Iran and Democracy
Daniel Brumberg

- The Islamic Republic of Iran has struggled with its primary political identity since the 1979 revolution: Should the state be based on religious principles mandated by God? Or should it be based on man-made laws about democratic governance and the will of the people?

- Prominent reformists have sought to harness Islam for democratic ends. But hard-line clerics insist that Twelver Shiism vests ultimate power in the *Rahbar*, or supreme leader, with his allies in the clerical establishment.

- Protests after the disputed 2009 presidential election reflected the intense internal debate over the linkage between Islam and democracy.

- A new generation of ultra-hardliners in the "New Right," led by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has sought to weaken parliament, even as they proclaimed their commitment to the will of the "people."

- The New Right has antagonized well-established lay political groups and the clergy who share a common interest in preventing a new Islamic despotism. But they lack a common vision of the political future and a leader with the populist allure to define such a vision.

Overview

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the 1979 Islamic revolution, was also the principal author of the hybrid political system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini did not simply advocate for a modern theocracy. He advocated a blended system that tried to both assign ultimate authority to the clerics, but also insure that their actions were responsive to and expressive of popular will.

The ideological tension is reflected in Iran's constitution as well as its government structure. The constitution borrows heavily from French and Belgian law, yet it also requires that all laws be compatible with Islamic Sharia. And the government has all the pieces of a modern democratic republic—independent executive, legislative and judicial branches—but it also has a set of parallel institutions dominated by the clergy.

Republican institutions	**Islamic institutions**
*President	*Supreme leader
*290-member parliament	*12-member Guardian Council
*Civil and criminal courts	*Islamic courts
*Regular military	*Revolutionary Guards and Basij

Hybrid politics

Khomeini's efforts stemmed from two social forces that brought about the Islamic revolution:

- The clerical right was a group of radicalized clerics. Backed by the urban lower classes, they perceived Khomeini as a charismatic, even semi-divine, savior. Loyal disciples, they embraced his novel idea of *velayat-e faqih* or the "guardianship of the jurist." Khomeini's doctrine called for a supreme leader who would rule with executive and judicial authority inherited through the Prophet Mohammed.

- The Islamic left was a group of lay political intellectuals joined by a new breed of left-leaning clerics. These clerics were based in institutions such as Tehran University and invoked the ideas of a charismatic sociologist, Ali Shariati. Shariati blended Shiite Islam with Marxist notions of popular revolution under an intellectual vanguard speaking for the masses. Shariati held that a dominant lay political party – rather than the clerics—should constitute that vanguard.

In the run-up to the Islamic revolution, many Islamic leftists argued that a clerical body was needed to inspire and mobilize the masses. For the Islamic left, clerical authority was a means to achieve political power rather than a prescription for clerical rule itself.

Iran's 1979 constitution attempted to bring together these two notions of republican governance and religious authority. It mentions the word "democracy" only once – in the preamble. The constitution notes that the Islamic revolution reflects "an attempt, also made by other Islamic and democratic movements, to open the way for the establishment of the unified world community." The guiding assumption of the constitution is that the ultimate purpose of political action—even elections—is to express one common sacred vision of political community.

Revolutionary splits

The ideological tensions reflected in the constitution often bogged down Iranian politics. The elected parliament, or Majles, was often at odds with appointed clerical bodies, especially the Guardian Council. The 12-member council regularly vetoed legislation passed by the 290-member parliament on the vague grounds of being "un-Islamic." Individuals or groups that criticized the system could be charged with being an enemy of the state and face possible imprisonment.

After his return from exile, Khomeini originally returned to the theological center at Qom. He intended to play a behind-the-scenes role as guide. And he initially tried to avoid getting involved in increasingly bitter disputes. But he ultimately had no choice

but to return to live in Tehran and try to create order. He publicly reprimanded squabbling politicians and urged greater unity.

Two key decrees

In the late 1980s, Khomeini issued two decrees to help sort out internal tensions. In reality, they also added another whole layer of bureaucracy that complicated governance. His first decree created the Expediency Council. It is made up of 22 to 30 members who try to resolve differences between the Guardian Council and parliament over legislation. Empowered to override the Guardian Council's veto of legislation, the unelected council further undermined Khomeini's claim that the Majles was to be the "house of all the people."

The second complicating factor was a fatwa, or religious opinion, that Khomeini issued in 1988. Standing before a Tehran University audience, he declared: "Government is among the most important divine injunctions and has priority over all peripheral divine orders. The government…which is part of the total (or absolute) vice-regency of the Prophet… can prevent any matter, whether religious or secular, if it is against the interests of Islam."

Decades later, Khomeini's *fatwa* still provides crucial ammunition in the escalating political battle over his legacy. Politicians who want the elected Majles and president to be the main base of authority cite Khomeini's focus on "government." Others who want to invest ultimate authority in the *faqih* assert, quoting Khomeini, that government is part of the "absolute" authority of the vice-regency of the Prophet, and thus subservient to the will of the supreme religious authority.

Political battle

Khomeini's charisma and religious credentials were critical to holding the regime together. His death in 1989 set the stage for a broader political struggle over his legacy and the source of political authority. This battle began in the run-up to 1992 parliamentary elections. The new supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, working closely with then President Hashemi Rafsanjani, tried to purge leading members of the Islamic left from the Majles and cabinet.

The effort to banish the Islamic left initially backfired. They offered a spirited defense, citing Khomeini's statements praising the authority of parliament and the role of elections. Ebrahim Asgharzadeh told a Majles session, "In the constitution, there is a whole chapter about the rule of the people, which is something that cannot be split apart…We cannot destroy the people's rights" by banishing "all those people" who had "made such sacrifices for the revolution." Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Khatami was among those forced out. He argued that, "we should free our society from the old mentality of law evasion," and "replace it with the mentality of the constitution," which provides for "security, justice, freedom and participation."

By the mid-1990s, Islamic leftists were actively pushing radical new ideas about the relationship between mosque and state. Disillusioned Islamic leftists, such as philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, even questioned the idea of clerical rule. Soroush argued that the Islamic faith would be strengthened, not undermined, by distancing political and religious authority.

Widening power struggle

In the 1997 presidential election, Mohammed Khatami led the Islamic leftists and reformers to power. But the power struggle only deepened over the next eight years, during his two terms in office, as defenders of the clerical establishment used their power over religious institutions to undermine elected offices. Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani lambasted the idea that the rule of a supreme leader should somehow be "based on popular demand." Similarly, Mohsen Azhini asserted that Khomeini's 1988 edict gave the leader "absolute authority." In a speech before parliament, Khatami countered that while the leadership will "guide and assist us," the "legitimacy of government stems from the people's vote."

The deepening struggle was reflected in July 1999, when students at Tehran University protested the regime's efforts to shut down a popular reformist newspaper. Following the regime's bloody repression of the protestors, the leader of the Revolutionary Guards sent Khatami a letter threatening to overthrow him if he did not distance himself from the students. Khatami offered the students only lukewarm support. In return, he was warmly embraced by Khamenei during a Friday sermon attended by thousands of regime loyalists.

Khatami's retreat helped to open the door to a sustained campaign by the judiciary and security apparatus to shut down the reform movement. They were able to silence intellectuals, professors and journalists clamoring for a more democratic Iran. Khatami was reelected in 2001, but by then the clerical right was well on its way to reasserting authority and preventing any form of Shiite reformation. The right's campaign gave almost unlimited power to the security apparatus, particularly the Revolutionary Guards and veterans of the Iran-Iraq War that had become part of a rising counter-elite of political apparatchiks. In 2004 elections, a new generation of radical revolutionaries won a large share of seats in parliament as well as many city and village council elections.

The right wins power

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election was a stunning upset over former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. It signified the consolidation of this new force in Iranian politics who took the name "principlists," for their commitment to the original goals of the revolution. The semblance of a democratic vote was a means to an end, but no longer an end in itself. Ahmadinejad's religious mentor Ayatollah Mohammad

Mesbah-Yazdi warned his disciples, "Accepting Islam is not compatible with democracy."

Pledging loyalty to the supreme leader, Ahmedinejad and his allies accelerated their campaign to take over key state institutions. In 2006, they even made a bid to put their allies on the Assembly of Experts, an elected body of 86 clerics who select a supreme leader and monitor his work. But the new president and his chief clerical ally on the assembly, ultra hard-line Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, overreached. They were soundly defeated by Rafsanjani and his allies.

The defeat of the clerical right in 2006 election intensified their quest for power using a variety of tools. Islamic courts tried clerics for un-Islamic activities. Newspapers were closed after publishing even modest criticism of government actions. The government increasingly warned of plots by foreign governments to carry out a "velvet revolution" similar to the upheavals in Ukraine and Georgia that produced democratic elections. Ahmadinejad and others from the ultra-right even publicly assailed early revolutionaries and longstanding political figures. The wave of repression was a harbinger of the regime's crackdown on the new Green Movement opposition after the disputed June 2009 presidential elections.

The future

- The debate over republic versus religion will be central to Iranian politics for the foreseeable future, even if the Green Movement recedes as an opposition force.

- The new generation of ultra-hardliners will complicate – and possibly preclude – a peaceful resolution to the democracy versus Islam debate.

- For the New Right, electoral procedures now appear useful largely to legitimize their rule.

Daniel Brumberg is a senior advisor to the Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention at USIP, where he also served as acting director of USIP's Muslim World Initiative.