

Cite: Paola Rivetti (2020) 'Islam and Factional Politics in Iran' In: Jeff Haynes (eds). *The Routledge Handbook to religion and Political Parties*. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 346-357.

Islam and factional politics in Iran

Paola Rivetti

School of Law and Government

Dublin City University

Introduction

Built to celebrate two crucial events in the history of the Islamic Republic, that is the 1979 revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), Tehran's Museum of the Holy Defence (*muze defa'-e moghaddas*) is a prism through which one can peruse the official narrative about the source of legitimacy of the current regime. The museum promotes a specific historical interpretation revolving around Islam as the pivot of both the revolution and the war. Islam was the source of inspiration for revolutionaries as well as the ideal that the soldiers and front volunteers defended during the war. It represents the central element of this official narrative—which obviously, is one of the narratives present in society, yet it is ubiquitous and predominant. Likewise, the political landscape in the country is narrowly constructed around loyalty to Islam and the principle of the *velayat-e faqih*. While the constitution of the Islamic Republic recognises both divine and popular sovereignty, the principle of the *velayat-e faqih* (or the guardianship/leadership of the jurist) locates ultimate sovereignty into the hands of the *vali-e faqih* (the jurist), considered to be almost infallible because guided by God and knowledge of the Islamic law and philosophy (Ghobadzadeh, 2014). This principle gives to the *faqih* special powers in terms of supervision and intervention if mundane politics derails from

the right path inspired by religion. In Iran, every legal political organisation is obliged to state its loyalty to the *vali-e faqih*, or the leader (*rahbar*), and must act in accordance with the principle. Additionally, yet needless to say, all permitted political organisations must be Islamic, in the sense of stating their allegiance to the Islamic religion and, consequently, the constitution.

In such a narrow political and discursive space, in which religion represents the common obligatory reference for all political forces, is Islam still a criterion for differentiating amongst active political organisations? This chapter argues that, in spite of the limited discursive liberty available to organised political forces, diverging interpretations of Islam do represent a criterion along which differentiation takes place and popular consensus coalesces. Obviously, popular political orientations transcend the limitation of Islam: secular preferences, whether leftist, liberal or conservatives, are present among the population, but do not find representation in the political system because of said constitutional constraints.

This chapter investigates how Islam constitutes an obligatory universal reference and an element of distinction at the same time. In fact, despite restrictions, political competition over elections and the distribution of resources is real (Alem, 2016). But, ‘where’ does such competition take place? What shape does organised politics have in Iran? How have Islam and the structuration of political competition in political parties/factions interacted? While parties do not exist as such, political preferences and interests regroup within factions. Instead of a derogatory term, faction (*faksiun*) indicates the coming together of like-minded individuals who share similar interests and mobilise to acquire elected positions as well as to orientate the policy-making process through a variety of means, ranging from alliance building to influencing public opinion.

Building on the scholarship examining the relationship between religion and politics, this chapter analyses the formation of a factional system pivoted around—among other things—

different interpretations of Islam, and proposes an investigation of the latter. More specifically, the chapter first examines Iran's 'political market' and its evolution: the field where political competition takes place and the historical trajectories that have contributed to its current structure. Secondly, the chapter discusses the ideological differences between the competing factions. Two variations are proposed: reformist or liberal Islam and anti-liberal Islam. These two ideal-types aim to capture the differences both in terms of values and factional interests that they embody. The chapter argues, in fact, that while discursive and ideological differences matter, competition amongst factions also has a material dimension informed by interests and class politics. The chapter does not conceive of the ideational and material elements as separate, and aims to grasp and examine both.

Religion and political organisations: Preliminary observations

The scholarship on the relationship between religion and political parties—or political organisations and politics, more broadly—is vast and has preoccupied scholars for sometimes. The Iranian revolution of 1979 opened the door to such reflections: during a time when modernisation theory and its ramifications were still the dominant lenses for sociological and political analysis, the Iranian revolution showed that religion was not wiped away by the force of authoritarian secularisation (Keddie, 1997). Likewise, the rise of the Christian Right in the United States concomitant with the coming to power of the Republicans and the end of the 'Golden age' powerfully stated that the ideological traction of religion in politics was far from being relegated to Muslim-majority populations (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2014). The rise of political Islam across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), in the meanwhile, suggested that a radical revision of dominant approaches to the study of politics was needed. As Volpi

and Stein (2015) explained, Islamism was hardly considered as a salient variable. The scholarship regularly proposed analysis pivoted around modernisation and class theory, and regularly dismissed Islamism as an obsolete anomaly.

The religious revival that occurred widely after the collapse of the Soviet Union forced scholars to re-consider extant approaches. In particular, the analysis of political parties and how they navigate the religious sentiment, how they instrumentalise it for electoral purposes and how parties are ‘taken over’ by religious constituencies has become central. As Payam Mohseni and Clyde Wilcox (2008) discuss, religion is a notion with multi-dimensional articulations, being at the same time an ideology, an institution, and a host of material and ideational resources for political organisations. Likewise, political parties can be equally difficult to define and analyse. While, at times, they have a clear structure and a defined political programme, at other times parties are poorly structured and their boundaries may be unstable, shifting, and vary according to circumstances. As electoral laws change, in fact, parties may dissolve and then regroup under different names, with a larger or smaller, more or less religious membership (Bartolini *et al.*, 2004).

It follows that the relationship between religion and parties may be difficult to examine as a stable and roundly-defined correlation. Parties may not be either secular or religious: they may need to ‘hide’ their religious preferences or, on the contrary, ‘enrich’ their secular nature with religious references under the pressure of institutional conditions or the public opinion. In the case of Turkey, for instance, Islamist parties such as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) need to pledge allegiance to the *laïcité* of the Turkish constitution and navigate a narrow space for implementing religiously-inspired policies that ‘moralise’ Turkish society (Yılmaz, 2015). On the other hand, Anne Wolf (2018) discusses how Nida al-Tunis, the secular party of Tunisia, still makes regular references to Islam and religion as a ‘moral compass’ for their policy choice,

to the point that she talks about ‘secular forms of politicised Islam’. Likewise, Hendrik Kraetzschmar and Alam Saleh (2018) challenge the ‘secular vs Islamist’ polarisation in Egyptian party politics, showing how the ‘polarisation as it takes place at the discursive level is not necessarily a sanguine reflection of the factual ideological/policy distances extant between political parties’ (p. 222), but reflects the need to offer an alternative political discourse to voters. In the last decade, Italian political parties have increasingly relied on religious symbolism to gain the voters’ support, in the belief that resorting to traditions was a winning electoral strategy (Giorgi, 2013). Ideological shifts informed by environmental conditions and time are also present when it comes to the democratic preferences of religiously-inspired parties: while scholars of Islamist politics debate whether Islamism is compatible with democracy or not, it is often forgotten that in the past Catholic political parties have often helped authoritarian political movements to achieve power—while their democratic commitment is today unquestioned (Conway, 2008). Finally, another important dimension of the analysis of the parties-religion relationship is the presence of non-state, non-party, agents that intervene in such a relationship. Sometimes, in fact, religious bodies and associations interfere and put pressure on political parties by raising ethical issues and by injecting (or withdrawing) material resources into the ‘political marketplace’ of a country (Giorgi and Polizzi, 2015).

It follows that, while religion is undoubtedly fundamental in structuring the party system and single parties’ policy choice and orientations, the way in which religion plays such a role depends on a larger configuration, and is informed by a multiplicity of factors. As Mohseni and Wilcox (2008) state, the relation between religion and political parties is complex because of the many ways in which religion can be examined—doctrinally, institutionally and socially—and the diverse articulations that such a relationship can have. In order to navigate such complexity, the two authors propose an analytical framework composed of six

dimensions: regime type, the political/religious marketplace, religious institutional structure (hierarchical or less so), the associational nexus, the nature of party system, and the parties and religious groups' stance toward the state. The analysis proposed in this chapter utilises this framework in order to examine how the political system in Iran structured and how Islam has intervened in this process—after which the chapter moves on to assess how is Islam a criterion for differentiation amongst factions.

The institutional context

Regime type and opportunities for party formation

Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi (2016) distinguish the Islamic Republic from 'full autocracies, which tolerate no uncertainty', and define it as a 'diffused-power semi-autocracy' in which 'power and authority [are] unevenly spread and concentrated among formal and informal mechanisms and arenas' (p. 8). Brumberg and Farhi stress the role of fluid and informal dynamics by which 'factions, cliques, and networks jockey for influence [...] while collaborating to deflect challenges coming from outside the ruling elite or family' (Ibidem, p. 8). Alternatively labelled as an 'hybrid regimes' or 'electoral authoritarianism' (Abdolmohammadi and Cama, 2015), the Islamic Republic is considered to be able to survive instability thanks to its flexibility and accommodating capacity (Keshavarzian, 2005). In such a system,

fluid institutional and legal mechanisms create a hobbled or 'feckless' pluralism (to use Tom Carother's evocative term), one that seems to be incoherent,

disorganized, and constantly improvised but uses such suppleness to channel, contain, or diffuse challenges to regime domination and elite unity (Brumberg and Farhi, 2016, p. 8).

‘Feckless’ pluralism articulates limited ideological diversity which translates into the presence of contrasting opinions voiced by different political organisations. How do political groups organise in Iran? The Iranian constitution allows for the formation of political parties. More specifically, article 26 legalises the establishment of ‘parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities’, unless they ‘violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic’.¹ In the early days of the revolution, nearly a hundred political parties were established, including leftist and liberal, reflecting the ideological and political diversity of the revolutionary front. However, after a severe crackdown, the subsequent 1981 ‘Law Concerning the Activities of Parties, Associations, Political Associations and Guild Associations, Islamic Associations or the Associations of Recognized Religious Minorities’ was issued to strengthen the newly established regime’s control over political competition (Fairbanks, 1998). The 1981 law, in fact, introduced the need to get a permission to operate by the Ministry of Interior—a requirement that led to the ban of most of existing parties. The Islamic Republic Party (*Hezbollah-e Jomhuri-e Islami*—IRP), dominated by Khomeini’s supporters who were also taking over the institutions of the new-born Islamic Republic, then became the only legal party in the country.

While the IRP self-dissolved in 1987 originating a factional system, as discussed in the next section, attempts at promoting the establishment of political parties regained strength again in

¹ Available at: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en

the late 1990s. During the post-war period in fact, one of the ambitions of ruling governments was to modernise, normalise, and rationalise Iranian politics through the establishment of political parties. The necessity for more structured political regroupings was something that politicians and journalists voiced, lamenting the fact that existing factions lacked proper strategy and clarity about principles, ideas, and programmes (Razavi, 2009). Towards this end, the reformist administrations led by Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) established the House of parties (*Khane-ye Hezb*) in 2002, with the goal of promoting the formation of parties. The House offered services such as registration and provided rooms and offices for meetings. It had the ambition of becoming a hub and a meeting point for reformist parties, increasing interactions among them and promoting the formation of inter-organisational structures. In spite of such efforts and in spite of the significant number of registered parties, very few became proper organisations with an independent programme and a working structure. According to one functionary of the House, most of the registered organisations were local groups whose function was to mobilise the electorate in favour of other ‘parties’ when local or national elections approached.² These ‘parties’ were built on extant networks of interest, clientele and professional associations that followed the government’s invitation to register, but did not have an independent electoral or political programme. Some new parties, however, emerged as real political forces with a specific identity and demands such as, for instance, the reformist Iranian Islamic Participation Front (*Jehb’eh Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami*—IIPF). According to Reza Razavi (2010), however, the parties established during this period faced a number of difficulties. Such constraints were: the hostility of the conservative front towards party politics; the existing legal restrictions, which did not allow political parties to function freely; internal structural problems, which determined a democratic deficit; and the fact that parties were formed from above, originating from the elite’s need for public visibility rather

² Interview with author, June 2008, Tehran.

than from a genuine popular demand. Structural conditions were unfavourable to the emergence of political parties, and in fact most of these new reformist political formations disappeared by the early 2010s under the joint pressure of state repression (especially after the 2009 crisis) and institutional marginalisation by mightier conservative bodies.

From a one-party system to factions

It is common understanding that factions run Iranian politics. Factions are loosely assembled groups that form along multiple lines of interests, ranging from shared economic interests to shared positions on cultural and social policies. Bahman Bakhtiari (1996) described Iran's elite factional system with an analogy to the Italian system of *correntocrazia*, which identifies in *correnti*, similar to factions, the protagonist of Italian politics. In Italy, political parties represent the infrastructure upon which constitutional politics is based, but it is within *correnti* that decisions are made and interests align. In Iran, likewise, decisions are prepared and interests align within factions. As Bakhtiari (1993) explains, factions have been a major impediment to the centralization of power in revolutionary Iran. They are fluid and allow for multiple memberships. Factions rarely participate in elections as such. Rather, candidates' lists are usually formed for electoral purposes and they may gather members from several factions. Historically, these conditions have strengthened elite fragmentation which, in turn, originated limited ideological pluralism (Keshavarzian, 2005).

Conventional wisdom makes the emergence of elite factionalism coincide with the dissolution of the IRP, the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, and the death of Khomeini. During the first decade after the establishment of the Islamic Republic there was little or no opportunity for elite factionalism: the war was raging, a new system of institutions and power had to be routinised and, particularly between early and mid-1980s, Khomeinist forces united to side-

line, when not physically eliminate, liberal and Marxist forces. The unity of pro-Khomeini forces was promoted through the IRP. However, as Maziar Behrooz (1991) discussed, political factionalism was rife during the 1980s and caused Khomeini's frequent interventions in public affairs. While the elite was united within the framework of the IRP, a number of satellite associations existed and weakened such unity. In June 1987, Khomeini dissolved the IRP. Later, the absence of an equally charismatic leader to replace Khomeini with made it difficult to keep together the elite, leading to factionalism.

The reasons why the IRP failed as an institution in the context of the routinisation of the Islamic Republic relate to increased factionalism on the one side, and to diffidence towards political parties as institutions on the other side. Political factionalism was boosted by the joint action of two phenomena, namely the presence of a range of contrasting opinions regarding economic policies and the failure of the IRP to develop into a mass party. These two elements led to the weakening of the IRP as a party structure, while diffidence played a fundamental role in destroying the party's legitimacy. In particular, a vision that juxtaposed the clergy and the party as institutions developed, leading to the opinion that the possible creation of two centres of power was detrimental to the revolution. The presence of political parties was seen as threatening to the centrality of the *rahbar*. The clergy, then, was indicated as 'the main guiding force for political activities in the country' (Razavi, 2010, p. 85). Diffidence was also fomented by the idea that Khomeini's original words and thought were enough to give political guidelines and instruction to the elite and population, without the mediation of structures such as political parties. Khomeini's leadership was rooted in the notion of the oneness of society, which presented similarities with the Islamic concept of *tohid* (*tawhid*), that is the unicity of God. Ideally, this vision prefigured a stateless and classless society, which united around the words of a leader rather than a multi-layered governing system.

Commented [JH1]: I don't know this word. What does it mean, please?

Commented [AR2R1]:

The 1988 parliamentary election saw the formation of two competing groups: the *Majma-e Rouhaniyoun-e Mobarez* (Assembly of the combatant clerics—MRM) and the *Jame-ye Rouhaniyat-e Mobarez* (Association of the combatant clergy—JRM).³ MRM included leftist members of parliament and candidates, earning the name of ‘Islamic left’ for itself. It counted on the presence of anti-capitalist personalities such as Mohammad Mousavi-Khoeinha, but also future reformists who would later become sympathetic to free market policies and willing to strike alliances with members of the JRM, such as Mohammad Khatami, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi. The JRM, or ‘Islamic right’, included rightist conservative personalities, such as the Ayatollahs Ahmad Jannati, Mohamad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi and Ali Khamenei, Khomeini’s successor as *rahbar*. JRM also included ideologically flexible individuals, who will later ally with the reformists such as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Hassan Rouhani. The backbone of the Iranian factional system was in place.

In 1989, Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected president replacing Khamenei, who replaced Khomeini as *rahbar*. The constitutional reform, approved in 1989, brought significant changes in the institutional make-up of the Islamic Republic: it increased the powers of the president of the Republic and, in parallel, those of the *rahbar*, who extended his powers of supervision and intervention in political disputes. The system was strengthened at the top at the expense of collegiality, and created a duality between the elected president and the unelected *rahbar*. The 1989 constitutional reform also dropped the requirement for the *rahbar* to be a *marja-e taqlid* (a source of emulation, the title distinguishing the most learnt and knowledgeable among the clerics), allowing an academically weak candidate, such as Khamenei, to ascend to the leadership. The foreseeable opposition of part of the Shia clergy—which present a significant variety of political opinion internally—to this change was easily contained thanks to

³ The JRM formed before the revolution as a loose and general association of revolutionary clerics in Iran. After the revolution, while still existing as an informal association, converged into the IRP.

Khamenei's increased constitutional powers. He supervised religious seminars and centres in Qom, the clerics' sermons and writings, appointed every Friday prayers' leader in the country, and controlled the Special Court for Clerics (*Dadgah-e Vije-y Rouhaniyyat*), which became an effective tool to curb criticism against the *velayat-e faqih*.⁴

The strengthening of the powers of the *rahbar* and the president sparked criticism amongst Islamic leftists, who demanded democratic inclusion. In addition, the shift toward a 'religionised politics' (Ayubi, 2003)—epitomised by the politicisation of the role of the *rahbar*—generated discontent within the elite and the clergy. They feared that such a 'mundanisation' was eventually detrimental to Islam, stripping it of all spirituality and pushing the people away from the sphere of the sacred towards secularism (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2004). The emergence of these intra-elite conflicts was the fundamental condition for the differentiation of the factions' interpretation of Islam.

Iranian factions

Scholars have repeatedly tried to map out the Iranian factional system, regrouping factions according to their political and ideological inclinations. Payam Mohseni (2016) suggests that sympathy (or lack thereof) towards elected or unelected institutions is the main criterion shaping political factions' ideological sensitivity of in the country. Mohseni identifies four subdivisions: the theocratic right and left, and the republican right and left—where 'right' and 'left' are distinguished on the basis of their orientation towards the 'social justice vs. the free market' cleavage.

⁴ Apart from this, constitutionally, the *vali-e faqih* nominates: the head of the Judiciary system, of state TV and radio, has direct control over the defence forces (both the regular army and the IRGC— Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, or *Sepah-e Pasdaran Enqelab-e Islami*), nominates half of the members of the Guardian's Council, influences the nomination of the Ministers of Intelligence and Interior, and plays a major role in the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution and National Security.

The theocratic right is supportive of conservative cultural policies and favours economic liberalism. Although historically related to the JRM, part of this factions moved towards more democratic views in the 1990s, giving birth to the republican right—a shift epitomised by figures such as the former president Hashemi Rafsanjani and the incumbent Hassan Rouhani. The republican right supports more progressive and liberal views in the field of social and cultural policies, along with neo-liberal policies in the economic field. The republican right represents the interests of the urban middle classes, professionals and entrepreneurs, and partially overlaps with the representatives of the reformist faction, who Mohseni originally located in the republican left. As Mohammad Maljoo (2017) points out, economic interests may overlap even if ideological preferences diverge. Examining the casualization of the Iranian labour market since mid-1990s, Maljoo discusses how members of both the right and the left, who later joined the ranks of the reformists (*eslahtalaban*), supported the deregulation of job hiring and termination. In the 1990s in fact, many Islamic leftists became owners of work placement agencies, thus benefitting from the presence of a growing mass of precarious workers. The republican and theocratic right, as well as the reformists, support the integration of Iran into global markets, but differ in their approach to the West as a cultural and political entity: *eslahtalaban* favour respectful cultural, religious and academic exchanges, while rightist factions are generally suspicious of such interactions. Their fear of cultural penetration, however, never clashed with the preference for an ‘open door’ policy in the economic realm. It also reflects the fact that many members of the Islamic right come from entrepreneurial families.

On the opposite side, we have the theocratic and republican left. The theocratic left favours state intervention in the economy and holds strong anti-imperialist views. Attention for issues such as poverty and social justice is often coupled with emphasis on piousness and personal piety. The republican left had quasi-socialist economic views originally, but this changed with

the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the decline of the left's popularity. Ideologically, it turned to reformism and liberalism in the late 1990s, adopting optimistic views on issues such as the compatibility of Islam with civil and political rights and favouring a democratic reform of the law. The republican left argued for the need to soften the system's ideological rigidity, becoming tolerant of political diversity, personal preferences and life styles, and supporting private entrepreneurial initiatives and privatisation in the economy.

Reinterpreting Islam

The pluralisation of factions was accompanied by various interpretations of Islam. More specifically, while factions cannot transcend the limitation of holding Islam as their central and essential ideological reference, along with loyalty to the *velayat-e faqih*, what became plural was the interpretation of Islam that factions can hold. The diversity of interpretations revolves around issues such as whether Islam is more or less favourable to human rights, and whether Islam approves of women's rights. This section examines the factions' discourse. It identifies two different interpretations of Islam as a way to represent the diversity of the approaches to religion that elites hold. These two ideal-types have emerged in specific contexts, when environmental conditions pushed factions to adopt a different Islamic discourse in order to distinguish themselves. The two discourses are: reformist or liberal Islam and anti-liberal Islam. While a number of variations exist in the middle, these two ideal-types present the widest differences and are therefore considered here for analytical purposes.

Reformist or liberal Islam

Muslim reformers, in Iran and elsewhere, emerged in the 1990s after previous generations in the 1970s and 1980s had worked for translating into practice the slogan 'Islam is the solution'. They believed that the promises of political Islam had remained unfulfilled considering that poverty, corruption, and state inefficiency were still present despite Islamist revolutions and political commitment. Muslim reformers deduced, then, that these problems did not originate from the failure of religious morality to penetrate the state and society. Instead, they held authoritarian politics as accountable, emphasising the need for a legal framework to enforce the rulers' accountability, the respect for human rights, and the right to dissent (Esposito, 1997; Browsers, 2006). At the same time, the collapse of the bipolar world order freed up the space for Islamic reformers and democratic leaders to have international legitimacy. A few years later, in 2001, the attack on the Twin Towers and growing global Islamophobia pushed Muslims and Islamists towards a discourse of moderation, with the goal of distancing themselves from radicalism. Between the late 1990s and the 2000s, the word 'reform' (*eslah*) had become one of the *leitmotifs* in the speeches of leaders across the Muslim world. Intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Dalil Boubakeur, Abdou Filali-Ansary, Fatima Mernissi, Bassam Tibi, Soheib Bencheikh, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim argued in favour of a liberal, democratic and, in their words, modern re-interpretation of Islam and Sharia to make them compatible with modern-day values and norms such as democracy and human rights. Referred to variously as reformist, modern, protestant, positive, enlightened, liberal Islam emerged when 'insistent calls' for 'reform and liberalization' came both from within and outside of Muslim communities (Filali-Ansary 2003).

In Iran, reformist or liberal Islam emerged both as an echo of such transnational debates and as a localised phenomenon, rooted in the idea that the 1979 revolution was somehow un-finished. In fact, the revolution failed to deliver the promise of democratic rule. This idea was dominant amongst leftist intellectuals and politicians, who were experiencing an ideological

transformation into democratic reformists. Hamid Reza Jalaeipour (2006), a university professor of sociology and a member of the reformist IIPF, described the Islamic Republic as a system navigating a 'crisis of achievement'. The notion of a 'betrayed' revolution is crucial in the thought of other intellectuals, too. A towering figure in the history of the Islamic Republic, as well as in the field of religious philosophy and hermeneutics, Ayatollah Ali Montazeri has criticised the isolation in which the Islamic Republic plunged after the revolution, the violence of revolutionary slogans, and the restrictions to civil and political freedoms—factors that, according to him, endanger Islam, the nation, and the foundations of the revolution. He insisted that unity, freedom, and the efforts of create an open society should be the guiding principles of contemporary politics. Montazeri also argued that the ultimate goal of the *velayat-e faqih* is to keep alive the republican character of the system by encouraging the people's political participation.

The philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush is perhaps the most famous Iranian public intellectual. He criticised the crystallisation of Islam into a codified and immutable system of laws. In his view, religious interpretation needs to be dynamic (*fiq-e puya*) to allow the law and customs of Iranian society to adapt to modernity. Soroush suggested the idea that a-historical interpretations of Islam would have led to the social marginalisation of religion. With the same urgency, reformists looked favourably at protection of women's and human rights (Farhi, 2001). The former president Mohammad Khatami identified in the obscurantist interpretation of Islam—which has been dominant in Iran for century, he argues—the origin of despotism (*estebdad*). Despotism and repression are inherent characteristics of Iranian society, nurtured by centuries of cultural deprivation and religious bigotry. Khatami proposed that reformism can break this lineage of authoritarianism because it expresses the revolution's democratic principles (Tazmini, 2009).

The reception of liberal or reformist Islam in Iran has been successful. Not only did the reformist front enjoyed several electoral victories (including Khatami's double election as president of the Republic on an electoral platform emphasising cultural openness and democratic sovereignty), but the impact of reformism is long-lasting and still informs the political preferences of Iranians. The liberal interpretation of Islam, in particular, was crucial to popular appreciation of reformists' and, later, Hassan Rouhani's electoral campaigns.

Anti-liberal Islam

While anti-liberal Islam has always been present in Iran as an unstructured system of ideas voiced by single policy-makers—such as the *rahbar* Khamenei—and opinion leaders, it emerged as an organised force able to capture elected positions in reaction to the eight years during which liberal Islam dominated elected institutions and the public discourse through Khatami's governments (1997-2005). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a crucial figure of this trend, but anti-liberal Islamic interpretations were also proposed by other politicians, intellectuals and members of the clergy. Differently from liberal Islam, which was the expression of a specific faction and of reformist groups organised in quasi-parties such as the IIPF, anti-liberal Islam has remained the ideological reference of a cross-factional regrouping, considering the reluctance to expand this trend into a well-structured and cohesive party-like organisation. Such a reluctance was also connected to the fact that the proponents of anti-liberal interpretations of Islam were predominantly members of the Islamic right, which has historically displayed anti-party hostility.

Anti-liberal interpretations were not only constructed in opposition to positive attitudes towards issues such as human rights and personal freedoms, but they also built upon the anti-liberal legacy of the revolutionary ideology—which was an integral, albeit not exclusive, part

of Iran's revolutionary thought. For instance, Ahmadinejad utilised the phrase *gharbzadeghi*, or 'Westoxification'—a term popularised by the revolutionary literature in the 1960s and 1970s—to identify a positive predisposition towards liberal notions such as personal rights. Instead, he proposed that an Islam constitutes the sole ideological framework in which all political and ethical evaluations must be conducted (Randjbar-Daemi, 2018, p. 180). This resonates with ideas proposed by the *rahbar* Khamenei, who during a speech in 2011, declared that Islam is the sum of all ideologies, so that there is no need for other political and moral references.⁵ The emphasis on cultural and religious authenticity has an explicit anti-Western and anti-imperialist coloration.

Part of anti-liberal Islam narratives do not only stand in opposition to reformism, but also to clerically-induced social conservatism. Ahmadinejad's anti-liberal Islam, in addition, was imaginative and focused upon slogans such as the promise to bring about an Islamic Japan (Randjbar-Daemi, 2018, p. 181). Such exaggerated comments did not only have the function of attracting visibility. They also suggested that anti-liberal Islam had a propulsive, creative force of its own. Another articulation of this vivacity is the attempt at creating an authentic Islamic knowledge. During an interview, Hassan Abbasi—a far-right intellectual, war veteran, and head of the Center for Doctrinal Analysis, an independent political strategic think-tank—lamented that current university curricula are moulded on a Western and liberal model of science. He asked:

we know that concepts such as *hoquq* (rights), *haqq* (right), *haqiqat* (truth) have roots in the Qur'an and other religious sources. But where the roots of "rights" [in English in the original] and "truth" [in English] are? Not really in any religious

⁵ Available at: <http://www.lenziran.com/2011/10/khamenei-islamic-republic-is-democracy-freedom-socialism-in-its-own-terms>

source... and though, these are the English translation for *haqq* and *hoquq*. We translate *hoquq-e bashar* with human rights. Do you see the distance between our *hoquq-e bashar* and “human rights” [in English]? [...] Psychology is translated with *ravanshenasi*, but it is not *ravanshenasi*, we should use “*espiritoloji*” or something alike [...] This is why the 90 per cent of the sciences that are taught in universities are wrong! How do you reconcile “law” with *hoquq*? [...] This is the problem: our thought is still secular, because we are merged in secular science and we only use Western secular sciences as a model.⁶

The kind of Islam that is proposed by adherents to this interpretation offers an all-encompassing vision of the world and politics, understandable through religion. No cross-cultural contamination is needed: rather, it is considered dangerous as potentially leading to the loss of identity. Such positions have inspired policies that are suspicious of diplomatic engagement with the international community, and have also translated into authoritarian stances towards political diversity.

The notion of justice is fundamental in the construction of an Islamic society. In contrast to the typically liberal celebration of private entrepreneurship, anti-liberal Islam has prioritised social justice over private profit. This has often translated into a discourse critical of ‘the powerful’ in society and in support of ‘the dispossessed’. A champion of such rhetoric was Ahmadinejad, who pushed his discourse to the point of criticising the reformist clergy for appropriating resources and power by brutalising Khomeini’s legacy—although he promoted economic policies privatising state assets (Ehsani, 2009).

The presence of anti-liberal Islam in Iran has been constant throughout the course of the revolution, although its electoral fortune has swung between success and defeat. Hybrid and

⁶ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0kEoIeS4Vc>

moderate forms of anti-liberal Islam are however present in society, and enjoy both circulation and publicity through cultural artefacts that celebrate Islam's central oppositional role in the history of Iran's relationship with the West.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that, while there are no official political parties in Iran and religion is an obligatory frame of reference, different versions of Islam inform divergent ideological preferences. It follows that Islam is an important factor in structuring the way in which political orientations coalesce into more or less organised groups.

The relationship between Islam and political organisations is however complex. A number of other factors must be considered, ranging from the presence of associations that enhance factionalism, to the resources that the Iranian 'political marketplace' can utilise for ideological renewal. Overall, environmental conditions constrain the establishment of organised political groups as discussed in the chapter. Potential new political strands must, in fact, integrate in the pre-existing ideological framework and this may be sustainable only for so long. In Iran, in fact, while the right to dissent is rhetorically celebrated, the right to start an organisation to voice such a dissent is very often denied.

In conclusion, the chapter sought to present a balanced analysis of how ideology interacts with material conditions when it comes to the establishment and the functioning of political organisations—that is, factions and parties—in Iran. While Islam is not simply a cover for the material interests that govern political differentiation and conflicts, attention also needs to be given to the role played by the logic of economic gains, the law, and the dominant political culture to offer a complete account.

References

- Abdolmohammadi, P. and Cama, G. (2015). 'Iran as a peculiar hybrid regime: Structure and dynamics of the Islamic republic', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42, (4): 558-578.
- Alem, Y. (2016) 'Electoral politics, power, and prospects for reform' in Brumberg D. and Farhi F. (eds.) *Power and change in Iran: Politics of contention and conciliation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 166-192.
- Ayubi, N. (2003) *Political Islam: religion and politics in the Arab world*, London: Routledge.
- Bakhtiari, B. (1993), 'Parliamentary elections in Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 26, (3/4): 375-388.
- Bakhtiari, B. (1996), *Parliamentary politics in revolutionary Iran*, Gainesville: Florida University Press.
- Bartolini, S., Chiaramonte, A., and D'Alimonte, R. (2004) 'The Italian party system between parties and coalitions', *West European Politics*, 27, (1):1-19
- Behrooz, M. (1991), 'Factionalism in Iran under Khomeini', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 27, (4): 597-614.
- Browsers, M. (2006) *Democracy and civil society in Arab political thought: Transcultural possibilities*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Brumberg D. and Farhi F. (2016), 'Politics of contention and conciliation in Iran's semi-authorocracy', in Brumberg D. and Farhi F. (eds.) *Power and change in Iran: Politics of contention and conciliation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1-35.
- Conway, M. (2008), *Catholic politics in Europe, 1918-1945*, London: Routledge.
- Ehsani, K. (2009), 'Survival through dispossession: privatization of public goods in the Islamic Republic', *Middle East Report*, (250): 26-33.

- Esposito, J. (1997) (ed.) *Political Islam: revolution, radicalism, or reform?* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Fairbanks, S. (1998). 'Theocracy versus democracy: Iran considers political parties', *The Middle East Journal*, 52, (1): 17-31.
- Farhi, F. (2001), 'Religious Intellectuals, the "Woman Question," and the Struggle for the Creation of a Democratic Public Sphere in Iran', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 15, (2), 315-339.
- Filali-Ansary, A. (2003) 'The Sources of Enlightened Muslim Thought', *Journal of Democracy*, 14, (2): 19-33.
- Ghamari-Tabrizi, B. (2004) 'Contentious Public Religion: Two Conceptions of Islam in Revolutionary Iran: Ali Shariati and Abdolkarim Soroush', *International Sociology* 19, (4) (2004): 504-523.
- Ghobadzadeh, N. (2014) *Religious secularity: A theological challenge to the Islamic state*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Giorgi, A. (2013), 'Ahab and the white whale: the contemporary debate around the forms of Catholic political commitment in Italy', *Democratization*, 20, (5):895-916.
- Giorgi, A. and Polizzi, E. (2015), 'Communion and Liberation: a Catholic movement in a multilevel governance perspective', *Religion, State & Society*, 43, (2): 133-149
- Jalaeipour, H. (2006) 'Iran's Islamic Revolution: Achievements and Failures', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 15, (3): 207-215.
- Keddie, N. (1997) 'Secularism and the state: Towards clarity and global comparison', *New Left Review*, (226): 21-40.
- Keshavarzian, A. (2005) 'Contestation without democracy: elite fragmentation in Iran', in *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, edited by Marsha Pripstein Posusney & Michele Penner Angrist, Lynne Rienner

Kraetzschmar H. and Saleh A. (2018), 'Political parties and secular–Islamist polarisation in

Maljoo, M. (2017), 'The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class since the 1990s', in Vahabzadeh, P. (ed.) *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 47-64.

Mir-Hosseini, Z., and Tapper R. (2006), *Islam and democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the quest for reform*, London: IB Tauris.

Mohseni P. and Wilcox C. (2008), 'Religion and political parties', in Haynes J. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, London: Routledge, 211-230.

Mohseni, P. (2016) 'Factionalism, privatization and the political economy of regime transformation', in Brumberg D. and Farhi F. (eds.) *Power and change in Iran: Politics of contention and conciliation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 37-69.

post-Mubarak Egypt', in Kraetzschmar H. and Rivetti P. (eds.) *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings. Governance, Pluralisation and Contention*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 221-242.

Randjbar-Daemi, S. (2018), *The Quest for Authority in Iran: A History of The Presidency from Revolution to Rouhani*, London: IB Tauris.

Razavi, R. (2010) 'The Road to Party Politics in Iran (1979–2009)', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46, (1): 79-96.

Tazmini, G. (2009). *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the turbulent path to reform*, London: IB Tauris.

Volpi, F. and Stein E. (2015) 'Islamism and the state after the Arab uprisings: Between people power and state power', *Democratization*, (22), 2: 276-293.

Wald, K. D. and Calhoun-Brown, A. (2014). *Religion and politics in the United States*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Wolf, A. (2018), 'Secular Forms of Politicised Islam in Tunisia: The Constitutional Democratic Rally and Nida' Tunis', in Kraetzschmar H. and Rivetti P. (eds.) *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings. Governance, Pluralisation and Contention*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 205-220.

Yılmaz, Z. (2015) 'The AKP and its Family Policy in the Re-establishment Process of Authoritativeness in Turkey', in Karakoç J. (ed.) *Authoritarianism in the Middle East*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 150-171.