

The Resilience of the Traditional Clergy to the Hardline Challenge in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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Section 1: Introduction

How Resilient is the Clergy as an Institution?

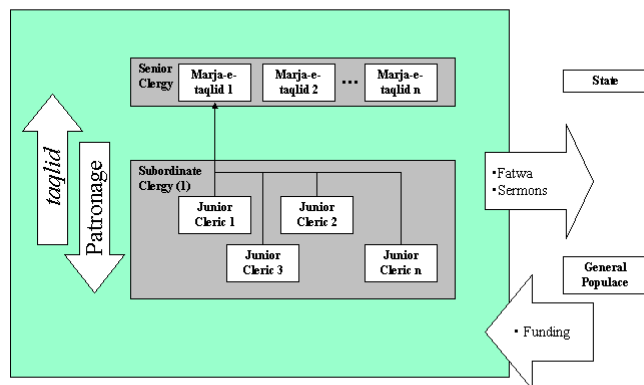
The post-revolutionary period in Iran has seen new challenges to the institution of the clergy that threaten its continued existence in its traditional form. The challenges come mostly from the clerics in government who enforce the official state ideology (the hardliners), and it remains to be seen how much change will occur in the traditional clergy. This paper will argue that the traditional institution of the clergy is resilient enough to survive largely intact thanks to the nature of the legitimacy wielded by a genuine senior ayatollah and the deeply rooted culture of critical discourse in the *madrasa* (shi'i seminary). The hardliners are using the tools of the state in ways that alter the traditional systems of patronage and funding of the clergy. They also seek to regulate the behavior and speech of clerics in a manner never attempted from within the clergy. However, the hardliners' challenge is

weakening because their position is not grounded in a stable, legitimating political order unlike their reformist opponents and the traditional clergy.

The second section of this paper will address some of the relevant background, including a description of the traditional institution of the clergy, changes since the revolution, and the

nature of the current challenges. The third section will put forward the main arguments for and against the continued existence of the institution of the clergy in its traditional form. The fourth and final section will present some brief conclusions.

Structure of the Clergy: Pre-Revolution



Section 2: Background

The Clergy as an Institution

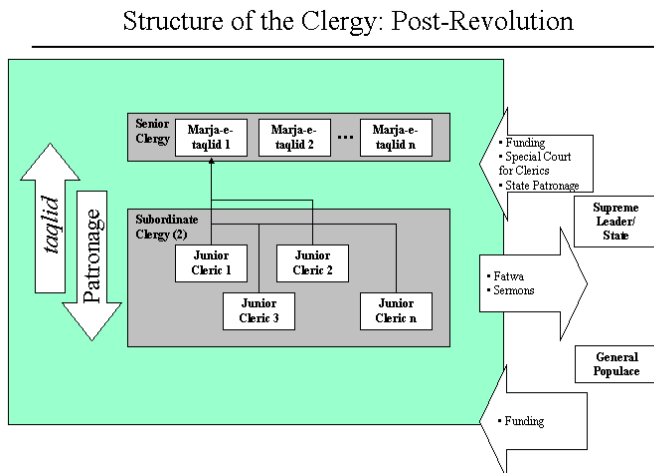
The actors to consider in a pre and post-revolution analysis of the structure of the clergy are the state, senior and junior clerics, and the general populace.

Within the clergy, relationships between junior and senior clergy are semi-transactional based on patronage and *taqlid* (translated as imitation or emulation). The senior cleric acts as a patron and the junior cleric takes the senior as a teacher and guide. The transactional aspect of the relationship is that both parties gain from this voluntary association: a senior cleric's

reputation is positively correlated to his number of followers and a subordinate cleric will gain financial support and a teacher from the relationship. As an additional benefit for the senior cleric, a network of ex-students becomes a powerful support to any future claims of leadership and boosts the cleric's public image. Subordinate clerics are free to choose their patron on the basis of the senior cleric's writings and teachings. The relationship between senior and subordinate clergy in general has not changed substantially in the post-revolution period.

The environment within the *madrasa* is one of debate and disputation. The *madrasa* curriculum is based on rhetoric, grammar, and logic; the first three subjects (or Trivium) of the classical liberal arts as they were defined in the late classical world.¹ The teaching style is based on the "dialectic principle of argument and counter-argument" in which students draw on their knowledge of the standard texts and just about any other intellectual resource they can bring to bear.² In this "culture of critical discourse" students earn promotion and respect through their creative and original contributions.³ However, as Kurzman notes, originality and open debate can conflict with the traditions of authority and leadership that also exist in the *madrasa* system, but that is the rare exception to the rule.

This lack of interpretive closure is consistent with academic debate among scholars, but in the post-revolutionary environment closure is essential for a regime that stakes its legitimacy on a particular interpretation of theological doctrine.



Clerical Leadership Based on the Usuli School

The concept of *marja-e-taqlid* (or source of emulation) developed out of the eighteenth century *usuli* school, which said that every shi'i has to follow an appropriately trained *mujtahid* (a cleric

qualified to interpret Islamic law) on issues of law and doctrine.⁴ In the later part of the nineteenth century the concept of *marja-e-taqlid* was refined to suggest that a *mujtahid* of superior learning should stand atop a virtual pyramid of lesser *mujtahids*, acting as the *marja-e-taqlid* for all others and whose *fatwa* were binding on his followers. In practice it has been common for multiple *mujtahids* to simultaneously be considered *marja-e-taqlid*. Rarely has a single *mujtahid* been considered of such superior learning that he could be the *marja-e-taqlid-e-tamm*, or supreme exemplar for the entire community to follow. There are currently ten senior ayatollahs recognized as *marja-e-taqlid* in the main shi'i seminary town of Qom, and there were six at the time of the Islamic revolution, including Ayatollah Khomeini.⁵ Ayotallah Boroujerdi in the 1950s, Ayatollah Ansari in the mid-nineteenth century, and Ayatollah Shirazi in the late nineteenth century are the three clearest examples of a single *marja-e-taqlid* being able to claim a near universal following.

There are remarkably few constraints on choosing a *marja-e-taqlid*. The emulator is supposed to decide based on which *mujtahid* best embodies the qualities of knowledge of the law, justice in the practice of the law, and piety, with

priority being given to knowledge.⁶ The process of observing these qualities and choosing a source is entirely up to the emulator, though he or she can also rely on the testimony of one or two “just consultants.”⁷ Amanat stresses the flimsiness of this schema to underscore that the emulator has not only a relatively free choice, but also room to change that selection as desired: “the *marja-e-taqlid* is in fact the willing dependent of the [emulator].”⁸

The Clerical Leadership as Representatives

Ayatollah Shirazi was the first *marja-e-taqlid* to use his position as a platform for significant political participation, playing a key in the 1891 tobacco protests. His impetus to action came mainly from the complaints and petitions of merchants whose commercial interests were threatened by the state’s sale of the Tobacco concession.⁹ These merchants were his own financial backers, and his letters to the Shah specify an interest in economic welfare of the merchants.¹⁰ This mutual interdependence described by Amanat is essentially a form of political representation. Of course, the active political role of a *marja-e-taqlid* was a significant departure from the traditionally quietist views of the clergy in which any temporal government in the absence of the hidden twelfth imam was necessarily illegitimate. Once this threshold was crossed, the momentum for clerical involvement in politics lasted beyond Shirazi’s death in 1895 to the period of the Constitutional Revolution in 1905. However, the clergy after Shirazi’s death could not achieve a unified leadership. Like any political representatives, the clergy competed for resources (in the form of students and funding) and were driven by the “conflicting interests and divergences in their followers’ political views and actions.”¹¹ One distinct interest group with an influence over the clergy was the Qajar state.

The State in the Balance

In Qajar times the state was a source of patronage. It furnished the clergy who worked with it with funds, titles, and functions (e.g. Friday prayer leader), though the price was compliance with government wishes through

more or less forceful means as the case required.¹² One such tactic was to appoint a rival to an official position to counterbalance the influence of a major *mujtahid*. The Qajar shahs attempted to placate the clergy after the tobacco protest of 1891-1892 by giving them money, and the clergy accepted pensions, land, and *waqf* funds (inalienable religious endowments) as late as the late 1970s.¹³ Later, in the twentieth century, the Pahlevis resorted to exile and even murder in order to keep the clergy in line, but these attempts to control the clergy always came from outside the institution.

The Post-Revolutionary Period

In the post-revolutionary period things have not changed much at all within the *madrassa* system, but relations among clerics have changed drastically because of their increased participation in the public sphere. There is greater continuity with the past when one considers the hardliners as the state and not clergy at all. The traditional structure continues relatively unchanged, but the state sector has changed considerably because it now incorporates clerics who claim to have married their tradition role to the functions of the state. The impact of this change in the state can be felt at all levels.

At the very top, the head of state is a cleric with a complicated relationship to the rest of the clergy. That the head of state uses the machinery of the state to persuade, coerce, and generally ensure compliance with its wishes was seen in both Pahlevi and Qajar times. What is new is that the head of state now claims the final word in all theological debates. However, the current situation of the leadership does not fully meet Khomeini’s criteria for the guardianship of the jurist (*velayat-e-faqih*).

A head of state commands allegiance; recognition of the *marja-e-taqlid* is the voluntary choice of many. The weak voluntary following for the Supreme Leader goes against the logic of the doctrine that established the position in the first place.

The overall thrust of these changes is that hardline clerics have access to power that has little basis in popular support. Traditional clerics on

the other hand would be marginalized if they lose their ability to attract a following, and the support that they enjoy is a form of representation on behalf of the ordinary people, students, and junior clerics who support them. The position that the Supreme Leader has the final word is also a violation of the norms of the seminary, where a culture of critical discourse based on argument and counter-argument rewards superior learning and not merely rank.

Section 3: The Case for the Continued Existence of the Traditional Clergy

Traditional legitimacy and popular support

The traditional clergy is an institution imbued with tremendous traditional legitimacy. Senior clerics (i.e. a *marja-e-taqlid*) can tap this traditional legitimacy as a platform for political participation through their public communications. However, there are institutional safeguards to ensure that access to this political platform is limited to clerics with genuinely popular roots. Rising in rank to be a senior cleric requires that a cleric offer compelling scholarship that earns him the respect of his peers and of theological students. More practically, supporting a number of students commensurate with the rank of senior cleric requires public support in the form of donations. In effect, there is a system of checks and balances in place. Expressed negatively, clerics are constrained by the consensus of their colleagues and the views of the general public. Expressed positively, senior clerics generally have the popular support to function as legitimate participants in politics. This is a strong position from which to resist the incursions of hardliners seeking to enforce their views.

Hardliners are denied legitimacy by being visibly distant from the traditional system while traditional clerics retain it along with popular backing. The 25 years since the revolution have seen the hardliners move away from their traditional roots to a focus on the exercise and maintenance of their power within the state. An explanation for this result can be derived from the model of the political activism of the clergy as a form of representation. Resources are provided to

hardline clergy on the basis of their participation within the state and their implementation of the guardianship of the jurist. There is therefore little need to maintain their popular constituency, especially as the majority of the populace has repeatedly expressed itself as supporting the reformist position over the hardline position. The interest groups that the hardline clergy represent are those groups associated with the state—mostly themselves. Representation of the broader population's interests has mainly been taken up by the reformists and some of the more traditional clergy (though these two categories often overlap).

The traditional clergy are still reliant on the general public for their access to critical resources. An individual can choose which cleric receives his or her alms, the giving of which is one of the five duties incumbent on every Muslim. Rank, reputation, the number of followers a cleric had, and—most importantly—the attractiveness of a particular cleric's teachings influenced the amount of donations they draw. Consequently, there is an organic link between the status of a senior cleric and their popular appeal. To become unpopular jeopardizes a cleric's funding, attracts less students, undermines his ability to support his students, lowers his reputation, and so on with the negative effects reinforcing each other over time. Without offering compelling teachings a cleric would simply become irrelevant as the individuals (and religious students) could always give their attentions to a different cleric.

Ayatollah Khomeini is a powerful example of a cleric in the traditional system who used the traditional legitimacy of the institution as a platform for political participation. Firstly, he used the communication channels of the clergy to launch his critique of the state. Most notably, he compared Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlevi to the tyrant Yazid, the slayer of Imam Hussain and the most reviled figure in Imami Shi'ism. This incomparable insult was delivered during a sermon on the ninth of Moharram, a day before the emotionally charged observance of the death anniversary of Imam Hussain.

Resistance to tyranny is one of the overriding themes of Shi'ism. Shi'is are literally the party of

Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet), who they believe was done a grave injustice when he was denied succession to the caliphate after the death of the prophet. This inaugural injustice is outdone only by the martyrdom of Ali's son Hussain, slain in Karbala in 680 in resisting the tyranny of the usurper Yazid. Insurrectionary uprising is "second nature to Shi'is, martyrdom the very cornerstone of their faith."¹⁴ The historical narrative of the Shi'i is nothing if not encouraging resistance to tyrannical rule.

The hardliners need interpretive closure

The Special Court for Clerics embodies the hardline clerics' claim to definitive interpretations of Islam. Leading reformist cleric and journalist Abdollah Nouri was imprisoned for five years for "deviation from the opinions of the Imam Khomeini."¹⁵ Resistance to this dogmatic approach is championed by Abdolkarim Soroush. His writings distinguish between religiosity and religion, and he argues that while religion is perfect, human understanding of it (religiosity) is necessarily imperfect and a function of their times: "It is up to God to reveal a religion, but up to us to understand and realize it."¹⁶ Soroush argues that plurality is unavoidable, but the ideological basis of the guardianship of the jurist is certainty and not merely relative superiority among a plurality of views.¹⁷

A crisis of legitimacy for the hardliners

The death of Khomeini in 1989 deprived the post-revolutionary regime of his unique charisma and left his political successors to seek out a new legitimating political order.¹⁸

This closing or Thermidorian phase of Iran's revolution was typical for a revolution where legitimacy was "derived from one over-arching charismatic figure."¹⁹ In the absence of that figure, the job of routinizing charisma falls to the disciples who survive the revolutionary leader. Brumberg argues that this progression leads in the long run to a more stable legitimating order (either based on tradition and custom or modern, rational legal authority) and is a complex, dissonant, and non-linear process in the case of Iran.²⁰ However, the hardliners are losing this

contest for legitimacy and the reformists are winning.

Despite institutionalizing the role of the supreme jurist as head of state and ensuring a smooth transition, the hardliners weakened their cause immeasurably through the accession of Ali Khamenei to the position of Supreme Leader. Khamenei held the rank of *Hojjat-ol-Islam* (a mid-level position) at the time he was president. Despite being elevated to the rank of Ayatollah when he became the Supreme Leader, he is not a *marja-e-taqlid* and has nothing close to the popular support of Khomeini. The 1989 constitutional amendments removed the requirement in Article 5 that the Supreme Leader be "recognized and accepted as leader by the majority of the people," i.e. have popular support.²¹ The amendment to Article 109 downgraded the minimum qualification from being a *marja-e-taqlid* as specified in the 1979 constitution to a *mujtahid*. However, Brumberg argues that as a *hojjat-ol-islam* Khamenei cannot even be considered a qualified *mujtahid*. A genuine *marja-e-taqlid* would bring his popular support and the traditional legitimacy of the clergy to the position. Instead, the position lost much of its uniting power. The Supreme Leader was ensconced as head of state, though he could hardly claim to lead either the clergy or the general public. The well-known reality behind the appointment of Khamenei is that none of the genuine clerical leaders would have made appropriate choices. Some were disqualified due to rapidly advancing old age, others were too removed from worldly affairs, and some didn't even support the theory of *velayat-e-faqih*.

The hardliners have forsaken the popular roots of the traditional clergy. The presidential election results of 1997 that brought Khatami to power showed that 70 percent of voters chose a reform candidate.²² "Disillusionment with the usefulness of the whole regime" kept voter turnout down to 12 percent in Tehran in February's local council elections, but the loss of popular support for reformists does not mean that the conservatives have improved their low standing.²³ Khomeini understood the paradox of wishing to inject the clergy into politics but seeking to maintain the autonomy of the clergy

from the corrupting influences of politics and state power. The political involvements of leading clerics made their disagreements a matter of public record which Khomeini recognized would lead to a mistrust and delegitimization of the clergy.²⁴

Section 4: Conclusions

Hardliners are losing the battle for legitimacy in the Thermidor of Iran's revolution. As their hold over government weakens and the reformists make progress, their capacity to suppress the traditional clergy will diminish. The hardliners have little left but their dominance in government and lack a legitimating political order with which to sustain that position.

The trends that explain this loss of legitimacy are the history of the shi'i clergy, the transformation of the hardline clergy into a state apparatus, and the state's need for ideological certitude. The hardliners departure from the traditional mold of the clergy has led them to become a state apparatus with needs and ambitions similar to that of any other state. Applying the idea that clergy in their political role are representatives, the hardliners can now be characterized as representing the interests of the state, i.e. themselves. In the traditional mold, the clerical leadership is dependent on its supporters and acts as their representatives in the public sphere. The hardliners now have control over the state, making appointments as they see fit and putting large state-run funds (the charitable organizations, or *bonyads*) under the direct control of hardline clerics. No longer being beholden to the general populace, they will feel less pressure to act as their representatives. Any head of state needs a founding ideology that must hold for people to support the structure of the state. That founding ideology has been weakened since the death of Khomeini, but the state—possibly in recognition of its weakness—tries to stifle debate on the shortcomings of the state ideology in how it is currently implemented.

Bringing closure to theological issues through fiat and decree is entirely at odds with the *madrassa* culture of learning. Superior knowledge of law was always the paramount

requirement of clerical leadership. It undermines the Supreme Leader claim to leadership in the traditional mold when the response to ideological challenges is in the form of sham trials rather than reasoned arguments that demonstrate his superior knowledge. The hardline clerics seem to think that it is necessary to claim certainty of knowledge, as if the debate in which they participated—and which has been a hallmark of the *shi'i madrassa* for a thousand years—is a sign of weakness. The irony is that the theory of *velayat-e-faqih* is itself a radical departure from standard *shi'i* views, and such an innovation of doctrine would never have been possible under the current climate.

The traditional clergy have strong popular roots and a healthy system of institutional checks and balances that keeps them in touch with the general public. The historical narratives of Shi'ism encourage resistance to state oppression and provide the traditional clergy with symbolic currency to be used in the face of persecution and victimization. The resilience of the traditional clergy looks to be outlasting the hardline challenge.

The hardliners have failed to ground their position in either modern, rational-legal legitimacy or traditional legitimacy. Without a more stable basis than the fading star of Khomeini's revolutionary charisma, the hardliners have lost ground to the traditional clergy and the reformists, both of whom offer a more legitimate political order.

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The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program on Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

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- ² Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 63.
- ³ Charles Kurzman, "Critics Within: Islamic Scholars Protest Against the Islamic State in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 2., Winter 2001, 343.
- ⁴ Nikki Keddie, Introduction to *Religion and Politics in Iran*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 9.
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- ⁸ Ibid, 101.
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- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid .
- ¹² Ibid, 106/
- ¹³ Keddie, 9.
- ¹⁴ Hamid Dabashi, "The End of Islamic Ideology," *Social Research*, vol. 67, no. 2, Summer 2000, 482.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
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- ¹⁷ Charles Kurzman, "Critics Within: Islamic Scholars Protest Against the Islamic State in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Winter 2001.
- ¹⁸ Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 6.
- ¹⁹ Matthew Wells, "Thermidor in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Rise of Muhammad Khatami," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, May 1999, vol. 26, no. 1, 27.
- ²⁰ Brumberg, 6.
- ²¹ Brumberg, 147.
- ²² Hamid Dabashi, "The End of Islamic Ideology," *Social Research*, vol. 67, no. 2, Summer 2000, 480.
- ²³ Quote from President Khatami in "A Weary Country," *The Economist*, March 6 2003.
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- ²⁴ Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 117.