**Religion: A Missing Ideological Institution in the Hybrid Regime Discussion**

**With Focus on the Islamic Republic Regime**

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**Abstract**

The Iranian Islamic Revolution took place amid the “third wave of democracy” which swept through Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, paving the way for democratic transition. Given the international enthusiasm for democracy and the Iranians’ longstanding desire for a democratic political system, the Islamic Republic embraced some of the most fundamental democratic attributes, including multiparty competitive elections, freedom of association, and peaceful assembly. Yet, these democratic practices have been overridden by tutelary institutions which use religion to justify their interference in the elected bodies. This dual or “hybrid” characteristic of the Iranian regime is key to its sustainability and political stability. Despite its pivotal role in regime maintenance, religion as an ideology has been less discussed by the extant hybrid regime literature. Addressing this gap, I will discuss the role of religion, along with other components of regime configurations, in the sustainability of the Islamic Republic. In doing so, I will examine how tutelary bodies justify their interference in political mechanisms of democratically elected institutions by using religion as an ideology, thereby maintaining the regime stability.

**Key words**: democracy, tutelary institutions, hybrid regime, religion, regime sustainability, the Islamic Republic

**Introduction**

When observers proclaimed the advent of the age of liberal democracy was upon the world following the third wave of democracy, the Islamic Republic appeared as an anomaly. Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of Islamic Republic, redefined a novel interpretation of the Shia Islam for the purpose of establishing an ideal Islamic government. Such a government is meant to manifest the divine and infinite wisdom of God, as articulated by the vali-e faghih, or the Guardian Jurist, thereby subordinating the will of people to the dictates of the divine. In this sense, an Islamic government — velayat-e faqih, or rule of the Jurist is an irreconcilable concept to Iran’s democracy.

However, an appreciation of the Islamic Republic as such narrows our understanding of its governmental nuances, thereby misleading us about the regime sustainability and political settlement. The Islamic Republic is not a theocratic aberration, rather it was the outcome of decades of Iranian effort to end the monarchic dictatorship in order to found a democratic regime. Before the Islamic Revolution, Iranians had been striving for almost seventy years to limit the power of the monarch by establishing a democratic constitution, or Mashruteh. Yet, the Pahlavi monarchy whose power was supposed to be more constrained by a democratic constitutional government bedeviled the Iranian will for democracy. It was in such a domestic context and pro-democracy international atmosphere that the Iranian people embraced the idea of the Islamic Republic which promised to deliver a more humane, egalitarian, and democratic political system.

This by no means suggests that the coalition supporting the revolution unanimously yearned for the project of the Islamic Republic and what it would later become. Rather, the revolution coalition constituted of different groups who temporarily cooperated to break down the Shah’s authoritarian regime, but never could agree upon the form of rule in the aftermath of the revolution. Given these incongruences of the revolution coalition, including socialists, national liberals, Islamic leftists, conservatives, etc., as well as the Iranian enthusiasm for democracy, the new form of rule offered by the Islamic Republic had to recognize the sovereignty of people. In fact, the Islamic Republic’s mode of legitimation pivots on popular sovereignty shaped by decades of constitutionalism.

As its name implies, the Islamic Republic embodies two contradictory concepts: Islam and republicanism. According to Article 56 of the Islamic Republic Constitution, “absolute sovereignty over the world and man belongs to God”, but it is delegated to all human as masters of their own social destiny.[[1]](#footnote-1) This implies what Talal Asad defines as “self-governing” but not “autonomous” individuals who are morally bound to conform to sharia.[[2]](#footnote-2) In fact, the Islamic Republic was based as much on the principles of freedom and republicanism as it was on Islamism and anti-imperialism.[[3]](#footnote-3) Therefore, from its very inception, it embraced some of the most fundamental democratic attributes, including multiparty competitive elections, freedom of association and peaceful assembly. However the degree to which it concedes to the democratic principles hinges on the degree of congruency to those principles within the Islamic codes. In this regard, the democratic principles which tend to contradict those of Islam are not accepted in the framework of the Islamic Republic. This “dysfunctional dual sovereignty”[[4]](#footnote-4) configuration allows the Iranian regime to implement both democratic and the authoritarian attributes, rendering it one of the earliest of the hybrid regimes.

Examining the Iranian regime from the perspective of hybrid regime deepens our understanding of regime sustainability and the deep roots of political settlement in this country. Yet, in the hybrid regime literature, there is little discussion on the role of ideology in general and religion as an ideology particularly in driving the engine of hybrid regimes. The mentioned shortcoming decapitates the aforementioned discussion to capture the very hybrid nature of the Islamic Republic, or for that matter any similar regime, in which religion plays an indispensable role. By discussing the role of religion, along with other aspects of regime configurations in the maintenance of the Islamic Republic, I’ll address the gap in the extant literature. In doing so, I will lay bare as to how tutelary bodies justify their interference in political mechanisms of democratically elected institutions by using religion as an ideology, thereby maintaining the regime stability.

**What Is Hybrid Regime?**

The third wave of democratization has brought a euphoria heralding breakaway from authoritarianism toward the establishment of democracy. At the beginning of the twenty first century, the number of regimes that hold multiparty elections has risen to 104.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet, at the turn of the century it has been evident that a great number of the new regimes do not manifest democratic attributes as expected and do not seem to be any longer in transition to democracy. Rather, they consolidated their forms of rule by mixing both democratic and authoritarian attributes. The mixed, or “hybrid” nature of these regimes surprised scholars who considered democracy as the only form of rule following the breakdown of authoritarian regime.[[6]](#footnote-6) Aiming at capturing the hybrid dynamics of these regimes, scholars created an array of concepts which have filled the hybrid regime literature with a blurred boundary between democratic and non-democratic regimes.

In the 1990s, being enthusiastic over the spread of democracy, scholars stressed on the democratic attributes of the hybrid regimes, producing a trend commonly referred to as “democracy with adjectives”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Among hundreds of democracy with adjectives, “illiberal democracy” and “semi-democracy” are two examples. The former was first introduced by Fareed Zakria who categorizes regimes which hold multiparty elections and adhere to the adult franchise, but fail to protect civil liberties as illiberal democracies.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the same vein, Diamond et al. urge a distinction between democracies and semi-democracies by focusing on the competitive elections and *de facto* power of elected officials.[[9]](#footnote-9) The boundary is so blurred that Diamond categorizes some regimes as “ambiguous regimes” in the sense that they fall somewhere in between democracies and non-democracies.[[10]](#footnote-10) Criticizing the tendency to classify regimes as such simply on the basis of holding competitive multi-party elections, Terry Karl introduced the term “hybrid regime” to refer to regimes combining both democratic and authoritarian attributes.[[11]](#footnote-11)

After the new millennium, in order to both address the biases of the first trend and alleviate the conceptual confusion, scholars shift the basis for conceptualizing the hybrid regimes to authoritarianism and its respective attributes. Schedler label regimes which hold multi-party elections, albeit unfree or unfair, “electoral authoritarian”[[12]](#footnote-12). Despite the regularities of elections, Levitsky and Way consider the regimes which don’t allow *competitive* multiparty elections as full-blown authoritarians, labeling them “hegemonic electoral authoritarian”[[13]](#footnote-13). The competitiveness of elections is the criteria, as they submit, to draw a fine line between authoritarian regimes and hybrid regimes.[[14]](#footnote-14) Subsequently, they offer a more restrictive category named “competitive authoritarianism” to refer to those regimes which hold regular *competitive* multi-partyelections.[[15]](#footnote-15) Yet, similar to Schedler, they postulate that the competition is not fair, meaning that “opposition forces are handicapped by a highly uneven—and sometimes dangerous—playing field”.[[16]](#footnote-16) Although their contributions altogether help distinguish democracy from non-democracy, the conceptual confusion of the hybrid regimes persists as scholars diverge on what constitutes hybrid regime. For instance, should countries such as Egypt and Singapore be considered as hybrid regimes or authoritarians? For Schedler, both regimes are hybrid, but Levitsky and Way categorize them as authoritarian par excellence.

Gilbert and Mohseni posit that such conceptual confusions result from regimes placement on a linear continuum from authoritarianism to democracy.[[17]](#footnote-17) Instead, they offer a configurative approach which represents the multi-dimensional arrangements for the construction of regime types. Based on the important regime features, including *competitiveness*, *tutelary inference*, and *civil liberties*, Gilbert and Mohseni visualize regime placement on the multi-dimensional figures.[[18]](#footnote-18) As such, they submit that regular multi-party competitive elections are building block of hybrid regimes, but hybrid regime may differ in the implementation of tutelary institutions and civil liberties. Such an approach is, indeed, necessary to distinguish regimes from one another based on their idiosyncratic institutional features in this sense that different regimes may fall into the very same category of hybrid regime, but diverge on the way they manage their forms of rules. Roughly forty-five to sixty five countries fall into the category of hybrid regimes or what Marina Ottaway calls “a vast gray zone that occupies the space between authoritarianism at one end and consolidated democracy at the other.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Both Russia and Turkey, for instance, are considered as hybrid regimes and share some common features, however, they differ from each other in terms of the degree to which they may manifest authoritarian or democratic features in dissimilar political events. Thus, such an institutional approach to the regime type does not only bring about more clarity to the regime classification, but also is suitable for examining the dynamics of the political institutions and the sustainability of the form of rule within a specific hybrid regime.

As for hybrid regime sustainability, the extant literature has offered various frameworks, including but not limited to, political participation, opposition parties, political institutions, and mass media. It is important to mention that these elements should no longer be seen as methods for democratic purposes as they would be in clear-cut democracies. In other words, the roles of such institutions in democracies should not be assumed to be the same for hybrid regimes. Rather, as Lee Morgenbesser rightly points out elections, and as I argue by extension the democratic institutions, in hybrid regimes have different undemocratic implications, including legitimation of incumbents’ right to power, patronage, and elite managements.[[20]](#footnote-20) Taking this fact into consideration help better capture the scholars’ frameworks for understanding the sustainability of hybrid regimes in relations to the democratic institutions. To begin with, Ekman focuses on the relationship between political participation and regime stability to demonstrate how incumbents can ensure the stability of regime through ballots while circumventing opposition parties with different tactics.[[21]](#footnote-21)What’s more, he points to the lack of ties between opposition parties and citizens as another key element for hybrid regime sustainability.[[22]](#footnote-22) There is also an array of the literature dedicated to the role of political institutions and mass media in the stability of the hybrid regime.[[23]](#footnote-23) Equipped with dependent or co-opted political institutions and mass media, hybrid regimes enjoy a longer stability than their authoritarian counterparts.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, despite the significant role ideology plays in the [longevity](https://www.google.com/search?q=longevity&spell=1&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiAtp3P6u_aAhVo7IMKHQEMByMQkeECKAB6BAgAECc) of hybrid regimes, the existing literature shies away from examining religion as an ideology in such regimes. This shortcoming handicaps the literature to explain the sustainability of the Islamic Republic, or for that matter any similar regime, in which religion plays an indispensable role.

Given this limitation, the dynamics of political participation, political institutions, and opposition parties in theocratic hybrid regimes cannot be fully addressed. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that democratization scholars have difficulty in explaining the sustainability of the Islamic Republic regime in the face of several major incidents of political unrests and foreign threats for almost forty years. Aiming to fill this gap in the literature, I will incorporate the discussion of religion as I demonstrate its inextricable influence on various components of the Iranian regime, which helps prolong the regime’s sustainability. In doing so, I will examine the interplay of religion and the democratic institutions to show how it transforms the democratic track of these institutions to a non-democratic road in order to ensure the sustainability of the Iranian hybrid regime.

**The Islamic Republic Constitution and Political Institutions**

The founding articles of the Islamic Republic Constitution are inherently hybrid and ambiguous. For instance, the very first Article of the Constitution asserts “The form of government of Iran is that of an Islamic Republic, endorsed by the people of Iran on the basis of their longstanding belief in the sovereignty of truth and Qur'anic justice, … through the affirmative vote of a majority of 98.2% of eligible voters”[[25]](#footnote-25). This Article implies that the Islamic Republic is a democratic elected form of rule, yet it seeks to consolidate democracy through qur’anic principles. In this sense, the end of both liberal democracies and the Islamic Republic is the same, but they diverge on the means. This difference can be seen through each and every articles of the Islamic Republic Constitution, which is further manifested in the dynamics of the regime political institutions. Admittedly, the word “democracy” needs to be defined with more considerations as the perspective with which the Islamic democracy has been defined is normatively different from that of liberal democracies. Yet in the scope of this paper, I don’t intend to engage in normative discussion through which the moral and ethical principles are judged. Rather, I consider democracy as a generic concept which was accepted to be achieved through an Islamic State by the majority of the Iranians in 1979. One may critique this narrow interpretation of democracy as outdated since not the majority of contemporary people might agree upon the Islamic path to democracy if they were to vote in another referendum. Yet as for now, it can be claimed that at least during the inception of the Islamic Republic, many Iranians by and large embraced the concept of the Islamic Republic as the form of rule to democratic transition and consolidation, as reflected in the Constitution.

However, it was self-evident that given the inconsistent revolution coalition and the Iranian long-lasting enthusiasm for democracy as well as the universally accepted belief in democracy as the best form of governance, the fledging state had to endorse democratic principles. Yet, widely lauded by the people, particularly by conservatives, the Islamic principles as opposed to those of the Western secular seemed indispensable component for the Islamic Republic Constitution. It was in such a historical context that the Islamic Republic was born to address both Islamic and democratic calls. This equivocal configuration of the Islamic Republic thus allows the Iranian regime to implement both democratic and the authoritarian practices, thereby rendering it one of the early hybrid regime on the pinnacle of the democratization wave. In fact, this is the divergence point where the Islamic Republic took a dissimilar path from that of liberal democracies to reach the supposedly similar goal. To this end, the Constitution, and particularly Article 4, asserts how certain political institutions are required to assure the compatibility of all laws and rules with the Islamic codes.[[26]](#footnote-26) Such religious ideological-oriented articles have legitimized the formation of different tutelary institutions and justified their interference in political mechanisms of democratically elected institutions.

On top of these tutelary bodies is the Office of Leadership entrusted to the *Vali-e-Faghih* (the Guardian Jurist) in whom the absolute authority is vested with the least degree of oversight. According to the Constitution, “Such leadership will prevent any deviation by the various organs of State from their essential Islamic duties.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This order borrows its instruction from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih. “... the ulema [clerics] were appointed by the imam for government and for judgment among people, and their position is still preserved for them ... Ulema are the heirs to the prophets … If a knowledgeable and just jurisprudent undertakes the task of forming the government, then he will run the social affairs that the prophet used to run, and it is the duty of the people to listen to him and obey him.”[[28]](#footnote-28) It is constitutionally asserted that the *Vali-e-Faghih* has been divinely chosen for his position to serve Islam. To this end, the Supreme Leader or *Vali-e-Faghih* is authorized to appoints crucial power-holders, including the 30 members of the Expediency Council; the head of the judiciary branch; the commanders of the Army, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Militia (*Basij*); the Chief of Police; the head of the National Security Council; and the head of the radio and television broadcasting, and most importantly the six clerical members of the Guardian Council, among others[[29]](#footnote-29).

The Guardian Council is another decisive institution which is specifically designed to serve as a watchdog to assure that the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iran function in accordance with the Islamic principles. It constitutes twelve members, including six Islamic [*faqihs*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faqih) (expert in Islamic Law), selected by the [Supreme](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supreme_Leader_of_Iran) Leader and six jurists elected by the [*Majlis*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majlis_of_Iran) (the Iranian Parliament).[[30]](#footnote-30) The composition of the Guardian Council, half appointed and half elected, representing the dual and somewhat contradictory nature of the constitution embracing both Islamic and democratic features.

The Guardian Council plays an important role in terms of the legislation process as the *Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmī* (the Iranian Parliament) cannot make laws without the GC’s approval. The legislative assembly is deliberately named the “Consultative Assembly”, or *Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmī,* since this organ “does not hold any legal status if there is no Guardian Council in existence.”[[31]](#footnote-31) In the same vein, the Guardian Council can declare any law passed by the legislative branch to be unconstitutional or un-Islamic. Therefore, the *Majlis* cannot pass a law to limit the Guardian Council’s role, thereby rendering it less effective to push for structural reforms. Yet this is not to suggest that the legislature branch is merely a façade, rather it can promote civil liberties to some extent. The reformist Sixth *Majles* (2000-2004), for instance, passed 111 bills out of 297 bills in support of civil liberties, political participation, women’s rights, ban on torture, press freedom, labor rights, public welfare policies, and so on. This fact more than anything attests the duality of the regime’ political system, which blends theocratic and democratic principles.

Such a hybrid configuration which demonstrates the ever-existing power struggle between the elites, the Islamic Left or reformists and conservatives, sets the scene for contestation. The created contestation, albeit tamed, generates the perception of feasibility of democratic reforms in the heart and mind of the citizens, thus effectively decreasing the chance of political uprisings which can challenge the stability of the regime.

**Election**

As mentioned, due to historical contingencies and an uneasy revolutionary alliance between conservatives and the Islamic Left or reformers factions, the Islamic Republic had to establish a form of rule which appealed to both factions. Thus, while embracing the Islamic codes, the Iranian regime from the very beginning recognized the will of people to determine their fates through ballot boxes. To this end, Article 6 of the Constitution asserts that “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution”[[32]](#footnote-32). Election in this sense has the same implication as it does in democracies, i.e. a method for selecting and empowering political representatives through contestation and competition over people’s votes. However, for the Islamic Republic, election means something beyond the mentioned traditional sense, it is to serve as a respiratory organ without which the Iranian regime would not have celebrated its 39th anniversary.

Elections, just like any other aspect of the Islamic Republic, by no means can be repugnant to the Islamic codes. To this end, all elected officials, including the president, are in a subordinate position to the Supreme Leader who can dismiss an unfit president from the office with due regard for the expediency of the country. Furthermore, the Guardian Council is authorized to manipulate elections through screening the candidates before allowing them into a race. For example, opponents of the *Velayat-e Faqih* are banned from elections as being unfit to hold any office in the Islamic system. The yardstick by which the Guardian Council assesses the qualifications of candidates is vaguely defined, allowing the Council to keep the electoral system under control. In 2004 after reformist Khatami’s surprise victory in 1997 and the takeover of the 6th Majlis by reformist representatives in 2000, the GC has banned more than 2,000 reformist candidates, including 87 members of the *Majlis*, from competing for the 290-seat assembly in the new round of parliament election.[[33]](#footnote-33) By doing so, conservatives effectively control the political process and limit the power sharing of reformists, preventing *de jure* and *de facto* structural change.

However, the regime has never gone so far as to call off, or for that matter postpone, elections altogether. Quite the contrary, Voter participation is encouraged by the regime for other purposes, including but not limited to symbolic purposes of both domestic and international legitimation. High voter turnout in one way or another represents evidence by a subordinate of consent to a particular power relation.[[34]](#footnote-34) Besides from legitimation, elections serve as a reconciliatory method which keeps the inherent elite fragmentation under control. In fact, the power struggle between the two factions is channeled through elections without gravely jeopardizing the regime structure. That’s why the institutional structure of the Islamic Republic has remained basically unchanged since its inception. Besides elite management, the competitive multiparty elections infuse the Iranian people with a perception that reform is feasible within the regime structure, thereby decreasing the chance of a revolution. Thus, while a House-of-Lords-styled Guardian Council vets candidates, the contrasts in candidates open for voter consideration are often stark enough to produce robust campaigns and surprising results.[[35]](#footnote-35) The reformist Muhammad Khatami’s surprise landslide victory in 1997 and the reformist takeover of the 6th Majlis in 2000 are cases in points.

Unsurprisingly the period of the reformist government (1997-2004) was regarded as the sharpest deviation from the Islamic path, necessitating the revival of the original Islamic project of the Revolution. Thus, the guardian council has rigidly applied its control to further manipulate the electoral process. Subsequently, the tight control over the candidates left voters with fewer choices and less motivation to participate in the elections, giving rise to the conservative candidates who later created the highest degree of structural and ideological unity (2005-2013) since the revolution. By 2005, the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary branches of government as well as the major clerical institutions were occupied by a coalition of conservative and hardline factions.

Yet, such measures were not without their backlashes as they interfered with the key role election plays in fostering the sustainability of the regime through legitimization, elite management, and generation of reform perception. In the 2009 presidential election results, conservatives aimed at further consolidating their power by manipulating the electoral mechanism. However, after the announcement of the presidential election and the victory of the conservative candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the regime witnessed massive street protests. Opposing the results, protesters accused the regime of rigging the election. The chain of protests, known as “the Green Movement”, was considered the greatest challenge to the regime in the aftermath of the revolution. This political uprising occurred largely due to the fact that the reformation perception was replaced with the perceived stolen votes or electoral fraud. This fact can explain why the regime has not run the risk of blatant manipulation of any subsequent election ever since. The victory of Hassan Rouhani, a moderate figure, in 2013, the moderate and reformist takeover of the *Majles* in 2016, and reelection of the President Rouhani in 2017 are the examples of the regime’s restraint from the electoral interference.

As mentioned, elections play a significant role in legitimization, elite management, and generation of the perception of structural change through democratic mechanisms, thereby ensuring the maintenance of the Islamic Republic. Relatively high presidential average voter turnouts (around 64.19%) demonstrates the success of elections to make the system appear to be open to constant reform toward a more humane, egalitarian, and democratic political system. However, the democratic institutions, including elections seem to start losing their viability to deliver their undemocratic purposes. This is mainly because the perceived structural change is already on the decline due to a whole host of reasons that contribute to the awareness of people. Among many, the failure of Rouhani’s Government to improve socioeconomic status of people and its inability to bring about structural change in the political system  frustrate the Iranian citizens’ hope for change through democratic reforms. The late 2017 protests and ongoing dissidence well attest the demise of this perception among people. For instance, amid the recent protests, people were chanting slogans like “reformists, hardliners, the game is now over!” More than anything, it shows that dissidents, which are not limited in number, have come to realization that the current political system cannot be improved by reformists. If we take for granted that the Islamic Republic has survived so far through these institutional arrangements, then it holds true that the regime sustainability can no longer be secured, or at least remained­­\_­­­ unchallenged, with the same relatively obsolete institutional arrangements.

**Opposition Parties and Protests**

For similar reasons as for previous institutions, political parties are guaranteed as unalienable rights of people. Article 26 of the Constitution permits “the formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities”.[[36]](#footnote-36) Yet, opposition parties are allowed to work provided they don’t violate “the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This instruction is open to various interpretations which, depending on how rigidly it is interpreted, can pose serious restrictions on political party functions. Needless to say, the regime uses this loophole to preclude the formation of new opposition parties on the one hand and paralyze the activities of the existing ones on the other.

The regime not only uses legal means to limit the activities of opposition parties, but also uses extralegal forces to either intimidate or co-opt political party leaders. In the aftermath of the Green Movement, for instance, the regime arrested Mohammad Taghi Karroubi, the leader of the *Ḥezb-e Eʿtemād-e Mellī* (Nationalist Trust party) associated with reformists, and severely restricted the party’s activities. In doing so, the regime sent a signal to other reformist parties, warning them of the similar consequences for blatantly criticizing the Islamic Republic’s principles. Besides coercion, many of these reformist parties, mainly comprised of the Islamic Left and moderates from the Right are prominent revolutionary figures who prioritize the regime’s survival over democratic reforms. That’s why the political leaders of the Green Movement coalesced around one issue, i.e. calling for protest against the fraudulent election, rather than questioning the whole system. Not even a single person from the reformist front broke the silence to comment on the *velayat-e-faqih.* This is not to say that all the elites are absorbed with the idea of the *velayat-e-faqih,* rather implies the hegemony of the Islamic discourse over that of liberal democracy. The elites are so concerned that their critical expressions toward the doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini may lead them to be labeled as *Mofsed fel-Arz* (corrupt of the earth), *mortad* (apostate), or similar religious stigmas that would lead them to be pushed out of the political playing field. Therefore, an initial agreement on the basic rules of play (i.e. Islamic principles, particularly the doctrine of the *velayat-e-faqih)* has been ever-present among the elites, which opens up the space for contestation, albeit to an extent which does not threaten the sustainability of the regime political structure. This is how opposition parties in the Iranian hybrid regime serves to keep both the political structure and the ruling elites intact, instead of delivering the purposes they were initially formed for in liberal democracies.

As for protests and assembly, Article 27 asserts that “Public gatherings and marches may be freely held, provided arms are not carried and that they are not detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Similar to party regulations, restrictions on freedom of association and assembly are codified in ambiguous and overly broad statutes, thereby violating this right to a wide range of Iranian citizens. For instance, Iranian people can assemble peacefully provided a political party or organized group from “within the framework of Islamic principles” receives a permission from the Interior Ministry. Such definitions confuse what is permissible, providing pretexts for legal actions, or coercive measures, taken against both political parties and citizens. Despite being cumbersome for the regime, freedom of assembly, like other democratic practices, has an instrumental purpose for the regime: guaranteeing the survival of the Islamic Republic. Instead of an outright repression against dissidents and dealing with its subsequent societal backlash, the regime uses other modern tactics aligned with religious symbols to delegitimize dissidents. In the face of every new uprising, the regime holds a parallel pro-government protests ornamented with religious verses from the Prophet Mohammad or Shi’a Imams to fortify the picture of dichotomous combat between the pious and the “Westoxificated” citizens. What’s more, pro-government protests serves as an effective method to make the system appear to be democratically endorsed by people on the one hand and delegitimize *jahel* (imperceptive, or blind-hearted to the divine wisdom, as manifested in the doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih*) dissidents on the other.

To give an example, in late December of 2009, following the most significant anti-government outpouring since the 2009 protests against alleged election irregularities, pro-government protesters took to the streets. The images of large-scale gatherings with the pictures of the Supreme Leader and religious slogans[[39]](#footnote-39) in support of the government were intended to showcase the regime legitimacy to both Tehran's rivals abroad and opponents inside the country. Hijacking the Islamic rhetoric to make dissidents, particularly the leaders of the Green Movement, sound *mohareb* (enemy of God), who should be executed under the Iranian Islamic laws, the government-organized demonstrators swore allegiance to the clerical establishment. In the same vein, after days of protests against the government and economic problems in late 2017, pro-government demonstrators took to the streets across Iran, waving Iranian flags and chanting in support of the Supreme Leader. Incorporating the Islamic ideology into the waves of protests, the regime fuels the binary image of Western imperialism and Islamism to accuse the United States, Britain, and even Saudi Arabia of being behind the protests in pursuit of undermining the Islamic Republic.[[40]](#footnote-40) Viewed within this context, it is evident that diverse political institutions have taken different purposes from their original ones in liberal democracies as not to foster a democratic transition, rather to sustain the already consolidated form of rule in hybrid regimes. Along with other modern state institutions, government-organized demonstration coupled with the Islamic rhetoric has been an effective tool for the sustainability of the regime.

**The Islamic Republic Resilience and the Path Forward**

The literature on hybrid regimes offers an institutional approach to examine the sustainability and political settlement in these regimes. Yet, the institutional approach cannot provide a thorough explanation concerning the dynamics of the Islamic Republic, or for that matter, any similar regime in which religion plays an indispensable role. As a unique form of rule, the Islamic Republic hybrid regime exercises power in a distinguished way. In order to understand how the institutional arrangements sustain this form of rule, the role of religion as an ideology should be incorporated into the discussion. Through this paper, I introduced the discussion of religion as I demonstrate its inextricable influence on various components of the Iranian regime. Examining the Islamic Republic Constitution, political institutions, elections, political parties, and protests all entangled with the Islamic codes, I aimed to depict how these democratic institutions have taken different paths to serve a totally different purpose from their original objectives in liberal democracies, i.e. to ensure the sustainability of the already consolidated form of rule in hybrid regimes. To this end, the democratic political institutions legitimize the extant form of rule while delegitimizing dissidents, manage elite fragmentation to an extent that does not threaten the political structure, and, most importantly, generate the perception of structural reform among the ruled. Needless to say, the role religion performs may change depending on the type of regime in question.

Although the aim of this paper is not to predict any trajectory for the future of the Islamic Republic Regime, it is plausible to ask whether or not the institutional arrangements which ensure the survival of the Iranian regime can be shaken, thereby challenging the regime’s resilience. The answer to this question remains to be seen, yet based on the facts presented, one may predict some probabilities. Since through this paper, I place a high importance on the role of reform perception in the minds and hearts of the ruled, I refer to it so as to speculate my answer to the raised question. In doing so, I refer back to the recent waves of protest in relation to the mindset of protestors. These new strings of protests in late 2017 have taken on different forms than those of previous ones. Unlike the 2009 or 1999 protests, they no longer resonate the discourse of reformists and the Islamic Left nor do they seek the same objectives (change through structural reform). Even though, an array of socio-economic issues, unemployment, corruption, and the perceived injustice trigger the current dissidence, these protests reflect a broader message. It seems that the institutional arrangements through which the regime has survived so far have already fallen short of keeping the cycle of the reform perception intact. The Iranian people once celebrated the idea of the Islamic Republic and later the “Post-Islamism”[[41]](#footnote-41), as opposed to the Western liberal democracies, as the earnest forms of rule to establish a democratic political system appear to be cynical with the role of religion as an ideology in the political spheres. The collective breakaway from the long-standing perceptions of reform, if taken as a key to the Iranian regime’s sustainability, implies that the regime sustainability can no longer be secured, or at least remained­ unchallenged, through the same institutional arrangements.

1. The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979, Article 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Talal Assad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marsha Pripstein Posusney, Michele Penner Angrist, ed., *Authoritarianism in the Middle East Regimes and Resistance* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Larry J. Diamond, “Elections without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 21-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Diamond, “Elections without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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25. The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979, Article 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations, and the fuqaha' of the Guardian Council are judges in this matter.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979, Preamble “The Wilayah of the Just Faqih”. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government*, Translated by Joint Publications Research Service (New York: Manor Books, 1979), p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979, Article 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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31. # [Kazem Alamdari](http://www.mei.edu/profile/kazem-alamdari), “[Elections as a Tool to Sustain the Theological Power Structure](http://www.mei.edu/content/elections-tool-sustain-theological-power-structure)”, *Middle East Institute*, January 29, 2009, <http://www.mei.edu/content/elections-tool-sustain-theological-power-structure>.

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34. David Beetham, *The* Legitimation of Power (NewYork: Palgrave, 1991), 13.

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37. The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979, Article 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The Islamic Republic Constitution of 1979, Article 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “We are not from the city of Kufa, a city in Iraq, whose people broke their allegiance with their Imam”, referring to the Kufi people who eventually plotted to assassinate Imam Ali, the first [Imam](http://en.wikishia.net/view/Imam) of [Shi'a](http://en.wikishia.net/index.php?title=Shi%27a&action=edit&redlink=1). This slogan implies that the pro-government protesters will not break their allegiance with their *Imam-e-zaman* or *valie-faghih* as the legitimate ruler in occultation of the twelfth and last Imam of the Shi’ite. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. # “Pro-Government Rallies Follow Days of Protests in Iran,” *Voice of America*, January 3, 2018, https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-protests-spark-pro-government-rallies/4190176.html.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Asef Bayat introduced the “Post-Islamist” to refer to one of the most remarkable reform movement ((junbish-i-islahat) in his book named “Making Islam Democratic” published in 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)