

The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: transition from populism to clientelism, and militarization of the government

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ABSTRACT Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has experienced two non-class power structures—populism and clientelism. Populism, a product of the revolution, helped Ayatollah Khomeini to rule Iran for a decade with absolute power. Clientelism in Iran is linked to Shiism, as well as to a rentier state, and to the revolution, which resulted in many autonomous groups formed in patron–client bonds. Neither clientelism nor Shiism can be analysed using classical class system theory. Instead of horizontal layers of classes, the power structures in both Shiism and clientelism are based on vertical columns of rival and autonomous groups. The traditional Shi'a institution of Marja'iyat (source of emulation), has come into conflict with an elected government. The reformist government elected in 1997 failed to deliver on its democratic promises and to end the destructive role of autonomous groups. Therefore, disenchanted with state-sponsored reforms, Iranian society seems to be moving towards pragmatism and utilitarianism, while the political power structure leans towards militarism.

Seventy years of conflict and challenge between monarchism, religious traditionalism, regionalism, tribalism, nationalism and the political left finally ended in the revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). This period had begun with the Constitutional Revolution of 1905. Reza shah ended regionalism and tribalism and established a nation-state for the first time in Iranian history. Constitutional monarchism, however, culminated in the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza shah Pahlavi following a military coup in 1953. During Mohammad Reza shah's rule, foreign investments and higher oil revenues helped Iran to pave the way to capitalist development and a class system. Twenty-five years after the coup, however, a major revolution ended the shah's power and monarchy. As a consequence, the political structure changed from an autocratic class system to a religious populist regime, a tyranny of the majority under the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

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Religious populism in Iran (1979–89)

Populism is a non-class structure with a charismatic leadership. It is a political, ideological and centralised radical mass movement. Ideologically it represents the declining traditional middle class. A populist movement occurs when a society enters a structural crisis of transition from an agrarian system to capitalism. Contemporary Iranian history is marked with these characteristics.

The land reform programme of 1961 and the shah's modernisation project aimed to replace the agrarian economy with capitalist relations and the neutralising of any revolutionary motives on the part of the peasants. However, it resulted in a 'peasantisation' of the cities, cultural and economic conflict, unregulated social mobility, and stratification, which set the stage for Khomeini's revolutionary populism. In a religious culture like that of Iran, and in the absence of political parties, when the shah lost his firm grip on his regime a charismatic leader who proclaimed himself God's representative on earth and the people's saviour easily manipulated the uneducated masses, who had no political experience. Khomeini's populist slogans were altogether directed against one figure, the shah. However, after the victory of the revolution, relying on his new populist base, Khomeini viciously excluded all his rivals and political opponents.

Populist Islamic rule, which is incompatible with the trend of modernisation and democratisation, pushed society into a permanent revolution, involving traditional authority, Islamisation of the social fabric and fragmentation of political desires. Had the war with Iraq (1981–88) not occurred, populism could have ended more quickly after the revolution, and society would have begun its routine activities. The war, however, empowered the populist Islamist authority to mobilise the ideologically ill-treated masses and to suppress political opponents under the emotional context of defending 'the land of Islam'.

The religious base of clientelism in Iran

Populism finally ended with the termination of the war in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. No one could replace the unique persona of Khomeini, who was a religious, political and spiritual leader of millions of people who followed his beliefs in search of an ideal society.¹ The Council of Experts' selection of the new supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was caused by a rift within the ruling clerical groups. Khamenei is not a *marja'a taqlid*, the most revered of the grand ayatollahs, as required by the Iranian constitution.² Evidently his selection was merely a political decision by the ruling group to overcome possible factional dispute. However, the vacuum of a populist leader after the death of Khomeini resulted in a dispersal of millions of supporters who had become disillusioned, in turn, with Islamic slogans. The death of Khomeini ended the absolute and unified hierarchy of power and opened the gate to the traditional multiple objects of emulation (*maraja'a taqlid*), which is the norm in Shiism. In a first move the dominant group purged rival powerful ayatollahs such as Mowsavi Ardabili

(former head of the judicial branch) and Azari Qomi (a leading member of the Council of Experts and founder of the conservative daily newspaper *Resaallat*). However, they could not stop the conservative, right-wing and radical zealots, who organized their own client–patron bonds under the name of *velayat-e faqih* (jurisprudence).

The principal religious base of the IRI, according to its constitution, is 12-imam Shiism. ‘All Shiite lay persons must choose a learned and upright cleric, whose rulings on the details of religious practice they must follow.’³ In its religious interpretation, adherents are free to choose their own *marja’a taqlid* (object of emulation). *Marja’a* (pl *Maraja’a* = *ulama*) are independent sources and can have their own *fiqh*, or code of behaviour, for their adherents.

Traditionally, *ulama* are expected to arrive at their decisions completely independently of one another, that is, no *ulama* should follow (*taqlid*) other *ulama*. Some schools of Islamic law forbid *taqlid* outright. In Iran in the 19th century there developed the notion of the *marja’a-at taqlid*: this individual was so learned and so perfect that it was incumbent on the *ulama* to follow (*taqlid*) his decisions.⁴

There is a deliberate split in decision making and power between the secular professionals on the one hand and the ideological and religious figures on the other hand. After the 1979 revolution *marja’a taqlid* became a political fixture in Iran, and political rivals now use the religious umbrella to justify their economic and political interests. Thousands of appointed city and town congregational imams set the macro and micro policies of the state, which often surpass or override the decisions of the elected government. Even *Majlis* (ie parliament) deputies have to restrict their decisions in accordance with the religious codes. Laws passed in parliament need final approval of the Council of Guardians, a body of six appointed clerics and six appointed lawyers, to ensure that they do not contradict *shari’a* (the Islamic codes) or the constitution. Some *Majlis* deputies, before instigating a bill, travel to the holy city of Qom to receive the approval of *Maraja’a*. In religious terms this has moved the power structure into a new stage of clientelism, in which the elected legislative body takes a subordinate position to an influential clergy and its associates.

The current political power structure in Iran is based on a Shi’a hierarchy, a system characterised by multiple objects of emulation and parallel power, which operates concurrently with clientelism. The power structure in Shiism is primarily based on a voluntary relationship between a *faqih* (jurisprudence) and his adherents. In clientelism the power structure is based on a voluntary relationship between a patron and his clients. In addition to religion, two other major factors—the rentier state and self-established and financially self-sufficient religious organisations—have pushed the political structure into clientelism. Given the current situation, it seems apparent that Iran cannot achieve democracy and the complete rule of law unless clientelism is replaced by a class system.

What is clientelism?

Clientelism is a structured relationship between a patron and a client. The term ‘patron’ is derived from the Spanish *patron*, meaning a superior, or a

person of power, status, authority, and influence.⁵ A ‘client’ is a subordinate actor who serves his or her patron in exchange for reciprocal rewards.⁶ In Iran some patrons may themselves be clients to more powerful patrons in the national hierarchy of patronage. Clientelism is a non-class system with a power structure that consists of separate vertical rival groups rather than horizontal class layers. Such a structure crosses classes, occupations and ethnic identities, and it organises society based on family or mafia-style relationships—ie cliques and clans based on patron–client interests.

Definitions of clientelism vary, but all have three common characteristics that link patron and client: 1) inequality of power, status and wealth; 2) reciprocity in the exchange of goods and services; and 3) the proximity of personal and face-to-face relationships, which create a sense of trust between two parties.⁷ Christopher Clapham defines clientelism as ‘a relationship of exchange between unequals’.⁸ For example, it may be a trade of protection and services between patron and client. These characteristics show that clientelistic groups share bonds that cut across social classes and levels of society.

Edward B Reeves, re-emphasising Eisenstadt and Lemarchand, pinpoints seven general characteristics of clientelism that help us to understand the current Iranian political power structure. They are as follows.

1. The relationship between patron and client is personal.
2. The relations are characterised by an exchange of different types of resources. Generally the patron provides material and political resources, and these are reciprocated in the form of diffuse loyalty and labour services provided by the client.
3. The relationship between patron and client is based on unconditional mutual trust.
4. The relation between patron and client is a voluntary and informal contract; law or the power of the state does not sanction it.
5. ‘Patron–client relations evolve into networks of persons rather than being relations between organized corporate groups, and they seem to undermine the solidarity of patron and client alike.’
6. The relations are predicated on material and political inequality, because patron and client occupy different positions.
7. Mutual trust and the obligation of kinship solidarity between patron and client are highly important because each actor is in danger of being thwarted by the other actor’s short-run calculations of personal security and advantage.⁹

Iranian clientelism is combination of the patrimonial and the saintly, in which both traditional and religious relations between superior and subordinates have been revived. Reeves, who has studied Muslim communities in Egypt, writes: ‘I suggest that the role of the saint is guided by universal standards rather than particularistic criteria. This means that the saintly patronage . . . measures up to normative criteria which derive their authority from the Prophet and God.’¹⁰ In justification of the patron (saint) and client (devotee) relationship, he adds: ‘The saint has a personal relationship with God, because

of his close relationship with the Prophet, which ordinary mortals do not have'.¹¹ The current political and legal system in Iran is heavily influenced by this view, with the multiple centres of power being based on different interpretations of this religious authority as representative of God on earth. The self-determined statuses in an Islamic system allow those in authority to have unique access to the various sources of income and power, and they exchange portions of this income and power for client services.

Clientelism as a non-class system

Like populism, clientelism prevents the formation of class structure. In populism followers are emotionally manipulated by the leader's unique qualities, and the existence of the system is dependent upon the leader. In clientelism, by contrast, the clients are aware of their subordinate positions because they have interests in the patron–client relations and the maintenance of the system.¹² This characteristic makes the system difficult to break.

Clientelism disintegrates class, occupational and ethnic solidarity, and instead organises people into rival groups and clique- or clan-types of relations. The vertical poly-class structure of clientelism, again, is based on patron–client interests, and this becomes the source of the political power structure of society, which operates beyond the government's control and the rule of law and creates decreased security and increased risk. As Eric Wolf (1997) says, clientelism dominates when general laws are weak. Clients who receive the full support of their patrons also undermine laws.

Clientelistic relations that prevent class division and consequently economic development feed corruption. Not only patrons and clients but also ordinary people tend to achieve their demands by accepting the necessity of bribing government agencies rather than exerting pressure for legal and political reforms. In their study of Italy Frank Belloni and Mario Caciaghi conclude that clientelism produces crisis in society and prevents the emergence of class because clientelism eliminates many citizens who could be positively active in the political and civil arenas in the development of society.¹³ Peter Flynn also confirms that the lack of class division is an obstacle to development.¹⁴ In addition, studies of southern Italy by Banfield and Bertran Hutchinson emphasise the role of clientelism as a brake on economic development in the region.¹⁵

Clientelism forms in and out of the government's bureaucracy. In traditional clientelism the source of the wealth belongs to the patron, while in the modern type of clientelism the source of income is the rentier state and, in the case of Iran, its dominant resource—oil. Therefore, in modern political clientelism patrons aim to hold governmental positions. Clapham argues that lack of a public ethic helps political clientelism to grow. During the era of the Islamic state in Iran the moral code has decreased significantly following the heavy corruption of individuals affiliated with the government and the clerics. Economic corruption has been mostly affiliated with the powerful sons of high-ranking clerics. In recent years a new term (*aqqa zaadeh ha* = sons of powerful clergy) has developed to describe these people, who have had access

to all types of political and economic privileges with no official positions, and thus no accountability. These individuals also benefit from the court system, which is under the control of ruling clergy.

Unlike in a class system, in clientelism clan-type group unity subordinates class integration in the form of political parties and unions. Therefore group competitions dominate class conflicts. Neither occupational unions nor political parties are used as organisational means of achieving class goals. Because the state is the main source of income, groups compete to occupy governmental positions and gain influence in society. Peter Flynn writes that clientelism is the main obstacle to class mobilisation of society, and he adds that class analysis does not help in understanding these societies.¹⁶

As N Leff writes, political leaders in a class system try to portray their party's agenda as the public interest.¹⁷ In contrast, patrons seek to divert public resources to their own personal ends. They do not care for society at large. Patrons using traditional norms have more freedom to manipulate the political system. Party leaders, in contrast, are bound by societal laws. Patrons are not afraid of losing their clients because the clients' interests are tied up with the patron's position. As long as patron–client relations maintain the reciprocal interests of both parties, the alliance remains intact. Political leaders in a class system are subject to criticism from their constituents and may lose their position if they disregard the legal framework of the society. In a clientelist system, only rival groups challenge and eliminate each other. Both patrons and their clients enjoy maximum privileges with a minimum of accountability.

Beginning of a new era (1989–present)

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini marked the beginning of clientelism in Iran. Various groups, of course, existed during Khomeini's rule, but they could easily be silenced by his order. Unless these groups were involved in suppressing political opponents, he remained quiet—if he did not send an approval sign. After his death some of the originally faithful supporters of an ideologically based Islamic government changed into advocates of the current state in order to obtain some independent reciprocal political and socioeconomic benefits. They became the beneficiaries of the status quo, not supporters of the 'rule of virtue' as they had been in the past. During the strong supreme leadership of Khomeini, all rivals or internal opponents were easily suppressed or remained quiet because his authority was unquestionable. The supporters' slogan at this stage was: 'Party, only party of God, leader, only Khomeini'. Therefore the government remained very centralised under his personal, arbitrary rule. After his death, various power centres grew up separately from the central government and many vertical columns of power independent of one another developed.

Clientelism in action

'Business is no good unless you enjoy a government rent or are the son of a cleric', said Faramarz Etemadi, 52, peddling black fabric for women's veils at

a stall in Tehran's vast bazaar. 'We had one shah, and now we have thousands.'¹⁸

Rafsanjani, the former president and the current head of the Expediency Council, complained about the difficulties of moving beyond the multi-power government, saying: 'In Iran many prefer to form bonds rather than political parties, because it leaves them unaccountable. In fact bonds operate in place of political parties.'¹⁹ But he stops short of specifying how this happens and how it could be prevented. This clearly exemplifies how a political and economic structure accords with clientelism, in a situation in which impenetrable rival political and religious groups enjoy unrestricted freedom. Clientelism has also weakened the middle class, the backbone of democratisation. The reformist government of Mohammad Khatami (elected in 1997) was a failed attempt to end clientelism.

Financially, patron-client organisations are self-sufficient because they either have charity and endowment incomes or officially receive allocated budgets from the government, or both. Easy access to allocated oil revenue and unchecked trade activities have provided some religiously privileged groups with unique opportunities to form autonomous politico-economic bonds. More than 60% of Iran's foreign trade takes place outside government administrative rule. Some of these groups have been involved directly in foreign trades owning their own ships and ports that bypass the customs department and that are guarded by their own armed men. The exact number of illegal ports in Iran is unknown, but Mohsen Bahrami, the chief inspector of the Trade Organisation, declares the number to be more than 200.²⁰ Some of these ports operate as the subsidies of official organs of the government. According to General Ayyubi, the general director of the anti-smuggling agency, the total annual value of smuggled goods in Iran is over \$9.5 billion.²¹ The groups involved in these activities are the actual powers in society, and they simply ignore the law and government orders. They have armed forces, intelligence units and hidden jails under their control, and they are very influential in the court system. According to the weekly newspaper *Neda-y Daneshjoo*, some of them are officially recognised institutions, like Bonyaad-e Janbaazaan (Foundation of Dedicated People) and are as big as the elected government itself, controlling assets as large as the facilities of a government.²² Multiple centres of power also undermine the law and security of a society, leading to political distress and economic crisis. In these circumstances economic capital circulates into short-term speculative investment rather than into production because it faces less risk and generates more profit. Also, because of such unpredictability, foreign investors have mostly been interested in petroleum zones.

Clientelism as a multi-power structure dominates in a situation of weak central government, or it may undermine the authority of a legal government.²³ It explains the numerous centres of power in Iran challenging each other and the elected government. According to one source, after the election of 1997 three parallel governments under the leadership of Mohammad Khatami (president), Ali Khamenei (the supreme leader), and Rafsanjani (head of the Expediency Council) formed in Iran.²⁴ Iran is among

the rare countries in the world with two official armies (a conventional army and the Revolutionary Guards) and two judicial systems (regular and revolutionary). Six central legislative institutions—the *Majlis*, the Council for the Cultural Revolution, the Council for National Security, the Council of Guardians, the Expediency Council, and the Council of Ministers—are influenced by various groups. There are many contradictory economic and financial policies, and several parallel selected and elected political leaders, plus many powerful shadow governments behind the scene.

General and local governors of provinces and cities, the Friday Prayer Speakers (congregational), and thousands of mosques are among power holders who challenge and contradict one another and the elected officials. Many religious institutions that emerged during the revolution of 1979 still continue to exist and operate outside government control. The conservative *Majlis* in 2005 diverted 300 billion toumans (about \$375 million) budgeted for non-religious organisations such as cultural centres, women's activities and tourist attractions, to religious organisations.²⁵ Many people are suspicious that some of this money will be spent on secret activities of violent groups. For example, *Bonyad Shaheed* (martyrdom foundation) offered a reward of \$1.5 million dollars to anyone who dares to kill Salman Rushdie, the author of *The Satanic Verses*. In a commentary on this situation, *Mowbien*, a religiously oriented publication, noted: 'Some of these institutions are governments in themselves; even the elected government cannot levy them'.²⁶ Abbas Kakavand, a former right-wing journalist, argues that the IRI is a multiple-state with five major centres of power. These centres are organised around individuals like Khamenei and Rafsanjani or groups like Jam'aiyat Mo'atalefeh Islami (the Society of Islamic Coalition—JMI), the right-wing fundamentalists groups and their military annex, and the Reformists.²⁷ He adds that each of these centres controls some financial resources, media, military forces, intelligence units and foreign diplomatic relations, and enjoys factional clerical support, allowing them to operate like self-sufficient, self-regulating states.²⁸ Some of these power groups control street mobs and courts and use violence and military force to terrorise and suppress their political opponents. IRI leaders remain silent because they benefit from these groups' repressive actions. While some of the groups are extremely violent, others are mainly interested in economic activities, using their influence to benefit from exclusive state privileges. Still others simply challenge their rivals' show of strength. The following story from the *New York Times* is a good indication of how the different governments operate independent of one another.

An American scholar who was instrumental in getting the head of the Library of Congress invited to Iran for an official conference in November has suspended his own five-year effort to build bridges between the two countries after he and a colleague were turned away at the Tehran airport in separate incidents last month. The scholar, Jeremy J Stone, had been traveling at the invitation of the Iranian government to attend a ceremony of Iran's National Library and to hear an address by the Iranian president, Mohammed Khatami.

In a written statement on Tuesday, Mr Stone said he had been carrying a valid visa issued by Iran's interest section in Washington.²⁹

After this incident, it was the turn of another faction of the government to play its role. Iran's Ambassador to the United Nations, Javad Zarif, has since expressed 'deepest regrets' for the incident, saying that it was the result of a misunderstanding and that 'steps were being taken to avoid its repetition'.³⁰ No one could dare to ask who was behind the decision to stop these scholars with valid visas from entering Iran. Even on a serious matter such as negotiation on nuclear energy, Hassan Rouhani, a powerful clergyman and head of the National Security Council, suddenly emerged as the chief negotiator, undermining President Khatami and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and has entered directly into dealings with European governments. Indeed, others had installed Kamal Kharazi, the foreign minister, a tool in the hands of the invisible power in the IRI, in Khatami's cabinet. After several back-and-forth discussions between Iran and European governments, they reached an agreement to stop the disputed enrichment of uranium. Following this decision, however, Iran's hard-line-dominated parliament and its ally, the Guardian Council (GC), 'approved a law mandating that the country develop nuclear technology—including uranium enrichment'.³¹ Five days later, despite the *Majlis's* and GC's decision, Rouhani announced that 'the Iranian government is committed to the Paris Agreement, and will not resume the enrichment of uranium'.³²

A charity foundation, the Imam Charity Committee (ICC), has built a financial empire using state budget money and private donations and has secured a strong political base for conservative groups. The ICC not only benefits from multibillion-dollar public donations, which it collects in thousands of donation boxes placed in every corner of the cities—even inside private homes—but also receives the fourth largest share of the government's annual budget after the Ministry of Defence, police forces, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).³³ The budget allocated to the ICC is larger than the budgets of the *Majlis* and the ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, and Islamic Culture and Guidance combined. Yet, despite receiving a huge state budget, the ICC is fully independent and free from government control or monitoring. It plays a crucial role in Iranian politics, including mobilising the poor and needy behind the conservative candidates in elections. The ICC is the exclusive stronghold of JMI, a powerful, ultra-conservative traditional organisation headed by the influential leader Habiballah Asgar Oladi.³⁴ Traditionally, JMI has had very keen ties with religious seminaries and the bazaar. With regard to the ICC's budget, Reza Nayyeri, its new chief, has declared that 'currently the annual budget of the ICC includes 460 billion toumans from the state source, and 160 billions from charity organizations (roughly \$7.8 billion).³⁵ Nayyeri adds that ICC has 16 000 paid and 66 000 volunteer employees.³⁶

The recent factional infighting with the confrontation over the newly inaugurated Imam Khomeini International Airport and the closure of the Tehran International Exposition, first by the Tehran municipality and then

by the judiciary, are other examples of power struggles and financial rivalries among various groups within the government. Heated debate over the airport goes back to a signed contract with a Turkish security company that was a bid winner selected by the government. The day after the opening of the airport the IRGC rushed in to take over the airport using a military showdown. Following this event the airport remained closed for about six months. The Tehran International Exposition has recently been targeted by the Tehran municipality to seize hundreds of acres of land in one of the best locations in northern Tehran. Apparently, conservative groups within the TV and Radio Organisation have claimed the land for a housing project for their own employees.³⁷

One prominent case of a mafia-type patron–client bond was located in the Ministry of Security and Intelligence, which was responsible for the murder of numerous political opponents inside and outside Iran. These murders were religiously justified by the secret *fatwa* (religious edict) of high-ranking ayatollahs.³⁸ In other words, the murders were carried out under the protection of a *faqih* (patron).³⁹ Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, a renowned Islamist philosopher and the head of Haqqaani Seminary in Qom, ordered his followers ‘to drown or choke those who intentionally oppose *velayat-e faqih*’.⁴⁰ Haqqaani Seminary trains judges for Islamic courts in Iran.⁴¹

After the election of Khatami in 1997 the conservative faction of the government lost full control over the Ministry of Security and Intelligence; subsequently, they tried to separate the ministry from the reformist elected government and make it accountable only to the supreme leader. When this failed, members of a death squad remained active within the ministry. To undermine and discredit the elected government and to terrorise the public and political opponents, they brutally murdered four political figures and released a list of 150 more to be killed. Dariyosh Foruhar, a national figure and the former Minister of Labour in provisional government, and his wife, Parvaneh Foruhar-Eskandari, both opponents of the *velayat faqih* (jurisprudence), and two writers, Mohammad Mokhtari and Ja’afar Pouyandeh, were murdered within a few days.⁴² Foruhar had been under surveillance and his home had been bugged by the Ministry of Security and Intelligence. The agents dispatched there brutally stabbed the husband and wife to death in their home. Offensive words, beatings, voices of resistance and the act of brutal murder were all shockingly documented in the recording system at the ministry office.

As soon as the news got out the conservative supreme leader accused agents of Israel of the murder of these four people. Khatami, the president, however, used the recorded tape to inform the public that the murders were done by a group within the Ministry of Security and Intelligence. He called this a ‘tumour within the ministry’. Nineteen members of the group, including Saeed Imami, the Vice Minister of Security and Intelligence, were arrested, and the Minister, Dori Najafabadi, a high-ranking cleric, was forced to resign, but the *faqih* behind the action remained unknown. In this case, several rival bands within the Ministry of Security and Intelligence

acted against each other to defuse the damage. The group led by Imami, Vice Minister of Security and Intelligence, plotted the murder of tens of political opponents. Apparently, another band, or his own associates by the order of a higher commander, mysteriously killed Imami while he was held in the prison after his plot was exposed and he began revealing other names involved in murder cases.⁴³ They also beat and tortured the jailed Imami's wife and coerced her into making a confession of being an agent of Israel. Most probably a third band, or allies of Imami, secretly video-recorded the act of torture and later released parts of it to the public to discredit those who were holding Imami's wife, or to show implicitly that Imami was also tortured and killed by these people.

Another case provides still more information on how these patron–client bonds operate in Iran. Saeed Asgar, a hit man, shot Saeed Hajjarian, who had been an adviser to president Khatami, a member of the city council in Tehran, and a strategist of the Participation Front, a political organisation with more than 100 deputies in the sixth parliament. Hajjarian was on a radical conservative hate list because he led the reformists, including president Khatami, to victory in the 1997 presidential election and the parliamentary election in 1999. Asgar, along with his assistants, were arrested and tried in a showy public court case. He confidently confessed to his crime, claiming that he had done his religious duty to punish a person who was hurting Islam. The court sentenced him to eight years in prison, but he was later released and returned to his street activities under the guise of a newspaper photographer. Two years later, he ran for the city council in Tehran, but he won only 146 votes out of millions cast.

In a third incident Dr Salehi, the president of the University of Science and Technology, was beaten and hospitalised. A vigilante group raising objections to the presence of two reformist speakers on the campus stopped the university president on his way home. After beating him, they took him hostage on a bus, and then, accompanied by 70 students and escorted by a police vehicle, they transported him to the Ministry of Science and delivered him to the Office of Intelligence and Information—even getting a written receipt, they later claimed.⁴⁴ Many words were exchanged between the police, the court and the university, but no serious action was taken against the offenders. Like Asgar, these people defended their actions as carrying out their religious duties. Obviously, this group, as clients, could not do this without the decisive support of a powerful patron.

Finally, in yet another incident, a clash between the Office of Intelligence and Information of the judiciary system on one side and the office of a clerical member of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Uroumian, and a female *Majlis* deputy, Eshrat Shayeq, on the other side ended in an infamous scandal.⁴⁵ The clergy's associates (clients) were accused of extortion, using force and even torture against their victims.⁴⁶

These are all examples of political, economic and criminal activities caused by various patron–client bonds in Iran that undermine the class structure of the system. This power structure is not pyramid-shaped, which means that there is no 'central pole' that might be removed and cause it to collapse.

Instead, it has multiple major and minor column-like structures that compete with one another for resources and act against one another politically even as they pretend to hold up the canopy of the Islamic Republic.

Clientelism cannot continue forever in Iran. Presently, the IRI lacks full legitimacy. Iran faces three options that may end clientelism and produce political change or stability in the years to come. The first is to move towards truly elected and democratic central and regional governments. The second is integration of the Iranian economy into the world economy, and the third is to establish complete militarism. Evidence shows that the third alternative is prevailing in Iran. Among the many centres of power formed around religious, political, economic and military figures, the IRGC and the security forces have emerged as the most independent power and prevail over all the other centres of authority. The US military threats against Iran in the past few years and the invasion of Iraq are among the causes of this gain in power. Today a group associated with the IRGC controls the major state-sponsored media. After gaining control of numerous city and town councils in 2003, many former members of the IRGC or its associates managed to enter into the legislative branch in the 2004 election. Soon this group may impose limitations on the prominent religious and political leaders of the IRI, including Khamenei, the supreme leader. The group had also set its sights on gaining control of the executive branch in the election on 17 June 2005. In this presidential election, out of 1010 candidates, the Guardian Council confirmed only six as qualified candidates to run. All other candidates, including 89 women, were disqualified. This decision raised objections from some of the rejected candidates, and subsequently, following an order by the supreme leader; the GC confirmed the qualification of two more candidates. Of six initially confirmed candidates, four were former IRGC commanders and two were clerics.

The two main candidates of this group were Ali Larijani, a former IRGC commander and the ex-director of the highly politicised state TV and radio network, and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the former chief of Tehran's police, who is also a former IRGC commander. Qalibaf openly declared himself a 'religiously devoted Reza shah' (*Reza shah Hezbollahi*). (Reza shah, the father of the overthrown Mohammad Reza shah, succeeded in suppressing all regionalism and tribalism that emerged after the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–09 in Iran and established central power under his rule.) Qalibaf has sensed that society was tired of a chaotic power structure. Mohsen Rezaei, a long-time commander in chief of the IRGC and presently the speaker of the Expediency Council, and Mahmood Ahmadinejad, the former IRGC member and the Mayor of Tehran, were the other candidates.⁴⁷ Javad Larijani, the older brother of Ali Larijani, has tried in a frank article to discourage Rafsanjani, a two-term Speaker of the *Majlis* and a two-term president, from entering the presidential race. He advises Rafsanjani to think of political 'virtue'. Despite this, Rafsanjani entered the race. Larijani, the Deputy of the Judiciary Branch, has suggested that the elderly leaders have paid their dues and now should attend ceremonial gatherings and leave the leadership to new figures, which is essential for the growth of the political structure of the country.⁴⁸

The presidential election ended in a runoff race between Mahmood Ahmadinejad and Akbar Rafsanjani, in which Ahmadinejad declared victory with 62.6% of the votes cast. Beyond the disqualification of all major candidates by the GC and the questionable process of the elections in both the seventh parliament in 2004 and the current presidency, two other factors played direct roles in Ahmadinejad's success. The first was the involvement of the IRGC and the *Basij* (state militia) in the election; the second was his campaigning as if he were someone from the opposition who was running against the establishment. He loudly proclaimed that he wanted to fight poverty, corruption and discrimination—all products of 26-years of the IRI. He even managed to mobilise some of the IRI dissidents behind him.

One day after the election Rafsanjani reacted bitterly to his defeat, alleging that tens of millions of toumans were spent in an orchestrated smear campaign to defame him and his family. 'All the means of the regime were used in an organised and illegal way to intervene in the election', Rafsanjani said in a public statement. 'I do not intend to file a complaint to the jurists, who have shown that they either cannot or will not do anything, and so I take it to the divine's court.'⁴⁹ He added, 'I entered the race relying on God's support and for his satisfaction. I believe in divine retaliation, but those who will be persecuted are definitely not the people, the Islamic revolution, or Iran—only the real criminals will be punished.'⁵⁰ Rafsanjani, a strongman in the IRI, like many other right-wing conservative leaders, has learned that he cannot use a show of muscle to challenge the new rivals. However, two other defeated candidates, Mehdi Karoubi and Mostafa Moin, also proclaimed that Ahmadinejad's victory in the election was backed illegally by well financed regime elements, including members of the ICC and the *Basij*.⁵¹

Mohammad Reza Khatami, Moin's running mate, concluded that they 'were defeated by a garrison party'.⁵² He said, 'Until three days before the election, everything was fine, then after a military coup was launched, of which we only learned later, an order was given to a specific military organisation to support a specific candidate, a person whom all the left-wing and right-wing pre-election pools had shown to be the least favorite among seven candidates'.⁵³ About the sudden rise and surprising victory of Ahmadinejad, General Mohammad Baqer Zolqar, deputy commander in chief of the IRGC made a very revealing statement. In his speech during a gathering of the commanders of the *Basij* forces, Zolqadr said, 'in the current complex political situation, in which both foreign pressures and internal forces were trying to prevent us from forming a fundamentalist [*osoulgara*] government, we had to operate with complexity'. He added, 'Fundamentalist forces, thank God, won the election thanks to their smart and multifold plan and through the massive participation of *Basij*'.⁵⁴ The plan was known as the military strategy of moving with lights off, so as not to be noticed by rivals.⁵⁵ Zolqadr is the most powerful IRGC commander associated with Ahmadinejad. In his initial move, the new president picked as 10 of his cabinet members men with military and security backgrounds.⁵⁶ This is another sign that the new government is seriously militarising politics in Iran.

Regarding the growing influence of military force in Iranian politics, Mehrzad Boroujerdi, in a supplement to his article 'The reformist movement in Iran', writes: 'It is fair to say that regardless of the outcome of the elections, the influence of the military forces in Iranian politics is bound to grow. The former adjutants of the clerics, who have finished their apprenticeship in revolution, are now demanding recognition as the linchpins of the Islamic Republic.'⁵⁷

After the election, Ansar-e Hezbollah, one of the main groups behind Ahmadinejad's election, in a harsh and critical article entitled 'The right faction, leave Osoulgaran alone!', wrote against the old guard, specifically naming a few leading conservative figures, such as Ayatollah Nateq Nouri, Asgar-Oladi, Asadollah Badamchian, Mohammad Reza Bahonar, and conservative organisations such as JMI, Rouhaniyat Mobarez (The Society of Combatant Clergy), Anjoman Islami Mohandesin (The Society of Engineers) and Shoray-e Hamahangi (The Council of Co-ordination). All of individuals and organisations were behind Larijani in the election and had endorsed Nateq Nouri, former speaker of the parliament, in his presidential bid in 1997. In addition, almost all along, the grand ayatollahs of the holy city of Qom backed Akbar Rafsanjani in the runoff race. Ansar-e Hezbollah accused them of being 'the right-wing monopolists' responsible for what the *Osoulgaran* suffered after Khatami's election in 1997—those who, by using traditional ways, continued to impose their candidates (pre-selecting the president from the top) and tried to force Ahmadinejad to drop out of the presidential race.⁵⁸ It seems that the rise of Ahmadinejad was, among other things, a sort of leftist revolt against the conservative old guard clergy and its associates, the right-wing faction of the IRI. Hatred and resentment towards the right-wing conservatives, including Rafsanjani, helped Ahmadinejad to win the runoff election. If Ahmadinejad seriously attempts to deliver on his promises, a new factionalism and even internal eruption is expected. It is too early to say whether Khamenei himself can save his power from the pressure of the military faction through his association with the conservative clergy, particularly the members of the Assembly of Experts (AE). The AE, with 84 clerical members, is responsible for the periodic evaluation of the supreme leader, his reinstallation, or the selection of a new supreme leader. Now Khamenei will be under pressure from the military–security faction to distance himself from the conservative clerics, on one side, and from the conservative members of the AE to set limits on the military–security forces on the other. In spite of the internal strife, however, the possibility that the military–security forces will be melded into the bureaucracy of their political and administrative positions and follow the path of their predecessors should not be dismissed.

Conclusion

The power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran is clientelistic and is composed of many autonomous parallel groups formed in patron–client bonds. This has originated in three major sources—the Shi'a multiple

hierarchy of power, the rentier state and numerous financially self-sufficient religious organisations formed after the 1979 revolution. The political structure of the IRI is not constructed like a canopy, in which removing the central pole causes its collapse; rather, it is built on many independent, rival, parallel columns of power that hold the system together. In the case of a sudden collapse of the IRI, a civil war and partition of the Iranian territory is highly probable. Paradoxical actions of numerous groups holding various centres of power and resources bring conflicts and disorder to society, but at the same time the diversified and vast engagement of various groups brings internal collaboration that resists the intrusion of political outsiders. Thanks to the Shi'a hierarchy of multiple centres of power that challenge the central power, to the integration of religion and state, and to the independent operations of hundreds of religious groups and organisations, elected government has failed to end clientelism. Although the elected government is recognised, non-elected leaders who have no interest in democracy hold the key positions in Iran.

Clientelism can end only if the political structure of the IRI fortifies a class system. This can be achieved by integration of Iran's economy into the global market, or if a truly democratically elected government prevails or a centralised state forcibly brings all independent groups under its control. The engagement of Iran in global trade and its commitments in international diplomacy could expedite the process of change, and a strong step in this direction would be Iran's acceptance as a member of the World Trade Organization. After the failure of the reformists to fulfil their promises, and especially following the results of the seventh election to the *Majlis* in April 2004, Iranian society is developing a more pragmatic approach, and people, particularly youth, seem to be moving towards utilitarianism and self-supporting interests and away from ideologies. This could be considered another phase of change in Iran. If reforms continue, they will probably take place through the engagement of people in various pragmatic projects that benefit themselves rather than through broad religious, ideological or political movements. However, under the newly elected president, Mahmood Ahmadinejad, a former member of the IRGC, the chance of prevailing over independent parallel groups and ending clientelism has increased.

Notes

I would like to thank Mehran Kamrava for his thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this article. As more social thinkers recognise and write about the clientelistic nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran, this article builds on work I have presented and published since 1997, including 'Clientelism, the characteristic of political power structure in Iran', *Iran Farda: Monthly Journal of Economic, Social, and Scientific Studies*, IIV (44), July 1998; 'From populism to pluralism: the Islamic Republic in transition', 8 April 1998, at <http://www.Iranian.com/Opinion/May98/Power/index.html>; 'Who holds the power in Iran: transition from populism to clientelism to pluralism', *Mehregan (An Iranian Journal of Culture and Politics)*, 6 (3), 1997; and 'Political clientelism replaces religious populism in Iran: a case of vertical power structure of rival groups', paper presented to the Middle East Studies Association 31st Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 19–22 November 1997.

1 For a full justification of Islamic government, see Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government*, trans Joint Publishers Reset Service, Arlington, VA, 1979. In his book Khomeini clearly indicates that 'the ulema [clerics] were appointed by the imam for government and for judgment among people and

- their position is still preserved for them' (p 73); 'Ulema (plural of 'alim) are the heirs to the prophets' (p 74). He adds: 'If knowledgeable and just jurispudent 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' (p 37).
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 - 6 *Ibid.*
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 - 8 Christopher Clapham (ed), *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State*, London: Frances Pinter, 1982.
 - 9 Edward Reeves, *The Hidden Government: Ritual, Clientelism, and Legitimization in Northern Egypt*, Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1990, p 170.
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 - 11 *Ibid.*
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 - 20 'Iran: invisible piers and visible smuggled goods', Special Economic Report, available at <http://jomhour.com/a/03art/0011643.php>.
 - 21 *Ibid.*
 - 22 *Nedaay-e Daneshjoo*, 12, cited in the *Journal of Iran-e Farda*, 37, 1376 (1997), p 27.
 - 23 Reeves, *The Hidden Government*.
 - 24 *Nedaay-e Daneshjoo*.
 - 25 *Shargh*, 3 March 2005, at www.Sharghnewspaper.com/831218/html/online.htm.
 - 26 *Mowbien*, 19, 1997, cited in *Raah-e Toudeh*, 65, 1997, p 40.
 - 27 Abbas Kakavand, 'The multiple rules', *Akhbar-e Rooz*, online daily, 27 June 2004, at <http://www.iran-chabar.de/1383/05/06/kakawand830506.htm>.
 - 28 *Ibid.*
 - 29 Douglas Jehl, 'US scholar, barred by Iran, suspends Amity Bid', *New York Times*, 9 March 2005.
 - 30 *Ibid.*
 - 31 Associated Press, 'Iran law mandates nuclear program', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 2005, A10.
 - 32 See BBC News online at http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/06/050603_mf_reply.shtml.
 - 33 See http://us.f528.mail.yahoo.com/ym/ShowLetter?MsgId=6370_61345_30300_2574_124330_0_22107_240056_670087070&Idx=54&YY=72025&inc=25&order=down&sort=date&pos=2&view=a&head=&box=Inbox.
 - 34 His younger associate, Mohammad Nabi Habibi, replaced Asgar Oladi, a long-time secretary general of JMI, in 2004.
 - 35 In 2000 Asgar Oladi declared that 'the financial circulation of the Aid Committee of Imam Khomeini will reach 700 billion toumans this year. The source of 500 billion toumans of this sum consists of state credits, and the rest was acquired from charity and the financial sources of the Committee itself.' See Payvand's Iran News, at <http://www.payvand.com/news/01/jan/1153.html>.
 - 36 'Imam charity committee and a challenge under the People Trust', *Baztab online daily*, 24 September 2004, at www.baztab.com/news/16386.php?action=print.
 - 37 See http://news.iran-emrooz.de/more.php?id=6075_0_7_0_M.

- 38 Dariush Sajjadi, 'Peechak-e Enheraaf: Baracy Hamgarei va Mosharekat Mafiaye-e Halqeh Rohanian Madreseh Haqqaani ba Mafiay-e Qodrat dar Israel', (Deviant turn: a study of the homogeneity and participation of the mafia clerical circle of Haqqaani Seminary and the mafia power in Israel), <http://www.geocities.com/dariushsajjadi/farsimaterial/Peechak2.pdf>, 2003. Sajjadi adds that the Haqqaani Seminary was behind the murder of political opponents. This series of murders is known as the chain murders in Iran.
- 39 Akbar Ganji, *Alijenab-e Sourkh poush va Alijenaban-e Khakestari* (The Red Eminence and the Grey Eminences: Pathology of Transition to the Developmental Democratic State), Tehran: Tarh-e no, 2000.
- 40 Sajjadi, 'Peechak-e Enheraaf', p 7.
- 41 Mesbah Yazdi was the only high-ranking ayatollah to openly endorse Ahmadinejad for president. After the latter's victory Mesbah Yazdi was the only high ranking ayatollah that Ahmadinejad visited at his home in Qom.
- 42 *Mihan*, an online journal, 56, 2002, at www.Iran-Emrooz.de.
- 43 For detailed information on the chain murders, see Akbar Ganji, *Ghosts' Darkhouse: Pathology of Transition to the Developmental Democratic State*, Tehran: Tarh-e No, 1999; and Ganji, *The Red Eminence and the Gray Eminences*.
- 44 'The president of the University of Science and Technology is dismissed from hospital and attackers will be prosecuted', *Baztab*, 5 November 2004, at <http://www.baztab.com/news/18014.php> and www.baztab.com/print.php?id=17863.
- 45 For details see *Baztab*, 2 January 2005, at <http://www.baztab.com/print.php?id=19901>.
- 46 For details, see *Baztab*, 31 December 2004, at <http://www.baztab.com/print.php?id=19974>.
- 47 During his campaign for the presidency, Ahmadinejad proudly declared that he was a member of the *Basij* (state militia) even during his teaching tenure at the university.
- 48 *Rooydad*, 5 September 2004, at http://rooydad.com/2004/09/blog-post_109439674901622214.html.
- 49 Rafsanjani's statement on the presidential election after his defeat, at <http://news.iran-emrooz.net/index.php?news/more/2378/>.
- 50 *Ibid*.
- 51 The total number of the *Basij* population is estimated at several million. In a ceremonial meeting in the city of Hamedan, in the presence of several IIRCG commanders, including General Kiani, the regional commander of *Basij* forces, Mardani, the president of the Student Organization of *Basij* said that 530 000 students had joined it. Of these 90 000 are active at 2600 resistance stations at various campuses. Accordingly, they publish about 1000 student publications, of which 250 are scientific. See <http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php?news2/print2/2731>.
- 52 Mohammad Reza Khatami, 'We were defeated by a garrison party', at <http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php?news/more/2463/>.
- 53 *Ibid*.
- 54 For details, see Zahra Ebrahimi, *Sharq*, 14 July 2005, reprinted at <http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php?news2/print/2829/>.
- 55 *Ibid*.
- 56 Mohsen Armin, *Emrooz*, 16 August 2005, at <http://www.emrouz.info/ShowItem.aspx?ID=4900&p=1>; and Iraj Nadimi, *Emrooz*, 14 August 2005, at <http://www.emrouz.info/ShowItem.aspx?ID=4855&p=1>.
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