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Revolution and Republicanism in
Contemporary Iran

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1. Introduction

Until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran and the Islamic world had passed unnoticed for most scholars and political analysts. The causes and motives that led to revolution, however, had already been unfolding for almost a century. The astonishment and surprise these events were received with, even in the context of the Cold War, when important efforts to prevent any detrimental change were in place, evinces the lack of knowledge regarding the Islamic world. The fact that the Islamic Revolution seemed unlikely even when it was already unfolding, that the United States were unable to revert the situation, or that the Soviet Union failed to take advantage of these events, just comes to show the distinctive nature and force of the Islamic Revolution. More than 40 years later, it seems as if the motives beneath the Revolution continue to be either misunderstood or underestimated. As of today, scholars continue to hold contradictory explanations of these events. The nature and consequences of the Islamic Revolution continue to be a matter of contention, and policymakers continue to fail in predicting outcomes and designing effective approaches to the Islamic Republic of Iran

The confusion that, since then, has reigned in almost every scholar circle comes to show the need to undertake an extensive effort to explain, and properly understand, the peculiarities and future prospects of the Islamic world. Since it is far more than a religion, Islam could be better defined as a set of mores, institutions, and ways of life, which are inextricably linked to the political realm. For this reason, Islam will likely turn increasingly political in the coming years, and just as it was the driver of the 1979 Revolution, it will likely be the driver of incoming social unrest. Islam has developed an unstoppable desire to link the real and the ideal, meaning that Muslims, whether Shi'a or Sunni, will increasingly seek to define their societies accordingly to their convictions, something surely understandable by anyone of us. The core of the Islamic Revolution lies in this attempt, common to contemporary sensitivity, to create a polity suitable to the desires of society. As dynastic structures and hereditary autocracies become obsolete, no longer suitable for an Islam that turns more vindictive and less quietist, revolution will surely follow, along with its advances, but also with the kind of violence unleashed after 1979 in Iran.

This project was born out of pure curiosity, not only for a phenomenon that even today remains obscure to our understanding, but also for the fate of a society that, as a whole, is undertaking great change. While time has distanced our perception from the great

turning points that have shaped our societies, we may still be able to witness the process of radical transformation that the Islamic societies are beginning to experience. In this sense, revolution in Iran is paradigmatic of the development of revolutionary processes, as it is of their excesses and contradictory outcomes. It shows both the advances and brutality that revolutions can unleash, and that, after all, the course of events still depends on those who carry out the revolution. What this project seeks to reflect is that the success of revolutions to crystallize their landmarks, or their fall into a spiral of violence, ultimately is up to human decisions. It does not rely on irresistible trends, nor it does on the inconsistency of any particular people to freedom and self-government.

2. Research Questions

The project's main aim will be to clarify the meaning and impact of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The objectives will be, firstly, to understand the repercussions of Islamic republicanism as a social and political model; secondly, to assess the 1979 Revolution as a process of democratization based on popular sovereignty, or rather as a regression into an authoritarian regime; and finally, to consider whether the Islamic Revolution can truly be described as such, that is, if it succeeded in consolidating genuine Islamic principles.

3. Methodology

The wide timespan covered, and the complexity of the events recounted, make this project strongly rely on a solid theoretical background, prescind of a comparative method that would prove both unfeasible and undesirable. The goal has been to clarify the impact of a unique event, which unfolded in a specific set of circumstances, but at the same time, to draw general conclusions. Thus, both the generic phenomenon of revolutions and the particular conditions of Iran have been the subject of study. For this purpose, the theoretical background will be essential to include a wider context than that of Iran, for it allows us to analyze general concepts from a particular case. Moreover, not only does the project intend to provide insight into the events that took place in Iran in 1979, but also to provide a critical perspective to the causes that led the revolution and to its consequences. We do not seek to limit this project into an objective analysis of causes and consequences, as we shall include a normative study able to assess both the achievements and the horrors that any revolutionary process is able to unfold. Impartiality will remain essential when assessing the incidents that led to and followed the Islamic Revolution, and an accurate use of theoretical concepts will be made, but under no

circumstance shall we remain indifferent or equidistant in our judgment of human decisions.

The Iranian revolution and the form of government that followed have frequently been approached from both liberal and structural stances. The former has usually advocated for the neutrality of the universal framework used to categorize political regimes. It has, in this sense, been successful in analyzing the elements of diverse regimes in a manner acceptable by scholars of diverse academical backgrounds. However, it has usually proved inadequate to correctly interpretate the contradictory and interlocking features of the Islamic Republic, which combines elements of an open society, such as elected institutions and functioning checks and balances, with aspects of an authoritarian, even theocratic, nature. In our view, the structural approach has not delivered either a satisfactory result in the particular case of Iran. Regarding revolution, the structural stance has usually centered attention on the power relation between classes that led to revolution and that resulted from it. And especially in the Third World, it has oversized the anti-colonial elements to explain the resource to regime change. We are not to deny that the social malaise of the late 1970s in Iran had a great influence in the success of the Islamic Revolution, or that Western powers have, since the early 1800s, conducted an extractive policy towards the Middle East. To be sure, the West has and continues to misunderstand and underestimate the dynamics beneath the Islamic Revolution, but we must oppose the reduction of Western influence to a mere relation of dominance, or the overemphasize of Western domination as the sole driver to revolution.

On the contrary, what we suggest is an approach that takes seriously the claim of creating an Islamic Republic, or, at least, one that considers the republican proposal as a legitimate and realistic attempt, able to combine Islam with self-government values, and traditional structures with modern statecraft. From a civic republican perspective, strongly backed by the theoretical insight of both classical and contemporary republicanism, including that of Aristotle, Cicero, Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Hannah Arendt, our attempt is to explain the kind of Republic that emerged from the Islamic Revolution. On the other hand, the views held by the most prominent figures of the 1979 Revolution will be considered, and a research on the Islam sources will be conducted. Special focus will we made on the tenets of political Islam contained within the Shi'a belief and intellectual tradition, especially when providing for ideas of self-government, egalitarianism, or social upheaval. Only through the insight provided by political

philosophy and theory, and by an extensive research on Islamic principles and sources, may the Islamic Republic of Iran be properly understood.

4. Status of the Issue

Ever since the 1979 Revolution took place, the Islamic Republic of Iran has generated considerable interest from scholars and intellectuals across the academic spectrum. Based upon contradictory principles and sources of legitimacy, Iran's revolutionary regime seems, as of today, menaced *by intense political divisions, endangered by economic disorder, discredited by rampant corruption, and smothered in social restrictions no longer acceptable* (Wright 2000, p.133). However, contrary to every prediction, the atypical modern state founded by the 1979 Revolution has managed to survive. Along with its complex system of government, *not quite a democracy, nor a theocracy* (CFR Editors 2020), the single feature that most captivates its observers is the survival of a seemingly doomed revolution.

a) The Fate of the Islamic Republic

Following the challenges of greater proportions to its survival, observers have often ventured to expect the collapse of the Islamic regime. However, expectations of regime failure, or successful alternative to it, have all been disappointed. As most observers *expected that Khomeini's death would create a power vacuum in Iran* (Hunter 1989), vain expectations of reform are now developed due to Ayatollah Khamenei's fragile health condition. Although *the death of Khamenei will mark the biggest political change in the Islamic Republic since the death of the last supreme leader* (Vakil & Rassam 2017), chances of a sudden political openness remain low according to a growing number of scholars, who begin to hold little doubt that the Republic *will remain Islamic, repressive, and revolutionary [...] with no overt challenges to its authority* (Sciolino 1983).

Since the early years after the Revolution, many scholars have drawn attention into the unusual resilience of the Republic, seeking to explain how *it has weathered a series of convulsion that might have brought down weaker regimes* (Sciolino 1983). Early literature on the Revolution and the Islamic Republic already predicted the everlasting presence of revolutionary Islam in contemporary Iran. Elaine Sciolino attempted to apply the concept of a perpetual revolution, product of an *erratic but shrewd state-building* which, able to adapt *to a more pragmatic approach [...] has achieved stability on its own terms*. According to her early analytical work "Iran's Durable Revolution" (1983), a

continuing Islamic Republic was likely to succeed despite Khomeini's death, thanks to its *ability to maintain state institutions and retain power through repression*. Even if not consolidating, the revolutionary institutions were *not likely to fall*. According to Sciolino, the Republic managed to gain leverage from its major convulsions, encouraging state-building and promoting national mobilization.

Immediately after Khomeini's death in 1989, the unpredictable outcome of the Islamic Republic revived an intense debate among observers. In "Post-Khomeini Iran" (1989), Shireen T. Hunter accurately pointed out the *unexpected unity and alacrity* of the Iranian leadership *in filling the political vacuum*, thanks to the creation of a *broad compromise and agreed consensus* embodied by the ability of Rafsanjani, 4th President of the Islamic Republic. Heralding the foundation of the Second Republic, from 1989 to 1997, Rafsanjani's presidency signified *a victory for the moderate realist camp* and a shift to pragmatism in national policy. Such *intra-regime bargaining* allowed the Islamic Republic to adapt and survive. Similarly, in "Iran: The Impossible Revolution" (1988), Fouad Ajami predicted that, in order to survive, the Islamic Republic would have to return from the *reconstituted revolutionary state to the more normal ways of statecraft*. *Reawakening to mundane reality*, and placing authority within the inherited institutions, would allow the created *structure to survive the demise of its dominant leader*.

More recent literature on the issue has focused on the unpredictable nature of Iranian politics, stating that, although *popularity is unlikely to continue [...]*, *the Iranian government is not necessarily as close to collapse or fundamental change* as many have forecast (Keddie 2006, p. 284). A skeptical mistrust for reform is shared by recent observers. Sanam Vakil and Hossein Rassam, in "Iran's Next Supreme Leader" (2017), predict a continuation of the repressive and authoritarian formula after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's death. Although it *will mark the biggest political change in the Islamic Republic since the death of the last supreme leader*, the Islamic Republic will likely keep its current situation through the *intricate security, intelligence, and economic superstructure composed of underlings* loyal to the current Ayatollah. As both scholars define it, this *deep state* will be trusted with maintaining stability and ensuring *that whoever replaces him [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei], shares its hardline views and is committed to protecting its interests*. Likewise, Eric Edelman and Ray Takeyh discard any near prospects of regime transformation. In "The Next Iranian Revolution" (2020), they openly make the case for seeking regime change in Iran as *the most pragmatic and*

effective goal [...] for a campaign of external pressure. Contrary to most revolutionary regimes, the Islamic Republic has managed to avoid moderation and adaptation to the prevailing international order. As a result, they contend, the Islamic Republic will never evolve into a responsible regional stakeholder, nor it will permit genuine political contestation without a comprehensive regime change.

On the other hand, a more optimistic approach to gradual reformism has also been adopted in the last decades. In “Reform or Revolution?” (2018), the analyst Haleh Esfandiari makes the case for a *peaceful change* that is taking place under the significant election of presidents Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani. Despite the state interference *in the social and cultural spheres [...], exacerbating tensions between the government and society*, the civil communities would be unable to conduct a massive upheaval. Instead, *ideas of reform, the rule of law, and democratic and accountable government* remain alive within the Iranian institutions. Likewise, Milton Viorst signals a significant *new atmosphere since Khomeini’s death in 1989*. In “The Limits of the Revolution: Changing Iran” (1995), Viorst argued that a *wide-ranging debate* was taking place *on the legitimacy of the Islamic Regime*. Based on the peculiarities of the Islamic Revolution, beneath the *monolithic religious state*, a lively pluralism was able to defy *the validity absolute clerical power*.

Other prospects of gradual reform are noted by Robin Wright in “Iran’s New Revolution” (2000) and Ahmad Sadri in “The Varieties of Religious Reform: Public Intelligentsia in Iran” (2001). According to the former, beyond the public discontent and its current repressive form, *Iran has begun to achieve one of the revolution’s original goals: empowering the people*. With a uniquely active civil society in the Middle East, the Iranian public has been able to redefine the revolution and to develop *progressive formulations about the modern Islamic state*. Thus, Iran stands out within the Muslim world as a unique *spread of public empowerment*. On the other hand, Ahmad Sadri draws attention to public intelligentsia in Iran, *the transmission belt that reinterprets and conveys the ideas of intellectuals to the public*, and its role in *spearheading the process of reform of the Islamic Republic*. He points out the lack of *institutional and ideological support, from the clerical intellectual aristocracy, toward the theocratic ideology*, as the best prospect for political reform.

b) The Nature of the Islamic Republic

Oscillating between a republican form, based on popular sovereignty, and an opaque clerical hierarchy, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a unique a complex political system that defies contemporary political theory. As a tutelary set of institutions held by the ruling clergy, Iran still holds regular elections able to generate power shifts and some tolerated public debate. However, they *fall short of democratic standards*, as *ultimate power rests in the hands of unelected institutions* (Freedom House Iran Report 2021). Based upon contradictory sources of power and legitimacy, Iran has generated an intense debate on the nature and structure of the Islamic Republic since its foundation.

The Council on Foreign Relations' latest report, "The Islamic Republic's Power Centers" (February 2020), focuses on Iran's intricate regime structure and institutions, characterized as *organs of a modern republic – a unicameral legislature, executive led by the president, and judiciary – enveloped by a clerical system*. The Council defines Iran's system of governments as *not quite a democracy, nor a theocracy*, being the result of Ayatollah Khomeini's foundational doctrine, *known as guardianship of the jurist*. The Islamic Republic's guarded democracy, where the ultimate *political authority springs from religious authority*, is animated by *consistency with Islamic law*, ensured by both informal and institutional constraints that set *the parameters of Iranian electoral democracy*. Moreover, the electoral features of the Islamic Republic are emphasized by Ghobadzadeh and Rahim in "Electoral theocracy and hybrid sovereignty in Iran" (2016), where, despite the *theocratic basis of clerical dominance*, elections continue to *generate unexpected outcomes and unleashed power and policy shifts*. Both scholars highlight the paradigmatic case of Iran as an *electoral authoritarian system* inspired by contending sources of legitimacy, divine and popular, and a *complex interaction between tutelary and electoral features*. Unable to reduce elections to an insignificant process, the Iranian regime *possesses key features of an electoral autocracy*, which allows the tolerated form of dissent to contest for executive and legislative positions.

A far more vigorous critique against the undemocratic and repressive elements of the Islamic Republic is posed by international advocates of human rights and political freedoms. In its 2021 "Freedom in the World" Report, Freedom House provided Iran a joint score of 16/100, a decline from 2020's 17/100 score, due to the government's restriction on information amid the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. According to Freedom House, Iranian elections *fall short of democratic standards* due to the pervasive influence

of unelected institutions that *disqualifies all candidates deemed insufficiently loyal to the cleric establishment*. With a 6/40 score in political rights and 10/60 score in civil rights, Iran is classified as *not free*, with *ultimate power resting in the hands of the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the unelected institutions under his control*. Suppression of dissent and *restrictions on civil liberties* are posed by the security forces and the judiciary. Political candidates are systematically vetoed by the Guardian Council and only political factions *loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate*. Moreover, transparency and accountability of institutions remains *extremely limited in practice*; censorship *about which topics to cover and how* remains pervasive; freedom of expression, of practice and of assembly are strictly limited to *state-sanctioned practices*; *basic due process standards are routinely violated*; and individual rights and social freedoms are restricted.

Likewise, Human Rights Watch has repeatedly drawn attention to the systematic repression on dissent by Iran's *security and intelligence apparatus, in partnership with its judiciary*, with no restraint on the use of force by authorities. According to its 2021 World Report, security forces displayed an *unlawful and excessive use of force* during the November 2019 protests and the internet suffered a total shutdown across the country, the *right to peaceful assembly and expression* continue to be undermined in practice, prison sentences, based on broad legal provisions, continue to be delivered to *activists, dissidents, and human rights defenders*, death penalty and inhumane punishments continue to be prescribed *based on vaguely defined national security charges*. On the other hand, the European Parliament issued a resolution [2019/2993(RSP)] referring to *the violent crackdown on the protests in Iran* and urging the Iranian authorities to conduct an *impartial investigation on the widespread and disproportionate use of force against non-violent protesters*. Denouncing the impediment of dissidents to *exercise their legitimate rights to freedom of expression and assembly*, the European Parliament expressed its concerns regarding the guarantee of fundamental rights in Iran.

In conclusion, the mixed nature of the Islamic Republic continues to be contested among scholars, focusing a longstanding debate to specify the defining attributes of contemporary Iran, defined whether as a post-revolutionary authoritarian regime, or as a perpetual and never-ending revolution, whether an obscure theocracy or an enlightened advance of republicanism. However, the fact is that the Iranian system will rarely be defined as an opened and free society. Regardless of the specific concepts extracted from

contemporary political science, the Islamic Republic is generally envisaged as a fundamentalist and authoritarian, although still electoral, political system.

5. Theoretical Framework

a) Revolution and Regime Change

The Greek and Roman political philosophy was as much interested in political constitutions, as concerned with the instability of political foundations. The cyclical doctrine of **anacyclosis** (*ἀνακύκλωσις*), based on the inexorable instability and process of decay of any political regime, regardless the genius of its constitution, haunted the political speculations of classical philosophers.

Indeed, the conviction of an unchanging mutability in the mortals' realm was common among the Greeks. As Plato's "Republic" expressed it, *since everything which has a beginning has also an end, even the most perfect constitution will not last forever, but will in time be dissolved* (Book VIII, p. 388), reflecting an inevitable change, yet deprived of any true novelty. The corruptible nature of political regimes is attached to the fallibility of human nature, for there must be *as many kinds of regimes as modalities of human souls* (Book VIII, p. 385). On the other hand, Aristotle did conceive the possibility of a stable political regime, specifically the **republic** (*Πολιτεία*), a mixed constitution considered to be the most perfect foundation. In "Politics", by restricting the likelihood of regime change to those fallible constitutions where law was transgressed (Book V, p. 277), Aristotle approached the kind of unnatural, sudden, and radical change that we shall understand as revolutionary. As a fair and well-adjusted constitution, the republic was a mixture of oligarchy and democracy **under the law** [Book V, ps. 279-281], that was able to defy Plato's cyclical theory. This way, the only true change can come from a revolutionary process, derived from the dissatisfaction and the conspiracy of groups of interest (Book V, p. 243). As it may be noted, Aristotle introduced the materialistic interpretation of politics to explain regime change, declaring **interest** (*συμφέρον*) to be the driving force of human affairs (Arendt 2017, p. 31).

Nevertheless, this perpetual cycle would never create anything entirely new, for it is subject to the natural course of human affairs. Greek philosophy considered regime change as an inevitable and immutable reality, very distinct to the contemporary concept of a revolutionary change. Roman republicanism did however approach the concept of revolution that will be handled for our purpose, by introducing a sense of perdurability

transmitted from one generation to another. Cicero understood in this sense the mixed system of the Roman Republic, able to prevent disorder and decay. As he exposed in “De Re Publica”, a balanced combination of the three initial regimes would be able to prevent the cyclical rotation (Book I, para. 69). This process for the perfection of human communities illustrates the evolution of the concept of change, arriving to the contemporary notion of revolutions, for only if political regimes are truly functional and able to be preserved, will changes be truly disruptive and innovative as to be considered revolutionary.

What we shall define as a revolution, was born with the two great revolutionary processes that took place in the North American colonies and France in 1776 and 1789, respectively. The modern concept of revolution became then attached to the restart of the course of history, *to an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, that is about to be unfolded* (Arendt 2017, p. 42). The conceptual abstraction of revolutions compels us to distinguish a “liberation”, a mere, although sudden, *substitution of one group in charge of the running of a territorial political entity by another group* (Brinton 1965, p. 4); from an actual revolution. Crane Brinton’s “The Anatomy of Revolution” offers an extremely valuable analysis on features and stages shared by revolutionary movements, focusing on the English, French, American and Russian revolutions, *as popular or democratic attempts to ensure a different kind of society [...], carried out in the name of freedom, and that resulted in the revolutionists becoming the legal government.*

However, we seek to refine the concept of revolution beyond mere “liberation from oppression” or large-scale change, and to escape the anacyclosis trap (in the sense that revolution is reduced to cyclical regime change). Thus, we will follow Hannah Arendt’s theoretical examination in “On Revolution”, equalizing revolution with *the task of foundation, the setting of a new beginning* (p.53), as well as with the creation of freedom as a political phenomenon. In this sense, the great result of revolutionary North America and France was not “life, liberty and property”, but the conception of these as **inalienable rights of men** (p. 48). Not only the actual process of liberation and emancipation from tyranny, but **liberty** as the open participation in the public affairs (p. 49), as a set of rights entitled to all mankind by virtue of birth: such were the achievements of the Enlightened revolutions. The foundation of an entirely new political body, the sense of restarting

history, and the creation of a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*¹ (p. 38), will be the parameters for our assessment of the 1979 events and of their repercussion.

Such conceptual purification was already followed by British political thinker Edmund Burke on his 1790 “Reflections on the Revolution in France”. Extremely critical with the revolutionary process in France, Burke already noted that the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was an absolute novelty, impossible to be found in any earlier stage of mankind. Contrary to what he regarded as *extravagant and presumptuous speculations* (p. 37), Burke advocated the *hereditary rights of Englishmen* (p. 25) as the best guarantee for *our antient indisputable laws and liberties* (p. 31). In an exercise of extraordinary insight, Burke warned of the consequences of mismanaged change, and was able to qualify the 1688 English Revolution as a restoration of *the original contract between King and people* (p. 27), rather than as a revolution. Thus, by excluding the “Glorious Revolution” from our concept of revolution, we will be able to exclude any restoration of an ancient order of things as a true revolution.

Burke’s acuity will allow us to solve the paradox between novelty and Islamic tradition that both inspired the Revolution in Iran. It will then be our aim to clarify to what extent did the Revolution in Iran create a sort of *Novus Ordo Seclorum* through an irreversible transformation of Islamic societies, and, ultimately, if it can be named as a revolution at all.

b) The Ideal of Republicanism

The French revolutionary Convention, the United States of America, or even the Soviet Socialist Republics: all these modern states had in common the republican form as inherent to their own definition. The concept of republic has been used with as much inaccuracy as the concept of revolution, leading to the embracement of republican formulas by governments as dissimilar to each other as to the original Roman republic. However, the concept of republic, or more specifically *politeia* (Πολιτεία), was used by the Greek philosophy not to define any specific form of government, but to refer to any “community of citizens”, or “regime”, in general basis. It would be Aristotle who would enable a more specific use of the term, which would be embraced by the Roman civilization under the designation of *Res Publica*. Moreover, European Renaissance, aspiring to recover the lost legacy of Antiquity, would seek to adopt the republican form

¹ Translated as “New order of the ages”

of government, which they restrictively reinterpreted as contrary to monarchical government. No genuine republican principles could be found, however, in the Italian city-states of Venice, Florence, or Genoa, or in the Dutch United Provinces, closer to oligarchical polities than to republican governments. It would be during the Enlightenment when the concept would both be updated and radicalized, until acquiring its connotations under contemporary political theory.

Plato's "Republic" deals with the term *politeia* in a manner completely unrelated to what we understand as a republic in modern times. Contrary to a more specific use of the term, *politeia* is used by Plato to describe a generic kind of political organization, suitable to an autonomous political unity, that may, among other features, very well be a monarchical polity. Going through its epistemological theory of ideas, Plato elaborates a univocal conception of justice able to set the foundations of the most perfect form of government. Contrary to the corrupted nature of timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical regimes (Book VIII, paras. 543-545), Plato defines the best *politeia* as the just one, that is, as the one where justice can be ensured through a correct distribution of functions in the political community (Book IV, para. 433). This way, only the philosophers, vested with the virtue of wisdom and able to access true knowledge, must *rule as kings*, and *political power and philosophy must coincide in the same place* (Book V, para 473d).

As it may be noted, Plato's transition from epistemology to a theory of government strongly correlates with contemporary Iranian thought. Indeed, Neoplatonism has nourished much of the Shi'ite doctrine, but not in a specific republican way. In fact, the first approach to a genuine republican government was attempted by Aristotle's "Politics", where a clear and detailed analysis of the existing political regimes (*politeie*) is accomplished. Just as Plato, Aristotle uses the generic term of *politeia* in a specific sense, describing as *politeie* those regimes that can truly be considered as such. But contrary to Plato's utopianism, Aristotle specifies the *politeia* as the only truly constitutional regime, where elements of oligarchy and democracy are combined: *from oligarchy the principle of electing to offices*, and *from democracy the disregard of qualifications* (Book IV, para. 9). From this mixed formula emerges the only regime worthy of being called constitution or *politeia*, for it is one fully subjected to general laws governing for the benefit of the community. Since early political theory, the republic has been different from a democracy in the sense that in the latter the majority **rules** in its

own benefit, while in the former, the majority comprises a well-settled middle class, which **governs** in the interests of the whole community. Thus, the real *politeia* is the one where the majority governs in the public benefit, and where *offices are filled by election and none by lot* (Book IV, para. 9).

In this Aristotelian sense did the Roman practical philosophy develop the notion of *Res Publica*, in which the mixed system of the *Senatus Populusque Romanus* was based. The notion of *Politeia* was embraced and refined under the term of *Res Publica*, and the notion of *imperium*, or authority granted by law, became the central concept of classical republicanism. In “*De Re Publica*”, Cicero describes the republic as *the concern of a people*, not as *a group of men assembled in any way*, but as *an assemblage of some size associated with one another through **agreement on law and community of interests*** (Book I, para. 39). This way, the Roman Republic was conceived as a mixed and balanced polity, where liberty was ensured with power in hands of the people, while remaining equitable thanks to the Senate and the rule of law (Book I, paras. 47-49). What the Romans in fact devised is a system of checks and balances between the competing institutions (the Senate and the assembled people), which are able to preserve equality under the law, and, ultimately, to create a durable and virtuous polity (Book I, para. 69).

While classical republicanism was strictly concerned with institutions and forms of government, the Enlightenment would divide the notion of Republic into two revolutionary traditions. On the one hand, the model founded by the birth of the United States, strictly following the classical tradition, and based on enlightened rationalism. On the other, the French revolutionary phenomenon, based on a radicalized version of Enlightenment, that took the notion of Republic to its last consequences. Indeed, the notion of the Republic became increasingly important during the 18th century Enlightenment, when it came to be synonymous with self-government and political liberty. Although primarily based on the Classical models, the republic would be gradually transformed and stripped from its original meaning by the forces of revolution. While the Founding Fathers of the American republic were extremely well-versed in the Classical model they intended to reproduce, they surely did not envisage the full implication of what they were about to create. What emerged from the American Revolution was not a mere rediscover of the Ancient formulas, but rather a completely new experience of government. It did not, however, reach the last consequences of this ideal of self-government, which would only stem from the French Revolution. The

resulting republicanism would nourish from the most radical notions of Enlightenment, such as egalitarianism and communitarian freedom. What emerged from these processes, the American and the French revolutions, are two different notions and models of government.

The American Founding Fathers perfectly understood the Classical concern for institutional building and mixed government. From the reading of “The Federalist”, it becomes clear their conviction that the idea of a political foundation was connatural to the newly conquered freedom, that only through the means *by which the excellencies of republican government may be retained, and its imperfections lessened or avoided*, could the *very principles of civil liberty* be preserved (Hamilton, No. 9). Not from an inevitable force or irresistible general will would liberty be founded, but from the conscious acts of free men, from the reasoned exchange of ideas among equals. Indeed, they consciously opposed the very basis of a democratic polity (in its Aristotelian sense), which they saw as a *spectacle of turbulence and contention*, as they bent towards the republican model. They did not rely on the *common passion or interest [...] of the majority*, but on a republican government, *in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking*. They envisaged a polity where *the public voice could be more consonant with the public good* (Madison, No. 10), a *government which derives all its powers from the great body of the people, who elect those considered worthy of representing the popular will* (Madison, No. 39).

Although the American Revolution succeeded in consolidating the foundation of liberty, and it did so with *no parallel in the annals of human society* (Madison, No. 14), it did not, however, create a *Novus Ordo Seclorum* in the sense that the French Revolution did. The Founding Fathers devised an innovative political body that was, after all, unsuitable for the social component of the 1789 Revolution. Their notion of republican government centered on a representative body, *able to refine and enlarge the public views*, a body composed by the most excellent of citizens (Madison, No. 10), but under no circumstance did they seek to carry out a social revolution in the thirteen colonies, for *the problem they posed was not social but political, it concerned not the order of society but the form of government*. Only when the French revolutionaries radicalized the notion of republic, opening the public realm to the urban masses, only when this public realm stopped being a domine of excellency, did a *Novus Ordo Seclorum* truly emerge (Arendt 2017, pp. 107-108). Madison’s theory of representation came to be replaced by

Rousseau's general will, where institutions and separation of power would be suppressed by an indivisible, inalienable sovereignty. The sovereign, conceived as *a collective being*, could not *be represented except by himself* (SC² II, 1), and it came to be synonymous to the unanimous will of the people. Contrary to the notion that civil society would encourage the excellency of the republic, the Rousseauian philosophy came to reject institutions as a fracture of sovereignty (SC II, 2), and associations as contrary to the general will (SC II, 3). As opposed to the republican notion of the Founding Fathers, Rousseau vested the general will with the ability to legislate, to govern and even to decide upon *the right of life and death* (SC II, 5). No limits nor constraints were to be found against the irresistible, even mystic consensus, of the community. Thus, at some point, a contradiction will come up between the revolutionary process and the republic, *because revolutions [...] break down, or at least weaken, laws, customs, habits, beliefs which bind men together in society* and, when all these mechanisms disappear, *force must be used to remedy that insufficiency* (Brinton 1965, p. 208). This will partly explain the downfall suffered by most revolutionary processes, and the hardships that revolutions experience to consolidate their gains into stable institutions. It will explain, to some extent, the spiral of violence that would follow the initial stages of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

What we hold is that the genuine republican experience was accomplished by the foundation of the United States of America, while, however, no *Novus Ordo Seclorum* was established there. It was rather accomplished by the 1789 revolutionary process in France, at the expense, however, of a successful republic able to consolidate the conquered freedom. We shall then examine in what sense is the Islamic Republic a genuine republican regime, and what are the principles that inspire it. We shall evaluate to what extent the Islamic Revolution managed to create a *Novus Ordo Seclorum* and/or to successfully crystallize the ideals of freedom into a well-functioning republican system.

² From this moment on, SC standing for "Social Contract".

6. Background

The very location of the Iranian nation may help to illustrate the diverse and interlocking forces that shaped its people, from the Achaemenid Empire until contemporary Iran. As *an island in the land ocean of Asia and a stepping-stone between East and West* (Mackey 1996, p. 2), Iran has for centuries been the core of international trading, traveling and knowledge routes between central Asia and Mesopotamia. Encompassing an area of 1.648.196 square kilometers, Iran is composed by a 2000 kilometers plateau, enclosed by the Alborz and the Zagros Mountain ranges, that includes the deserts of *Dasht-e Lut* and *Dasht-e Kavir* (Gran Atlas Geográfico Universal 2005). This geologic diversity allows for distinct climate conditions, with seasonal extremes in most of the territory and a dry climate, except for heavy rainfalls along the Caspian Sea. The isolation between valleys, provided by solid mountain ranges, has allowed for distinct communities to survive with their own identity and self-government. At the same time, extreme conditions have encouraged the concentration of most of the population in dense urban areas, including Teheran, Meshed, Isfahan, Tabriz, and Shiraz (Gran Atlas Geográfico Universal 2005). Consequently, *a dense and organized peasant population, which encourages a more rebellious peasantry*, has been developed rather than a *sparse and scattered* one (Keddie 2006, p.2).

Since it first became inhabited by Indo-European settlers around 1000 BC, the Iranian plateau has attracted diverse migrations waves and cultural influences. The term “Iran” stems from “Aryan”, as the first settlers used to identify themselves, although the branch within the heartland of contemporary Iran would later become known as “Persians” (Keddie 2006), a term adopted by the Greeks (*Περσις*) that became generic for all three Achaemenian, Sasanian and Safavid Dynasties. For this reason, Iran’s official language, the Farsi, is better known as Persian, although Persians roughly represent 61 percent of the Iranian population, and Farsi is spoken by almost 110 million people. With an estimated population of almost 86 million (Central Intelligence Agency 2021), Iran possesses diverse variations from the Persian culture and language within its borders. Historically distinct groups number as many as four hundred, many of whom share an Iranian origin, such as the Tajiks (20%), Kurds (10%), Lurs (6%) and Baluchi (2,5%) (Gran Atlas Geográfico Universal 2005), while many others have or of various ethnicities, such as Azeris (16%), Turkmens (2%), Arabs (1%) or Qashqai (1%), just to mention a few of the most significant communities (Mackey 1996).

Although most Iranians adhere to Islam (99,4%), comprising a 90-95% of Shi'a Muslims and 5-10% of Sunnis, the ethnic and linguistic diversity is accompanied by limited, yet influential, fragments of other religions: Zoroastrians, which are remnants of the religion of Pre-Islamic Iran, Christians, Jews and Bahais (Central Intelligence Agency 2021). From these communities, the Jews are the most tightly integrated into the Iranian culture and society, in contrast to the Bahais, a historically excluded ramification of Islam. It should be noted that religion has played a complex role in the 1979 Revolution and in contemporary Iran: not quite as an Islamic revival, but rather as a path of *expressing socioeconomic and cultural grievances in the only way familiar to most people - a religious idiom [...] promising to bring justice to the oppressed* (Keddie 2006, p.3). As it will be clarified, a militant Islam has been politicized more than politics have become Islamized, since Islam has adapted to the public sphere more than vice versa.

Since the Revolution, Iran has experienced an astonishing increase of its former 34 million population, jumping to more than 50 million (Wright 2000), and positioned in nearly 90 million as of today (Central Intelligence Agency 2021). Important social changes have occurred in rural areas, while healthcare and education have expanded to all levels of society. University admissions granted to female students reached 66 percent by 2003, maternal mortality rates dropped from 140 deaths per 100,000 births to 36 (Keddie 2006), urbanization reached the 75.9 percent of total population by 2020, and literacy the 85,5 percent by 2016 (Central Intelligence Agency 2021). GDP per capita began to ameliorate since 1988, correcting a falling trend originated by 1976, during the last years of the Shah (Gapminder 2020). This positive social advances since the 1979 Revolution contradict the still repressive formulas and the increasing unpopularity of the Islamic Republic in recent years, complicating any attempt of a comprehensive assessment.

However, we may conclude that the demographic pressure, the increasing demands from the population, and the social advancements since 1979 have greatly transformed and developed the Iranian society. The Islamic Revolution was not but the construction of a modern state within the Islamic world, placing the contest between Persian and Islamic identities in the center of public debate. Indeed, the Revolution showed how Iranians still confront *the deeply disquieting challenge of creating a modern civilization* (Mackey 1996, p.6).

7. Historical Overview

Until the Muslim Arab invasion from 637 to 651, Iran had been the heartland of two major dynasties: the Achaemenian (559-330 B.C.) and the Sasanian (224-651 A.D.), centers of vast empires and cosmopolitan cultures (Keddie 2006). Thus, pre-Islamic Iran developed a religious and social content that would continue into Islamic times, even surviving the Hellenistic influence of the Seleucid dynasty. Greatly modeled by Zoroastrianism, which served as the official religion during the Sasanian reign, the Persian influence set the standard of Islamic civilization between the 8th and the 11th centuries, through the export of knowledge, art, and an administrative elite.

The Islamic period began for Iran by 651, when the Sasanian Empire fell to the Arab invasion led by Caliph Uthman (‘*Uthmān Ibn ‘Affān*). Exploiting the power vacuum left by decades of conflict between the Byzantines and the Sasanians, Islam began an astonishing expansionary drive. Since the death of the Prophet in 632, his immediate successors, known as the Rashidun or “Rightly Guided” Caliphs (*al-Khulafā’ ar-Rāsidūn*), continued the expansionary campaigns initiated with the consolidation of central authority in the Arabian Peninsula. By 636, Caliph Umar (‘*Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb*) defeated the Byzantine forces in Syria, and the Sassanians on Mesopotamia, seizing Iraq and beginning the invasion of Iran (Hiro 2013). While the Byzantine Empire managed to block the Arab campaigns beyond Syria, the Sasanian Dynasty soon crumbled under the Islamic invaders (Mackey 1996).

After the fall of Ctesiphon in 638, Mesopotamia quickly fell under the Arabs. In a scarce lapse of time, the greatest adversary to the Islamic conquests crumbled, and Persia and the regions of central Asia were united under the Caliphate. Throughout its ancient history, Persia had been conquered by many invading waves, all of which *inevitably fell under the influence of Persian culture, adopting much of the essence of Persia*, but Islam did cause a radical and fundamental change to Persian culture and society (Mackey 1996, p. 48). Although the Persian ethos remained unchanged, Islam introduced a world view and model of society based on the cultural traditions of the Arabs, which would model the former. Any allegiance to any cultural system, or any bond between subject and Empire, was about to be replaced by the commitment to the *Ummah*, a universalistic claim that clashed with the defined entity of Persia. However, Islam would not be preserved in Iran under its original form: the Shi’a faith, although not peculiarly Iranian, would come to power in Iran as a militant movement under the Safavid Dynasty

(1501-1736), consolidating and becoming forever bonded to the Persian peculiarities of Iran (Keddie 2006).

a) Shi'a Islam and Iran

Shi'a Islam emerged many centuries before it was officially established in Persia in 1501. Originally with a religious and political sectarian character, Shi'ism emerged in the early decades of Islam around the matter of succession, the *single most contentious issue in Islamic history* (Hiro 2013, p. 12). After Muhammad's death with no descendancy, in 632, the main contenders for the leadership of the community of believers (*ummah*) were Abu Bakr (*Abū Bakr al-Siddīq*), father-in-law to Muhammad, and Ali (*ʿAlī ibn ʿAbī Ṭālib*), Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. While many have contended that the Prophet did appoint Ali for succession, and that he was the most suited for leadership by his Islamic virtues, many others argued that no successor could be appointed based on descendance from Muhammad, but rather *the most able and pious under Muslim* should be chosen as leader of the *ummah* (Hiro 2013, p. 17).

The fact remains that Abu Bakr, as an early convert to Islam and experienced spiritual leader, was appointed by the assembly to succeed the Prophet. And before his death in 634, only two years after his appointment, Abu Bakr had already nominated Umar (*ʿUmar bin al-Jaṭṭāb*) as his successor. While the great expansion of Islam was taking place, Ali withdrew from public life until the murder of Uthman (*ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān*), Umar's successor, by a popular uprising in 656. Ali interceded on the rebellion's behalf and was finally nominated as Caliph. Civil unrest, caused by the violent overthrow of Uthman and by sectarian militancy, would mark the leadership of Ali. Forced to battle Aisha (*ʿĀʾishah bint Abī Bakr*), who had been one of the two wives of the Prophet, Ali faced constant opposition to be acknowledged as Caliph. Finally murdered in 661 by a sectarian ramification, Ali succumbed to the founder of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-749), who, contrary to Islamic law and traditions, would adopt hereditary succession.

Shi'ism or "party of Ali" (*Shīʿatu ʿAlī*), emerged in this first century of Islam originally as a political claim, favoring Ali's appointment by Muhammad, as opposed to Sunnis or "followers of the practice [of the Prophet]" (*ahl as-sunnah wa l-jamāʿah*). The Shi'a Muslims insisted then on the *charismatic leadership of the male descendants of Ali* and came to develop a religious content and a variety of political doctrines (Keddie 2006, pp. 4-5). Under the Umayyad Caliphate, Shi'ism would develop a sectarian form,

conducting a series of uprisings that were brutally repressed by the reigning dynasty. With the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), Shi'ism then developed a **quietist stance**, acquiescing to the Abbasid Caliphs, yet deeming them as illegitimate usurpers, and rising an uneasy cooperation with the Sunni caliphate.

According to the Shi'ite theological insight, the Koran has, in addition to literal meaning, *a hidden one that escapes ordinary men*. Thus, *only a spiritual guide – an Imam – can gradually reveal the secrets of the Koran* (Hoveyda 2003, p. 70). Although the Caliph' political leadership was acquiesced, no true authority was granted to them, for only the hereditary line of Imams could give *correct, indeed infallible, opinions on all subjects* (Keddie 2006, p.9). Among the branches of Shi'ism that were developed during the Abbasid caliphate, the majoritarian **Twelvers** (*Imamiyyah*) believe that the 12th Imam went into occultation in 873, acquiring the title of **Hidden Imam** and interrupting the line of descendants. According to Shi'ite theology, the 12th Imam remains invisible to humans. He is identified as the *Mahdi* (“messiah”), who is *to reestablish the reign of justice and true faith on earth*. In his absence, the *ulama* (“Doctors of Law”) must ensure the protection of faith and govern according to Islamic law, maintaining *a state of lying-in wait for the coming of the savior* (Hoveyda 2003, ps. 70 – 71). Thus, every authority was *equally acceptable (or unacceptable) in the absence of the Twelfth Imam*, a claim that would be used *to assert the illegitimacy of any temporal government* (Keddie 2006, p.8), for the *ulama* were the only qualified to interpret the will of the hidden Imams.

However, the Shi'as have enjoyed hegemonic periods in the Islamic world: the Shi'a Buyid Dynasty subjugated the Caliph in Baghdad in 932 and a Shi'a caliphate, the Fatimids, was established in Cairo in 969 (Hiro 2013, p. 142). But it was in 1501, when the Safavids came to power in Iran, that an official version of militant Shi'ism was to be established. Originally a quietist Sunni order of allegedly Kurdish origin, the Safavids adopted a militant and egalitarian **Twelver Shi'ism** reminiscent of its early versions. Their Shi'a doctrine would soon be turned from a popular and rebellious form into a conservative one, suitable for stable rule. Struggle against Sunni Ottomans and Uzbeks encouraged the Safavids to reinforce the Shi'i identity of Iran. By the end of Safavid rule in 1722 (*brought on by Afghan Sunni invaders*), *the vast majority of Iranians did identify strongly with Shi'ism* (Keddie 2006, p. 11).

b) Contemporary Iran

During the 19th century, Iran experienced disruptive socio-economic effects while overwhelmed by the increasingly expansionist British and Russian Empires. By 1796, the Qajar dynasty (which lasted until 1925) reunified a divided Iran after the fall of the Safavids. Supported by the colonial powers, the Qajar's unpopularity and the transformation of economy and society, through interaction with the West, built the way to the early 20th century convulsions. European incursions in Iran had been in place since the 1801 British Treaty with the Qajar rulers during the Napoleonic Wars. By the 1880s, growing economic discontent and political dislocation, due to Western impact, led to a fall of exports and currency in Iran. The Shah's concession policy to great powers, mainly the 1890 tobacco monopoly granted to the British, and the huge indebtedment, encouraged then the first reform movements (Keddie 2006). Pan-Islamic intellectuals, like the well-known Sayyed Jamal ad-Din "al Afghani" (*Sayyid Jamāl-al-dīn al-Afghānī*), and liberal officials, began advocating reform.

Massive protests in 1891 culminated on a nationwide boycott on tobacco, which forced the government to cancel the concession by 1892. From the late 19th century protest movements, emerged a precedent for popular mobilization that would permeate opposition to the Shah and to foreign intrusion during the 20th century. Political instability in Iran led to the assassination of the Shah in 1896, while Belgian Ministers began to influence the Iranian politics and Russian loans indebted the economy by the early 1900s. Discontent with the government culminated in the **1905 Constitutional Revolution**, when religious authorities united to demand a representative House of Justice (*adalatkhaneh*) to the Shah, who agreed in 1906. Massive protests erupted in the main urban centers and a representative Assembly (*majles*) was finally accepted by the Shah and first opened in October 1906. The complete version of a Fundamental Law (*mashruteh*) was signed by 1907, with the guarantee for rights and freedoms, and the setting of a Constitutional Monarchy (Keddie 2006). However, the Constitution, which formally was in place until 1979, was pervasively breached in practice since 1911, when Russian troops occupied Tehran and the *majles* were dissolved.

The outburst of World War I saw the extension of fighting in Iran. The devastation caused *promoted revolutionary and democratic sentiments and fueled the desire among many to reconstruct Iran as an independent country* (Keddie 2006, p. 73). By 1921, a military coup against the Shah gave rise to a nationalist government, which put in place

a centralized bureaucracy, administrative reforms, and the independence from Western interference. At this point, the Pahlavi family started its accession to power. Originally an army Commander, Reza Khan was appointed as war minister by Sayyed Zia (*Seyyed Zia'eddin Tabataba'i*), new prime minister of Iran. The new government turned increasingly authoritarian, protest movements were suppressed, and newsletters were censored. By 1923, Reza became prime minister of Iran and convinced the Shah to travel to Europe, becoming *practically the sole ruler of the nation*. Although his initial vision was *to depose the Qajar Shah and proclaim a republic*, the *majles* made him Shah in 1925, after deposing the last monarch of the Qajar dynasty (Hoveyda 2003, ps. 6-7). Reza adopted then the name of **Pahlavi** and his son, Muhammad Reza, became crown prince of Iran.

During Reza Shah's reign, major changes within society and economy occurred. National homogeneity, modernization, anticlericalism and strengthening of the state were pursued, while *decision making was increasingly monopolized by the Shah* and *political life was extremely limited, owing to the Shah's despotic controls and suppression of opposition* (Keddie 2006, ps. 88-89). Although the Shah conducted a comprehensive modernization program, building the railroad, expropriating the nobility, instituting a judicial legal system and public health programs; no land reform was carried out, the tribes' autonomy was suppressed, and the economy became state controlled. In a highly repressive political climate, the Shah *drove Iranians with unflagging demands that often exceeded their capacity and willingness to comply* (Mackey 1996, p. 183). Thus, fundamental change was hindered by the stalemate of the poorer classes and the unwillingness to encourage innovations. Finally, Reza Shah was deposed in 1941 by an Anglo-Soviet invasion, during the war with Germany. Once again, Iran was divided into spheres of influence, this time with the presence of the United States, and the kingdom was put under Mohammad Reza.

c) Road to Revolution: Mosaddeq and the Shah

The first decade of Mohammad Reza Shah's reign was marked by a growing American intrusion, social dissatisfaction, inflation, and political instability. Protests and mobilization intensified, trade unions began to operate and the Marxist Tudeh party (*Hezb-e Tūde-ye Īrān*), which later had a significant role in the Islamic Revolution, was founded in 1942. Economic and social disruption encouraged urbanization and created new opportunities for merchants and creditors, while inflation skyrocketed, and shortage

of supply caused famine and suffering to the popular classes. Moreover, Iran met after the war with the disruption of modernization, as new urban groups appeared and political organizations multiplied, and *the gulf between the staggering poverty of the long-suffering masses and the wealth of the privileged few* was widened (Keddie 2006, p.110).

In the mid of the post-war instability, the figure of Mosaddeq and the National Front emerged from the *emotionally charged issue of oil*. While echoing the Constitutionlists of 1905, a fundamental change was introduced by the 1950 convulsion: the opposition to Western intrusion in Iran, *symbolized by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company* (Mackey 1996, ps. 196-198). From member of the *majles* to the *de facto* ruler of Iran, Mosaddeq was launched by the popular resentment against the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), which became the center of Iranian politics by 1950. After the failing negotiations with the AIOC to replace the 1933 concession, the *majles* supported Mosaddeq's position, and nationalization of the oil industry was approved by 1951. Contrary to the Shah's choice, Mosaddeq became prime minister soon after. Although nationalization was followed by international boycott and economic hardship, Mosaddeq retained popular support and proved resistant to the Shah's attempt to replace him in 1952. It was then when specific plans for overthrowing the National Front originated within the British Intelligence and the CIA.

The coup that culminated in 1953, after provoking the split between Mosaddeq's coalition and the Tudeh party, *could not have succeeded without internal disaffection or indifference*, but it would not have occurred either *without outside aid* (Keddie 2006, p. 130). This fact traumatized the Iranian public opinion and paved the way to the 1979 Revolution, and a new emphasis on anti-imperialism and national independence, two elements that inspired the 1951 coalition, would since then define any revolutionary movement in the developing world. But most significant was the composition of the National Front Coalition: without substantial support from the clergy, oil nationalization and public mobilization would have never been possible, as Ayatollah Kashani (*Sayyed Abu'l-Qāsem Kāšāni*) devised a fusion of politics and religion, *a revolutionary theology*, that *ultimately changed the future of Iran* (Mackey 1996, p. 197). For the first time, quietist Shi'ism got extensively involved in human affairs, and Islam became a platform for popular mobilization. *Similar sentiments were to be expressed by another ayatollah – Ruhollah Khomeini – and fuel the forces of the Islamic Revolution* (Hiro 2013, p. 155).

After 1953, Mohammed Reza Shah *mobilized the elements of authoritarianism* and reinforced *the organs of coercion belonging to the state*. Especially since 1970, the Shah relied on less conventional *tools of state control*, resting on an strengthen army, the police, with SAVAK (*Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*), formed in 1957, as the main intelligence organization (Mackey 1996, p. 212-213). The autocratic nature of the regime was revealed in the decline of participation in decision-making and in the lack of free and fair elections, while promoting an ambitious and unrealistic reform program. Since the 1960s, a series of modernizing measures, which laid the base for a state-dominated capitalism, came to be known as the White Revolution, an exercise of political expediency that relied on a mismanaged and ineffective land reform. Public expenditure soon skyrocketed, and economy became oil dependent, with no real interest in using taxation for income distribution or in fulfilling the everyday needs of most Iranians. Preferential policies toward large enterprises disfavored small crafts, while the over-centralization of the national market in urban centers, investment in large agricultural units, and heavy inputs of foreign capital, all were *concomitants of unemployment, waste, corruption, and poverty* (Keddie 2006, p. 157).

Meanwhile, opposition to the Shah started convulsing the Iranian politics between 1960 and 1963. Elections were routinely considered dishonest as evidence of vote fraud kept growing, and the Shah increasingly dismissed and supported successive Prime Ministers. In April 1961, Ali Amini became prime minister with the Shah's approval, expecting a *lengthy, and technically unconstitutional, period of rule without elections or a majles*, allowing the government to legislate by decree (Keddie 2006, p. 143). Protests in this same year resulted in strong restrictions on the National Front and in the arrest of several political leaders, while student protests were brutally suppressed in 1962. By this time, Ruhollah Khomeini, then a *Hojatolislam* (an Islamic authority of minor status to the Ayatollah), began to articulate a radical opposition from the religious center of Qom. The Shah's public displays and extravaganza, anathema to the radical clergy, already inflamed the situation by the early 1960s. As he began to preach against the Shah, Khomeini was arrested in March 1963, placed under house arrest, and finally deported to Turkey in 1964 (Hiro 2013). He nevertheless continued his attacks on the Shah, who he condemned as "un-Islamic", and organized his forces from the Iraqi city of Najaf, where his most prominent works would be produced, including the *Velāyat-e faqīh* (the Guardianship of the Jurists) in 1970, setting the bases of the future Islamic Republic (Hoveyda 2003).

By 1977, the economic and social effects of the Shah's programs were widely felt by the Iranian people. After the appointment of a new prime minister, the *sudden growth in unemployment [...] in combination with inflation, shortages, and large and evident income-distribution inequities, helped to create a classic prerevolutionary situation* (Keddie 2006, p. 164). Since secular opposition had been dismantled and opposition leaders had disappeared, religious and clerical opposition became the only tool available to express grievances against the Shah's regime. Throughout the 20th century, the urban masses had been propelled into a middle class that would largely support revolutionary change. With no political reforms introduced and an increasing dependency from the West, the 1979 disruption would be pushed forward by the *ever-increasing popular surge and revolutionary fervor* mobilized by Khomeini (Hiro 2003, p. 167).

8. The Iranian Revolution

The events preceding the 1979 Revolution did not seem much more than a crescendo of violent protests when they began to develop in 1977. Contrary to most revolutionary processes, where a single event dramatically triggers agitation (Brinton 1965), the Iranian Revolution may appear to have been incubating for almost a century. The first steps were led by spontaneous riots not unknown to contemporary Iranian politics, except for the persistence of popular mobilization and the failure of the authorities to suppress them. However, conspiracy and planning, rather than the spontaneity and popular action that were present in the first stages, would define the 1979 events, when *a revolution within a revolution pitted group against group in a violent struggle* to define the new Iranian state (Mackey 1996, p. 272).

Ironically, the Iranian revolutionary process was set in scene by growing pressure from the United States, where Carter had been elected President, favoring liberalization policies from the Shah. Following the release of hundreds of political prisoners in February 1977, intellectuals, writers, academics, and professionals resorted to address open letters to authorities and to publication of grievances. By the summer of 1977, *each concession by the Shah brought further demands from the opposition* (Hiro 2013, p. 164-165), and in July 1977, the shah appointed a new prime minister, Jamshid Amuzegar, in the face of growing public discontent. No essential political changes were introduced, however, and the urban popular classes adopted more militant methods. Although supervised by official trade unions, workers' strikes became frequent and underground

labor organizations started a parallel political life. Meanwhile, student's opposition was fed by the recent access of popular classes to college education, which soon radicalized and became organized in Student's Confederations (Keddie 2006).

Following the usual pattern in revolutionary processes, the Iranian Revolution started with a formulation of grievances, hoping to restore *an old order of things that had been disturbed and violated by the despotism of absolute monarchy* (Arendt 2017, p. 69), in this case, applying to the rights and guarantees of the 1906 Constitution. However, what was conceived as the restoration of rights granted by the Shah, soon became a revolution, and introduced the tendencies that we associate today with revolutionary change. Both the modern and traditional middle classes, who would nourish the main opposition to the Shah, became active against a model no longer acceptable to large sectors of the Iranian society. *The seeds of public empowerment were planted* (Wright 2000, p. 134), as public mobilization was made possible by the cooperation from various elements of the population, and new forms of organization were spontaneously created.

In this order of events, the summer of 1978 proved crucial for the development of a revolutionary movement. After the semi-official newspaper *Ettela'at* published a slanderous attack on Khomeini, a massive student protest erupted in Qom and was brutally repressed by the security forces. In the two days it lasted, *at least seventy were killed, making it the bloodiest incident since 1963* (Keddie 2006, p. 225). As the death students were made martyrs by the religious establishment, mourning ceremonies, mosques, and universities became the focal point of opposition. By the end of March 1978, disturbances had spread, and violence had escalated in every major city of Iran. The urban poor and the rural workers, who had remained unconnected to the strategy and ideology of revolution, provided then the widespread rebellion with its massive numbers. *As Shi'ism had suddenly become the vehicle of ecstasy and rebellion* (Mackey 1996, p. 279), the common linkage of religion and the rise of Khomeini introduced a radical social element into revolution. More than in any previous rebellious protest, the urban poor and subproletariat were represented in Khomeini's claim for justice; they made up the aroused and the enraged Muslim masses that would occupy the Iranian main cities during 1978. The decisive entry of the urban working classes into the mass protests, who would soon be alienated by revolutionary Shi'ism, marked the massive politico-economic strikes that paralyzed the economy in the summer of 1978.

It was, however, the popular middle classes, the *bazaaris*, comprised of urban manufacturers, merchants, and professionals, who actually came to prominence in the revolutionary process. The radicalization of this urban population, centered on the traditional Islamic culture, and its involvement in the massive protests, would provide the kind of universal and heterogenous support that led to Khomeini's accession. It was the urban middle classes, the cross-section of the Iranian society, who would compose the *spontaneous councils and committees*, setting the daily life of local communities after 1979, and who organized around the *revolutionary guards, urban quarters, factories, and other institutions* (Keddie 2006). As in revolutionary France, where the radical stages had been dominated by the *ordinary man, the leaders* in the Iranian revolution were *substantially of the same social standing as the rank and file*. The rural and urban poor provided the massive numbers for the early stages of revolution, but they did not run the Islamic Revolution. Khomeini's base of support, the conductors of the hostage seizure in the United States' embassy, the ideologues behind the moderates' overthrow, and those holding *positions of prominence and even of responsibility* (Brinton 1965, pp. 97-120), were the radicalized members of the middle class that emerged from urbanization. Such is the essential feature of any actual revolution: the empowerment of the ordinary men, the opening of the public realm to *the immense majority who are not free because they are driven by daily needs*, unlike the ruling elite, who remain free from the burden of necessity (Arendt 2017, p.76). And in Hannah Arendt's words, such is the very feature that transformed the 1978 uprising into the 1979 revolution, *a change so radical that the subjects became rulers themselves* (p. 64).

This way, spring gave way to summer with the intensification of protest and repression. Massive demonstrations in the urban centers reflected the involvement of all segments of society, and made of these initial stages a *unified, multiclass movement* that would, however, reach *its conclusion with the fall of Muhammad Reza Shah* (Mackey 1996, p. 286). As violence increased during the summer of 1978, real opportunity of accommodation with the opposition ended, and on September 8, a date remembered as the "Black Friday" (*Jom'e-ye Siyāh*), military force was employed to suppress a massive demonstration in the Jaleh Square of Tehran, leaving *more than 4,000 people dead* (Hiro 2013, p. 166). However, public mobilization persisted and even intensified. While open activity by militant groups, namely from the Marxist *Feda'iyan* and *Mojahedin* parties, was encouraged by the authorities' repressive response, Khomeini intensified his appeal

after his expulsion from Iraq in October. Massive protests culminated with the peaceful demonstration of over a million people in Tehran, on December 11, 1978, where a resolution was passed *asking Khomeini to lead Iran and calling on Iranians to struggle until the shah was overthrown* (Keddie 2006, p. 234). By fall 1978, Khomeini's *moral attack on the army* and his call on the troops *to renew their bond with the people*, finally resulted in the army fraternizing with the crowds in open opposition to the Shah's mandate (Hiro 2013, pp. 166-168).

The indecisive and deluded Mohammed Reza Pahlavi finally confronted the fact of his political downfall, but it was already too late to rebuild a credible monarchy and the radicalization of events had become inevitable. On December 30, the shah appointed a moderate National Front member, Shapour Bakhtiar, as prime minister. Asked to form a new constitutional government, Bakhtiar would face intense opposition from Khomeini's block, which included virtually all sectors of opposition. When the Shah departed Iran on January 16, 1979, the parallel institutions created by Khomeini's followers, the **Revolutionary Komitehs** ("committees"), based in local mosques, had already taken over all effective power (Hiro 2013). As it happened in 1917 Russia, the creation of a provisional government in Iran gave the impression that the revolution was over, when, in fact, it had hardly begun.

9. The Year 1979

Khomeini's return to Iran from exile on February 1, 1979, marked the progression, common to all revolutions, from *crystallizing people's best hopes*, to *realizing the full measure of their despair* (Arendt 2017, p. 90). The unanimous enthusiasm that welcomed Khomeini, after a 14-year exile, reflected the desire of members of all groups, classes, and parties to put an end to a regime that was no longer acceptable. The Islamic nature of the 1978-79 uprising, although not evident at the beginning, should not come as a surprise. As a spontaneous movement at first, the structures and ideas that made possible the revolution could only develop in the **mosque**, where *virtually any issue of concern to the community is discussed*, since *religion and politics are inseparable in Islam*. As the *Shah's repression had pulverized the secular parties, traditional and otherwise* (Rouleu, p. 5), only the Shi'ite imaginary could offer a structure and mechanism to express grievances against social injustice and oppression. The mosque, as the only *officially approved meeting places*, would be transformed *into a political organ* (Sciolino 1983, p.

898) along with the parallel government of neighborhood *Komitehs*. Meanwhile, the ulama, *independent from the state*, would provide for a leadership *of central importance in organizing demonstrations, orchestrating grievances and publishing and distributing pamphlets* (Omid 1992, p.676).

Thus, the massive mobilization of all social segments, the universal appeal against injustice, the cooperation of all ideologies and interests, inexistent in any previous revolt, could only stem *from the specific religio-cultural environment of Shi'a Islam* (Hiro 2013, p.168). The fact that it raised from traditional structures, as those of the clerical establishment, does not impede the 1978-79 rebellion from being a revolution fully capable of creating a political body *ex novo*. Regardless of their novelty, revolutions do not stem overnight, but they rather emerge from the existing institutions, until events *take a direction which had little if anything to do with the willful aims and purposes of men* (Arendt 2017, p. 80). What, if not hundred-year-old institutions, were the Estates-General in France or the colonial assemblies in the American colonies, before giving way to the National Assembly or the Continental Congress? The case of the Iranian Revolution is no different: Shi'a Islam became the language of freedom and justice, providing *an ideological dimension to political movements*, and the mosque became the space to express discontent. After Khomeini's return to Iran, a second phase of revolution opened, one where *the sacred union achieved around a common goal explodes under the pressure of the centrifugal forces reflecting the interests, aspirations, and political leanings of diverse groups* (Rouleau 1980, pp. 1-6). The doom of the Iranian revolution, its decay into terror, the purge of opponents that soon followed, were an expression of the excesses inherent to revolutions, more than a consequence of political Islam.

In this sense, this second phase of the revolution adopted the form of conspiracy and plot, as opposed to the spontaneity and desire of freedom of its first steps, when *Khomeini's forces* started taking *power from what had been a multiparty revolution and state* (Keddie 2006, p.241). In the days next to his return, on February 5, Khomeini depicted the provisional government as illegal and appointed a parallel government: the Provisional Revolutionary Government. With Mehdi Bazargan as "real" prime minister, the parallel institutions were charged with changing *the political system of the country to an Islamic Republic* (Hiro 2013, p. 169). A situation known as **dual sovereignty** was then created, which is perfectly defined by the Russian term of *dvoyevlastiye*, used by Lenin to express the sequence of power from the Provisional Government to the Soviets. This

dual sovereignty may be described as the situation where two *conflicting chains of institutions provide conflicting set of decisions* [...], when *two sets of institutions, leaders, and laws demand obedience, not in one single respect, but in the whole interwoven series of actions which make up life for the average man* (Brinton 1965, pp. 132-133). This situation was plain in Iran when the parallel machinery of the *Komitehs* and the Revolutionary Government, as opposed to Bakhtiar's government, *played a game of power in which the prize was the shah's once formidable military* (Mackey 1996, p. 285). On February 9, the air-force cadets and technicians initiated a violent rebellion in Tehran and confronted the Imperial Guard. The Marxist *Fedai'yan* and *Mojahedin* militants, in the last moments of their political alliance with Khomeini, mobilized and distributed guns among protesters, beginning the transfer of power in favor of Khomeini's coalition. By February 11, 1979, after two days of violent confrontation where prisons and armories were opened, the members of the military finally joined the guerrillas and the Islamic Revolution culminated with Khomeini's accession. Mehdi Bazargan became then the Prime Minister of Iran.

However, the parallel rule of the *Komitehs* and the dual sovereignty paradox would continue after Bazargan's accession, this time through the Islamic Revolutionary Council, led by Khomeini in secrecy since January 13. Bazargan's government, which was *strongly tingled with conservatism*, was mainly composed of ministers from the *moderate wing of the National Front* and *former officers and middle-class businessmen* (Rouleau 1980, p. 7). This way, Bazargan's period fully represented what Brinton has described as *the Rule of the Moderates*. By supporting a government aimed at maintaining the instruments of the old regime, Khomeini was able to *keep opposition from the bazaar merchants, the liberals, and the guerrillas to a minimum*, while empowering a set of parallel institutions that soon *begun to usurp power* (Sciolino 1983, p. 895). Since February 1979, the *Komitehs* were transformed from the 1978 neighbor assemblies, as autonomous spaces for public deliberation, to instruments of rival authority and popular pressure. Along with the Islamic militias, which were reorganized into the Revolutionary Guard, the new revolutionary courts started conducting *summary trials and hasty executions* (Rouleau 1980, p. 8), while the *Komitehs* became *vigilantes determined to prevent a counterrevolution by arbitrarily arresting men, women, and even children on charges ranging from suspected prostitution to undefined antirevolutionary activities*. Under strict control and purges, the *Komitehs* multiplied and consolidated Khomeini's

conquest of power by eliminating any kind of opposition. Already by the end of 1979, almost six hundred Iranians, suspect of counterrevolutionary activities, were executed by the revolutionary tribunals, while Bazargan's government became increasingly fragile (Mackey 1996, p. 289-291).

On April 1, 1979, the revolutionary process culminated with the proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, overwhelmingly approved by 98.2% of votes through national referendum (Keddie 2006, p. 247; Hiro 2013, p. 169). With an unprecedented voter-turnout of 89% (Hiro 2013, p. 169; Mackey 1996, p. 289), the election was strictly controlled by the *Komitehs*, who pointed out and harassed non-participants, easily detectable through a stamp on the identity card of those using their vote (Hiro 2013, p. 169). Although falling short of democratic and transparency guarantees, and ensured through pressure by the Islamic militancy, the April 1 proclamation did reflect an enthusiastic and widespread consensus on the path that the revolution should adopt. However, popular surge and mobilization would be instrumentalized by Khomeini's followers and increasingly charged with Islamic fervor. The fragile Bazargan government timidly expressed its discrepancy with the referendum, asking to allow an election between a secular or religious foundation, but Khomeini insisted on an early referendum where people would express for or against an Islamic Republic.

The only step left was the approval of the Islamic Constitution, essential to the consolidation and preservation of the conquered freedom. This is the point where successful Revolutions should culminate: in the foundation and completion of liberty through a set of institutions able to preserve it: in what Hannah Arendt (2017) accurately defined as the *Constitutio Libertatis* (pp. 225-293). On the contrary, those who exercise power in the Islamic Republic boast of maintaining an endless revolutionary government, a kind of *permanent revolution* or *continuing crisis* (Brinton, pp. 226-228), as if such phenomenon were possible or desirable. What really happened is that freedom was unable to crystallize, and a profound abyss stood between the foundation of the ideal republic and the harsh reality of revolution, where violence and terror, rather than open participation in the public realm, would drive the course of events. What came unnoticed to most Khomeinists is that terror and violence would not only prevent the success of counterrevolutionary forces, but that it would also undermine the foundation of their idyllic Islamic Republic. Whenever an act of violence substitutes conscious deliberation on which should be the foundation of the new republic, no newly conquered *power of the*

people is to be consolidated, but it will rather *disintegrate in the chaos of violence* (Arendt 2017, p. 145). Although the theoretical foundation of the Islamic Republic is indeed a bold work of imagination, facing nothing less than *the need to construct a society able to live in peace with itself* (Mackey 1996, p. 284), the ideals of justice, central to political Shi'ism, were unable to crystallize under this new political body.

The Iranian people, as sovereigns of this new order, *had only one thing in common – the destruction of the Pahlavi dynasty* (Mackey 1996, p. 284). Since no agreement existed on what kind of political entity should replace the fallen monarchy, and the Iranian revolution had incorporated *the material for social revolution* [...], the *wrath of the underclass* would be instrumentalized by Khomeinists to make all relevant political decisions (Ajami 1988, p. 139). The fury of the popular masses, through *an act of outrage*, would serve to ensure the adoption of the new constitution (Mackey 1996, p. 295). In this sense, the “policy of *fait accompli*” would define the nature of power, rather than the opposite, where constitutional power should direct the course of events. An act of violence would then substitute *an irresistible and anonymous stream of violence for the free and deliberate actions of men* (Arendt 2017, p. 179), and this act almost spontaneously appeared to Khomeini when, on November 4, 1979, members of the Islamic association “Students Following the Line of the Imam”, seized the U.S. embassy in Iran. The **Iran hostage crisis** would be Khomeini’s chance to overthrow Bazargan’s moderate government and radicalize the revolution. In fact, it was artificially prolonged by Khomeini to *weaken moderates and non-Khomeinists, pass the constitution, and consolidate power*.

Since this moment, *debate on the constitution was undermined by claims that such debate was treacherous* (Keddie 2006, p. 249), and the public debate, only possible through the exchange of opinion among equal citizens, was replaced by enforced consensus. The fundamental law of the republic was approved by harassment and coercion, rather than by public participation. The rage of the masses would then constitute a new form of tyranny, and, as students *projected themselves as being at once the conscience and the instrument of the revolutionary movement*, they would next proceed with *the elimination of the opponents of the Islamic regime* (Rouleau 1980, p. 12). While the United States became the common enemy able to provide for national unity, Bazargan, unable to control the radicalization of events, resigned on November 6. An interim government was then created by the Council of the Islamic Republic and, by December

3, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic was approved by referendum. As expressed by Brinton (1965, pp. 148-171), revolutions at this point *enter its crisis stage*, and the *accession of the extremists* develop a *dictatorship of commission* through the ruthless use of force, and that precisely is what followed in Iran.

10. Shi'ite Epistemology and Political Thought

The very doctrine animating the Islamic Republic is profoundly rooted in Shi'ite belief, although religious activists, especially Khomeini, would *cast aside the historical restraint of Shi'ism, its subtlety* (Ajami 1988, p. 149). Traditional Shi'ite theology holds that, after the 12th Imam went into occultation by 873 A.D, four special assistants were successively left behind as the only able interpreters of his will. When the last of these four died with no succession by 941 A.D., resulting in the greater occultation, no infallible interpreter of the Twelfth Imam's was left. Since then, there would not be another one until his reappearance as the *Mahdi* ["Rightly Guided One"], when he would then *govern earth with justice and assure the happiness of real Muslim* (Hoveyda 2003, p. 71). This eschatological philosophy, centered in the absence of an infallible interpreter of the Koran, continues to be decisive for Muslims' perception of government and justice. Since no other spiritual guide would be able to reveal the hidden meanings in the Koran, and to interpret the inscrutable will of God, no perfect knowledge would be attainable for the common men, and no new meaning could be revealed, for *the source of infallible legal judgment had disappeared*. However, the maintenance and protection of the Islamic faith, centered in the search of justice, could not be suspended for an indefinite period, and *issues continued to arise on which some trustworthy judgment, even if fallible, was desired* (Keddie 2006, p. 9).

This way, Shi'ism reinforced its **Neoplatonic** elements: no infallible knowledge could be attained, hindering the application of a divinely originated justice, but the **imitation** of the already revealed meaning, and its translation into practical indications and rulings, could be possible in order to keep the *Ummah* on the right path. Thus, the disappearance of Imams would lead to a legal system where judgments would fall on the *ulama* (theologians) and the *fuqahā* (Doctors of Law). The *most savants among them*, would become *ayatollahs* ["Reflection of God"], and *the sagest among them* receives the title of *marja-e-taqulid*, ["Source of Imitation"] (Hoveyda 2003, pp. 70-71). In this Neoplatonic conception, justice is seen as an immutable object of divine nature, in relation

to which mankind is unable to innovate, being only able to understand the meaning of God's revelation. Thus, in Islam, especially in Shi'ism, justice is not a matter of human creation, but rather of knowledge, nor does it depend entirely on human wisdom, but on the revelation by the grace of God. The importance of knowledge in Islam is such that the time prior to Islamic faith is referred to as *jāhiliyyah* ["Age of Ignorance"], for, according to Islam, *Allah has blessed the believers, as He raised up among them a messenger from among themselves, who recites to them His revelations, and purifies them, and teaches them the Scripture and wisdom; although before that they were in evident error* (Koran 3:164).

Not even the Imams are able to innovate, but merely *to reveal the hidden meaning of Quran*, whenever *men are ready to understand it*. But not even them, or the Prophet, are able to uncover the divine law by themselves, for even they must *not be hasty with the Quran before its inspiration is concluded*, and they must ask for it: "*My Lord, increase me in knowledge*" (Koran 20:114). However, after the greater occultation, only an imperfect and fallible knowledge of law could be attained through the ayatollahs, who could not *reveal new meanings of the Koran*, but *only repeat the meaning revealed by the eleven Imams* (Hoveyda 2003, p. 71). At this point, without an infallible interpreter, an irreversible breach between the divine and the mundane would be established, and interpretation would then become essential for the ability of the *Ummah* to resolve its day-to-day matters. This interpretation must not be understood in the sense of revelation of new content, but rather as an **imitation** of the already revealed content, a task that concerns the *mujtahids* (legal and theological scholars able to make correct, yet fallible, judgments). In this sense, Shi'ism was *in a position roughly parallel to the early Sunnis*, who held that, *after an early date, all fundamental legal principles had been decided on the basis of the Koran*, that is, *the practices of the Prophet and the consensus of scholar-jurists* would be the only roads to knowledge, since no room for new judgments was left (Keddie, 2006 p. 9). As the last Imam went into occultation, the Shi'ites renounced to the possibility of developing any new knowledge, while they were stripped of their political influence and became subject to the Sunni Caliphate. Without a spiritual guide, the Shi'a believers had no option but to acquiesce to real power. Resigned to have an imperfect knowledge and to remain in the periphery of Islam, Shi'ism developed a **quietist** stance towards the Sunni power. Banished from the public realm and overwhelmed by the Caliphal power, the Shi'ites faced the *problem of finding a balance between the ideal and*

the real, the perfection of Islam and the human and material facts of life (Hiro 2013, p. 20). They then resolved to begin an uneasy co-operation with the Sunni state, while deeply rejecting the Caliph's legitimacy. Although Shi'a militancy was common before Khomeini, and was broadly practice by the Ismaili branch, never had Shi'ism ventured into creating a powerful and capable state, able to overcome the dialectics of the real and the ideal, and to offer a promise of utopia on earth.

After rejecting the legitimacy of any government for centuries, and declaring any sovereign as a usurper, the speculative effort to build an ideal republic was indeed revolutionary. While traditional Shi'ism had considered the *Mahdi* as the only true ruler, Khomeini even dared to call for an *executive power and an executor* to be instituted, able to *impart order to all affairs of the country* (Khomeini 2017, pp. 18-19). Although defining an Islamic government as *the rule of divine law over men* (2017, p. 29), it became clear that his idea of state surpassed the traditional Shi'ite belief that, since *God alone is entitled to legislate, the government must do no more than implement the laws of Islam* (Omid 1992, p. 675). After all, Khomeini did introduce the concept of Republic into the Islamic doctrine, meaning that, despite the *tutelary features* of his state, *the notion of popular sovereignty remained a vital element*, creating a kind of paradox known as **dual sovereignty** (divine and popular), where *a modern conception of statehood* was constructed, rather than *traditional forms of Islamic governance such as the Caliphate system*, which required *not only the amendments to many religious precepts and principles, but also the adoption of modern processes* (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim 2016, pp. 455-457). By declaring that, *in the time of the Occultation of the Imam, it is still necessary that the ordinances of Islam relating to government be preserved and maintained*, Khomeini (2017, p. 33) leant towards the possibility of reaching the ideal through the real. The divine absolute, until then inaccessible for common knowledge, could now be approached from the domain of human affairs.

Khomeini was not alone when it came to alter traditional Shi'ism. Many others embraced the most radical notions of Shi'ism, which revolve around strong egalitarianism and social militancy, while maintaining the Neoplatonic elements of Shi'ite mysticism. However, Khomeini's eccentric political doctrine, showing no rigor when it came to politicize Islam, was not exempt of challenge from both, religious and lay, intellectuals and activists, which provides evidence of the revival of political thought that came with revolution. From among its main ideologues, **Ali Shariati** embodied the intellectuals'

role as *catalysts of cataclysmic revolutionary change* in Iran. Through its *Islamic liberation theology*, Shariati decisively contributed to *spearhead the process of reform of the Islamic Republic* (Sadri 2001, pp. 271, 279). Contrary to other critics of Westernization, Shariati did not hesitate in recognizing the progress that Enlightenment had provided to political Islam since the 1906 Revolution. He praised the progressive aspects that lied beneath Shi'ite theological and social doctrine, while strongly disapproving the *institutionalized clergy*, that had *moved away from enlightenment* and become *part and parcel of the ruling elite* (Omid 1992, p. 678). Better than any other, Shariati represented contemporary *public intelligentsia* in Iran, that is, *the transmission belt that reinterprets and conveys the ideas of intellectuals to the public* (Sadri 2001, pp. 271-272). He became the most daring attempt to express the meaning of Islam in universalistic terms, by presenting *politics and piety, ideology and faith, as interchangeable*, and by *using Islam to redefine*, rather than to counter, contemporary ideologies as Marxism or Anticolonialism (Mackey 1996, p. 265). Although the revolutionary masses of 1978-79 saw no meaningful difference between Khomeini and Shariati, the fact is that the latter despised the idea of the ulama becoming directly involved with politics. Moreover, Shariati distinguished his view of Islam by centering not on the Shi'ite epistemology and theory of justice, but on the liberating aspects of its doctrine. He thus developed an *Islamic humanism* focused on "Alid Shi'ism" (from Ali, first Imam) as a *movement of progress and revolution*, opposed to what Shariati saw as *aberrant forms of worship* (Keddie 2003, p. 202). Although prematurely dying in 1977, while at exile and under unclear circumstances, Shariati's innovative position had an immense appeal for the Iranian Marxist left, greatly inspiring the revolutionary Shi'ite response.

Other stances regarding political Shi'ism were those of **Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani** or **Muhammad Kazim Shariatmadari**, two Shi'ite religious thinkers that did, however, strongly oppose Khomeini's *Velayat-e faqih* doctrine. Elected to the 1979 Constituent Assembly by the highest number of votes, Ayatollah Taleqani had played a prominent role in the religious opposition to the Shah since the 1950s. As the closest religious leader to Shariati, Taleqani held a strong egalitarian view of Islam, which conceived wealth *as a means to implement Allah's will and not as an end in itself*, and advocated for its redistribution. Although Taleqani appeared as a liberal and moderate ulama, he held more orthodox views than those of Khomeini, stating that *the society that*

an Islamic regime would aim to create would parallel that which existed under Prophet Muhammad in Medina (Hiro 2013, p. 184). He did conduct a radical interpretation of traditional Sharia rules, declaring the common property of all goods and lands, with *God as the absolute owner*, and rejecting the privileges of *a priestly class*. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the *progressive aspects of Islamic morality* made of Taleqani the main link between the religious opposition and *lay groups like the National Front* (Keddie 2006, pp. 195-197). Taleqani declared his priority to be the consensus-building, ceasing his challenge to Khomeini in the early stages of revolution. He would die, however, under mysterious circumstances in September 1979. Similarly, Ayatollah Shariatmadari opposed the idea of *direct intervention by the ulama in the day-to-day running of the government* (Hiro 2013, p. 170). As one of the most traditionalist and moderate stances during the Islamic Revolution, Shariatmadari's distance with Khomeini illustrates the radical yet unorthodox views of the latter. As a defender of constitutional monarchy, who despised the social unrest fostered by Khomeini and opposed the U.S. embassy assault (Keddie 2006), Shariatmadari portrays the ironic fact that the most rigid defenders of Islamic traditions were actually deemed as counterrevolutionary, as was Shariatmadari himself when placed under house arrest in 1981. In any case, this vivid debate shows to what extent did the Shi'ite doctrine allow for multiple interpretations, and for even more varied ways of application.

In this sense, the Shi'ite communal aspects were updated by modern republicanism, rooted in the French Enlightenment, taking the form of a radical egalitarianism. Indeed, the republican concept of a *general will* has plainly adopted in Iran the meaning of a *total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community* (Rousseau; SC I, 6), to the extent that the ideas of national sovereignty, or the uplift of the underprivileged, actually lie beneath the religious passion of the most militant elements of revolution. The radicals' *revolutionary interpretation of Islam*, their emphasis on *its egalitarian dimensions*, and their *rigid position on the application of the Islamic moral code*, comes not from religious fervor, but from considering *laxity as threatening to bring back prerevolution, bourgeois middle-class cultural values and to undermine Islamic revolutionary zeal* (Hunter 1989, p. 140). To be sure, the egalitarian and militant version of republicanism, which shows how well Iranian revolutionaries were versed in Western political thought, has done more to radicalize the Revolution than any Islamic rigidity. Evidence of such influence is Khomeini's condemnation of dynastic

succession as *opposed to Islam* (2017, pp. 10-11), his referral to Islam as *prepared to subordinate individuals to the collective interest of society* (2017, p. 53), Taleghani's statement that *God is the absolute owner of the goods confided to us* (Keddie 2006, p. 197), his assertion that *ownership derives only from labor hands*, or Bani Sadr's vision that *the ownership of the land rests with the ummah* (Hiro 2013, pp. 183-185). Thus, modern Shi'ite political thought contradicts the Caliphate, along with other traditional forms of government, as well as the very basis of Islamic laws on inheritance and contract. Influenced by modern secular doctrines, Shi'ism has defined the Islamic Republic on the basis of *justice, independence, self-sufficiency*, along with *Islamic piety*, and has developed the vision of a *just Iran*, where *legal and social codes reflect Islamic mores together with an egalitarian economy with minimal class disparity* (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 9).

On the other hand, the traditional Neoplatonic elements of Shi'ism place the *Vilayat-e Faqih* doctrine at the *cornerstone of the Islamic polity*, as *necessary to ensure the Islamic nature of the laws* (Hiro 2013, p. 171-172). Coherently with the Islamic epistemology, Khomeini makes of the *faqih*, the jurist, the *true ruler*. Since *Islamic government is the rule of divine law over men* (indeed, *a government of law*), **knowledge of the law** becomes *necessary for the ruler* (Khomeini 2017, pp. 29-32). Of course, Khomeini is not referring here to the Greek concept of *techne* (τέχνη), as some legal technic, but to a knowledge that encompasses the understanding of the divine precepts, of all meanings of the revealed law. He refers to a knowledge that cannot be taught, nor attained by anyone, but only by those who know *the law perfectly and possess in full the virtue of justice* (Keddie 2006, p. 193). Thus, it is not a conventional *ulema* who may possess this knowledge of mystical connotations, but a sage man *learned in all aspects of faith, who possesses excellence in moral and belief, someone just and untainted by major sins* (Khomeini 2017, p. 32). This emphasis on excellency contradicts the republican elements of the state, creating an Islamic government parallel to Plato's *Republic*, where *philosophers rule as kings [...], and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place* (Book V, para. 473d). Such is the contradictory nature of the Islamic republic that, regarding the classical republican theory, it would fit best with Aristotle's notion of an aristocracy (*ἀριστοκρατία*). Indeed, in *Politics*, aristocracy is defined as the *government formed of the best men absolutely, and not merely of men who are good when tried by any given standard*, that is, a government where *magistrates* may be elected by citizens,

but always and exclusively *according to their merit* (Book IV, para. 7). Thus, although encompassing public participation, the significance given by the Islamic Constitution to **virtue** is such that it overshadows its republican features, shifting importance to its elitist elements.

On other grounds, the Islamic Revolution was as much a reaction against obsolete forms of sovereignty in the Muslim world, as it was against the **two-cultures** phenomenon, that is, *different cultures for the elite and the masses*. Although this conflict between the *secular* and the *religious* has always been present in Iran, the consciousness about such division only arose when *interaction with the West* started to *hasten and alter the nature of socio-economic change* (Keddie 2006, pp. 170-173). For this reason, the revolutionary quest for self-government and justice soon became a reaction against westernization with anti-imperialistic elements. Perhaps as the only element shared by every intellectual and revolutionary, the quest for an Iranian identity free from the **westoxification** (*Gharbzadegi*), a pejorative term coined by intellectual Jalal al Ahmad in the 1960s (Omid 1992), soon turned into an appeal of *the unorthodox elite* against the *orthodox mass* (Keddie 2006, p. 176). Thus, the impact of anti-imperialist, especially among the Marxist opposition groups, must be understood in the context of an anti-elite uprising. Regardless of how fallacious this assertion may be, the fact is that the Western modernity, especially *secularism*, became increasingly *associated with ever-increasing state control, and the failures of the state* came to be *explained in terms of the failure of modernist anti-religious policies* (Omid 1992, p. 676).

The powerful appeal of the anti-western stand may be explained by its multiclass nature, and by the influence that it had on the Marxist emancipation ideals of the Tudeh and the People's *Fedai'yan-e*, who became key in the success of the revolution. Originated as a **pan-Islamic** movement led by the activist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, the quest for a purified Iranian identity, linked to its Islamic sources while despising an elitist Persian past, would adapt to the many *nationalist and Third Worldist ideas*, which viewed *the Third World as uniformly exploited by an imperialist West* (Keddie 2006, p. 176). During the mid-20th century, Jalal Al Ahmad, contemporary to the Mosaddeq reaction against foreign dependency, came to associate *westoxification* with the ruling elite, identifying tyranny with the Shah as much as with the colonial powers (Omid 1992). Under the repressive Pahlavi system, which encouraged secularization and depicted the religious opposition as reactionary, the resentment against Westernization increased and

became linked to moral corruption. Consequently, the link between Islamic justice and independence necessarily adopted an anti-western stand, which came to see *foreign powers as hostile to an independent, Islamic Iran* (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 9). This paranoia against foreign intrusion and conspiracy, common to all revolutionary processes, would become the dominant trend after the assault on the U.S. embassy. The rage against the United States, followed by the Iraqi invasion of Iran, gave way to the idea that the revolution was under siege, and that national defense, even martyrdom, was a duty for every virtuous Muslim. To be sure, the anti-colonial and anti-western elements of the 1979 revolution would become common in the Third World politics, especially among the Islamic militants. Nevertheless, the notion of *westoxification* held by revolutionists was fallacious and far from honest, and their knowledge about the West was in fact schematic and prejudiced, as it was that of the Shah. While the revolutionary intellectuals intentionally ignored the contribution of Western ideas to democratic aspirations, the Shah profoundly misunderstood modernization, which he viewed *as a mere material process consisting of the importation of technology*. He did not sense *the necessity of ideological reforms*, and both him and his critiques failed to admit that *modernity was, first and foremost, a whole new philosophy upholding the basic dignity and freedoms of human beings* (Hoveyda 2003, pp. 98-99).

As a consequence of this varied context, Khomeini's doctrine is equally animated by hugely different sources and influences, making it contradictory in its very nature. Indeed, Khomeini seems to envisage a republican State, combined with Islamic values, where *people would assume responsibility for affairs in society and would be treated as equals before the law* (2017, p. 80), while, on the other hand, the masses would be supervised by an aristocratic government. As Rousseau's radical republicanism contended, Khomeini was convinced that no contradiction existed between an open society and a restricted set of institutions: it would be perfectly possible for the popular sovereignty *to restrict the government to a small number* (SC III, 3), since *power indeed may be transmitted, but not the will* (SC II, 1). In this sense, they both inherited a radical interpretation of Aristotle's mixed government. After all, Khomeinists seemed to believe that a contradictory two-pillar polity could survive, and that the ideal of the Islamic Republic could overcome such contradictions by establishing the *government of God* on Earth (Hiro 2013, p. 169). In fact, Khomeini was not genuinely interested in building up institutions. His approach to government remains *simplistic*, under the *notion of a*

guardianship of minor, as he keeps a blind faith on a *devout populace* who would *willingly obey the rule of God* (Omid 1992, p. 688), and under the conviction that the problems of contemporary Iran were due to the absence of Islamic values and to the corruption of the West. Under this vision, the virtuous populace, no matter under which government, as long as it was free from secularism, would expand the revolution and deliver the Islamic justice to all the oppressed. He actually relied more on a mystical general will than on the guarantees of the promised justice. However, the Republic's downfall into a spiral of repression would prove that Khomeini's disciples did neglect the real consensus building, something that Shariati or Taleghani had relentlessly insisted on.

11. The Islamic Republic of Iran

That the Islamic Republic was far more than an Islamic revival can be inferred from the very pages of Khomeini's *Velayat e-Faqeeh*. The impassable contradictions of Khomeini's words, between popular sovereignty and the authority of the *faqih*, not different to those of his Islamic contemporaries, announce the revolutionary nature of the Islamic Republic. Just as the French revolutionists hoped to revive the spirit of Roman antiquity, the Iranian people undertook the challenge of bringing back the virtues and models of early Islam. The utopia promised by the revolutionary state was inspired by a pristine past, in contrast to the moral decay of Western modernity and secularism. However, just like the men that carried out the 1789 Revolution *had come, much against their will, to a point of no return* (Arendt 2017, p. 65), so would the Iranians discover that, in fact, not only did they not aim at, but they also failed in, reviving the times of the Prophet. Instead, what resulted from the Iranian political thought was an extraordinary work of creative imagination: nothing less than the creation of a modern Islamic state, a political entity able to represent the collective will of the ordinary men, while searching a promised Islamic ideal, a Republic, indeed, *capable of integrating the diverse ideals of freedom and modernization in the context of traditional values and customs* (Mackey 1997, p. 284).

Without any doubt, the most pressing matter of the Islamic Republic, the main point of contention which expressed the innovative concern of the 1979 Revolution, was the question of **sovereignty**. Such matter came to express every contradiction comprised within the Shi'ite doctrine, based on which, Khomeini declared that *sovereignty belongs to God alone and law is His decree and command*, in such way that *the legislative power*

and competence to establish laws belongs exclusively to God Almighty (Khomeini 2017, p. 29). However, Khomeini's doctrine was not unanimously accepted by other intellectuals. On other grounds, the revolutionary ideologue Ali Shariati saw in Shi'ism *a motor of liberation* attributing sovereignty directly to the people. He stressed that no *mystic presence* was needed to unite the *ummah*, for the community is united by its own movement around its leader. Contrary to the *Velayat-e Faqeeh* doctrine, Shariati argued that the imamate is not an investment of authority through God's sovereignty, but rather *a systematization of leadership*. In this sense, Shariati secularized the divine sovereignty, arguing that both the spiritual and political leadership of the Imam would be *willingly accepted* by the people (Keddie 2006, p. 202). His central point against the clerical rule was, however, his conviction that the clergy had *moved away from enlightenment*, and that *institutionalization* of religion would be contrary to the spirit of the early Shi'a clergy, which remained *embattled and represented the people and the resistance movement* (Omid 1992, p. 678). Moreover, clerical leaders as Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani did contradict Khomeini's doctrine as well, denouncing *the harm that a priestly class could do in some societies*. Therefore, Taleghani highlighted that a *mujtahid* should be *subject to the same law, with no privileges, and at the same level as others in assemblies* (Keddie 2006, p. 198).

In fact, the very *Velayat-e Faqeeh* doctrine contradicts its own principles. Khomeini constantly confuses authority with sovereignty. While *Shi'ism lacks an overarching central authority*, for it lies in the hands of the Hidden Imam, *but he has not appointed a person to act on his behalf* (Ghobadzadeh and Rahim 2016, p. 455), Khomeini went ahead to declare that sovereignty belongs to God and *authority is vested in the fuqaha* (2017, p. 35). If by this statement Khomeini means that there are theological grounds for a clerical government, in the sense that God invests the *faqih* of authority over the *ummah*, then he is speculating beyond Islamic principles, for the only authority vested by God belongs to the Imam. Thus, if a person other than the Imam is to hold authority over the community, such authority cannot derive from God's sovereignty, but from the very *ummah*. In this sense, Shariati's critique on Khomeini's deviation is extremely acute, as no Shi'ite precept ever refers to authority being granted by God directly to a temporary ruler. God only provides for an eternal ruler on earth, the Imam, through his sole divine sovereignty. Therefore, Shariati correctly interprets Islamic doctrine when arguing that the authority and leadership among the community must

depart from the *ummah* itself, since God could never grant authority on a fallible individual. If someone other than the Imam is to be granted with authority, meaning *government, administration, implementation of the sacred laws* (Khomeini 2017, p. 34), then this authority must come from the people's sovereignty, for no mortal is worthy of holding the power that a divinely appointed authority implies.

In any case, the Islamic Constitution tried to reach a compromise regarding the matter of sovereignty, as article 53 states that *Absolute sovereignty over the world and man belongs to God, and it is He who has placed man in charge of his social destiny*. As the reader may note, even such a cautious statement is already innovative and revolutionary, not to mention the way in which this same article concludes: *No one can deprive man of this God-given rights nor subordinate it to the interests of a given individual or right*. However, the matter of sovereignty continues to be controversial. Khomeini's statement that *the legislative power derives from God, that no one has the right to legislate, and no law may be executed except the law of the Divine Legislator* (2017, p. 29), overtly contradicts the republican fascination for popular sovereignty and the enshrinement of the nation as a political community. Indeed, while the Islamic Constitution provides in Article 57 for *legislative, executive, and judicial powers*, which *arise out of the right of national sovereignty*, and declares these powers as *independent of each other*; Khomeini repeatedly rejects national sovereignty and conceives the legislative power as a *simple planning body, that takes the place of the legislative assembly*. He also avoids the concept of separation of powers, which he substitutes by the term *branches of government* (2017, p. 29), and article 4 of the Constitution established that *the faqih has divine authority to rule and is accountable only to God*.

Moreover, the contradictory features of the Islamic Republic created a rare equilibrium between *the people as a political force* (Hiro 2013, p. 163), and the guardian institutions that, *knowing divine commands and exercising justice, may govern Iran with equity* (Keddie 2006, p. 19). These trends are crystallized into the different institutions created by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, providing for one of the most complex and intricate structures of modern political systems. And, at the same time, both features represent two different models of state and society: a republican society with a strong participation from individuals, along with an aristocratic guidance of political affairs, resulting in a set of institutions with different sources of legitimacy.

Firstly, the Islamic features of the Republic are embodied by a set of tutelary institutions, almost of aristocratic nature, devoted to the guardianship of the Iranian society. In this sense, the very core of Khomeini's doctrine, the *faqih*, remains the center of the Iranian politics under the leading figure of the **Supreme Leader** (*Rahbar-e Mo'azzam-e Irān*), designated by Article 5 of the Constitution as *the governance and leadership of the nation*, that is, as the *just and pious faqih acquainted with the circumstances of his age*, who shall possess *administrative ability* and be *accepted as Leader by the majority of the People*. Moreover, article 110 lists the *Rahbar's* duties and powers, among which are included the position of commander-in-chief of the armed forces, as well as the Revolutionary Guard Corps, the authority to appoint the president, based on the election results, to dismiss him in case of prior decision by the Supreme Court, to approve presidential candidates and to appoint the highest judicial authorities. But, most importantly, Article 110 invests him with the right to appoint the Islamic jurists on the Council of Guardians, the foremost religious institution after the Supreme Leader, to supervise *the proper implementation of the general policies of the system* and to *determine the overall politics of the Islamic Republic system*. In short, he *combines the roles of the head of state and the chief justice*, whose authority derives directly from the event of the *occultation of [...] the missing Twelfth Imam* (Hiro 2013, pp. 172-173), being the ultimate guarantee of *consistency with Islamic law*, as both the highest political and religious authority (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

As the second highest tutelary institution, the **Guardian Council** is charged with the main guardianship position regarding the everyday body of legislation. Its mixed membership, however, reflects the very mixed nature of the Islamic Republic, as the Council is composed, according to Article 91, by six Islamic jurists, *conscious of current needs and the issues of the day*, directly appointed by the Supreme Leader; and by six lawyers, *specializing in different areas of law*, elected by the *National Consultative Assembly* (that is, the majlis). Consequently, the Guardian Council is the main guarantor of the principle of legality, meaning both the compatibility with the Constitution's general principles and with Islamic principles. This way, the Guardian Council is in charge of *setting the parameters of Iranian electoral democracy* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), using as directly applicable legal sources the tangible instruments of the republic (the Constitution, legislation, or jurisprudence), as well as the precepts of *the unwritten constitution*, defined as the religious restraints rooted in Islamic Shi'ite law (Hoveyda

2003, p. 72), including the Koran, the Sunna and the secondary sources. Among its other functions, the Guardian Council *vets all candidates for the parliament, the presidency, and the Assembly of Experts* (Freedom House 2020). The Guardian Council comes to portray the paradoxical role of Islam in the Islamic Republic, both as a *key impediment to democratization*, for it continues to suppress opposition or minoritarian positions against the religious establishments, and as an obstacle against *efforts by the ruling clergy to forge a close authoritarian system* (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim 2016, p. 455). This way, the role of the Guardian Council suppresses any opposition to the basic Islamic precepts, but it also serves as a guarantee of legality against arbitrariness or abuses by the ruling elite.

Other tutelary institutions vested with religious authority are the **Expediency Discernment Council**, established in the 1988 Constitutional amendment to mediate in disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council, which is elected by the Supreme Leader and has increasingly been charged with the supervision of government; and the **Assembly of Experts**, charged by Article 107 with the election of the Supreme Leader and mandated with overseeing the Supreme Leader, although *oversight is carried out in secret committee, and it is unclear whether experts have ever sought to meaningful check wither Khomeini or Khamenei* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). In any case, the Assembly of Experts is a considerable exception to the rule of appointment for most meaningful tutelary institutions, as its eighty-eight jurists are directly elected by the people to an eight-year term. This way, a mild democratic legitimacy is introduced in the election and activity of the Supreme Leader, since members of the Assembly of Experts are directly elected and act as an institutional constraint to the Supreme Leader. The fact that the Assembly of Experts is vested with a popular base explains the role of this institution as a Constituent Assembly after the proclamation of the Islamic Republic on April 1, 1979. After both secular and religious groups demanded further debate on the original constitutional draft submitted by an appointed committee, the newly elected Assembly of Experts was charged with the elaboration of a definitive Constitution. The result was a *far more clerically oriented and potentially authoritarian constitution*, in contrast with the first draft, which *did not mention velayat-e faqih and gave no powers to the clergy* (Keddie 2006, p. 247). In this sense, the Assembly of Experts seems to portray the Islamic social contract pursued by the revolutionaries' main thesis, for it introduced the interests of the Muslim masses, providing for both the Islamic and popular base of the cornerstone of the Republic: The Supreme Leader.

On the other hand, the **President** of the Islamic Republic serves as head of the state since the 1988 Constitutional amendment, which removed the position of Prime Minister. Contrary to the tutelary institutions, the President is directly elected by the people and invested with democratic legitimacy, being the most powerful political figure after the Supreme Leader. According to Article 113, the President has a residual executive authority, for he heads *the executive power except in matters pertaining directly to the Leadership*, as well as the responsibility for implementing the constitution and ordering relations among the three powers. Elected by an absolute majority of the electorate, the President serves for a renewable four-year term and must be a male Shi'a Muslim. While he does *appear to reflect the choice of the electorate among the available candidates*, the Guardian Council filters the presidential candidates prior to the election (Freedom House 2020). In short, the complex institutional structure of the Islamic Republic leaves unclear how the balance of power between the clergy and the elected figures must be kept. While Khomeini exercised the role of an arbitrator between clergy and president, Khamenei's leaning toward the most conservative branches of the Republic has often led to a deadlock between the elected and the appointed institutions. The fact is that, as of today, the liberalizing and reformist position usually belongs to elected institutions, including the President or the majles, with the exception of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as opposed with the conservative tutelary bodies. Whether a proper balance of power between the President and the clergy is maintained will depend on the political ability and disposition to negotiate of the Supreme Leader, but the fact is that contemporary Iranian politics increasingly portray a direct rivalry between the President and the Supreme Leader, two leading figures of the Republic with opposing sources of legitimacy.

Regarding the unicameral legislative power, the majles, officially known as the **Islamic Consultative Assembly**, comprise 290 members directly elected to a four-year term by geographical district, reserving five seats for religious minorities. According with the Constitution, the Majles *legislate laws on all issues within the limits set by the Constitution* (Article 71), *explain and interpret ordinary laws* (Article 73), *investigate, and evaluate all the affairs of the nation* (Article 76), as well as oversee the functioning of government and, specifically, of the President of the Republic (Articles 87-89). Although the Majles mostly function as a regular legislature, its power inherently contradicts that of the Guardian Council, *charged with determining whether laws it passes are permissible under the Constitution and Islamic precepts* (Council on Foreign Affairs

2020). While half of the Council are legal scholars elected by the Parliament, who supervise the well-functioning of the legislature according to Constitution, the other half are theologians appointed unilaterally by the Supreme Leader. Thus, just as the presidential figure, the powers of the majles as holders of national sovereignty are challenged by the unelected institutions that stem from the *absolute sovereignty* belonging to God (Article 56). Once again, it is in the very nature of the Islamic Republic that its centers of power will continuously have to confront each other when defining the future of the nation, with each institution claiming its own righteousness based on different sources of legitimacy.

Finally, the judiciary, described as an independent power by article 156, is headed by the **Supreme Judicial Council**. This Council sets de standards and criteria for the establishment of the **Supreme Court**, whose President and Prosecutor General are required to be mujtahids – practitioners of *ijtihad*, or “reflecting effort” – and are ultimately appointed by the Supreme Leader. Among the current functions usually conferred to the judiciary, Article 156 includes the responsibility *for restoring public rights and promoting justice and the legitimate freedoms* and for *overseeing the quality of the execution of the laws*. Moreover, the Minister of Justice, appointed by the President from a list of proposed candidates submitted by the Supreme Judicial Council, oversees the relationship between the judiciary and the other two powers (Hiro 2013, p. 175).

As a consequence of the intricate structure of the Islamic republic, a set of competing centers of power, with opposing sources of legitimacy, was created by the 1979 Constitution. Although the Council of Experts imprinted the final draft with the central notion of *Velayat-e Faqih and divine sovereignty*, upholding the *clergy’s divine right to political authority* [...], *the notion of popular sovereignty remained strong and could not be dismissed altogether* (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim 2016, p. 456). As mentioned before, the Shi’ite foundation of the Republic has been as much an obstacle to liberalization as it has been to the creation of a closed authoritarian system, if not of a totalitarian one. In fact, the *notoriously amorphous ecclesiastical structure* of Shi’a Islam, which *provides for an unsteady foundation for an Islamic theocracy*, and the lack of *theocratic rigor* found within other religions (Sadri 2001, p. 275), has turned the Shi’ite elements of the Republic into an **unwritten constitutional law**. This way, *the lack of legitimacy of any government since the absence of the Twelfth Imam*, and the statement that any *provisional occupant of the house* [...] *is in any case a usurper* (Hoveyda 2003,

pp. 73-74), explains the fact that *mutually exclusive and utterly incompatible interpretations of the Islamic Republic overlap* (Sadri 2001, p. 272). Since the beginning, the Islamic elements of the Revolution have actually been a key guarantee for pluralism and ideological dissent, rather than the framework for a fundamentalist and authoritarian project.

To be sure, as almost any revolutionary process, the Iranian Revolution did end in tragedy. Since the course of revolution came to be decided by duress, and the initially representative bodies became instruments of extermination, the Islamic Republic ended up as a repressive system unable to crystallize the landmarks of revolution. Social cohesion and allegiance would depend more on the advances in the Iraqi battlefields, than on the legitimacy of the new republic. The radicalization of events, however, cannot be solely attributed to Islam, but rather to the sectarian and militant interpretation performed by Khomeinists. It is rather explained by the totalitarian notions of unanimity and virtuosity put forth by the revolutionary militancy, which would, ultimately, lead to violence and ruin the accomplishments of the young Republic. More than the tutelary institutions imprinted in the Constitution, the main factor for the authoritarian drift of the revolution was the *systematic pattern of repression* set by, in Khomeini's words, "*the police force of 36 million*", that is, the *armed youths* and popular masses spontaneously organized in committees and revolutionary tribunals. The politics of terror, which transformed any *non-conformity* into *suspect* (Sciolino 1983, pp. 900-901), are explained, more by the impact that modern politics and statehood had on Islamic tradition, than by religion itself. This helps to understand why even more orthodox Muslims, such as Mehdi Bazargan or Sayyid Mahmoud Taleghani, who were far more attached to tradition than Khomeini (Hiro 2013), were actually known as moderates, for they opposed social radicalism and advocated for the end of purges. Such trend comes to show that the line separating loyalty from hypocrisy, virtue from un-Islamic behavior, was in fact a political division.

Perhaps more than any other religion, Islam and politics are intensely intertwined, as Islamic Shi'ite doctrine lays down that God alone is entitled to legislate, so *government must do no more than implement the laws of Islam* (Omid 1992, p. 675). Thus, there is no full compliance with Islamic principles without proper implementation of Islamic law. During the early expansion of Islam, the Prophet did not only convey the revelation and expound and interpret the articles of faith and the ordinances and institutions of Islam,

but he also *undertook the implementation of law and the establishment of the ordinances of Islam, thereby, bringing into being the Islamic state* (Khomeini 2017, p. 18). More than in any other religion, the Islamic way of life is attached to a political realm able to promulgate, interpret, and finally implement, the Islamic law. Nevertheless, Islamic politics have proved to be *both sufficiently flexible to accommodate the vast and varied countries and cultures that it ruled, and sufficiently cohesive to create a sense of identity and a semblance of unity* (Omid 1992, p. 675). The fact that Islam aims to provide a political and legal framework does not make it impervious to contemporary political elements, such as republicanism or secularization, nor does it make it inconsistent with political freedom. Instead, Islam has been subject to as many political interpretations as possible since its origins. Thus, Islamic values did not prevent the 1978-79 uprising from becoming a revolution, as the contemporary interpretation given to Shi'a Islam was truly innovative. The flexibility of Islamic political and legal doctrines is evinced in the very history of the Islamic world, where multiple interpretations have addressed the gap between an idyllic society and the reality of power. Proof of this has been the transit from the Sunni Caliphate, conceived as the only righteous government following the Prophet's succession, to the diluted Ottoman sultanate. The fact that *Islam entered the modern age under the leadership of Ottoman Turks* is explained by the feebleness of Islamic societies after the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate, when the Ottomans proved *unequal to the task of fending off European rivals* (Hiro 2013, p. 44). This way, Islamic orthodoxy adapted to the demands of power politics, and the title of Caliph was *de facto* earned by the Ottoman rulers. This is how a dynasty that had remained peripheral to Islam until the mid-1400s, later became considered as the political entity inheriting the guardianship of faith, solely based on their military power and prestige.

Likewise, the Iranian republican interpretation of Islam, although haunted by the revolutionary excess and the savagery of war, is the adaptation of *Islam as a complete social system* (Hiro 2013, p. 1) to modernity, creating *a hybrid, a jumble of old and new realities spawned by the revolutionary situation* (Ajami 1988, p. 136). In this sense, the 1979 Revolution, and the republic it gave birth to, is not an expression of Islamic fundamentalism in strict sense, contrary to Saudi Arabia or to Taliban rule in Afghanistan, if by fundamentalism we understand *the effort to define the fundamentals of a religious system and adhere to them, as well as to protect the purity of Islamic precepts from the adulteration of speculative exercises* (Hiro 2013, pp. 1-2). The Islamic republic was,

precisely, *a speculative exercise*. While Islam was able to channel the social unrest and to express the popular grievances against the Shah, once the revolution occurred, it proved unable to provide by itself a new political entity. Therefore, Islamic political thought had to be combined with, and inspired by, contemporary movements such as egalitarianism, republicanism, or anti-imperialism, involving *new interpretations of the old texts and practices, interpretations sometimes attacked by the most traditional and orthodox critiques* (Keddie 2006, p. 212). The fact that the Shi'ite ulama has decisively taken part in politics, relinquishing the quietist *Shi'a belief in the illegitimacy of any government and its suspicion of power* (Omid 1992, p. 675), is already a flexibilization in the Shi'ite doctrine. Contrary to common belief, revolutionary Iran is not a fundamentalist state, nor it is a mere religious awakening, but *a modern Islamic state capable of organizing great campaigns, where the paralyzing gap between state and society has been closed, and with politics clearly in command* (Ajami 1988, pp. 136; 144). In fact, the creation of the Islamic Republic was nothing if not an adaptation of Enlightenment combined with traditional Islamic values. What may still be surprising for many is the violence that Enlightenment and modern ideologies, more than any Islamic tradition, are capable of triggering.

12. The Aftermath of Revolution

If the seizure of the U.S. embassy, in November 1979, marked the turning point of the revolution, the Iraqi invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980, accelerated the radicalization and repressive ways of revolutionary Islam. Every new crisis was then used *as a means to implement a successful two-pronged strategy: systematic extermination of enemies and ongoing state-building that relied more and more on direct clerical leadership* (Sciolino 1983, p. 897). After Bazargan's resignation, the secularist Abolhasan Bani Sadr won the January 1980 election with an overwhelming majority, becoming the first President of the Islamic Republic. He would, however, face the immediate opposition of the Khomeinist IRP (Islamic Republic Party), which soon took over constitutional control of the country. By the fall of 1980, Khomeinists controlled all significant institutions except the presidency: the Majlis, with Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a disciple of Khomeini with great political ability, as speaker; the Council of Guardians, since members are elected by Khomeini as Supreme Leader and by the Majlis, controlled by IRP; and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (*Pasdaran*), which became the *paralegal military arm of the Revolutionary Council* and were key to *undercutting Bazargan's government*. Composed of *zealous volunteers from the poor and the humble*

empowered by the revolution, the Revolutionary Guards actually *belonged to the mullahs, not to the state*, and was essential to ensuring the loyalty of the army to the IRP (Mackey 1996, pp. 289-209). The Revolutionary Guards was perhaps *the most important post-revolutionary creation*, and since they had their own budget, recruiting system and intelligence service, they became an independent body from the army (Sciolino 1983, p. 900), at the sole orders of the radical clergy. With the consolidation of *de facto* power, the IRP became a faction more than a political party. It was, in fact, *a collection of various religious and secular individuals with contradictory tendencies*, more than *a structured mass party* (Rouleau 1980, p. 19), centered on alienating the Republican institutions. Khomeini himself promoted the corruption of the very institutions embodied in the Constitution, when the IRP captured them one by one, while sieging Bani Sadr's government. Through the *disenfranchised mobs from the masses of the urban and the rural underclass*, the IRP ultimately *suppressed any opposition and led widespread purges in all institutions* (Sciolino 1983, p. 898).

With the hostage crisis, the revolution discovered *the common enemy as a unifying principle within the nation itself that would be valid for domestic politics as well*. As it has happened in every revolution before, the Islamic Revolution sought *to detect a common enemy*, not only in the United States or in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but also *outside the range of foreign affairs*. Only then, under *the unifying power of the common national enemy* (Arendt 2017, p. 122), could such thing as the orthodox masses exist, when war was declared to both the revisionist powers and the hidden enemies within the revolution. The hostage crisis actually consolidated the power of the IRP and the complex of institutions it had created, since it compelled *the moderate parties and public figures to remain silent or adopt an attitude sufficiently ambiguous so as not to attract accusations of defending the United States* (Rouleau 1980, p. 13). The crisis escaped the effective control of both Bazargan and Bani Sadr and, since its resolution was commissioned to the IRP-controlled Majlis, it was soon instrumentalized by Khomeinists. Once it started, the hostage crisis was deliberately prolonged until after the Islamic Constitution had been passed, so as to prevent any serious debate on the matter by the moderates. Only when they *no longer served a purpose in the contest with secular government*, were the American hostages released *444 days after their seizure*. Since those events, *the word "moderate" carried treasonous overtones*, and the revolution started absorbing the republic itself. Once Bani Sadr had been displaced from the real

decision-making, decisions came to be taken by the instrumentalized rage of the dispossessed mobs, and *revolutionary Islam would, in time, destroy the secular president of the Islamic Republic* (Mackey 1996, p. 299).

The repressive downfall of the revolution was already in place after the Council of the Cultural Revolution, established by Khomeini in May 1980, began the dismantling of Iran's cultural and intellectual life and achievement. Beginning with an ultimatum to the opposition to leave the universities, the Cultural Revolution culminated with a campaign *to eradicate vestiges of Iran's pre-Islamic culture*. Restrictions on the press ended in prison terms for offenses against Islam, ancient punishments resurfaced, and *hejab* was imposed on the entire female population (Mackey 1996, p. 298). The war for the culture consumed all of society, as it *stripped the civil culture of any sense of its own worth and efficacy*. A *reign of virtue* was created, full of *prohibitions and pretensions*, where *vigilant groups and enforcers* have continued to operate ever since, *instructing the faithful in the proper ways of righteousness* (Ajami 1988, p. 148). The ultimate descent of the Revolution into a Reign of Terror would however be triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980. Although initially a defensive war, the Iranians soon turned the conflict into a revolutionary war that, far from what Saddam Hussein had calculated, *combined Shi'i and nationalist fervor* in Iran, *revived the armed forces and strengthened the Pasdaran and Khomeinists* (Keddie 2006, p. 251). War with Iraq actually *helped the process of Iran's state-building* and the consolidation of the repressive patterns of revolution. In a similar way to what revolutionary France accomplished with its foreign wars, the Islamic revolution began to be feared, *to be taken seriously, when its neighbors decided to march and overthrow its regime but were decisively turned back by fervent fighting forces* (Sciolino 1983, p. 904). What had started as the Iraqi invasion of southwestern Iran, soon became an export of revolution. Although at great human cost, Iran developed the ambition *to become a party to the affairs of the Arab world*. Khomeini's challenge on the Iraqi state, and an Iraqi Islamic republic as condition for any peace treaty, was followed by the interference in Lebanon's communal unrest and the creation of *Hezbollah* in 1985 (Ajami 1988, p. 141). More meaningful would be, however, the consequences of war for the Iranian domestic affairs.

While Bani Sadr, as Commander-in-Chief, saw in the Iraqi offense an opportunity to consolidate his position while running Iran from the war front, so did the Khomeinists. On the pretext of wartime emergency, the IRP increased repression and consolidated

control. The Revolutionary Guards Corps merged *with armed volunteers, organized into self-governing units*, which led pervasive purges on the army's leadership, replacing necessary components with members of the paramilitary local committees. The result was *a formidable military force* that not only *stunned Iraq*, but it also overcame the ability of Bani Sadr to ensure the loyalty of the army (Sciolino 1983, pp. 904-905). Blaming Bani Sadr for mismanaging the war front and allowing the Iraqis to advance through Iranian territory, the radical Khomeinists ensured the control of the war affairs and led a domestic war from the outside. Encouraging the martyrdom of fervent Shi'ite believers against the Iraqi ranks, the IRP took advantage of the national mobilization, using the *levée en masse* to alienate all Iranians regardless of their political allegiance to revolution. At this point, the pattern of all revolutions incurring in their own revolutionary wars was fulfilled by the Iranian Revolution. By then, *the whole question of politics, including [...] the problem of form of government, became a matter of foreign affairs*. All debate around the direction of revolution was turned into an affair of foreign aggression, as every internal position would be labeled as treasonous. The revolution finally *disintegrated into war, into civil war within and foreign wars without*, and, as it had occurred in almost every other revolutionary process, *violence, and not power, was to turn the scale* (Arendt 2017, pp. 144-145). As the radical clergy turned the defense of the nation into *a testing ground of the revolution and its ideology, an internal war [...] raged over the control of the Islamic Republic* (Mackey 1996, p. 302). The Majlis, who had already lost all sense as a republican institution, declared Bani Sadr to be politically incompetent, and Khomeini, by virtue of his powers as Supreme Leader, dismissed him. Bani Sadr then went into hiding and, partnering with the *Mujahedin-e-Khalq*, a radical Islamist politico-military organization, called for an uprising.

What then followed was what Brinton has depicted as the *Reign of Terror and Virtue* that has become *one of the uniformities we can list for [almost] all revolutions*. At this stage, *politics becomes as real, as pressing, as unavoidable [...] as food and drink*. Political indifference, *that mainstay of the modern state, becomes impossible*, and the participation in *the common thing, in the drama of revolutionary state* is simply inevitable. By then, revolutionary Islam would not even leave the average man to himself. Participation in national defense, active affiliation to *the revolutionary mania*, become a cure for the *unrepublican vices*. What the Reign of Terror actually achieves is *each old habit sloughed off, each definite break with the past, to increase the strain upon*

everybody, or nearly everybody, in the social system (Briton 1965, pp. 177-203). In this context, the Hezbollah militias attacked the *Mujahedin* headquarters and the rallies against Bani Sadr's impeachment. An armed struggle then began by June 1981, when a bomb killed more than seventy men at an IRP conference, including its secretary general, Mohammad Beheshti, four ministers, and twenty-five majlis deputies. As executions took place in massive numbers, turmoil was sensed by the economy and the political landscape. The Iranian population started to feel the effects of economic hardship and stagnation, as goods were rationed and distributed through the network of mosques. Anarchy spread as the peripheral ethnic groups and tribes violently expressed their grievances against a disintegrating central government. Chaos burst as the clerics, now in possession of the entire state through the Revolutionary Guards' purges, dispensed patronage from government funds and organizations. As they failed to deliver stability, turmoil enveloped the technocrats and professionals, who soon fled in fear (Mackey 1996).

At this point, the pressures against the Islamic Republic seemed to signal the triumph of a counterrevolution. The regime did not collapse however, but it responded by replacing the assassinated leaders, conducting the July 1981 presidential elections, and waging a reign of terror that would have its peak until the spring of 1982. As both President Mohammad-Ali Raja'i and prime minister Mohammad Javad Bahonar were simultaneously assassinated, the militant cleric Ali Khamenei won the October 1981 presidential election, the third ones in a lapse of twenty-one months. As their call for mass rising had failed, the head of the Mojahedin and Bani Sadr fled to France in late July 1981, and Iran was ultimately stripped of any viable opposition. In response to the violent assassination campaign put forth by the Mujahedin, which had killed over two hundred government functionaries by August 1981, the authorities carried out the massive execution of Mujahedin and Tudeh members. For a period of three months, fifty people a day were routinely executed among anyone suspicious of real or imagined connections with the political left, regardless of its secular or religious nature. Moreover, the radical phase of the revolution included the nullification of all un-Islamic modern codes by the Supreme Judicial Council in August 1982, the reintroduction of physical punishments by the majles, and the imposition of an ideological commitment to the revolution (Keddie 2006). Although Khomeini's "Eight Point Declaration", issued on December 15, 1982, officially ended the executions campaign against the Mujahedin, terror would remain enshrined *as a means to retain power and as a legitimate tool of government* (Mackey

2006, p. 308). The authorities kept acting against any suspected opposition, arresting most members of the Tudeh by early 1983, and purging the army of dissenting officers. Ultimately, although aligning with the government, the remaining left – the Tudeh and the Fedai'yan – were declared illegal in May 1983. In many ways, repression continued to be pervasive throughout the decade of 1980. Further political purges included supporters of Khomeini since the beginning of the revolution, such as Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, put under house arrest in 1987, or former Revolutionary Guard's officer Mehdi Hashemi, executed that very same year. The physical elimination of dissidence culminated in 1988, when Khomeini *took several important steps to weaken political opponents and strengthen the state and his followers*, with the mass-execution of thousands of dissidents across Iran between July and December 1988 (Keddie 2006, p. 260).

Only after 1989 did the Islamic regime show signs of normalization. By then, the country had been ruled for almost a decade by the same leading figures as president (Ali Khamenei), prime minister (Mir-Hussein Mousavi) and parliamentary speaker (Hashemi Rafsanjani), which created *a sense of continuity and order among ordinary Iranians* (Hiro 2013, p. 207). The transition to the aged, post-revolutionary, authoritarian regime that today remains, was introduced by the pragmatic decision, encouraged by Rafsanjani, to accept the United Nations Resolution 598, which called for a cease-fire with Iraq. Thus, on July 20, 1988, the Iran-Iraq war, which had caused at least 700,000 deaths, ended after seven years with no significant gains from any of the contenders. Constitutional revision soon followed and was performed by President Khamenei in April 1989, which eliminated the position of Prime Minister, adopting the presidential form, and *increased the political and decreased the religious nature of the faqih*, stating that *preference for the faqih should be based on his public support* (Keddie 2006, p. 261). With Ayatollah Khomeini's death on June 3, 1989, the Islamic Republic fully entered a new phase, with Ali Khamenei as new Supreme Leader, aligned with Hashemi Rafsanjani as President of the Republic. This new leadership, headed by the pragmatist views of Rafsanjani, conducted economic reconstruction and to some extent improved Iran's international relations. Along with the widespread disillusionment and public discontent, the kind of *reawakening to mundane reality*, where *Iran's impossible revolution* seemed to end, the *wide chasm opened between what men and women profess and what they do* (Ajami 1988, pp. 148, 155), does indeed resemble to the Thermidorean reaction that follows all

revolutions. As Brinton described, some kind of *convalescence from the fever of revolution* brings a *slow and even return* to normal ways of statecraft and government, where *the politically proscribed are amnestied* and the pressures *applied to ordinary men are relaxed* (Brinton 1965, pp. 205-209).

In this sense, Iran did transit *from reacting against the past to realistically dealing with the present*, with a new leadership setting out *physical reconstruction, economic reform, and a diplomatic thaw* (Wright 2000, p. 135). Nevertheless, the extent of the Thermidorian reaction must not be magnified in the case of the Islamic Republic, for no *formal restoration of the old regime*, nor any replacement of the revolutionary elites and policies, have been significantly performed. The *permanent revolution* that Iranian leaders boast of is indeed fallacious, for the regime has entered a phase of self-preservation, and the *continues crisis and perpetual nightmare* (Brinton 1965, pp. 225-228), to which Iran was once subjected, are partially over. But no *return to the old habits* is possible for Iranians, and no full *reconciliation of word and flesh, ideal and real*, has actually been accomplished (Brinton 1965, pp. 234-235). The *more moderate consensus* that since 1989 has emerged, did carry out *economic reconstruction* and accomplish an *alleviation of the people's financial hardships* (Hunter 1989, p. 142). To some extent, social restrictions have also been relaxed, but this very partial liberalization must not conceal the fact that the Islamic Republic remains today a closed and highly restrictive authoritarian regime.

Under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, lacking the political ability and wit of Khomeini, political divisions have reappeared, and paralysis has set in. The promises of further liberalization during the so-called "Second Republic", from 1989 to 1997, remained largely unfulfilled (Wright 2000), although Iranians have since then continued to express, through votes and word, their desire for actual reform. Regardless of the power of elections, which have withstood political manipulation and do provide *unanticipated outcomes and meaningful power shifts* (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim 2016, p. 455), the fact is that the pervasive intrusion of the tutelary institutions has ensured that only a tolerated opposition is able to survive. The preservation of the regime has thus become the main driving force of its public policies, and no significant dissent is allowed to enter the political spectrum. The change from *popular appeal to structural alliance* that many expected to happen (Sciolino 1983, p. 920), did happen, but it never provided for an exchange of opinion between equals. It rather signaled the ideological bankruptcy of the

Islamic Revolution, giving path to the most conventional forms of tyranny. Since the transition of leadership was made, political factions have coped the public life of the Islamic Republic: the radical Islamic left, seized by modern Khomeinists since the Marxist and Secular left had been eliminated; Conservatives, who advocate for religious orthodoxy and private property and are often depicted as hard-liners; and the technocratic Pragmatists, who won victory with Rafsanjani's presidency and focused their concern on economic recovery (Keddie 2006). Consensus and rivalry among these groups has been subject to countless variation over the years, as have the composition of each one, but a sense of inheritance is preserved, a lack of innovation and of connection to the real needs of Iranians so profound that it prevents any significant dissent to thrive. More than political associations or parties, these groups are factions, not aiming at exercising shared sovereignty in representation of the Iranian public, but at hijacking the republican institutions. Sectarianism, as much as repression, has become the main setback for the functioning of an actual Republic. Institutions have indeed become mechanisms to advance factious interests. While the Majles has usually leant towards a reformist or pragmatist tendency, as has the Presidency under the figures of Khatami, from 1997 to 2001, or Rouhani, since 2013; the un-elected institutions portray the hard-liner positions, as the Guardian Council, which continues to disqualify candidates and to veto any discordant laws. Contrary to Khomeini, who was able to mediate among institutions, Supreme Leader Khamenei proved unwilling to exercise the role of arbitrator. Although first aligning with reformists under Rafsanjani, he would bluntly support candidate Mahmud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential elections (Sadjadpour 2009).

With this limited opposition, and the use of institutions as a battleground among factions, an *intricate structure of underlings* has seized the Islamic Republic, where the Supreme Leader has surpassed its constitutionally assigned role. As a network supported by the crucial role of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, a *superstructure* based on the consensus of the established elite (Vakil & Rassam 2017, pp. 76-79) has replaced what was left of the republican and self-government principles of Revolution. With the *ideological fatigue* of the regime, not any longer a Republic, Iran's quest for Islamic justice has been turned by the underling authority into *a source of its strength and staying power* (Sadjadpour 2009, pp. 8-9). As of today, the Islamic Republic is an opaque and obscure set of institutions, where power is held by coercion rather than by legitimate authority. The paranoid sense of conspiracy against revolution continues to reinforce

popular allegiance, as foreign policy has actually become the pillar of revolution. With *enmity and opposition toward the United States and Israel* as Khamenei's pillars (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 14), the revolutionary defense against the common enemy continues to hijack any proper debate. Likewise, nuclear program, regardless of the impoverishment brought by sanctions, is still the embodiment of independence and self-sufficiency. Sectarianism has destroyed freedom of thought and speech; it has stripped the Revolution from its only worthy objective: the creation of a free community of equals. No longer an Islamic Republic, Khamenei's Iran has become a closed society directed by the very few.

In today's Iran, the two cultures phenomenon has been reinstated, this time between the private realm, where people, always fearful of any surveillance, may be able to express their views, and the public realm, which, once again, has tightly closed its doors to human freedom. Just as most revolutions, what the Iranian revolution has proved is that the Republic shall be nothing but the consequence of a deliberate and conscious act. The foundation of public liberty has resoundingly failed, and the Islamic Republic has actually created a situation exactly opposite to the republican principles: the indifference of the Iranian people for power affairs. Just as before the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian people have withdrawn into the private realm, they have indeed been stripped from the light of the public, which has been reserved for an opaque elite. Expelled from the public sphere, Iranians have lost all that was left from a free republic, *for political freedom means the right to be a participator in government, or it means nothing at all* (Arendt 2017, p. 359).

13. Conclusions

What this project meant to illustrate is the fact that, in spite of the current authoritarian nature of the Islamic Republic, the 1979 Revolution was a meaningful and decisive phenomenon. Not only as the culmination of Iran's long revolutionary process, but as the creation of a polity completely unknown to the Islamic world, the Islamic Republic was an effort of extraordinary imagination in creating a modern Islamic state. In this process, not only did the Revolution adapt Islamic values and precepts to modernity, and even to secular ideologies, but it altered the Iranians' *most basic notion about themselves and their roles as citizens* (Mackey 1996, p. 272). When opening the public realm to the ordinary citizens, the Islamic Revolution reacted against a form of statehood no longer suitable for the social and political needs of Iranians. Although far from a truly democratic outcome, the Revolution has achieved a new paradigm of governance and statecraft, it has portrayed the popular claim for *a greater say in public life*, and it has planted the *seeds of public empowerment* (Wright 2000, p. 134). No longer the particular realm of a dynastic elite, the public sphere was opened to the ordinary men, the dynastic interests were replaced by new national interests, and, ultimately, a new social contract was created between the citizenry and the political elite.

By no means shall we underestimate the repressive autocracy placed today in the Islamic Republic of Iran, nor shall we overstate the virtues of Revolution. What we attempt to put forth is the fact that the Islamic Revolution did create a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, that far from being a mere fundamentalistic movement, it did conceive a completely new notion of the state and of the role expected from the citizenry. Even if lacking significant participation in decision-making, popular sovereignty remains strong and has invariably become linked to the very notion of Islam. No matter how much authorities may be willing to curtail it, public participation has already reshaped the political scene in Iran. From its initial successes, the revolution is now being somehow redefined. Although facing serious discrimination, *women are freer in Iran than in the Arab world*, and they continue to be active in challenging dress codes and restrictions (Viorst 1995, pp. 7-8). The work of Iranian reformers, although facing serious harassment from authorities, *is nonetheless spreading through 53-nation Islamic bloc*, and *much of the most profound discourse within Islam today is taking place in Iran's newspapers, courtrooms, and classrooms* (Wright 2000, p. 137; 140). New ideas have continued to emerge from within the revolution, and an increasing number of activists, intellectuals,

and even clerics, *dare to challenge the regime on far more critical issues, from centuries-old Islamic traditions to recent clerical interpretations* (Wright 2000, p. 144). Moreover, although closely monitored and restricted by the Guardian Council, elections have preserved their *regime-subverting potential* and continue to keep *considerable uncertainty* in their outcomes. When it comes to participation, *reformist groups consistently contest for executive and legislative positions and, from time to time, they are successfully elected* (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim 2016, pp. 452-453). And when evidence of fraud and manipulation has emerged, Iranians have taken to the streets to preserve popular sovereignty. In this sense, the Islamic Revolution continues to *spread public empowerment around the Islamic world* (Wright 2000, p. 145).

Likewise, Iran has become a venue for profound debate on the relationship between Islamic values and modernity. In fact, most revolutionary Shi'ites *make no apology for their modernism*, for it is not the Prophet's age that they venerate, but the Twelve Imam's heritage as leaders of a cohesive community of Muslims, including *an esteem for knowledge and reason as instruments for dealing with social problems* (Viorst 1995, p. 7). For this reason, we shall relentlessly insist that Islam is not inconsistent with human freedom in any of its alternatives, and that Islamic tradition, far from ruining the Revolution, was in fact its driving force. What prevented the consolidation of the conquered freedom was not Islam, but the militant and sectarian ideology that came from its radical interpretation. It is rather the fact that Khomeinists chose to reinvigorate the popular appeal, and the rage of the dispossessed, as vehicles for revolution. Showing no interest in institutional building or in republican values, revolutionaries attempted to conquer the absolute from the mortals' realm, they sought to gain access from the real to the ideal. They did so, however, not through the conscious acts of equal men, but by relying on the irresistible general will of virtuous Muslims. Far from a Republic, the Revolution created a popular government, with power held by a revolutionary dictatorship while sustained by the irrational masses. They did not achieve liberty, but just liberation from tyranny. Not legitimacy and reason, but brute force, were to direct the new state, which could only end on Terror followed by an unreal Thermidor.

Since the beginning of revolution, however, several groups have resisted authoritarian trends. *The opposition and disagreements* they continue to express have actually *helped the system from becoming a full dictatorship* (Keddie 2006, p. 242). The Islamic Revolution was indeed born of excess. *The wrath of those watching their world become*

increasingly difficult to comprehend was transformed into a set of repressive institutions (Ajami 1988, p. 154), but the people's commitment to the very ideas that inspired Revolution has continued to be displayed on several occasions. Even if failing to provide for regime change, the 2009 massive protests in response to the fraudulent election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad, known as the Green Movement, quickly resembled the last phase of the 1979 Revolution. The fact that the Iranian civil society has not been completely atomized was once again proved by the 2017-2018 and the 2019-2020 protests, initially caused by economic unrest, but ultimately leading to calls for the overthrow of theocratic rule in Iran. As limited as the results of reform may be, the public empowerment that emerged with revolution is still displayed by the civil society in many ways, a fact that has left room for expectations of reform. The Iranian public has proved resilient against the authoritarian nature of today's Iran, just as it did during the Shah's rule, and the message of revolution has proved to be more durable than revolution itself. This way, the very same Revolution that both empowered Iranians and consumed the Republic, may still be able to provide a response to Iran's long quest for justice.

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