafsanjani's public endorsements of Hassan Rouhani just a week before the election gave a fresh momentum to Rouhani's campaign and Mohammad Reza Aref's withdrawal in favour of Mr Rouhani increased his chances of winning in the first round.

## Conclusion

Most theorists of democratisation believe that the fragmentation of elites contributes to the collapse of authoritarian regimes.<sup>68</sup> However, scholars such as Arang Keshavarzian,<sup>69</sup> Ronald Axtmann<sup>70</sup> and Steven Levitsky<sup>71</sup> have pointed out that in some cases, the authoritarian regimes have managed to keep the damage to a minimum.

Some benefited from pockets of permissiveness in the international system, due in large part to economic or security issues that trumped democracy promotion on Western foreign policy agendas. Others benefited from state control over revenues from valuable commodities (such as oil), which undermined development of an autonomous civil society and gave rulers the means to co-opt potential opponents, and still others took advantage of quasi-traditional elite networks that facilitated the establishment of neopatrimonial regimes (as in Central Asia).<sup>72</sup>

Keshavarzian points out that fragmentation of authority in Iran, which is the result of the “segmentation of the state agents”, has ironically contributed to the regime's survival in spite of the serious conflicts that every now and often arise between IRI elites.<sup>73</sup>

I argue that not only the sovereignty is divided but the Iranian regime is highly fragmented. It is this quality that enables the regime or more specifically the hard-liners within the regime, to reproduce its power and control the society, and it is because<sup>1</sup> of this structure and in spite of elite fragmentation and contestation that the Islamic Republic has survived. I thus refer to the Islamic republic as a “fragmented autocracy” which is shortened for a “fragmented state with an autocratic regime”.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The emphasis is original.



For instance, the high level of elite confrontation during Khatami's presidency did not bring about the downfall of the hardliners within the regime mainly because the reformists' nominal legal power and authority, derived from elected bodies, was overridden by their rivals' extra-legal real power coming from non-elected organisations. Moreover, the disarray within the reformist alliance prevented them from forming a coherent strategy to alter the balance of power in their favour. In addition, because their parties lacked a nationwide grassroots organisation, the reformists failed to mobilise popular support when they most needed it. Finally, powerful moderate conservatives such as Rafsanjani, who could have joined forces with Khatami to curb the hardliners' power and influence, were alienated from the reformist alliance. Instead of trying to join forces with the moderate conservatives against the radicals, the ultra-reformists chose to settle old scores with their former rivals and in doing so missed a golden chance of gaining an upper hand over the radicals in unelected bodies.

To better understand the complex Iranian polity, it is helpful to go back to the IRI's constitution. The Iranian state as formed by the constitution comprises a mixture of contradictory institutions with overlapping authority and, as Francis Fukuyama describes it, "is a curious hybrid of authoritarian, theocratic and democratic elements."<sup>75</sup> For instance, although the country is officially called an Islamic 'Republic', the president is only second-in-command after the Supreme Leader and whereas (according to the constitution) the Majlis is "the sole legislative power",<sup>76</sup> the same constitution has allowed other institutions such as the Expediency Council, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and the Office of the Leader to put forward their own legislations. This situation has reinforced both the schism between different IRI elites and the factional system that gradually became the main characteristic of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

However, the constitution must not be treated as the single cause of the factional system. In fact, in the early years of the revolution the political system was characterised by a form of dominant party rule which demonstrates the fact that factionalism was not the inevitable result of the IRI's constitution. Moreover, the 1989 amendments to the constitution which legalised the status of the Expediency Council (a non-elected parallel organisation) and thus added another layer to the already complex factional system, was itself an effect of the factionalism that existed in the Iranian state even though the factional system was also influenced (reinforced) by these amendments. The Iranian constitution is an important factor in understanding



why some options are repeatedly favoured by political actors; yet, there are other more compelling reasons why Iran is locked into factionalism, which will be dealt with in the following paragraphs.

The hybrid nature of the Iranian constitution as mentioned before allows for constant struggles between various elite groups in the elected and appointed public and state bodies, such as:

- The President's office vs. the Supreme Leader's office
- The Guardian Council vs. the Majlis
- The Majlis vs. the Expediency Council
- The Ministry of Science vs. the Islamic Azad Universities
- The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance vs. the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution

What is interesting about these authority overlaps is that despite the serious conflicts that persist between the above-mentioned institutions and the elites residing in them, so far the regime has been relatively successful in co-opting electoral loser elites into the system by allowing them to maintain some power through parallel organisations such as the Expediency Council, the Guardian Council, the Islamic Azad Universities and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution. So far, this strategy has been efficient in containing the elite conflict within the system, thus ensuring the regime's survival. When state organisations are inhabited by electoral losers, then according to Keshavarzian those organisations could serve as incubators for cadre building and safe havens for the defeated elites, allowing them to modify their previous positions and build new strategies for winning future elections.<sup>77</sup> Keshavarzian calls these mostly non-elected IRI bodies, which from time to time act as a shelter/incubator for the electoral losers, the 'parallel' or 'auxiliary' organisations.

In the Islamic Republic the production of political elites takes place within a diverse array of state organisations, rather than a single party or military hierarchy. The topography of the state, however, is such that elites differentiate themselves from one another and electoral losers remain active within the state. These auxiliary organisations allow elite conflict to persist by preventing one faction from completely suffocating opposing elites even if they are marginalised.<sup>78</sup>

Despite the serious disagreements that sometimes emerge between elites in the Islamic Republic, the benefits of membership in various state organisations have so far prevented major elite defection. Although Mousavi and Karroubi were of course exceptions to this rule, the fact that other dissident IRI elite figures, such as Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani, did not follow in the footsteps of the Green Movement





leaders is an indication that the prospect of membership of the regime's safe havens can serve as a way of containing dissent before it spreads to the public arena. Another example of a rogue elite figure who challenged the authority of the Supreme Leader but did not go the full distance towards antagonism was President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Although Ahmadinejad's future is uncertain and much will depend on the future course of events, it is important to note that two months after the 2013 presidential election he was appointed by the Leader as a member of the Expediency Council. As seen in the previous examples, when a group of IRI elites fall from favour they are given a chance to take refuge in one of the parallel organisations. They would tolerate the Leader's arbitrary rule in return for a new lease of life and prosperity in the sanctuary of these auxiliary organisations. The livelihoods of the 'loyal' opposition elites are protected at the expense of their cooperation. Therefore, if they have to choose between their positions in these safe havens and their loyalty to a political party, they would most probably choose the former. This is why, historically, IRI elites do not resist the closure of their allied parties; IRP elites do not fight against the closure of their party, just as Rafsanjani did not stand firm against the dubious prosecution of *Kargozaran* director general, Mr Gholamhossein Karbaschi, and just as Mohammad Khatami did not resist the suppression and the dissolution of the Mosharekat party. All the elites involved knew that if they had strongly opposed the above-mentioned actions, their opposition would most likely have cost them all the advantages and benefits they enjoyed from their long-time attachment to the regime, such as lifelong impunity, membership of the Assembly of Experts (and the Expediency Council in the case of Rafsanjani) as well as the hope of a return to public office (and/or the auxiliary organisations in the case of Khatami). This could be seen as part of the dynamic of self-reinforcement or positive feedback processes<sup>79</sup> that have led the anti-party, factional system in Iran to a single equilibrium. The greater the number of elites who choose to work within the confines of auxiliary organisations instead of political parties, the more the anti-party factional system is subject to positive feedback. With the passage of time, these elites will have less and less experience in how to build and run a political party and more and more on how to operate and flourish inside a faction. In addition, these elites would gradually be more inclined towards clientelistic<sup>80</sup> personality politics, useful in the IRI's factional system. In contrast, their organisational expertise would not increase commensurately. Moreover, the high cost of setting up a party would further deter these elites from joining or building a party while the set costs and the increasing benefits of working within a faction would reinforce the path of anti-party authoritarianism.



The path dependence of the IRI's authoritarianism becomes clearer when considering some examples. The fragmented authoritarian state on one side and the weakly institutionalised factions on the other are reinforcing each other in a positive feedback loop; weakly institutionalised factions or fronts are no challenge to Khamenei's authoritarian rule. Besides, a fragmented state and parallel organisations discourage elite defection and party building. With so much investment of time and financial resources (thanks to the rentier economy) in the bureaucracy of *beyte rahbari* (the office of leader), the Expediency Council, IRGC, Basij, the religious organisations and Friday prayers organs, IRI elites would not risk abandoning what is already operational and effective to go for a party system which would be expensive and time consuming to build and the outcome of which is not certain.

A case in point is the current president, Hassan Rouhani. Following Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005, Hassan Rouhani was removed from his position as Iran's top nuclear negotiator and was given a toothless position as the representative of the Supreme Leader to the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. However, Rouhani was allowed to keep his position as the head of the Centre for Strategic Research (CSR) and took full advantage of the opportunities available through that auxiliary organisation to advance his own political ambitions. It was not an accident that the top ranks of Rouhani's 2013 campaign team were his colleagues from the CSR. For example, Ali Younesi was deputy of the department for jurisprudential and legal studies in the CSR; Mahmoud Vaezi was the deputy of foreign policy and international relations; Akbar Turkan was the director of the infrastructure management studies group; and Mohammad-Bagher Nobakht was the deputy of the economic research department. Rouhani is yet another example of an elite figure choosing to operate within auxiliary organisations rather than forming or joining a political party.

It is important to note that Ayatollah Khamenei prefers the weakly organised clientelistic groups or cabals such as the JMO and JPEE which have short lifespans (usually these fronts do not last more than one Majlis term, or four years) to well-institutionalised political parties as it is easier for the Supreme Leader to control these loosely organised factions than to influence a well-established political party whose members are first and foremost committed to the party line. Throughout his time as Leader, Khamenei has systematically resisted the emergence of a party system in Iran and allowed parallel organisations and the factional system to flourish. In addition, to hold a rigorous and oppressive grip on factional affairs, he has encouraged the IRGC and the Basij to become more involved in factional politics. Pierson explains how the



allocation of political authority to particular actors (in the case of this study, Ayatollah Khamenei) is a key source of positive feedback.

Where certain actors are in a position to impose rules on others, the employment of power may be self-reinforcing. Actors may utilise political authority to change the rules of the game (both formal institutions and various public policies) to enhance their power, these changes may not only shift the rules in their favour, but increase their own capacities for political action while diminishing those of their rivals. And these changes may result in adaptations that reinforce these trends, as undecided, weakly committed, or vulnerable actors join the winners or desert the losers.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, having mentioned the functionalist and rational choice perspectives of the fragmented state and factionalism in Iran, it must be noted that the purpose that these institutions are serving today is different from the forces behind their creation. Today, the IRI's factional system may seem the most efficient in terms of keeping the opposition under control; however, we must not forget that at the genesis of the factional system, other more 'efficient' options (such as a single ruling party) were available but were ruled out because of the contingent events. The institutionalisation of the IRI's factional system was not the result of an inevitable utilitarian process, nor the result of a single cause or function, but forged out of contingent events by the mechanism of positive feedback.

### *Possible future modes of change in the factional system*

Many arguments about path dependency contend that radical reforms and new path dependencies would be shaped at critical junctures otherwise change is largely incremental and constrained by the past<sup>82</sup> or 'historically bounded'.<sup>83</sup> Yet, notable recent contributions have emphasised alternative causal models such as 'layering' and 'conversion' that do not involve institutional breakdown.<sup>84</sup> Thelen identifies two such 'modes' of gradual institutional change/innovation in path dependencies.

One is the notion of institutional "layering" which involves the partial renegotiation of some elements of a given set of institutions while leaving others in place. The other is what we might call "conversion", as existing institutions are redirected to new purposes, driving change in the role they perform and/or the functions they serve.<sup>85</sup>

With no positive signs in the horizon, 'conversion' seems unlikely in the case of Iran's factional system. Nevertheless, one can imagine a scenario in the future where change in the factional system is instigated through the 'layering' method. Currently,



there are few weak, fragile and amorphous minor political parties living side by side with the key factions in the Iranian socio-political environment. At present there are a number of amorphous organisations such as *Hezbe E'temad Mellī* (the National Trust Party), *Hezbe E'tedal va Towse'eh* (the Moderation and Development Party] and the Islamic Motalefeh Party which operate in the Iranian political system. However, there was a time, not long ago, when more settled political parties such as *Mosharekat* operated in the IRI's factional system. Thus, there are reasonable grounds rooted in empirical evidence from IRI history to believe that a parallel inferior system of political parties existing side by side with the greater system of factionalism is possible within the boundaries of the current system; yet, this depends very much on the strength and flexibility of the agency (elites) and its ability to interact with the powerful actors in the system.

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive argument on inertia see Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2002; Bahman Baktiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran: The Institutionalization of Factional Politics*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1996 and Kazem Alamdari, 'The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government', *Third World Quarterly*, 26.8 (2005), pp. 1285-1301.

<sup>3</sup> See Kathleen Thelen, 'How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative – Historical Analysis', in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (eds), *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 2014.

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<sup>5</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*.

<sup>6</sup> Thelen, 'How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative – Historical Analysis'.

<sup>7</sup> Arang Keshavarzian, 'Contestation Without Democracy: Elite Fragmentation In Iran', in Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (eds), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, Colorado, Rienner, 2005, pp. 63-87.

<sup>8</sup> Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post Khomeini Iran*.

<sup>9</sup> Baktiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran*.

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<sup>17</sup> See Mahoney 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', Pierson *Institutional Theory in Political Science* and Thelen, 'How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative- Historical Analysis'.

<sup>18</sup> Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', p.508.

<sup>19</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', *The American Political Science Review*, 94.2 (2000), p. 263.

<sup>21</sup> Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', p.513



- <sup>22</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, pp. 1-2.
- <sup>23</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, p. 77.
- <sup>24</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, p. 44.
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- <sup>29</sup> Bakhtiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran*, pp. 217-221.
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