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# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS REFORMIST DISCOURSE IN REGIME RESILIENCE IN IRAN

FATEMEH JAMALI

74 Pages

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been seen as the primary bastion of radical Shi'a Islam and a force which fosters the Middle East instability. The Iranian regime has often been labeled as a theocracy, which often overshadowed the attention to nuances about its polity and its mechanisms of survival. The main purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the political system of Iran and its survival mechanism while situating it in the hybrid regime category. Hybrid regime framework is especially useful since it allows us to better understand the resilience of the hybrid political structure as distinct form of governance from both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Viewing Iran as hybrid form of polity, I aim to provide a better understanding of its sustainability. Yet, it is important to note my approach to the study the Iranian political system and its resilience does not follow hybrid regimes institutional approaches in which institutional processes like elections or other state organs are commonly considered. I will instead look more closely at the formation and transformation of the religious reformist discourse as it has influenced the Iranian political system. The articulation of the religious reformist discourse and its politicization during the reform era played an important role in securing the Iranian political system. This mainly results from the theoretical philosophy of the reformist discourse, which considers reformism as the only *modus operandi* to modify the political system. By analyzing the religious reformist discourse, I hope to contribute to the study of hybrid regime as well as the discussion of regime resilience in Iran.

**KEYWORDS:** Religious reformist discourse, Iran, hybrid regime, regime resilience, Reformism

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS REFORMIST DISCOURSE IN REGIME RESILIENCE IN IRAN

FATEMEH JAMALI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Politics and Government

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2019

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# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS REFORMIST DISCOURSE IN REGIME RESILIENCE IN IRAN

FATEMEH JAMALI

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F.J.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been seen as the primary bastion of radical Shi'a Islam and a force which fosters the Middle East instability. The Iranian regime has often been labeled as a theocracy, which often overshadowed the attention to nuances about its polity and its mechanisms of survival. The main purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the political system of Iran and its survival mechanism while situating it in the hybrid regime category. Hybrid regime framework is especially useful since it allows us to better understand the resilience of the hybrid political structure as distinct form of governance from both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Viewing Iran as hybrid form of polity, I aim to provide a better understanding of its institutional arrangement and sustainability for four decades.

Yet, it is important to note my approach to the study the Iranian political system and its resilience does not follow hybrid regimes institutional approaches in which institutional processes like elections or other state organs are commonly considered.<sup>1</sup> I will instead look more closely at the formation and transformation of the religious reformist discourse as it has influenced the Iranian political system. It is also important to note that this is not to suggest that institutions will be completely discarded, rather they will be studied in relation to the religious reformist discourse as it has influenced these institutions and their functions. The articulation of the religious reformist discourse and its politicization during the reform era played an important role in securing the Iranian political system. This mainly results from the theoretical philosophy of the reformist discourse, which considers reformism as the only *modus operandi* to modify the political system.

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<sup>1</sup> The hybrid regime literature has offered various frameworks, including elections, opposition parties, legislative and executive institutions, mass media in order to explain sustainability in different hybrid regimes, including Russia, Venezuela, Tanzanian, and Iran. For more see, petrov, Lipman, and Hale (2013); Ekman (2009); and Abdolmohammadi and Cama (2015).

By analyzing the religious reformist discourse, I hope to contribute to the study of hybrid regime as well as the discussion of regime resilience in Iran.

### **The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the New Political Order**

In early February 1979, the Pahlavi dynasty, which had ruled Iran for more than fifty years (1925-1979) was toppled by the various political forces which had widely divergent views regarding Iran's post-monarchical political system. The revolutionary coalition, which played a major role in organizing the masses, consisted of heterogeneous groups of liberal-nationalists such as the Freedom Movement favoring a secular and democratic form of government, leftist forces like the *Tudeh* Party to the Islamic-Marxists of the *Mujahedine-Khalgh*, Islamists<sup>2</sup> who were also divided on their visions of Iran's future political system. The tumultuous yearlong debate over the new post-monarchical state order finally resulted in the implementation of the jurisprudential doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini, the *Velayat-e Faqih* in the Constitution of November 1979 (Randjbar-Daemi 2013). This doctrine was developed based on the Shi'a conception of occultation of the Twelfth Imam and absence of a direct leader chosen by one of the Twelve Imams. Until perfection is achieved when Mehdi conquers the forces of darkness and spreads peace and justice on Earth, it is incumbent that Islamic societies have the proper forms of leadership and government. In the doctrine of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, the ideal form of government is one which is led by the *Vali-ye Faqih* or the supreme jurist who, having ascended to his highly-esteemed position, will exercise guardianship (*Velayat*) over the faithful and will ensure the rule of Islam within the country.

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<sup>2</sup> The more traditional Islamists favored a constitutional role for the clerical establishment. Ayatollah Golpayegani, for instance, made the first call for an explicit inclusion of the *Velayat-e Faqih* within the new constitutional framework to ensure the rigorous subordination of all state decisions to Islamic principles. His remarks was followed by the support grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri. Unlike these clerics, other Islamists rebutted the very idea of the Islamic idea or the inclusion of political positions for the clergy given the Shi'a political theory that a truly just government could not be established until the return of the twelfth Imam.

In the 1989 rewrite of the Constitution, the “absolute” rule of the *Faqih* was incorporated in the *Velayat-e Faqih*, labeled as *Velayat-e Motalqe-ye Faqih* (Absolute mandate of the jurisconsult) in order to give the *Faqih* the absolute power to change any Islamic law or disregard some of the religion’s commands in the interests of the state. For instance, the annual pilgrimage to the Hajj can be cancelled if the interests of Islam are better served (Noroozi 2001, 242). Another significant constitutional change was the requirement that the leader must be a *Marja’-e taqlid*, source of emulation, was removed.<sup>3</sup> This was a drastic change as it did not require the *Faqih* to have a moral and religious guide supremacy, which was core to the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Ayatollah Montazeri (2003), one of less than a handful of clerics who insisted on the inclusion of the *Velayat-e Faqih* in the 1979 Constitution maintained:

“throughout Islamic history, and especially during the rule of Imam Ali and the other rightful Imams, the person of the *Vali-ye Faqih* was not only a political leader but was also one of the pre-eminent living authorities on jurisprudential matter, an esteemed scholar who served also as a moral and religious guide and a source of emulation for devout followers. Separating *Marja’iyyat* from *Velayat* for the sake of political expedience has endangered the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic system and the institution of the *Velayat-e Faqih*” (as cited in Kamrava 2008, 1113).

The political system which emerged in Iran after the Revolution and the constitutional amendment of 1989 turned into a hybrid regime, which can be essentially classified as an

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<sup>3</sup> Article 109 of the 1979 constitution specified two qualifications for the *Faqih*: “1. The necessary scientific and religious competence for leadership and religious emulation (*marja’iyyat*); 2. Political and social competence and sufficient bravery, power, and management skills for leadership.” In the 1989 revisions to the same article, the requirement that the leader must be a *Marja’* was removed.

authoritarian polity with such the trappings of democratic systems like parliament, elected presidency, and regular elections.

### **Some Remarks on Hybrid Regimes**

This thesis assumes that the Iranian political system is a form of a hybrid regime, meaning it displays, indeed, many characteristics of authoritarian polities, but it also allows for some elements, albeit mediated, of democratic political systems. Although Iran is not linked to the historical context which gave rise to the formation of many hybrid regimes, it is useful to note a few quick points which resulted in an important body of literature on this topic. The end of the Cold War and the rise of the third wave of democratization<sup>4</sup> had brought a euphoria heralding the breakaway from authoritarianism toward the establishment of democracy. At the beginning of the twenty first century, there were 86 free countries (2,465.2 billion people; 40.69 percent of the world population) and there was forward momentum toward increased political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2001). Yet, at the turn of the century it was evident that a considerable number of new countries did not manifest democratic attributes as expected nor did they seem to be any longer in transition to democracy. Instead, they consolidated their forms of rule by mixing both democratic and authoritarian attributes. The mixed, or hybrid nature of these regimes surprised scholars who considered democracy as the only form of rule following the breakdown of authoritarian regime (Diamond 2002). Aiming at capturing the hybrid dynamics of these nascent regimes, scholars created a bountiful literature on hybrid regimes with a blurred boundary between democratic and non-democratic regimes.

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<sup>4</sup> The third wave of democracy was developed by Samuel Huntington to describe the global trend that which swept through Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, paving the way for democratic transition since Portugal's Carnation Revolution in 1974, (Huntington, Samuel. 1991. *The Third Wave of Democratization in the Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).

In the 1990s, being enthusiastic over the spread of democracy, scholars stressed the democratic attributes of hybrid regimes, producing a trend commonly referred to as “democracy with adjectives” (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Among hundreds of democracies with adjectives, “illiberal democracy”<sup>5</sup> and “semi-democracy”<sup>6</sup> are only two type of political systems which hold competitive multi-party elections (Zakaria 1997; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1998). The boundary is so fuzzy that Diamond (2002) categorizes some regimes as “ambiguous regimes” in the sense that they fall somewhere in between democracies and non-democracies (25). Instead of the classification of regimes as democracies with adjectives simply on the basis of holding elections, Terry Karl (1995) introduced the term “hybrid regime” to refer to regimes combining both democratic and authoritarian attributes.

After the new millennium, scholars shifted their focus to authoritarianism and its respective attributes for conceptualizing hybrid regimes. Schedler (2002) labels regimes which hold multi-party elections, albeit unfree or unfair, “electoral authoritarian”. Despite regularities of elections, Levitsky and Way (2010) consider regimes which don’t allow *competitive* multiparty elections as full-blown authoritarians, labeling them “hegemonic electoral authoritarian” (7). The competitiveness of elections is the criteria, as they submit, to draw a fine line between authoritarian regimes and hybrid regimes. Subsequently, Levitsky and Way (2010) offer a more restrictive category named “competitive authoritarianism” to refer to those regimes which hold regular *competitive* multi-party elections (5). Similar to Schedler, Levitsky and Way (2010) postulate that

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<sup>5</sup> Fareed Zakaria categorizes regimes which hold multiparty elections and adhere to the adult franchise, but fail to protect civil liberties as “illiberal democracies”. Farid, Zakaria, “The rise of illiberal democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy> (accessed 8 December, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Semi-democracies are “those countries where the effective power of elected officials is so limited, or political party competition is so restricted, or the freedom and fairness of election so compromised that electoral outcomes, while competitive, still deviate significantly from popular preferences; and/or civil and political liberties are so limited that some political orientations and interests are unable to organize and express themselves” (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1998, 17).

the competition is not fair, meaning that “opposition forces are handicapped by a highly uneven—and sometimes dangerous—playing field” (8).

The shift of focus on authoritarian attributes when analyzing hybrid regimes was appropriate since the vast majority of hybrid regimes do not present democratic characteristics enough to be classified as democracies.<sup>7</sup> At best, hybrid regimes can be regarded as non-democracies. Thus, it seems appropriate to place hybrid regimes within the diverse classification of authoritarian systems, regardless of their different characteristics depending on their historical development. I, therefore, study the Iranian polity as a form of hybrid regime in this context, for it is an essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits allows for some formal democratic institutions and a limited sphere of civil and political liberties.

### **The Islamic Republic Constitution and Political Institutions**

The coalition supporting the revolution did not unanimously yearn for the project of the Islamic Republic and what it would later become. Rather, the broadly based coalition of revolutionary groups, including Islamic forces and the secular groups temporarily cooperated to break down the Shah’s authoritarian regime, but never could agree upon the form of rule in the aftermath of the Revolution. The Revolution was ultimately followed by the relatively hasty institutionalization and consolidation of political power by a narrow circle of Islamists who more or less endorsed Khomeini’s notion of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Yet, some of the incongruences of the initial revolutionary coalition was reflected in the Islamic Republic Constitution. In fact, a more

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<sup>7</sup> These regimes give some concessions to political parties and organizations of civil society, allows for a somewhat independent press to function and for some political debate to take place, but in essence, they are authoritarian, meaning they are not imperfect democracies in progress toward improvement and consolidation, rather political systems determined to maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing their political positions and power to democratic institutions.

detailed analysis reveals a rather mixed nature, pivoting on both principles of republicanism and Islamism.

The very founding articles of the Islamic Republic Constitution are hybrid, ambiguous, and reflective of ideological inconsistencies of the coalition. For instance, the very first article of the Constitution asserts:

“The form of government of Iran is that of an Islamic Republic, endorsed by the people of Iran on the basis of their longstanding belief in the sovereignty of truth and Qur'anic justice, ... through the affirmative vote of a majority of 98.2% of eligible voters”.<sup>8</sup>

This Article implies that the Islamic Republic is a democratically elected form of rule, endorsed by the majority of people based on their Qur'anic and Islamic values. This dual Islamic and democratic characteristic can be readily seen in many articles of the Constitution. According to Article 56 of the Islamic Republic Constitution, “absolute sovereignty over the world and man belongs to God”, but it is delegated to all human as masters of their own social destiny.<sup>9</sup> This implies what Talal Asad defines as “self-governing” not “autonomous” individuals who are morally bound to conform to *shari'a* (Assad 2003). The Constitution, and particularly Article 4, asserts how certain political institutions are required to assure the compatibility of all laws and rules with the Islamic codes.<sup>10</sup> Such Islamic articles have legitimized the formation of different unelected bodies and justified their interference in political mechanisms of democratically elected institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 1.

<sup>9</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through, Article 56.

<sup>10</sup> “All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations, and the *fuqaha'* of the Guardian Council are judges in this matter”.

On top of these unelected bodies is the Institute of Leadership entrusted to the *Vali-e-Faqih* (the Guardian Jurist) in whom the absolute authority is vested. According to the Constitution, in the absence of the Imam, “Such leadership will prevent any deviation by the various organs of State from their essential Islamic duties”.<sup>11</sup> This order borrows its instruction from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih*:

“... the *ulema* [clerics] were appointed by the Imam for government and for judgment among people, and their position is still preserved for them ... *Ulema* are the heirs to the prophets ... If a knowledgeable and just jurisprudent undertakes the task of forming the government, then he will run the social affairs that the prophet used to run, and it is the duty of the people to listen to him and obey him” (Khomeini 1997, 37).

It is constitutionally asserted that the *Vali-e-Faghih* is divinely chosen for his position to serve Islam. To this end, the Supreme Leader or *Vali-e-Faghih* is authorized to appoint crucial power-holders, including the 30 members of the Expediency Council; the head of the judiciary branch; the commanders of the Army, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Militia (*Basij*); the Chief of Police; the head of the National Security Council; and the head of the National Broadcasting station, and most importantly the six clerical members of the Guardian Council, among others.<sup>12</sup>

The Guardian Council is another decisive institution which is specifically designed to serve as a watchdog to ensure that the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iran function in accordance with the Islamic principles. It constitutes 12 members, including six Islamic *faqihs* (expert in Islamic Law or *fiqh*), selected by the Supreme Leader and six jurists

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<sup>11</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Preamble “*The Wilayah of the Just Faqih*”.

<sup>12</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 110.



nominated by the Head of the Judicial Power and then confirmed by the *Majles* (the Iranian Parliament). The composition of the Guardian Council, half appointed, and half elected, representing the dual and somewhat contradictory nature of the Constitution embracing both Islamic and republican features. The Guardian Council plays an important role in terms of the legislation process as the *Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami* (the Parliament) cannot make laws without the Guardian Council's approval. Put it differently, the legislative branch "does not hold any legal status if there is no Guardian Council in existence".<sup>13</sup> The Guardian Council can also declare any bill passed by the legislative branch to be unconstitutional or un-Islamic in which case the bill returns to the *Majles*, in to be amended.<sup>14</sup> In practice, the *Majles* cannot pass a law to limit the Guardian Council's role, thereby rendering it less effective to push for structural reforms. The Guardian Council is also in charge of supervising the elections of the President of the Republic, the *Majles*, and the direct recourse to popular opinion and referenda.

The Assembly of Experts is another important institution given its crucial responsibility to elect the *Vali-e Faqih* in the event of that a decisive majority of the people" cannot find a suitable person for this position.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the Assembly of Experts has the authority to remove the *Vali-e Faqih* from his office (Hashemi 2002, 90-2).<sup>16</sup> The members of the Assembly of Experts are elected every eight years among *fuqaha* (Islamic jurists) who are assumed to have the expertise to appoint the *Vali-e Faqih*. The other state body is the Expediency Discernment Council which was initially formed to resolve disputes between the *Majles* and the

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<sup>13</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 93.

<sup>14</sup> According to the article 96 of the Islamic Republic of 1989, "the determination of compatibility of the legislation passed by the *Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami* with the laws of Islam rests with the majority vote of the *fuqaha* on the Guardian Council; and the determination of its compatibility with the Constitution rests with the majority of all the members of the Guardian Council."

<sup>15</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 107.

<sup>16</sup> According to the Constitution, the Assembly of Experts, at least in theory, has the authority to remove the *Vali-e Faqih* from his office. In practice, though, this action is unprecedented.

Guardian Council. Before the amendment of the Constitution of 1979, several legislative malfunctions appeared due to disputes between the *Majles* and the Guardian Council where laws passed by the former could not be enacted by the latter on the grounds of violation of Islam or the Constitution. In response to these conflicting opinions between the *Majles* and the Guardian Council, Expediency Discernment Council was institutionalized in the amended Constitution. Historically the Expediency Council often takes side with the Guardian Council, limiting the power of the President. The members of this Council are all appointed by the *Vali-e Faqih* (Zanjani 1999, 517).

While embracing the Islamic codes, the Iranian political system from the very beginning recognized the will of people to determine their fates through ballot boxes. The pressure of liberals, moderate Islamists, secular-nationalists led to the establishment of the republican institutions. The article 6 of the Constitution asserts that:

“In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the president, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly [*Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami*] and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution”.<sup>17</sup>

The President of the Republic is the second most powerful person who is in charge of the government and the implementation of the Constitution. After the abolition of Office of the Prime Minister following the constitutional amendment in 1989, the President as the head of government has obtained the highest executive power, previously shared by prime minister. According to the

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<sup>17</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 6.

Constitution, the President appoints and supervises the Cabinet and the vice-president. The President is also in charge of “national planning and budget and state employment affairs and may entrust the administration of these to others”. In term of foreign policy, the President or his legal representative possesses “the authority to sign treaties, protocols, contracts, and agreements concluded by the Iranian government with other governments, as well as agreements pertaining to international organizations, after obtaining the approval of the *Majles*.”<sup>18</sup>

The Parliament (*Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami*) is the second influential republican body. The *Majles* plays a key role in legislating economic, political, and cultural policies through bills proposed by the representative of the *Majles* or the President Office. In addition to its legislative power, the *Majles* functions as an organ of checks and balances on the executive branch through two mechanisms: the vote of confidence on Cabinet members, the interpellation of the Cabinet members, or of a single member, and the right to interpellate the President, if voted by at least one-third of the representatives. The members of the Cabinet or ministers can be effective only after obtaining the vote of confidence by the *Majles*.<sup>19</sup> With at least 10 representatives on board, the *Majles* can pose questions to minister, or with at least one quarter of the representatives in case of the President on a subject relating to their duties. This answer must not be delayed more than one month in the case of the President and ten days in the case of the minister. If the answers are not provided or deemed insufficient, the *Majles* may request dismissal for ineptitude.<sup>20</sup> The *Majles* also has the right to investigate all the affairs of the country. Concerning international politics, all “treaties, protocols, contracts, and agreements must be approved by the *Majles*. The taking and

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<sup>18</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 125-6.

<sup>19</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 87.

<sup>20</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 88 and 89.

giving of loans or grants-in-aid, domestic and foreign, by the government” also must be approved by this body.<sup>21</sup>

This institutional management is a testament to the duality of the Iranian political system, which blends Islamic and republican principles. In many ways and in many classifications, and for good reasons, Iran is regarded as a full-blown authoritarian polity, particularly after the 1979 Revolution. Yet, an institutional analysis reveals its hybrid nature where a collection of institutions representing both Islamic and republican principles coexist uneasily. The assumption that the Iranian political system is a form of a hybrid regime is indispensable for this thesis, as I argue, in the absence of this hybrid characteristic in the Iranian political structure, the religious reformist discourse would have been suffocated in its nascent state and subsequently could have not paved the way for reformists to enter the state offices.

### **The Birth of the Religious Reformist Discourse**

For the first decade after the Revolution (1979-89), the Islamic Republic marked a revolutionary period during which the radical Islamist leadership made a concerted effort to Islamize Iranian society. This Islamization took place in virtually all spheres of life including the laws, political institutions, schools and media (Gasirowski 2007, 74). The only prevalent discourse in public spheres was the revolutionary conservative discourse. It provided the blueprint for the Iranian political system, its social order, its objectives, and its relation with the world. Translated to reality, the *Velayat-e Faqih* was cherished as the ideal form of governance and the protection of the system and Islamic values against corrupting influences of Western modernity became paramount. The conservative discourse was conveyed through Friday Prayer sermons in cities and towns across the country, mosques, print and electronic media, and the national

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<sup>21</sup> The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 76, 77, and 80.

broadcast. It was also highly spread through the Iranian school textbooks which served as key instruments of political-ideological education and identity construction based on the identification of the “self” and the “other”. A content analysis of primary school books reveals clear demarcation lines based on “Iranian/non-Iranian, Muslim, non-Muslim, good/evil, friend/enemy, and male/female dichotomies” (Mehran 2002, 232). Given the necessity to maximize mobilization of resources and manpower for the war effort and the charisma of Ayatollah Khomeini at the time, the conservative discourse had prevalence in public spheres. The discourse exalts the *shahadat* (martyrdom) as the highest form of earthly accomplishment, particularly by invoking historical glories of Shi‘ism especially the martyrdom of Imam Hossein<sup>22</sup>.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, discourse contestation over the right course to follow in the future began. Nevertheless, policy priorities to recover from the shocks of the war prevented the emergence of a new discourse to challenge the officially endorsed and dominant revolutionary conservative discourse. It was not until the 1990-91, that the religious reformist discourse started to strike balance between Islam and modernity. Seeking for an alternative worldview, a group of academics, social scientists, and writers began to lay the foundation of a new discourse through publications and interviews in increasing newly founded journals and newspapers. These group of people are known as “religious intellectuals” dubbed by Mohamad Khatami a few years prior to his presidency to call for an urgent need to redefine the capabilities of Islam in the modern world based on today’s complex human needs. The fledging discourse sought to make a distinction between religion as a divine entity and the

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<sup>22</sup> Al-Hossein ibn Ali, is the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad and son of Ali (the fourth Islamic caliph) and Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet. He is revered by Shiite Muslims as the third Imam. After the assassination of his father, Hossein refused to recognize the legitimacy of Muawiyah’s son and successor, Yazid. Hossein and his small escort were martyred near the banks of the Euphrates River at a place called Karbala in October 680 after his refusal to surrender. In remembrance of the martyrdom of Hossein, Shiite Muslims observe the first 10 days of Muharram (the date of the battle according to the Islamic calendar) as days of mourning and lamentation.

hermeneutics of Islam as a form of religious human knowledge. It also reconciled Islam with some of the liberal tokens of modernity such as democracy, civil society, and popular sovereignty.

Religious reformist intellectuals did not only develop some abstract ideas about religious reformation, but also initiated the project of “political development” (*towse-ye siyasi*) to reform Iran’s closed political structure. This project was developed in a systematic fashion by a research team led by Saeed Hajjarian<sup>23</sup>. Following the war, Hajjarian founded the Political Bureau of the President’s Center on Strategic Studies (CSS). The Center was a haven for religious intellectuals<sup>24</sup> where many of them worked on certain projects, including political culture, state and modernization, and the theories of reforms. One of the unprecedented debates they pursued centered on the nature of the religious state in Iran, often challenging the relevance of *Velayat-e Faqih*. For this group, the religious state pivots its legitimacy on the will of people, thus, the doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini was subject to reform or removal if the people decided to do so (Ganji 2005, 100). This was not to suggest that religion be disposed altogether. Rather, they sought to reform the closed Iranian polity without sacrificing the essence of religious ethics. In fact, it was a core argument among religious intellectuals that if modernity and democracy were to succeed in Muslim societies like Iran, religious sensibilities must be respected (Bayat 2007, 96).

The process of political development or reforming the polity was to be achieved through nonviolent strategy. It was to be realized by winning over the institutions of the state through elections. Hence, reformists mobilized people, like never before, to vote for their candidate: Mohammad Khatami. The campaign and election strategies headed by Hajjarian, based on years

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<sup>23</sup> Saeed Hajjarian is the most innovative reformist political strategist and journalist who was later known as the architect of the reform movement. He was a former intelligence deputy minister. During the reform period, he served as an advisor to President Mohammad Khatami.

<sup>24</sup> Moosavi Khoiniha (Center’s General director), Abbas Abdi, Khosro Tehrani, and Mohammadreza Tajik (directors of Cultural Studies), Mohsen Kadivar (Director of Islamic Political Thought Program), Mostafa Tajzadeh, Mohsen Aramin, Alireza Alavitabar, Majid Mohammadi, and Hassan Aghajari were leading programs on modern state and religious state.

of social research at CSS and the mobilization of young students, women and middle classes, led to the landslide victory of Khatami. This victory opened an avenue for many religious intellectuals to enter the new government as politicians, while many others pursued journalism which within two years gave rise to one of the most professional press network in the entire Middle East. The ideas developed by religious intellectuals in prior years finally found their place in state institutions starting in May 1997. In power,

### **The Roadmap to the Discussion**

By examining the development of the religious reformist discourse, this thesis aims to explore the dynamics of the Iranian regime as a form of hybrid polity. The articulation of the religious reformist discourse and its politicization during the reform era (1997-2004) played an important role in securing the Iranian political system. This mainly results from the theoretical philosophy of the reformist discourse, which considers reformism and respect for the rule of law as the only *modus operandi* to modify the political system. By analysis of the religious reformist discourse, I hope to contribute to the study of hybrid regime by highlighting discursive elements that are often overshadowed by institutional focuses on electoral, legislative, and other government bodies and also build upon the existent literature on the Iranian studies. The reformist discourse under study here has been articulated in Iran majorly through written word such as books, journal articles, and, on a few occasions, through sermons, interviews, and speeches, some of which were then printed as articles or book chapters. In either case, I relied on heavily on written primary and secondary sources, and since the vast majority of religious reformists' publications are in Farsi, I translated some of the arguments.

For the purpose of clarification, it is apt to define what reformist scholars mean by democracy. The concept of democracy as articulated by religious reformists will appear through

this thesis several times. For the most part, for religious intellectuals, democracy is not significantly different from the Western notion of it. This means Islamic or religious democracy is not an exception and derives its legitimacy from the people, features political participation and limitations on the powers of rulers, and is buttressed by civil society (Kamrava 2008, 138-44). Political participation is key to define the Islamic democracy. Referring to the Qur'an (13:11) "Verily God does not change the state of a people till they change themselves", Ayatollah Abbasali Zanjani (1998) highlights the significance of political participation as it is a religious responsibility for people to partake in the social and political management of their societies (as cited in Kamrava 2008, 139). Religious intellectuals refer to *bey'at*, a ceremony in which people take an oath of allegiance to rulers, to emphasize the importance of political participation during the Prophet's leadership. The Prophet personally engaged in *bey'at* on eight different occasions, and the practice is mentioned in the Qur'an three times. Today, the electoral system performs the same function that the *bey'at* did during the Prophet's time in a more comprehensive way, and therefore, it must be integral part of Muslim societies (Mousavian 2002, 26 & 46).

Religious intellectuals strongly endorse the electoral politics and popular political participation as the pivot of legitimacy, without which a political system becomes dictatorial. Rejecting to attribute political legitimacy to divine sources, religious intellectuals lambast the conservative's false distinction between popular acceptability (*maqbuliyat*) and legitimacy (*mashru'iyat*) given by Almighty, as a recipe for dictatorship (Aqajari 2002, 129-30). For conservatives, there is only one source of legitimacy: Almighty God. The *Faqih* receives his legitimacy from God, not from a constitution or other man-made, and thus fallible, conventions such as elections. Saeed Hajjarian (2002), the most innovative reformist political strategist, discredits the misleading distinction between *maqbuliyat* and *mashru'iyat* as a means to justify



dictatorial rule through concocting the latter with rigorousness (Hajjarian, 476). For religious reformists, political participation through electoral means and popular will are the key features of democracy, which can be realized through an active civil society. Mohammad Khatami (2000) offers a thorough definition for a civil society: “In the civil society that we have in mind, the culture and norms of Islam form the primary orbits and standards of activity. But, there is no room in it for personal despotism, group dictatorship, or even the dictatorship of the majority” (as cited in Kamrava 2008, 143).

In laying out the arguments of the thesis, I will start in chapter two with an explanation of discourse analysis used for the examination of the Iranian hybrid polity. On its own, this is a novel approach for analyzing the dynamics of regime resilience in the context of hybrid regimes. Chapter three explores the formation of the religious reformist discourse through prominent reformist thinkers’ books and journal articles, and, on a few occasions, through speeches and sermons, most of which are then printed as articles or book chapters. The difference of the religious reformist discourse from that of conservatives lies in its *ijtihad* or methods of articulation of Islamic sources. By the late 1990s, the religious reformist discourse paved the way for rise of the reform government. In 1997, reformists came to power and established control over state institutions which shifted the nature and scope of the discourse which in turn triggered criticisms of the reformist government. With reformists in power, the religious reformist discourse, often described as pragmatic, left behind its considerably harsh censure toward the clerical establishment. It was then articulated in conjunction with popular liberal notions of democracy, civil society, and popular sovereignty as well as culturally familiar concepts such as Shi‘a Imams. This pragmatic reformist discourse has left the enduring legacy on the Iranian political culture. This legacy traces back to the nature of the discourse which is that of reformism. Never in either theory or political

practice, despite their varied views, did reformist thinkers advocate violent actions for achieving democratic change. Quite the contrary, reforming the system from within through gradualism and legalism was the only preferred method for these thinkers. This genuine belief in the idea of reform influentially shaped the voting behavior of Iranian people who showed their dissatisfaction with the conservative establishment by voting for moderate candidates in the subsequent elections. Chapter four examines this in greater depth.

## CHAPTER II: RE-APPROACHING REGIME RESILIENCE IN IRAN

This thesis explores the dynamics of the Iranian regime as a form of hybrid polity. Instead of institutional processes like elections or other state organs, commonly considered in discussions of hybrid regime stability. I will look more closely at the formation and transformation of the religious reformist ideology as it has affected the Iranian political culture. The articulation of the religious reformist discourse and its politicization during the reform era played an important role in securing the Iranian political system. This mainly results from the theoretical philosophy of the reformist discourse, which considers reformism as the only *modus operandi* to modify the political system. By discourse analysis, I hope to contribute to the study of hybrid regime by highlighting discursive elements that cannot be fully captured by current institutional approaches. Before explaining what I mean by discourse and ideology and its role in regime resilience in Iran, I will first provide a brief literature review of institutional approaches.

### **Institutional Approaches to the Iranian Regime Resilience**

In the book “Middle East Authoritarianisms”, Heydemann and Leenders (2013) argue that regime resilience in the Middle East results from “attributes, relational qualities, and institutional arrangements” that enable the authoritarian regimes to “adapt governance strategies to changing domestic and international conditions” (5). This definition is important since the question of resilience deals with a “process” or continual “everyday governance”, rather than an “outcome” or a reaction to a threat. Based on this definition, it can be inferred that this “recombinant quality” of the Iranian regime enables it to “manage the distribution of power and resources, the production of legitimacy, and the maintenance of their authority” that ensures its survival (Heydemann and Leenders 2013, 7). Heydemann and Leenders’s theory of “institutional flexibility” provides a helpful insight into regime resilience in the broader Middle East and Iran by focusing on economic,

legislative, and electoral intuitions of Middle Eastern political systems. The following paragraphs provide a brief summary of institutional analysis in different chapters of the book.

Kevan Harris (2013) contends that Iran's mixed welfare regime contributes to the resilience of the Islamic Republic. Harris characterizes Iran's current social policy as inherited from both the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), named “corporatist welfare regime” and the “revolutionary welfare regime”, which traces back to the post-revolutionary formation of endowed foundations (*bonyad*), and the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. The former institution provides economic benefits for the urban and middle classes while the latter directs the social welfare benefits to Iran's least-well-off social strata, including the rural poor who were deprived under the Pahlavi's welfare programs. By addressing the needs of large segments of both Iran's indigent and middle classes through this “dual set of institutional apparatuses” (a generous subsidization of bread, fuel, gas, heat, electricity, and medicines and public transport), the regime has sustained a broad base of popular support (Heydemann and Leenders).

Osanloo (2013) contends that as the societies in the authoritarian regimes change and reconfigure themselves, these regimes exploit the multiple system values in the society to respond adaptively to a changing configuration of challenges. She argues that the “unusual fusion between Islamic principles and republican institutions” contributes to a context in which social actors have developed a repertoire of sustained collective actions (Heydemann and Leenders, 130). This feature enables, as she puts it, the Islamic Republic to exercise more control over the population through a set of participatory elements such as regular elections. The recognition of women's rights, including allowing single women to travel abroad on state scholarships, the introduction of adult education for rural women, raising the legal age of marriage for girls, giving women greater rights to divorce their husbands, and reforming child custody are all examples of the regime's

transformation and adaption to new demands (Heydemann and Leenders 2013, 239). By exercising institutional flexibility, the Iranian regime includes more segments of the society, and thus decreases chance of resistance.

Elections in Iran, and particularly presidential elections, relatively meet needs of the Iranian socially-changing society, as presidents in Iran have power over issues of national policy, including social justice, foreign policy, different models of economic developments, etc. Therefore, the electoral confrontation and competition are real, even in the face of limitations imposed by the Guardian Council, and generate uncertainties which lead to the political mobilization of both hardliners and reformers around the defined boundaries of political contestation. “The genuineness of competition” creates a direct link between different candidate’s struggles and social conflicts, thus engaging a significant part of society in political competition (Cama and Abdolmohammadi 2015, 568).

For instance, the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election responded to millions of enthusiastic youth and adults who would otherwise be frustrated by the status quo and threaten the polity by out-of-control protests and discontent. Rouhani’s victory in 2013 played the same role which is referred to as a “relief valve” by Cama and Abdolmohammadi (2015). Rouhani’s victory responded to people’s dissatisfaction with political repression, especially after the Green movement<sup>25</sup> and former president Ahmadinejad’s radical economic and social policies. This hybrid political system, in which repressive institutions coexist with electoral competition, allows the system to adapt and make social, economic, and cultural concessions to people who were excluded before or whose political demands went unsatisfied. Yet,

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<sup>25</sup> It refers to the political movement that arose after the disputed June 12, 2009 presidential election when peaceful demonstrators turned out on Tehran streets to protest official claims that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the 2009 presidential election. Their widely-known slogan was: “Where is my vote?”

simultaneously, it ensures that concessions and reforms in public policies do not go too far as to significantly change the polity altogether. In the same vein, Keshavarzian (2005) argues that the institutions of the State fostered the survival of the regime “by effectively controlling the formal political process and limiting the organization of soft-liners and their potential societal supports (80).” Through, mollification of protests and institutional blockage of substantive democratic policies by the Guardian Council and the Office of Supreme Leader, conservatives assure that short-run political losses and electoral defeats will not lead to radical transformation of the polity (Keshavarzian 2005, 80).

In chapter ten of the same book, Ehteshami et al. (2013) highlight the link external threats and state resources to domestic strategies adopted by the Iranian regime. Based on their economic resources and security threats, the Iranian regime expands or contracts the level of elite contestation and inclusion of social forces (Heydemann and Leenders). For Ehteshami et al., the openness of political competition is in part determined by wars and national security issues as well as resources at regime’s disposal. The triumph of conservatives in the seventh *Majles* (2013) and the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 election were followed by a narrowing of contestation and shift in the regime coalition away from international relations facilitated by both the U.S. war on terror and rising oil rents. In such a context, the regime could relatively readily justify the need for hostile relations with America while still meeting the economic needs of the people, thanks to the high oil revenue. This, in turn, narrowed the base of the regime, which necessitates broadening the political competition and inclusion in consequent election (Heydemann and Leenders 2013). Such flexibility to expand or decrease political competition in accordance with available rents and security condition can explain part of the story of regime

resilience in Iran. It is important to note that many hybrid regimes do not possess institutional capacities to regulate political competition as such<sup>26</sup> or entirely lack the electoral bodies to do so.

### **Discourse Analysis: The Case of Iran as a Hybrid Polity**

These approaches summarized above help explain the dynamics of regime resilience in Iran. I intend to add to this discussion by re-approaching the same phenomenon from a different angle. The discourse analysis approach helps capture the factors that are not readily visible in institutional arrangements and political struggles among the main political actors and factions of the Iranian regime. In particular, it captures the gradual formation of diverse ideological discourses that emerged through constant interaction with state institutions and society. This thesis intends to highlight the religious reformist discourse formation and transformation and its role in the regime stability.

Harris's example of dual welfare system, and other others' effort to examine institutional flexibility explain part of the story about the regime stability. The other part which often goes unnoticed consists ideological packages which reinforce or weaken institutions during different periods. For instance, the populist ideological packages of the Revolution preceded and later justified the establishment of various economic bodies such as the *Mostazafin* Foundation of Islamic Revolution to garner popular support. Similarly, Khatami's new readings of religion and vision for disenchanted people to rebuild their relations with their political system and the world had come to existence a decade, if not more, before he became president in 1997. This is not to suggest that both institutional and ideological contribution to regime stability are two mutually

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, the Venezuelan regime is based on plebiscitary systems in which elections are meant to legitimize the undisputed political leader; or in the case of Russia and most Central Asian republicans, a sort of multi-party system functions where the dominant party allows for some degree of freedom of action, but a genuine political competition is absent. For more see Abdohammadi and Cama, 2015, p. 566-9.

exclusive possibilities. Rather, it intends to incorporate possible un-institutional explanations into account. To this end, I shall highlight the role of ideologies and discourses in regime stability.

### **Discursive Analysis**

Taking a discursive analysis, I hope to include ideological and discursive dimensions and show how they emerge in state institutions and the discourse of political actors and function in favor of the status quo. For this thesis, it is fitting to elaborate what I mean by ideology after all. I take ideology to mean a chain of thoughts and worldviews, based on a series of assumptions, about the nature of socio-political structures as they are and as they ought to be. Ideology is meant to include all political belief systems which ultimately intend to guide actions directed at preserving, destroying or reforming a given social order. Martin Seliger's definition of ideology is useful here:

“An ideology is a group of beliefs and disbeliefs (rejections) expressed in value sentences, appeal sentences and explanatory statements ..., designed to serve on a relatively permanent basis a group of people to justify in reliance on moral norms and a modicum of factual evidence and self-consciously rational coherence the legitimacy of the implements and technical prescriptions which are to ensure concerted action for the preservation, reform, destruction or reconstruction of a given order.” (Seliger 1976, 119).

This means that politics and ideology are inseparable in a sense that all political actions are ultimately aimed at the preservation, reform, or destruction of a certain social order. Seliger's definition departs from the Marxist conception of ideology which directly links ideology with the domination of a certain class or “false consciousness” in Engels's term. Put it differently, ideology, in this thesis, does not necessarily refer to sustaining relationships of dominations.



Rather, it is a body of thought which critically examines the present social order and functions as blueprint for the future. It is closer to what Gramsci calls hegemony: the “cultural, moral and ideological” leadership of a group that manufactures consent among populations so that the masses regard their assent as spontaneous (Gramsci 1971). In this sense, the process of meaning production naturalizes power relations and renders them in line with common sense. This process of forming consent through meaning production process is what Gramsci calls leadership as distinct from Marx theory of domination.

In line with this definition of ideology, discourse theory stresses that meanings, interpretations, and practices are inextricably linked (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000). Discourses cannot be separated from the reality they seek to explain in a sense that they influence the creation, disruption, and reformation of the practices wherein they dwell. In doing so, discourses permeate societies primarily through the conduit of language and discursive elements. Regardless of its milieu or geography, beliefs, values, identities, etc. are articulated through discursive elements. “Articulation”, as Laclau and Mouffe (2000) remark, refers to “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (7).

The notion of articulation is important given the attention of this thesis to discourse formation and its consequent contribution to the stability of the Iranian political system. Also, the two logics of equivalence and difference developed by Laclau and Mouffe are practical for this thesis. These authors argue that creation of equivalential identity weaken internal ideological differences among different socio-political fractions. For instance, prior to the Islamic Revolution, the student, middle-class and lower middle-class families, *bazari* people (businessmen), and intellectual organized an unusual alliance around the mystical discourse of the *mostaazafin* (the

oppressed) by opposing themselves to a series of “others”. This process is referred to as the “logic of equivalence” (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000, 11). The “logic of difference” functions exactly the opposite: it foregrounds discrepancies between socio-political forces by dissolving existing chains of equivalence.

The new articulation of religion in the form of religious reformist discourse results from the dissolution of chains of equivalence among the revolutionary coalition. The articulation of this discourse succeeded to attract many people and groups who were disoriented and dissatisfied with the established discourse of conservatives, and effectively directed their political behavior toward peaceful political and electoral participation. Yet, beside electoral victories, the reformist discourse failed to overcome internal discrepancies and fractions among various liberal and reformist groups. It could not create effective chains of equivalence to unite various fractions in the society such as seculars and even some groups of reformists<sup>27</sup> to gain political concessions from the cohesive theocratic establishment. This dynamic involving electoral victory and containment of disruptive activities along with somewhat institutional flexibility has functioned in favor of the status quo.

In this study of regime resilience in Iran, most of my attention is centered on the logic of difference. I argue that the logic of equivalence facilitated the organization of various social forces into one united group which contributed to the success of the Islamic Revolution, whereas the breakdown of existing chains of equivalence in the revolutionary coalition has facilitated the resilience of the regime since the Revolution. By the 1990s, the formation of a new reformist religious ideology departed from the traditional articulation of *Velayat-e Faqih* (the mandate of the jurisconsult) by the revolutionary coalition. The religious reformist discourse did not endorse

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<sup>27</sup> The pragmatic religious reformist discourse which was being articulated during the reform era lost its popularity even among those reformist groups such as student groups and many religious intellectuals who had cherished it before the presidential election of 1997.

the conservatives' interpretation of Islam, and more specifically the *Velayat-e Faqih*. Quite differently, it aimed at defining a more democratic interpretation of the religion which was applauded largely by the young Iranian population. Through the new articulation, reformists managed to attract vast popular support that eventually placed them in state offices. One of the functions of this discourse was that it encouraged the vast majority of the Iranian youth to realize their demand for change through the ballot box rather than demonstration and street protests. This is mainly because reformism is an inherent component of the discourse which views reforms from within the confines of the existing framework of the Islamic Republic as the only proper route to Iran's progress. But, as mentioned, it failed to realize the establishment of a democratic polity as it did not or could not, due to pragmatic considerations and/or co-optation of reformist politicians, force considerable political concessions from the autocratic regime. It is to the development of the religious reformist discourse in the 1990s that this chapters turns.

### CHAPTER III: THE MAKING OF RELIGIOUS REFORMIST DISCOURSE

“While the common perception is that since the reformists came to power in 1997 a new religious reform is also unfolding, the reality is that the political reform movement is one auspicious fruit of a religious intellectual reform movement already at work at least one decade prior to the 1997 political watershed” (Forough Jahanbakhsh, 2003).

In this chapter, I aim to show the development of the religious reformist discourse through the major works of two influential clerics Hasan Yusefi Eshkavari and Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari. The former nurtured the notion of the “Islamic Democratic Government” and fueled the engine of the reform movement (*jonbish-e eslahat*) and the latter contributed to the introduction and application of modern hermeneutics for analysis of religious texts and sources. Also, I highlight Abdolkarim Soroush’s thesis on “the Contraction and Expansion of the *shari‘a*” which is his most important contribution to the study of Islam. His articulation of *faqih*’s position derives its origin from his hermeneutical study which distinguishes *fiqh*-based (knowledge-based) religion from faith-based religion. Also, it is fitting to devote a section to Mohammad Khatami more so as an independent thinker, not as the president elected in 1997. This distinction is important since Khatami as President failed to fully represent the ideals of the reformist discourse and in some cases, ignored some far-reaching ideas of reform envisioned by leading religious intellectuals like Soroush.<sup>28</sup> The mentioned intellectuals, among many others, are referred to as “religious

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<sup>28</sup> Importantly, Khatami never questioned the concept of *Velayat-e-faqih* and refrained from openly criticizing the supreme Leader Khamenei. Throughout the duration of his Presidency, he tried to equip himself with Khamenei’s support for his policies, knowing that the Supreme Leader’s backing would provide him with the authority he needed to implement his reforms. In pursuit of his goals, he also avoided antagonizing Khamenei over sociopolitical issues about which the two held conflicting views. Similarly, some other pragmatic reformists like Saeed Hajjarian and Mohsen Kadivar argued for preserving the *Velayat-e Faqih*, but democratizing it. For instance, Saeed Hajjarian and Mohsen Kadivar argued for preserving the existing political system of *Velayate Faqih* but democratizing it through revising certain conditions stipulated in the Constitution for limiting the Supreme Leader’s power. Soroush, on the other hand, did not entrust any clerical rule of any kind in any way.

intellectuals”<sup>29</sup> (*roshanferan-e dini*) who have formed the religious reformist discourse through *ijtihad* or reinterpretation of religious sources during the 1990s and broke the monopoly of the dominant ideological establishment.

### **Historical Background**

In the discourse contestation in the 1990s, the religious reformist articulation of religion gained vast popular support from the people, especially the youth who were alienated by the mainstream conservative discourse. A number of historical developments contributed to the religious reformists’ success. The rising political expectations following relatively rapid economic growth played an important role (Abdi and Godazi 1999). Moreover, during the eighties, Iran’s population grew by a staggering average of 2.8 percent per year, reaching 56 million in 1990 from 39 million in 1980. By the mid-nineties, an astounding 74.4 percent of the 60.5 million population remained below the age of the 35, who at best had a faint memory of the revolution. Meanwhile, Iran’s urban population increased from 54 in 1986 to 61 in the 1996.<sup>30</sup> Also, literacy was on the rise. From 1980 to 1991 the share of literate women jumped from 30 % to 59 % and the rising trend held true for men: from 54% to 66%.<sup>31</sup> Iran experienced a dramatic expansion of higher education from 155.8 thousand enrollment in 1977 to 625 thousand in 1997 (Ehsani 1999). These changes helped the religious reformist discourse appeal to an increasingly mobilized and politically-conscious young urban middle classes who were disillusioned by the excess of the regime in the name of religion, its social and cultural rigidity, and the stifling political atmosphere.

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<sup>29</sup> The term *roshanferan-e dini* or religious intellectuals first mentioned by Mohamad Khatami a few years before he became president to call for an urgent need to redefine the capabilities of Islam in the modern world to address complex human needs. See Khatami *Bim-e mowj* (the Fear of the Wave): 139.

<sup>30</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the population statistics are cited from the website of the Statistical Center of Iran, at [www.sci.org.ir](http://www.sci.org.ir), accessed on December 25, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> The percentage of Iranian with a formal education went from 26.6 percent to in 1979 to 79.5 percent in 1996.

In fact, the popularity of the political reform, as one of the Iranian social scientist puts it, was not just a necessity to reduce potential ruptures, but an inevitability (Mansournezhad 2003, 209).

The rise of new religious reformist discourse played key role in sustaining the Iranian political system. This is mainly because, despite genuine reverence for the idea of the Islamic reformation and democratic aspirations by religious intellectuals, in the realpolitik, reformist politicians always cherished the preservation and improvement of the system and Islamic values (Khatami 1997).<sup>32</sup> Religious reformists, despite their diverse ideas varying from secularists to Islamic thoughts, indisputably believed that the only proper route to Iran's progress is through reforms with "resort to and participation within the legal and established mechanism of the state" (Kamrava 2008, 124). Overall, despite their strong dissatisfaction with the autocratic ruling in the the Islamic Republic, reformists encouraged people to accomplish their demand for change through the ballot box rather than subversive activities which advocate the overthrow of the regime (Kamrava 2008, 130).

What makes the religious reformist discourse different from that of conservatives lies in its *ijtihad* or "independent reasoning", or more specifically, "personal independent judgment of a jurist to infer precepts from authoritative sources like Qur'an and *Sunna*" (Sachedina 1998, 135). Reformists sought to break the monopoly of the *faqih* and clerical state over *ijtihad* and expand its scope to interpret the *shari'a* according to changing circumstances of the modern world. It goes as far as to include interpretation and criticism of the *faqih*'s role and the concept of the *Velayat-e Faqih*. It is important to note that not all what reformist thinkers wrote and advocated was reflected by the reformist government of Khatami, leaving this body of intellectuals often disappointed by the very administration they had cherished before. This is the main reason that many reformist

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<sup>32</sup> "Khatami Interviews on Elections," *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, 25 February 1997.

intellectuals such as Soroush among many others, took issues with Khatami's administration and went so far as to suggest he resign.<sup>33</sup> For instance, in 1998, Soroush in a letter to Khatami urged him to take more decisive actions and warned him about the consequences of his compromising policies that would lead to rejuvenation of conservatives (Soroush 1999, 77-83). Many religious and non-religious supporters of Khatami disagreed and believed it would only be a matter of time for Khatami to fulfill his campaign pledges. Yet, time has proved the contrary. Political compromises and inaction frustrated the golden opportunity for a peaceful political transformation that had enjoyed the unwavering support of the people.

Unwittingly, the formation of the reformist discourse through the means of *ijtihad* and its implementation in the reformist administration reduced the chance of revolutionary activities. This is mainly because at its core, it encouraged democratic political engagement over any sort of disruptive activities. It should be also highlighted that this effect on stability is largely an unpredicted consequence of the reformists' method. Religious intellectuals did not inspire social activism to deliberately keep the autocratic regime intact. Quite the contrary, they genuinely pursued reforming the polity through non-violent activities, but ultimately succumbed in the face of state oppression and lack of internal unity. That being said, I shall now move to examine the development of the religious reformist discourse through the major works of some of the most influential religious intellectuals: Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, and Seyyed Mohammad Khatami.

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<sup>33</sup> In realpolitik, after the 1997 presidential election and reformist's victory's, Khatami's administration failed to keep up reformist ideas and promises developed in the 1990s by many reformist intellectuals. This is why many of these thinkers lambasted Khatami's administration harshly. For instance, in a remarkably prescient letter to Khatami in November 1997, Ayatollah Montazeri warned President Khatami that "with the style he is pursuing, he will not achieve anything." He urged Khatami, therefore, to be more assertive in pursuing his reform program and demanding authority. Montazeri also suggested that Khatami talk to the Supreme Leader and point out to him that "over 22 million people had voted for him, knowing full well that his views diverge from those of Khamenei... . If the president's conditions were not accepted, Khatami should resign" (Montazeri 1997 as cited in Siddiqi 2006).

## Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari and “Islamic Democratic Government”

Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, a religious intellectual, is well known as an outspoken critic of the current government of Iran. In 1949, he was born in Eshkevar near Rudsar, a city in Gilan province. After finishing primary education, he entered the Rudsar Seminary in 1961 to start his journey to become a religion student. In 1965 he went to Qom Seminary where he studied Islamic studies until 1979. During this period, he learned basic knowledge in fields such as literature, logic, commentary, theology, philosophy, principles (*osul*), and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Unhappy with the seminary curriculum, he started searching for new religious knowledge. One of the centers that offered new ideas was the *Hoseyniyeh Ershad* of Tehran which began its activities in 1966. It was there, that he came to know Dr. Ali Shariati by attending his lectures. For him and his generation, Shariati and his lectures on *Islamshenasi* (Islamology), represented a harmonious mixture of faith, thought, and struggle. Eshkevari was deeply inspired by Shariati’s notion of “political Islam” which provides Muslims with an ideology for political action and enable them to use their faith to oust despotism of the Pahlavi’s dynasty. Eshkavery endorses Shariati’s concept of political Islam and seeks to redeem it through democratizing and tranfering it into “social Islam”. Influenced by Shariati, he started his political activities and was arrested twice in 1974 and 1975.

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, he was elected to the first *Majles* (The Consultative Assembly) of the Islamic Republic (Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 41-50). He continued his intellectual and political engagement, but his participation and controversial remark in the Berlin Conference held in April 2000 became a significant turning point for him to become a famous religious intellectual against the regime. Eshkevari was arrested and charged with ‘apostasy’ and waging war against God in *Dadsara va Dadgah-e Vizheh-ye Rouhaniyyat* (Prosecutor’s Office and Special Court of *Ulama*) in December 2000. His charged resulted in a



death sentence, which thereafter was commuted to imprisonment, and after spending less than five years in prison, Eshkevari was released in 2004 (Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 1-3).

With the increasing disillusionment of religious intellectuals with the monolithic interpretation of *Velayat-e Faqih*, paralleling the world-wide spread of democratization movements in the 90s, religious intellectuals started to spread the religious reformist discourse which had its roots in intellectual developments several decades ago. Such efforts were especially welcomed by the youth who longed for freedom, pluralism, and political tolerance. It is against this background that Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari's notion of the Islamic democratic government (*Hokumat-e Demokratik-e Eslami*)<sup>34</sup> began to influence the reform movement. He expresses the relationship between democracy and Islam in a robust way. Aiming to redeem the project of political Islam embraced by Shariati, Eshkevari argues that while religion is an integral part of society and should not necessarily be distanced from politics, Islam does not mandate a specific form of government (Hosseini and Tapper 2006). Similar to other religious intellectuals, Eshkevari (1998) maintains that:

“Never in Islam has the act of governing been mandated as a function of religion’. Government, instead, is a purely human endeavor, cannot possibly have one form and type at all times, and is contextually dependent on the times and the conditions in which it finds itself” (as cited in Kamrava 2008, 133).

Therefore, there is no contradiction between religion and democracy, which would compel us to forsake one for the sake of the other. Quite the contrary, Islamic government cannot be undemocratic. In fact, the most religious and also the most appropriate manner for administrating

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<sup>34</sup> Islamic democratic government is a collection of Eshkevari's arguments which were originally produced between 1995 and 2000.

Muslim society is democracy (Hosseini and Tapper 2006). For him, the basic liberal democratic values of equality, justice, and human dignity are central to Islam, and thus any form of despotism, particularly theocratic one, is an anathema to the fundamental values of Islam. Based on this reasoning, he offers his thesis of “democratic Islamic government”.

According to democratic Islamic government, religion as a form of “guidance, worship, moral purification, human elevation, and perfection” has nothing to do with government neither in theory nor in practice. This is because “guidance and devotion are matters that give direction and motivation to [individual] ethical and spiritual perfection”. Yet, religious justice, or the justice intended by religion, is unattainable without an established political power. It is here that “justice is the hinge that joins religion to government”. Yet, the nature of relations between religion and government must be democratic as:

“The simplest meaning of justice is giving everybody their rights, putting everybody in their rightful place, preventing discrimination and injustice, and finally establishing a reasonable balance in society; and the most natural, the most humane, and the most useful way to create balance in human society is the establishment of a state and the creation of political and governmental power, by people exercising their conscious free will, with the maximum participation of all different opinions and ideological persuasions” (Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 85).

Since in accordance to the rational and textual origins of Islam, the sources of power, government, and the state are worldly and popular, not divine, no one can make a priori and claim to be representing God or the prophet in “the matter of government and the exercise of political power”. Therefore, the phenomena of power and government fall into the realm of the “people’s

voluntary and chosen act”. In fact, any other relationship between religion and government, including authoritarianism and despotism in which people are not allowed to participate in decision-making process for their own destiny, is absolutely against religion (Kamrava 2008, 135-6). This democratic requirement is self-evident for the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. “The Republican political system, founded on *Velayat-e Faqih* is established and acquires legitimacy through the will and vote of the majority of the Muslims (even non-Muslims, since every Iranian citizen has the right to vote), and nothing else” (Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 91).

Redeeming shariati’s notion of political Islam, Eshkevari proposes the idea of social Islam; “religion has social, cultural, and political functions, and if it is going to have a part in government it must be through democratic means” (Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 184). His views alongside with other religious intellectuals to interpret religious resources and subject the authority of *faqih* to the will of people contributed to the plurality of the Iranian political discourse. No longer was the conservative articulation of Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Motlagheh ye Faqih* (Absolute mandate of the jurisconsult) dominant, but was the emergent reformist religious and concomitant political discourse utilizing the *ijtihad*. The emerging discourse tapped into the disenchantment of vast majority of the youth with the conservative interpretation of *Velayat-e Faqih* and expressed their dissatisfaction by decisively voting for the reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami in 1997 presidential election. The subsequent rise of the reform movement brought about discourse hybridity in political domain, which until recently has unwittingly resulted in the advocacy of democratic reforms over any sort of revolutionary change.

### **Abdolkarim Soroush and the “Contraction and Expansion of *Shari‘a*”**

Abdolkarim Soroush, born in 1945 in Tehran is one of the most well-known and prolific religious intellectuals in Iran today. He graduated from *Alavi* High School where students learn

both modern and religious sciences. He studied pharmacology at the University of Tehran and continued his post graduate studies in England, where he integrated western theories within the framework of his vast Islamic learning. He returned to Iran during the revolution and joined the Council on Cultural Revolution (*Setad-e Enqelab-e Farhangi*), but he soon resigned due to the alleged “cultural fascism” committed by some of the Council’s members (Soroush 1998). Soroush soon came to be known as the “Luther of Islam”<sup>35</sup> and the most erudite critics of the clerical rule.

Unlike Eshkevari and other religious intellectuals, Soroush criticized the idealization of religion and its use as a political tool and a legitimizing force. Criticizing Shariati’s project of political Islam, in the spring edition of *Kiyan*, he reiterates his ideas previously published in “*Farbeh-tar az Ideology*” (Healthier than Ideology) regarding a central paradox in Shariati’s thought: on the one hand Shariati advocated for an ideological religion for realizing social and political ends, thus necessitating an official class of ideological interpreters, while on the other hand, influenced by mystical Shi’ism, he objected Islam to be transformed into a man-made ideology.<sup>36</sup> Instead, Soroush explains why religion should be detached from worldly matters, including politics by making distinction between religions and religious knowledge.

To make his case for the separation of religion and politics, he puts forward his most significant theoretical contributions in his thesis on “*Qabz va Bast-e Teorik-e Shari‘at*”<sup>37</sup> (the contraction and expansion of the *shari‘a*) where he makes a distinction between *fiqh*-based religion and faith-based religion. He contended that religion as revealed by the Almighty should be separated from religious knowledge, or our understanding of the Qur‘an and the *Sunna*, for the

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<sup>35</sup> American Journalist Robin Wright and many after her have referred to Soroush as the Luther of Islam.

<sup>36</sup> “Soroush on Freedom of the Clergy,” *Kiyan*, April-May 1995.

<sup>37</sup> “*Qabz va Bast-e Teorik-e Shari‘at*” (the contraction and expansion of the *shari‘a*) is the collection of Soroush’s articles which were initially published in a weekly newspaper *Keyhan-e Farhangi* and later published in a book form in 1990.

former is beyond human reach, sacred, and immutable while the latter is sincere and authentic, but limited and fallible form of human knowledge. It is not religion itself that is up for interpretation, but rather religious knowledge which similar to other sciences is “in constant flux, evolution, contraction, and expansion” to meet needs of the time (Soroush 1995). This distinction is the basis of his argument against the assumption of innate goodness of mankind, shared by radical Marxists and Islamic fundamentalists alike, for “one’s religious beliefs no matter how perfect they may seem are still only what the person as an individual believes” (M. Sadri and A. Sadri 2000, 32). This is his call for expanding the domain of *ijtihad* to “extra-religious”<sup>38</sup> (*boron-dini*) approaches to understand religion, which challenges the monopoly of conservatives over interpretation of religion and consequently undermines the role of *vali-e faqih*.

In the summer 1995 edition of the *Kiyan*, Soroush takes his argument one step further and challenges Iranians to rethink the relationship between religion and politics. He argues that in the modern age, secularism “has been presented as a conscious discarding of religion from the affairs of life and politics”, but this definition does not show secularism nuanced reality. In fact, “a secular government is not opposed to religion, but neither does it make religion the foundation of its legitimacy or the basis of its actions”. He argues that religion cannot legitimize politics because modern government base their actions on scientific knowledge, which is inherently distinct from faith-based religion. Hence, secularism is “nothing rather than rational and scientific social management”. In this sense, the practice of secularism is “indifferent” rather than hostile to religion (Soroush 1995).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Soroush makes a distinction between *aliman* (plural of *alim* meaning religious thinkers) and *roshanfekran-e dini* (religious intellectuals) as the former only refer to existing religious knowledge to understand religion but the latter has the perspective to go beyond the inner circle and study religion from outside of the religion (*boron-dini*). See Soroush “*Qesse-ye Arbab-e Marefat*” (Tales of the Masters of Knowledge) 1994.

<sup>39</sup> “Soroush, Farhadpour on Secularism-Soroush on Meaning, Foundation,” *Kiyan*, August- September 1995.

In a not much indirect reference to the position of *faqih*, he maintains, in the secular arrangement, we have no “position, office or rule that is above general supervision, from the ruler himself to the manner of exercising”. Government policies are not sacred (meaning it is scientific), and thus, can be supervised by scientific methods (Soroush 1995).<sup>40</sup> Thus, Soroush (1997) argues against placing a cleric “in a position he may be tempted to betray religion” since

“This is not an easy task, Soroush claims, as the clergy is a syndicate group whose economic interests and livelihood depend on presenting and perpetuating specific, often petrified, interpretations of religion. Religious knowledge cannot progress and reach additional heights so long as it remains tied to the clergy’s syndical interests. It is no accident that the clergy by and large remains deeply steeped in tradition and that reformists among it represent no more than mere voices in the wilderness” (as cited in Kamrava 2008, 160).

For this reason, the quest for the divine or faith-based religion from the state or all other forms of worldly power must be totally severed if religion is to retain its moral and spiritual authority, Soroush (1995) contends (as cited in Brumberg 2001, 206). Soroush, like Eshkevary, questions the authority of *faqih* over *ijtihad* by introducing the distinction between religion and religious knowledge and stretching the scope of *ijtihad* for interpreting the latter. For him, only in secular arrangement can such a condition be provided.

### **Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari and the New Islamic Theology (*Kalam-e Jadid*)**

Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari was born in 1936 in Tabriz. He studied in the seminary where he obtained his degree in *ijtihad* and Doctorate in Philosophy. He served as a director of the

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<sup>40</sup> “Soroush on Freedom of the Clergy,” *Kiyan*, April-May 1995.

Islamic center of Hamburg from 1970 to 1979 and was well-versed in German philosophy and theological concepts, particularly religious hermeneutic. He is regarded as the pioneer of the new Islamic theology (*Kalam-e Jadid*) for his application of modern hermeneutics to traditional Shiite theology and jurisprudence.

Shabestari argues that since the understanding of a text does not happen at once nor without prelude or a pre-understanding of a given text, the interpretation of religious sources is not exempt from distortion by the interpreters' prejudgments and preconceptions. Influenced by the Western hermeneutical concepts, he contends that there always exists a pre-understanding of a given text that constitutes the prelude for its later understandings and interpretations. This understanding is especially indispensable for understanding difficult texts, and this is why such texts are subject to recurrent study and analysis over time. During each "hermeneutical cycle" (*dor e hermeneutic*), the preunderstandings (*pish fahmha*) are different and interpreters eternally transition from one cycle to the next. As a result, there can be no ultimate or one true interpretation of sacred texts for all times. This philosophical and methodological approach leads Shabestari to endorse the limitation of *fiqh* and calls for the constant interpretation of Islam and a "reconstruction of religion" (*bazsazi e dini*), if Islam is to remain relevant to people's lives and avoid intellectual ossification (Shabestari 2000).

Similar to Eshkevari, Shabestari emphasizes that the Qur'an does not prescribe a particular form of government, thereby refuting *Velayat-e Faqih* as the only form of government for Muslim people. He argues that the Qur'an's main concern is value-based (*arzeshi*), meaning that the Qur'an sanctions any form of governments which delivers justice. Justice, and not the form of government, is the eternal and unchangeable basis (Shabestari 2000). These chains of contention convey that a certain interpretation of religion, or what he calls "the official religious doctrine", for an absolute

form of government is not the ultimate truth and people can and should be able to determine their suitable type of government which is the most capable of realizing justice.

In his book “A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion”, he famously criticizes the official reading of religion by the state. This distortion is what he calls “jurisprudential Islam” (*Islam-e foqahati*). “Jurisprudential Islam” relies on two mistaken assumptions that *fiqh* produced by a group of *fuqaha* can serve as the basis for modern politics, economics, and law; and the equally wrong assumption that state is in charge of Islamic laws in society (Shabestari 2000). The rapidly changing world in the modern era has created new living conditions and demands which cannot be addressed by *fiqh* interpreted only by *fuqaha*. Rather, “continuous *ijtihad*” (*ijtihad-e mostamar*) is needed to reconstruct Islamic knowledge which should be complemented by insights from other sciences and disciplines. Along with other religious intellectuals, his efforts aim to break the monopoly of a handful of *Fuqaha* over the interpretation of religion and offer a new avenue to view the Muslim society.

### **Seyyed Mohammad Khatami and the Advocacy for Dynamic *Fiqh***

Mohammad Khatami, the leader of the reform movement, was born in 1943 in an open-minded religious facility where he was encouraged to listen to radio news broadcasts, read poetry, novels, newspapers, and delve into books banned by other clerics. He studied religious studies and later pursued graduate study in philosophy. In 1987, he moved to Germany where he experienced his first major encounter with Western culture. A year after the Islamic Revolution, he returned to Iran and served in the first *Majles*. With the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and death of Khomeini in 1989, Khatami was already dismissive of the state’s repressive policies and called for a more open cultural regime. Under conservative pressure, he distanced himself from politics by resigning from his position as a head of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1992 and continued



his cultural and intellectual activities as the head of Iran's National Library and cultural advisor to President Rafsanjani (1989-1997). During this time he resumed writing a series of books until he was elected as President in 1997 (Sciolino 1998).<sup>41</sup> This section provides a brief discussion of Khatami's ideas developed prior to his political life as the President. This distinction is crucial since after assuming presidency, Khatami and his administration were not necessarily seen as the ideal representative of reformist ideas and political objectives he himself and other reformists had sought to realize.

Articulating the estrangement from the absolutist regime, which was also shared by the new generation, Khatami similarly criticized the absence of scholarship and *ijtihad* in Islamic philosophy and thought. At a time when issues such as political development, justice and equality, and freedom and democracy are focal concerns of modern nation-states, the clergy's inattention and indolence seriously undermined what was once a vibrant tradition of critical thought and analysis among Muslims. The modern world necessitates the clergy to equip itself with the newest and most functionally relevant ideas (Khatami 2000, 109). He argues what our society needs to overcome the deep distrust toward the state's institutions and intolerance is intellectual diversity in order to flourish *ijtihad* (Khatami 2001). "It is perilous to Iranian society that we have an absolutist notion for religious truth, or *fiqh*, the *Velayat-e Faqih*, or the Revolution" (Khatami 2000, 132). Instead, intellectuals should engage in progressive *ijtihad* and dynamic *fiqh* (*fiqh-e pouya*)<sup>42</sup> to avoid "the twin plagues of inflexibility and ossification" and stay relevant to all times (Khatami 1993, 71).

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<sup>41</sup> Elaine, Sciolino, "Beneath the Turban: A Special Report.; Mullah Who Charmed Iran Is Struggling to Change It," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/01/world/beneath-turban-special-report-mullah-who-charmed-iran-struggling-change-it.html> (accessed December 8 2018).

<sup>42</sup> When *ijtihad* is based on reason, and more specifically, takes into account context, time, and place, the dynamic *fiqh* is formulated.

While away from the political limelight, Khatami had written some of his most influential books which propelled him to prominence and emerged in his political career. He immersed himself in Islamic and Western political thought in an attempt to bridge the distance between the Western civilization and the Islamic civilization. Khatami (1993) argued the West cannot be understood as monolithic, for “the two-way give-and-take among civilization is the norm of history” (Khatami, 13). “Western civilization”, he asserts, “rests on the idea of liberty and freedom”. The West has made a major contribution by “casting aside the deification of repressive thinking that had been imposed on the masses in the name of religion” through the reformation movement. Khatami then challenges Iranians to abandon the nativist ideology of the revolution, and instead create a new civilization which “absorbs the positive aspects of Western civilization” while maintaining the Islamic values” (Khatami 1993, 17-19). Such civilization development cannot be achieved under the current conditions where any “closed-minded and dogmatic person can use the excuse of conspiracy to oust its opponents from the political state ... with the excuse of defending the interests of the system, the Revolution, and religion” (Khatami 1993, 49).

Opposing the clerical hegemony, Khatami (1993) contends in today’s world, autocratic methods no longer provide a useful means of creating Islamic civilization, rather state should promote a climate in which the young freely develop a “vision” and gain re-enchantment. This genuine spiritual re-enchantment can only occur when it is unencumbered by compulsion or dogma (Khatami, 48). This is not to suggest they become enamored with the West, attempting to preempt conservatives’ accusation of falling for what they call cultural onslaught, but rather entertain a willingness to exchange Western ideas of democracy, justice, and equality as necessary to recover Islamic thought from the plague of absolutism (Khatami 1993). Similar to other religious

intellectuals, he emphasized the importance of progressive *ijtihad* and exchange of ideas in order to legitimize the reformist articulations of Islam as well as their ideal polity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Influenced by Islamic Leftists, including Ali Shariati among others, religious intellectuals produced a new articulation of Islam, albeit with a different goal from that of their predecessors. Unlike Shariati, they decried a totalistic Islamic ideology to realize political and social ends. They aimed at producing new interpretation of Islam in order to reform the religious polity that had denied many of civil rights and meaningful participation. The efforts of religious intellectuals, including Eshkevari, Soroush, Shabestari, and Khatami, along with those of the many other religious reformists not mentioned here, formed a vibrant and expansive discourse of Islamic reformism through hermeneutic reading of religious sources during the 1990s. Their method to realize a democratic polity was a non-violent strategy through social movement or what Masoud Behnoud called “mobilization from below and negotiation from above”<sup>43</sup> to take over institutions of state. None of these intellectuals cited in this chapter, nor any others, advocated the violent overthrow of the religious polity, or even violating the rule of law enforced by the very same polity they opposed. In fact, reforming the system from within through gradualism and legalism was the only preferred *modus operandi* of these intellectuals. Through persistent activism, these intellectuals paved the way for the rise of the reform movement began by the landslide presidential victory of Mohammad Khatami.

With reformists in power, the religious reformist discourse, previously centered on scholarly atmospheres, newspaper and journal interviews, and public debates, was for the first time institutionalized. With the institutionalization of the discourse, its articulation and implementation

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<sup>43</sup> The statement was made by Masoud Behnoud, a veteran secular journalist, in an interview with *Iran* daily newspaper in July 5, 2000.

faced a major shift. While in power, reformist politicians softened the excessive reformist demands articulated by religious intellectuals and attempted to make a pragmatic peace with the clerical establishment. As a result, the reformist discourse embraces a more general and vague form which gradually and ultimately distanced from what reformism principal religious reformers had in mind. Conceivably, that was why several religious intellectuals criticized the reformist government of Khatami of hollow promises and incompetent of making a democratic change demanded by the people of Iran.

Ultimately, the pragmatic religious reformist discourse formed by reformist politicians had the veneer/tone of reformism while lacking far-reaching reform measures and radically different from the non-democratic clerical establishment. It was generally articulated in conjunction with popular notions of democracy, civil society, popular sovereignty, and the like as well as culturally familiar concepts such as Shi'a Imams and rituals. Despite its failure to deliver any substantial political change, this newly-institutionalized discourse demystified the Iranian religious polity in which clerics use religious language to justify their autocratic rule. And perhaps more importantly, it left a long-standing influence contributing to the survival of the regime through ingraining its non-violent method of reform from within. The non-violent method which has its root in the *second of khordad legend*<sup>44</sup>, reverberated in high voter turnout and popularity of moderate and reformist candidates in the aftermath of the reform era. Instead of supporting revolutionary activities and civil disobedience which could have threaten the resilience of the State, Iranian people found political participation as the most viable method to reform the polity. This is conceivably why the people casted their ballots for moderate candidates in the most important elections, including the

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<sup>44</sup> *Dovvom-e Khordad* or the Second of *Khordad* conceding May 23, 1997 marks the reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami landslide victory in the presidential election. *Dovvom-e Khordad* or the Second of *Khordad*, became the shorthand for the incipient reform movement which pivoted on gradual reform within the confines of the existing framework of the Islamic Republic.

2009, 2013, and 2017 presidential races as well as the 2016 parliamentary election. This is what next chapter explores with a more in-depth discussion about this pragmatic reformist discourse and its crucial role in the survival of the regime.

## CHAPTER IV: THE LEGACY OF RELIGIOUS REFORMIST DISCOURSE

Religious reformist intellectuals in the 1990s formed a new interpretation of Islam in order to reform the Iranian religious polity that had denied many of civil rights and meaningful participation. The efforts of religious intellectuals, including Eshkevari, Soroush, Shabestari, and Khatami, discussed in the previous chapter, formed a vibrant and expansive discourse of Islamic reformism through hermeneutic reading of religious sources during the 1990s. Their method to realize a democratic polity was a non-violent strategy through social movement to gradually take over institutions of state. Through persistent activism, these intellectuals paved the way for the rise of the reform movement began by the presidential victory of Mohammad Khatami in 1997.

In power, due to pragmatic considerations, expediency, or co-optation, reformist politicians failed to uphold the principle premises of the religious reformist discourse. They started articulating the discourse in a more a pragmatic form while its more academic and radical version with a greater theoretical depth and unfettered criticism of the polity was restricted to the academia and smaller spheres of intellectuals. The new face of the discourse became more popular and more readily available to people given its articulation in conjunction with popular notions of democracy, civil society, popular sovereignty, and the like as well as culturally familiar concepts such as Shi'a rituals. This discourse transformation and the legacy it has left in the Iranian political culture is what this chapter unfolds with a more in-depth discussion about this pragmatic reformist discourse and its crucial role in the survival of the regime.

It is worth noting that the legacy traces back to the nature of the discourse which is that of reformism. Despite later disagreement that emerged among reformists over the course of action for reform, never in any years of research prior to 1997's election or political practice, did reformists advocate violent actions for modifying the political system. In fact, reforming the

system from within through gradualism and legalism was the only preferred method for this group. In order to trace these developments, I will first provide a brief discussion on how the discourse was articulated in conjunction with more popular Western notions of civil society, democracy, and popular sovereignty. I argue that articulation process never lost its religious character. Political reformists sought to reconcile the Western popular theories of state with Islamic ethics. Their efforts to blend religion and democracy, Islam and republicanism, and ethics and politics were summed up in Khatami's notion of "religious democracy" (*mardom salari-ye dini*). In this way, the articulation of the discourse was closely tied to culturally Islamic figures, or more specifically Shi'a Imams. I will explain this process primarily through President Khatami's articulation of the discourse. Then, I will show the legacy of transforming discourse on the political culture through its influential effect on collective political behavior and results of following elections.

### **Reformists in Political Power**

In the Persian second of *Khordad* of 1376 coinciding with May 23, 1997, reformists ascended to political power on the shoulder of years of in-depth discussions and articulation of religious reformist discourse. For the first time in Iran's history, religious intellectuals having state power at their disposal promoted the promise of a home-based model of democracy in a Muslim society. In power, notwithstanding, the reformist discourse had undergone twists and turns. It had made headway to public spheres where its ideas were up for public consumption and played a key role in the construction of Khatami's reformist project. As the symbolic figurehead of the movement, President Khatami played an important role in the transformation of the discourse and its introduction into the realm of politics. At the time, it was necessary to expand the domain of discourse to a more popular and more readily available level, as the mobilization from below was key to the movement's success. However, at that stage of development, the religious reformist

discourse had far-reaching reform measures which would be vetoed by the conservative centers of power. It thus had to be softened and articulated in a less critical way to avoid conservative backlash, eventually forging a consensus for major reforms. At least, this was the judgment of pragmatic reformists at the time. This task was mainly carried on by reformist politicians and above all else, Khatami. He was considerably cautious, and according to *The Economist*, was “carrying out his reforms with a certain stealth, determined not to upset the apple-cart by going too far or asking for too much.” Certainly, he refrained from questioning, “at least out loud, the basic structure of the Islamic republic or its hierarchy”. In this sense, he was “both president and opposition leader”.<sup>45</sup> Given the great prominence and exposure Khatami had by being President, a better understanding of some of his arguments, or at least of some of the prevalent themes on democracy, civil society, and popular sovereignty provides useful insight into the shift of discourse.

### **The Transformation of Religious Reformist Discourse**

Some of the themes that Khatami kept repeating in his speeches and interviews grapple with major Western concepts and his previous works when he was seeking to bridge the cultural gap between the West and Islamic societies’ philosophical theories. Concepts like democracy, civil society, and popular sovereignty have been the recurrent themes which has remained salient in the political spheres even in the aftermath of the reformist movement. The discourse’s departure from intelligentsia gatherings to wider public spheres was necessary for social mobilization to push forward the reformation of the polity. As Asef Bayat (2007) mentioned based on the tactical and strategic considerations at the time, the movement had to shift ideologically “toward a pragmatist post-Islamist paradigm based on democracy and civil

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<sup>45</sup> “The people against the mullahs,” *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/special/2000/02/17/the-people-against-the-mullahs> (Accessed June 20, 2019).



liberties” (108). This was not an easy task, especially in the face of conservatives’ opposition. In order to keep both his supporters and conservative clerics content, Khatami had to walk this fine line by incorporating Islamic and cultural values into the Western liberal notions.

Khatami managed this difficult task by way of great rhetorical skill. From the very beginning of his administration, he emphasized the importance of democracy as a precondition for progress. The path to save Islam and bring about progress to the Iranian society was, Khatami (2001) argues, to combine democracy and Islam. This could not be achieved unless there was a strong civil society. Civil society organizations empower popular participation and people’s role in their own affairs. More importantly, these organizations protect individuals’ rights and hinder a group of people to impose their will on others in the name of freedom or even Islam and Revolution. Khatami exemplified Medina as one of the best form of civil society where Islamic ideas and culture are central, but never was the dictatorship of the majority at the expense of the minority sanctioned (Khatami, 25-36).<sup>46</sup> In defining the concept of civil society he often invokes Rosa Luxemburg’s idea of democracy to refer to the necessity of freedom of the opposition and the protection of minority. Khatami (2000) further describes civil society as the haven of the minority:

“In this society, because man is who he is, he is treated with respect and dignity and his rights are observed. The citizens of Islamic civil society determine their own destiny and are in charge of their own affairs ... In our civil society, Muslims alone do not have the rights and privileges of

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<sup>46</sup> In AD 622, escaping persecution in Mecca, the prophet Muhammad arrived in Medina to establish a Muslim community (*Ummah*). After the arrival, Muslim and Jewish clans who were already well-established in Medina signed a pact to protect and respect each other, regardless of their religious and traditional differences. And perhaps this coexistence in the face of many differences is what Khatami refers to as an ideal civil society where citizens, regardless of their religious orientations can coexist peacefully.

citizenship, and, within the framework of the law, the rights and liberties of each person are protected and respected. I am not speaking of respect for human rights and civil liberties out of political considerations. Respect for human rights is an integral part of our religion and what Islam dictates” (as cited in Kamrava 2008, 154).

Being aware of unwieldy activism and fragile civil society, Khatami promoted policies which help consolidate civil society institutions in closed political systems like Iran. With an attempt to mobilize people to form an active civil society, he endorsed the expansion of civil institutions such as free press and political organizations. During his first year in the office, hundreds of press permits were issued. By April 1998, a thousand publications, including some twenty major dailies filled the newsstand. In the meantime, the total daily readership reached to more than 12 million (Bayat 2007, 109). The reformist publications such as *Jaameeh* (society), *Sobh-e Khanevadeh* (family’s morning), *Rah-e No* (new path), and *Salam* (hello) among many others, sparked taboo debates, including the legitimacy of *Velayat-e Faqih*, secularism, and relations with the West, which had never before taken place in the entire history of Iran. Reformist papers rapidly flourished in the face of troubled conservative press such as *Keyhan*, *Resalat*, and *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, which could have gone bankrupt, had they not received generous subsidies from hardliner institutions.

To reinforce the pillars of civil society and thus push their agenda, reformists mobilized ideologically-diverse social forces. They established the central Second of *Khordad* Front, a broad coalition of eighteen groups integrating student organization, women’s activists, and professional and intellectual associations. At its core there were the Islamic Participation Front (IPF) and the Organization of the *Mojahedin* of Islamic Revolution, both dissolved in 2009. They also embraced

nationalist-religious activists (*melli-mazhabiha*), the freedom movement group (*nehzat-e azadi*), and secular democrats. Altogether, the reformists sought to incorporate different ideological-religious tendencies ranging from traditional religious reformist, Muslim democrats, and moderate conservatives to secular democrats. With the help of reformist press and socially mobilized groups, the reformists' power at the state level was being reinvigorated while conservatives started losing their positions in legislative and executive branches. In 1999, reformist candidates won overwhelmingly nationwide in the first municipal council elections. In Tehran alone, reformist secured 12 of the 15 seats.<sup>47</sup> The resounding electoral victories did not end there. In 2000, reformists managed to take control of the *Majles* by winning 240 of the 290 seats, and 28 of the 30 seats in Tehran. Thanks to active civil society organizations and grassroots support, reformists enjoyed their control over almost all elected state institutions by the time Khatami was reelected to the office.

Besides reconciling the concept of civil society consistent with Islamic values, Khatami used his rhetorical skill to institutionalize popular sovereignty. In doing so, he needed to reassure the conservative clerics, especially the *faqih*, that his administration would not embolden the secular and inimical forces which had been trying to weaken the system. The most effective method to do so was to articulate the concept of popular sovereignty by invoking the historical and cultural legacy of the Revolution. Linking his goal to that of Ayatollah Khomeini, Khatami (1997) argues that the Imam<sup>48</sup> has put great efforts to preserve and flourish the Revolution. The preservation of the system and Islamic values is the most important priority, which hinges on the empowerment of each and every one of its parts, including both the people and *faqih*'s rights and responsibilities

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<sup>47</sup>“By Popular Demand: Iranian Elections, 1997-2001,” *Public Broadcasting Service*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/elections.html> (Accessed on 15 March, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini was the first and only Iranian cleric to be referred as "Imam", a title which is only reserved in Iran for the twelve infallible leaders of the Shi'a.

established by the Constitution (as cited in Brumberg 2001, 220). This argument was further expanded and repeated in his subsequent speeches and interviews. Citing Ayatollah Khomeini's oft-repeated description of the *Majles* as "the essence of the nation's virtues", Khatami (1997) sought to reinvigorate the constitutional authority of the *Majles* which defends people's rights (as cited in Brumberg 2001, 223). This statement subordinates the authority of both the president and particularly the *faqih* to that of the *Majles*. For Khatami, this was deemed necessary for the survival of the system, as the *Majles*, by the virtue of being directly exposed to popular sovereignty, could reform the structure of government to the benefit of the people.

By repeating similar themes throughout his time at the office, Khatami attempted to square the *faqih*'s authority with the principle of popular sovereignty by again invoking the concept of the system. It is necessary that society rely on all the people, Khatami argued (1997). For him, this view is by no means in contrast with the need for "the presence of the immaculate Imam leadership as the pivot of society". The clerical leadership is the matter of guidance and ability to preserve the political system. Not all abilities are equally used in society and some duties, like leadership, is entrusted to people who possess a higher degree of knowledge and skills. But such duties do not justify undermining popular sovereignty, or endorsing patrimonialism. In this sense, he argues that the Leader is everyone's leader, even all those people who do not believe in religion but have accepted the system. By using this logic, he argues that the *faqih*'s authority as the leader of society derives from above the political fray of conservatism and reformism.<sup>49</sup> By making this argument, he discredited the conservative class that the Leader is only their leader and warned them that such

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<sup>49</sup> This statement also send a signal to the *Faqih* that he as the Leader of the political system should be situated beyond political and ideological tendencies. This is because, constitutionally and traditionally, *faqih* is not allowed to take a political standing, and Ayatollah Khomeini himself did not favor any particular candidate since that is up to the people's decisions.

claims demote the *faqih* from his position at the head of society and weaken the Constitution and the political system (as cited in Brumberg 2001, 221-3).

### **The Destiny of the Reform Movement**

Attempting to reform the polity without dashing the hopes of youth, intellectuals, and women for change, while simultaneously working with conservatives and assuring the preservation of the system was not an easy task. Even the sophisticated religious reformist discourse presented with a great rhetorical skill was curtailed to deliver this task. Conservatives rethought their discourse to save their Islam and take back what they lost. They called on grand clerics and the Supreme Leader to rearticulate religious sources to rebut the reformists' theological flaws (*shobahat*). The main verbal struggle was targeted at the very thing religious intellectual sought to expand: *ijtihad*. The confrontation did not stop there. Conservatives used all they had at their disposal to dampen the movement, from judicial orders to shut down the reformist press to coercive tactics by vigilantes.

At a conference at the Qom Seminary in 1996, conservatives attempted to sabotage the very root of the reform movement, which is the religious reformist discourse. They attacked the reformists' very idea of rereading the religion. The conservative Society of Combative Clergy warned that the diverse individualistic interpretations of the sacred principles of Islam should be prohibited. As usual, conservative resorted to Shi'a symbols and history to legitimize their battered position. Ayatollah Khazaali (1998), one of the conservative member of the Guardian Council, declared obedience from *ulema* is a religious duty. The *Velayat-e Faqih* is the continuation of divine rule and hence disobedience from the *Faqih* is tantamount to disobedience from Imam Ali, and thus from God himself (as cited in Bayat 2007, 114). Conservative theologians also make an important theoretical distinction between acceptability (*maqbuliyat*) and legitimacy (*mashru'iyat*).

For conservatives, there is only one source of legitimacy: Almighty. In the Iranian Islamic system, the *Faqih* receives his legitimacy from God, not from a constitution or other man-made, and thus fallible, conventions such as elections. God bestowed the Prophet Mohammad with legitimacy to carry on his mission and after the Prophet the Twelve Imams, and in their absence, *faqihs* are the only legitimate rulers to continue the Prophet's mantle (Mesbah Yazdi 2001). In this sense, the *faqih* has legitimacy or right to rule, even without having *maqbuliyat* or acceptability from the ruled.<sup>50</sup>

The articulation of such arguments justified the attack on civil organizations which reformists sought to institutionalize through the legislative branch. When it came to amending the press law and reinstate the victimized press in August 2000, conservatives meddled in the process. The *Faqih* himself intervened to block the debate on the proposed bill and embolden the Judiciary system to continue its assault on the press. During the second term of Khatami, the courts banned hundreds of reformist press. The crackdown on the press bill undermined the authority of the *Majles* which reformists praised highly as their power base. The free press bill was only one bill among many others that were blocked by the veto power of the Guardian Council. It vetoed 111 out of 297 bills passed by the reformist *Majles* in support of civil liberties, political participation, women's rights, ban on torture, press freedom, labor rights, and public welfare policies (Bashiriyeh 2009). The arbitrary veto power relegated the *Majles* from a legislative branch to a mere platform for free speech for reformists to lambasted conservatives' policies. Yet, it was only the beginning of reprisals taken against the reform movement.

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<sup>50</sup> It is not uncommon for conservatives to give the example of Imam Ali, the immediate rightful ruler after the Prophet's death in Shi'a theology. Imam Ali is seen as the absolute legitimate and rightful ruler, although he did not find *maqbuliyat* or people's acceptance for his rule. Referring to this example, conservatives view *mashru'iyat*, the idea of right to rule, separately from *maqbuliyat* or the power to actually rule. For more, see Kamrava, 2008, page 102-4.

By 2002, hundreds of journalists, editors, intellectuals, writers, and activists were accused of vague anti-religion and anti-state charges and subsequently placed behind the bars. Reformist intellectuals, including Akbar Ganji, Abbas Abdi (director of Cultural Studies at CSS), Yusuf Ashkevari, among many others were charged with waging against God and the Islamic state. Even the reformist politicians were not immune from the judiciary's assault. Abdullah Noori (the Interior Minister) was one of the most senior Islamic politicians who was sentenced to prison for religious and political dissent. Students did not escape similar coercive measures. One of the most relentless attacks on students occurred on July 8, 1999, when security forces and vigilantes stormed the dormitories of Tehran University. Hundreds of students were injured and one killed (Elling 2009). The crackdown sparked the most widespread student unrest throughout Iran since the revolution in the following week.<sup>51</sup> The following state repression and detention of protestors and student leaders in the face of Khatami's weak attempts to prevent unlawful actions was a devastating blow to the reform movement. Frustrated with reformists' hollow promises, student groups initiated a painful divorce from Khatami and his coalition.

Ultimately, the Guardian Council veto power and state coercive measures on one hand, and Khatami's failure to remove the Council's prerogative and limit unconstitutional rulings of the Judiciary branch from the other determined the defeat of the reform project.<sup>52</sup> In 2003, reformists lost in the municipal council elections that partly resulted from student boycotts and popular disenchantment with the reform movement. A similar result repeated in the 2005 presidential election when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a staunch hardliner, was elected. In action the reform

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<sup>51</sup>The attack on dormitory happened a day after students' peaceful demonstration in opposition to the closure of one the famous reformist daily Salam (Hello).

<sup>52</sup> In October 2002, Khatami introduced two important bills to the *Majles*. If ratified, the twin bills would remove the Guardian Council prerogative to vet candidates for elected bodies, including the *Majles*, the presidency, and the Assembly of Experts; and also empower the president to prevent the Judiciary branch from unconstitutional rulings and trials without a jury or behind closed doors. After months of provocations and delays, the twin bills were vetoed by the Guardian Council in April and June 2003.

movement failed to deliver its goal to democratize the polity. Its initial method of “mobilization from below and negotiation from above” turned into an onslaught from above and popular apathy from below. However, it did ingrain its strategy of working within the Constitution and gradual reform, which reappeared in the following presidential elections.

### **The Legacy of Religious Reformist Discourse in the Iranian Political Culture**

In action, the religious reformist discourse and the consequent reform movement failed to dislodge conservatives from the helm of political power. Its method of “negotiation from above and mobilization from below” fell victim to its very own discourse of rule of law and nonviolent strategy. After all, how could the rigid polity be reformed without violation of its own rules to allow for democracy? The reformists’ solution for unjust laws was to change them legally, and not to violate them. However, the legislative branch, *Majles*, could not legally pass any law for change without the Guardian Council’s approval. This challenge is well explained by Bayat in his book “Making Islam Democratic” as he put forward the dilemma of reform movement as “working simultaneously both within and yet against the state” (Bayat 2007, 106). In this sense, the reformists’ call for the rule of law which virtually sabotages its discourse and practices turned into self-perpetuating cycle for undermining the movement.

Beside internal theoretical contention, the transformation of discourse into a compromising and pragmatic reform government gave rise to harsh criticism against ruling reformists even by moderate reformists, let alone secular groups, subversive parties, radical reformists, and the like. The lack of homogeneity and chains of equivalence failed to bring divergent groups together which could have ultimately forced concessions from the recalcitrant regime. However, the reform government did pose the most serious challenge to conservatives’ moral and political legitimacy, who had been subjugating the majority of Iranian in the name of religion for over two decades. It



made debates about democracy and civil society to heights rarely reached before not only in Iran, but in, Turkey aside, the Muslim Middle East. Khatami's reformist discourse of Islamic civilization and civil society, among many others, arising from a decade of *ijtihad* and discourse practice, left an enduring political cultural legacy. It shaped collective political behavior and directed it at widespread electoral participation. It encouraged the method of reformism from within as the only optimal way to change the polity since then. In the aftermath of the movement, never has Khatami, or any other reformists, encouraged a rebellion against the legacy of Khomeini: the Islamic Republic. Quite the contrary, reformists almost always, even in the face of mass protest, cherished their very idea that the most important priority is that the political system should be preserved, reformed, and strengthened.<sup>53</sup> Khatami encouraged Iranian people to politically engage and keep dogmatic candidates out of the elected institutions by widespread participation in elections. He urged people to cast their ballots for reformist or moderate candidates in the presidential elections in 2009, 2013, and 2017, as well as the parliamentary election of 2016.<sup>54</sup> In this manner, reformists succeeded to manage people's demands toward peaceful channels, effectively abating revolutionary activities, but they never became inclusive and cohesive enough, even among themselves, to implement their major reforms.

In 2009, Khatami withdrew from the presidential election race and stood aside another reformist candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the former prime minister (1980-1988). In an official

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<sup>53</sup> Even in the face of the Green movement turmoil where millions of people took to street, all reformists, including their candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi called for respect for the rule of law and asked their supporters to pursue their demands through legal channels from within the Islamic Republic. For more on post-movement statements, see Mousavi's proposed covenant issued in June 2010.

<sup>54</sup> It was not limited only to elections, but in some other historical moment, politicians or former reformist politicians resorted to the reformist discourse to advocate for their policy. For example, during nuclear negotiation, president Rouhani and his key cabinet ministers applied the reformist discourse along with Shi'a historical events to push for the nuclear deal. In several occasions, Rouhani invoked Imam Hassan's Peace treaty to justify the negotiation with foreign rivals. In 661 AD, Hassan, the second Shi'a Imam, agreed on a compromise arrangement with Muawiyah, the Umayyad caliph. The compromise prevented a devastating war between the Sunnis and the Shias, but solidified the Sunni Umayyad dynasty's hold on power at the expense of the Shias.

announcement, Khatami said that he believes that “Mr. Mousavi has the necessary competence to change the current situation”. He also added that “despite the differences in our opinions and actions, the important thing is that Mousavi seriously defends and will defend the fundamental rights and freedoms of people and the country's international reputation”.<sup>55</sup> Despite the reformists’ failure to deliver meaningful political change during the reform period, the religious reformist discourse and the religious intellectuals’ plans for Islamic democracy still resonated with nearly two thirds of the population (Hashemi and Postel 2010, 6-7). The 2009 electoral race was the most heated election which featured the highest record of voter turnout (85 percent as reported by the Interior Ministry).

It was widely expected that Mir Hossein Mousavi would beat the controversial incumbent if there was a high turnout - or at least do well enough to trigger a second round. After an official announcement of the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the conservative candidate, with 62.63 percent of the vote, peaceful demonstrators turned out on Tehran streets to protest the electoral results with a widely-known slogan: “Where is my vote?” Amid demonstrations, the political leaders of the Green Movement and the leader of the reform movement, Khatami, called for targeting the peaceful protest against the fraudulent election conducted by the Interior Ministry of the incumbent President, rather than the system altogether. Never, did reformists break their silence to question the Constitution and its undemocratic constituent: *Velayat-e Faqih* which virtually renders democratic reform elusive.<sup>56</sup> This political stand traces back to the reformist theoretical discourse of cherishing the system and reforming it by working within the Constitution.

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas, Erdbrink. “Khatami Pulls out Of Presidential Race,” *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/17/ar2009031701522.html> (Accessed 8 December, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Mousavi’s refrainment to criticize the *Faqih* and insistence on working within the constitution convinced some Iranians that he no longer reflected the movement's views, particularly those which questions the authority of the *faqih* and his House-of-Lords-styled Guardian Council.

Similarly, in both consecutive presidential elections in 2013 and presidential 2017, Khatami, who has been banned by state's judiciary from speaking publicly in the aftermath of the disputed presidential election in 2009, publicized his support for Hassan Rouhani, a moderate cleric favoring openness and détente policy with the West:

“I will give my vote to my esteemed brother Dr. Rouhani and ask all, in particular the reformists and those who seek the dignity and elevation of the nation to cast their votes for him. Although he does not belong to the reformist front, I see Dr. Rouhani as a suitable candidate who created hope among people after the dark Friday [referring to the day of 2009 election] and will seek to meet Iranian demands with wisdom and moderation”.<sup>57</sup>

He, along with the majority of reformist politicians, once again supported Rouhani for reelection in 2017. In a video message released on social media, Khatami announced his support for Rouhani: “We have started on a path with Rouhani and we have come half way. We have resolved some problems and bigger problems remain for us to resolve on this difficult path with him.” He continued that “it is now your turn to renew your vote for our dear Rouhani in order to strengthen hope for a better future”.<sup>58</sup> His endorsement helped greatly mobilize turnout for the incumbent, who was facing tough competition as he struggled to defend his record on the economy in the aftermath of the nuclear deal.<sup>59</sup> Also, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, the green

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<sup>57</sup> “Khatami az namzadi-ye Hassan Rouhani hemayat kard (Khatami Backed Rouhani's Candidacy),” *BBC Farsi*, [http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/06/130611\\_ir92\\_khatami\\_rouhani\\_nm](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/06/130611_ir92_khatami_rouhani_nm), (accessed 10 December, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Louise, Ireland. “Iran's Khatami urges voters to re-elect Rouhani as president,” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-khatami-idUSKCN18A0NQ> (accessed 14 March, 2019).

<sup>59</sup> The lifting of sanctions led to a sharp increase in the volume of exports by 2017, but non-oil exports did not experience a significant increase. The slow economic recovery is also partly due to domestic factors, such as the anti-inflationary economic policies of the Rouhani government, corruption, and economic mismanagement. For more information on “the Iranian economy two Years after the nuclear agreement”, see Habibi, 2018.

movement leaders, publicly backed President Hassan Rouhani for re-election from their confinement under house arrest.<sup>60</sup> Such mobilization greatly helped win over voters disillusioned with the slow pace of change.

In the 2016 *Majles*'s election, reformists created a list of candidates, dubbed as the *list-e omid* (List of Hope), for every city and town in Iran. They encouraged people to vote for the reformist list to have a moderate *Majles* cooperating with the president for the betterment of the nation (Kishi 2016). In every major election after the end of the reform movement in 2003, many pragmatic reformists, particularly Khatami encouraged institutional change through democratic means, namely participating in elections, rather than disruptive activities. On different occasions, he announced that nothing is more important than the protection and improvement of the Imam's legacy, therefore, reforms within the framework of the system has been the only viable approach to modify the political system. The popularity of religious reformist discourse over that of the conservative has had ingrained influence on the public opinion as a majority of people participate in elections (the average of voter turnout for presidential elections is about 70 % as reported by the Iranian Interior Ministry) as a means to keep conservative candidates out of the elected institutions and pave the way for the rise of moderate and reformist politicians. As such, the chance of rebellious measures to threaten the system as a whole has decreased considerably.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Amid the heated international discussion of the “clash of civilizations”, on September 21, 1998, at the 53<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly, Mohammad Khatami introduced and championed the concept of “dialogue among civilizations”. Recapitulating the main thesis of his book “*Goftego-ye Tammadon-ha* (Dialogue of Civilizations)” Khatami emphasized the

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<sup>60</sup> Parisa, Hafezi. “Iran reformists to back Rouhani re-election, though some voters grow cool,” *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-rouhani-rights-idUSKBN1802J3> (accessed 14 March, 2019).

significance of institutionalizing dialogue and replacing hostility and confrontation with discourse and understanding. Later in that year, the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted the resolution proposed by Khatami and designated the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of the dialogue among Civilizations. At the session, Khatami (2012) put forward similar prospective he cherished at home:

“Religions, such as Islam and Christianity, believe in the sacred, but considering as sacred the socially and historically constructed interpretation of religion, and imposing it on society and thus hindering thought and progress causes hardships. We must instill in ourselves some kind of flexibility so that we could talk to the rest of the world while remaining committed to the sacred ... . One defines his or her identity by drawing a line around his or her historical, emotional and religious personality, and decides who belongs within this circle and thus, who is familiar, and who stands outside the circle and thus, who is a stranger. If you are biased towards your circle, the number of outsiders or others increases; others, who must not exist, must accede to you or dissolve in your identity. History is full of wars, conflicts and violence caused by such closed identities. On the other hand, there is no such thing as a person without an identity. Stripping personality from identity is like taking away humanity from humans. Dialogue among civilizations can resolve our problem regarding this issue”.

The remarkable change in domestic and détente foreign policies pursued by reformists in Iran sowed the seeds of hope for a more democratic Iran and a better world in the minds and hearts

of many people. Yet, the domestic autocratic establishment and its control of the judiciary system in the face of disorganization and heterogeneity among reformists along with the international atmosphere of violence and war following 9/11 curtailed the movement from making an institutional change. What was translated out of the religious reformist discourse into reality was a reform government which only managed to get most people to put them in state offices while in practice, these reformists succumbed to the power hierarchy of the system. Its elements of democracy, active calm, and political participation reemerged on multiple historically important moments in the aftermath of the reform era during following presidential elections. Along with the Iranian regime's institutional capacities, these deeply-ingrained concepts played an important role in convincing the people to make their voice for change heard through the ballot box rather than violent and distributive actions.

As such, the rise of the reformist discourse and the subsequent reform movement ultimately contributed to the resilience of the Iranian political system to a great extent. Again, this contribution was not a conspiracy plotted by reformists to prolong the autocratic regime. Rather, this was the results of years of interaction among reformists and their relationships with state institutions. Pragmatic reformists and above all Khatami had some sense of respect for the system and its undemocratic constituent of *Velayat-e Faqih*, and many among them were convinced that they could gradually persuade clerical conservatives to support the path to reform. And in their belief, this end was best achieved through political activism and electoral participation. Now having the benefit of hindsight, we know that they made a miscalculation for not trying the more confrontational and riskier path. After all, that path at least could have had a chance of success, whereas the path taken by pragmatic reformists has seen major reforms unfulfilled and given rise to criticism even within the reformist camp.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

“If you interpret reform as a movement within the government, I think yes, this is the end. But if you regard it as a social phenomenon, then it is still very much alive” (Reza Yousefian, former reformist *Majles* (Parliament) member, 2004).<sup>61</sup>

### **Restatement of Thesis**

By examining the development of the religious reformist discourse, this thesis aims to explore the survival dynamics of the Iranian regime as a form of hybrid polity. The formation of the reformist discourse in the 1990s politically mobilized most young students, women and middle-class people to rally behind reformist candidates. It is a mistake to assume that all individuals and groups identified with the reform movement necessarily shared the same ideals of reform and desired form of government. Some of the pragmatic figures of political reform, mentioned earlier, such as Abbas Abdi, Abdullah Noori, Mohsen Kadivar, Yusufi Eshkevari, Hashem Aghajari, and Khatami and the like did not share, some still not, the depth and the scope of interest for reform envisioned by several leading religious intellectuals like Abdolkarim Soroush. However, for the sake of entering state offices to initiate democratic reforms, they advocated the candidacy of Mohammad Khatami and his subsequent program for “political development” (*towse-ye siasi*). The movement based on years of social research and ongoing debates and discussions ultimately led to the landslide victory of Khatami.

In the corridors of power, however, reformist politicians resorted to pragmatism while betraying some of the key ideas and ideals of religious intellectuals, hoping to gradually facilitate the path of fundamental reform. As a result, several religious intellectuals lambasted the government of Khatami, and his administration lost popularity in the face of inability to deliver

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<sup>61</sup> Jim Muir, “Analysis: What now for Iran,” *BBC*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3514551.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3514551.stm) (accessed June 20, 2019).

structural reform. Why reformist politicians did what they did is beyond the scope of this thesis. What this thesis is concerned about is what has come out of years of ongoing interactions among the fragmented camp of reformist on the one hand, and their relations with state offices and the center of power on the other.

Pragmatic reformists were convinced that structural reforms were best achieved through political activism and electoral participation, with which only a few reformists disagreed. After all, revolutions, coup d'état or any other disruptive form of change was off the table for reformists given the philosophy of their discourse which envisioned reformism and respect for the rule of law as the only path to change the political system. Given the lack of other peaceful alternatives, advocacy for political participation in national elections appeared as an irresistible path to take. Time has proven that because of this policy and the lack of consensus on a more confrontational approach, reformists failed to deliver structural change. Despite this failure and having the benefit of hindsight, several pragmatic reformists, including Khatami, have not stopped resorting to electoral participation for reform.<sup>62</sup>

### **Electoral Victory, Reform Failure**

The reform government ended frustrating its popular bases, but its method of reform from within through ballot box remained intact and resurfaced in consequent national elections. This can be readily observed in the most recent presidential elections. In both 2013 and 2017 presidential elections, Rouhani won in large part due to Khatami's call to vote for him (Mohseni 2013).<sup>63</sup> Rouhani, however, made little progress on his domestic agenda, especially in economic

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<sup>62</sup> In fact, today, many people refer to such reformists as pro-status quo (*estemrartalaban*) as opposed to reformists (*eslahtalaban*).

<sup>63</sup> "Khatami: Lost Reformist votes will go to regime changers," *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/iran-khatami-election-boycott-reforms-change-rouhani-vote.html#ixzz51Dr5x3MS> (Accessed March 14, 2019).



domains. The United States withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal and economic pressure on Iran further exacerbated the situation. The currency has depreciated, unemployment is high, inflation is rampant, and the GDP contraction of 2018 is set to shrink even further in 2019. Meanwhile, little improvement occurred in social and political freedom. Rouhani did not, or could not, curb the powers of the security forces and extra-judicial orders while dozens of activists, journalists, bloggers and artists were jailed on political grounds.<sup>64</sup> He also failed to roll back restrictions that govern how Iranians dress, behave, speak and assemble despite all his promises that Iranians should enjoy the same civil rights as other people around the world.<sup>65</sup>

The collection of these economic, social, and political conditions, and top of all, no chance of reform, has aggravated people's dissatisfaction with the government of Rouhani and his reformist supporters. This is a palpable phenomenon to the camp of reformists. In his latest meeting with the Reformist "Hope Coalition" of parliament in early March 2019, Khatami assessed that Iran is in an "extremely difficult situation." He mentioned that because of the current crisis in Iran, "it will increase the mistrust of the people toward the government, and this mistrust will turn into the state of hopelessness." He reminded his audience of the situation in which people's disillusionment and dissatisfaction with reform can lead to dangerous outcome of regime change:

"Today I am encountered with this question from the people: You encouraged us to go to the ballot box. Show us one instance that was in

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<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch reported last year that Rouhani had failed to deliver on his promise of greater respect for civil and political rights. Also, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists in 2015 reported that more journalists were in jail in Iran than any country other than China and Egypt.

<sup>65</sup> In June 2018, Reuters reported that the Rial, Iranian currency, has weakened from around 65,000 Rials just before Trump's announcement of the U.S. withdrawal in early May, and from 42,890 at the end of 2017, which threatens to boost inflation, hurt living standards and reduce the ability of Iranians to travel abroad. The currency has been sliding for months due to economic mismanagement, corruption, financial difficulties at local banks, heavy demand for dollars, and shortage of foreign exchange due to economic sanctions. By the end of 2018, the currency further weakened to 140,000 Rials, leading to a staggering inflation rate of over 40 percent as reported by the International Monetary Fund.

the direction of true reforms? Has the judiciary and the way they confront people improved? Can we have a presence in a healthy private sector? Has the behavior that has put us at a large foreign impasse been reformed? Or has there been healthy resistance to this behavior? Given the situation, it is now very hard to encourage people to vote. Do you think that in the next election people will go to the ballot box based on our words? It is unlikely, unless there are transformations within the next year. Unfortunately, the rise of disappointment in our society and the loss [of votes] from Reformists will not go in to the basket of the rivals of reformists but will go into the basket of regime changers. Even if reformists have criticisms for the system, they are within the system. We are standing against the overthrowers and stress that reform must occur within the country. The danger is when people become disappointed of reform. We must endeavor not get to this stage by making the government amenable to reform within the government”.<sup>66</sup>

His speech marks an important moment as never before have reformists, and especially Khatami, expressed their concern about the complete loss of their influence on public opinion and about the looming danger of regime change. It is worth noting that his remarks were followed with harsh criticism by the people who within less than 24 hours posted nearly 30,000 tweets with the hashtag “#من براندازم” (I am over-thrower). The content of these tweets ridiculed Khatami’s hope for reform, stressing that the regime change and total opposition to both the reformists and

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<sup>66</sup> “When Khatami expresses concern for the loss of reformists’ political influence,” *Farhikhtegan*, <http://www.farheekhtegan.ir/newspaper/BlockPrint/166752> (Accessed in March 28, 2019); “Khatami: Lost Reformist votes will go to regime changers,” *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/iran-khatami-election-boycott-reforms-change-rouhani-vote.html#ixzz51EFBU5pV> (Accessed in March 28, 2019).

conservative factions of the Islamic Republic is the only way to change the political system. Predicting any trajectory for the future of the Iranian political system is beyond the scope and the aim of this thesis. What is important is to show the development of the religious reformist discourse, its birth, its politicization, and its recent decline in relation to resilience of the Iranian polity. Perhaps, it is still too early to conclude that critical views of Khatami and reformists in general are held by most citizens, but it is almost certainly possible to suggest that the pragmatic reform has already started losing its influence on public opinion more than any other time in the last three decades.

### **Final Analysis and Future Research**

The declining popularity of the reform agenda implies that the collective trust in reforming the system from within is waning. Consequently, the voter turnout will be lower than before in the future elections. Perhaps more importantly, given fervent social aspirations for reforms and change, the people may choose civil disobedience or subversive measures to change the system. The collective breakaway from the idea of reform, if taken as one of the important keys to the Iranian political system's sustainability as argued here, means that the regime can no longer be secured, or at least remain unchallenged, through the same political arrangements. Thus, it is now clearer than ever before that the dichotomy of the reformist and conservative can no longer explain the future political equilibrium in Iran. The result of this change remains to be seen as Iran under the Islamic Republic is undergoing perhaps one of the most difficult year in political and economic terms as it celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Finally, the argument of the thesis can be further substantiated by survey analysis. This thesis argues that the religious reformist discourse has effectively influenced the people to choose ballot box over disruptive activities to reform the polity. In order to assess this statement, a few

questions can be designed to assess why citizens went to the ballot box in pursuit of reforms and to what extent the reformist discourse has influenced this trend. Due to time and resource limitations, I could not design surveys and find representative respondents to assess the main argument of this thesis. But, I believe the assessment of public opinion about the effectiveness of the reform policy on shaping electoral behavior, if highly rated, can substantially support this thesis.

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