Chapter Sixteen
Politics in Iran
Country Bio: Iran

- **Population:**
  - 66.3 million
- **Territory:**
  - 636,296 sq. miles
- **Year of Independence:**
  - 550 B.C.
- **Year of Current Constitution:**
  - 1979, amended in 1989
- **Head of State:**
  - Ali Khamenei
- **Head of Government:**
  - Mahmud Ahmadinejad
- **Language:**
  - Persian, regional languages
- **Religion:**
  - Twelver Shiite Muslim 90%, Sunni Muslim 10%, non-Muslims less than 1%
Iran Population Pyramid for 2005

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base.
Background: Islamic Republic of Iran

- World’s only theocracy
  - A form of government in which ideally all laws are grounded in religion and express the will of God, and the clergy exercises supreme power
Established in 1979

- A few months after a popular revolution uniting poor and middle-class, religious and secular people overthrew Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi – the last ruler of the country’s ancient monarchy.
- Ruholla Khomeini – charismatic clerical leader who had authored a blueprint for theoretic government in the 1970s, led the 1979 revolution
  - Opposed democracy on religious grounds
  - Sovereignty belongs to god alone
  - Divine law, know as the shari’a, as interpreted and applied by the ulema (religious scholars in the Muslim world) takes precedence over laws made by human legislators.
Background:
Islamic Republic of Iran

- Developed a very lively political system after Khomeini’s death in 1989
  - Presidential, parliamentary, and local elections offer Iranian citizens a choice of candidates advocating differing policies.
- One of many paradoxes found in Iran
Current Policy Challenges

- Iran is the first country in which Islamists have had to deliver on the promises of a society characterized by social justice and moral propriety.
- During the first decade of the Islamic Republic
  - Some redistribution of wealth
  - New leadership came mostly from humble or middle-class backgrounds and adopted populist policies that somewhat bettered the lot of the poorest.
    - Rural development
    - Health
    - Women’s education
    - Roads
  - Poverty, inequality, and underemployment continue to be major public grievances.
Current Policy Challenges

- Job creation has been very inadequate.
- Need to increase economic output.
  - Population grows by one million a year.
    - Discontent spurred out migration from the country
      - One in four Iranians with higher education live abroad
      - Subsequently, Iranians often have family abroad in the U.S., Canada, and Europe
- Corruption
- Dissatisfaction with the status quo among some of Iran’s ethnic minorities
Historical Legacy

- Never formally colonized by Europeans
- Borders arise from historical balance of power between its shahs and their neighboring rules.
- Current Iranian state was set up in the early 16th century by the Safavid dynasty.
  - Establishment of Twelver Shiism as the official state religion and the conversion of most Iranians who had been Sunnis to Shiism
  - Political center of the Shiite world
Historical Legacy

- Twelver Shiism
  - Split between Sunnis (90% of all Muslims) and the Shiites came about after the death of the founder of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad
  - Shiites believed that descendants of the Prophet could be the only rightful successors/leaders—Imams.
    - Third Imama, Husayn, whose martyrdom in 680 C.E. symbolizes for Shiites for the struggle of the just against the unjust.
    - Most Shiites believe the Twelfth Imam was the last of the Imam, thus their name.
      - Believe he is alive and will come forth and show himself to establish a just rule at the end of time
      - He is a messiah-like figure.
  - Role and function of the ulema
Historical Legacy: Constitutional in Iran

- In 1905 widespread dissatisfaction with the way the country was governed
- Led to a popular movement that would rest the constitution from the shah in December 1905
- Shiite ulema played major role in the constitutional movement
- Powers of the monarchy needed to be curtailed
Believed the citizenry had the right to elect a representative parliament

Shah could name a prime minister only in agreement with parliament.

Parliament could hold the government accountable.

Constitutionalist ulema found ways to justify them in Islamic terms.

Ayatollah Muhammad-Husayn Na’inni

- His argument implied the novel idea that as long as the Twelfth Imam chose to remain in hiding, the believers themselves were his deputies.
- Reconciled Shiism’s core beliefs with modern notions of constitutionalism and is a legacy that the revolutionaries of 1979 could not ignore as they set out to create an Islamic state.
Historical Legacy:
The Pahlavi Monarchy

- In a 1907 secret agreement Britain and Russia divided Iran into two spheres of influence.
- During WWI, belligerents repeatedly violated Iran’s neutrality and fought each other on Iranian territory.
  - Created strife in Iran
Historical Legacy: The Pahlavi Monarchy

- 1921 coup d’état put an end to the rule of the old establishment
- Between 1941 and 1953 Iran’s political system included three main camps:
  - Pro-Western conservative establishment (Shah and landlords)
  - Pro-Soviet communist Tudeh party
  - Neutralist National Front, which aimed at establishing the full rule of law within the country and consolidating its standing among nations.
    - Mohammad Mossadegh: nationalizing the Iranian oil industry
    - British plotted his overthrow; accomplished with the help of the U.S. Central Intelligence (CIA) in August 1953
Historical Legacy: The Pahlavi Monarchy

- Reverted to royal autocracy as the second ruler of the Pahlavi dynasty (1963)
  - White Revolution
    - Land reform and granting suffrage to women
    - Westernizing policies
  - Traditionalists rioted
    - New opposition: Ruhollah Khomeini
  - Riots suppressed with violence
  - Khomeini arrested and exiled: settled in Najaf in Iraq until 1978 when he was expelled by Saddam Hussein until his triumphant return to Iran in 1979
Historical Legacy: The Pahlavi Monarchy

- Demands for free elections
- Shah’s regime increasingly contested at home but it continued to receive support from the West in general and in the U.S. in particular
  - Opposition to the Shah also became opposition to the U.S.
  - Evidence suggests that Shah was successful at manipulating U.S. policymakers to achieve his ends rather than it being the other way around.
Historical Legacy: The Islamic Revolution & the Iran Iraq War

- 1977 Jimmy Carter – president of the U.S.
  - Focus on human rights
- Shah had terminal cancer; began liberalizing Iran’s political system
  - Groups pushed for greater reforms
- Revolutionary uprising
  - Khomeini
- 1979 New Constitution
  - Maintained a parliament elected by universal suffrage
  - Shah replaced by an elected president
  - Principle of velayat-e faqih “guardianship of the jurisprudence”
Historical Legacy: The Islamic Revolution & the Iran-Iraq War

- 1979 to 1981
  - Competition for power; violence
  - Khomeini gains the upper hand and began instituting Islamic law in all spheres of public life.

- Iran-Iraq War

- Legacy of Oil Wealth: A Rentier State
  - Sustain themselves independently of social pressures and powerful interest groups
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Head of State</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Shah: Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—Various cabinets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Mohammad Mossadegh (51–53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—Various cabinets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Amir-Abbas Hoveyda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Leader: Ruhollah Khomeini</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Jamshid Amuzegar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Abolhasan Banisadr</td>
<td>Mehdi Bazargan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Mohammad Khatami</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Mahmud Ahmadinejad</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Institutions of the Islamic Republic

- Multiple power centers
- Leader
  - Highest authority in the Islamic Republic
    - Combines religious and temporal authority
  - Assembly of Experts
    - Choose the Leader
- President
  - Elected by universal suffrage every four years
  - Must be a Twelver Shiite and a male; does not have to be a cleric
Institutions of the Islamic Republic

- Parliament
  - Unicameral, the Majles, comprises about 290 members
  - Must be Muslims but the Constitution provides for five members of Parliament to represent Christians (3), Jews (one) and Zoroastrians (one)
  - Two features of the political system seriously limit the Majle’s legislative role.
    - Many policies, rules, and regulations are set by unelected specialized bodies.
    - All its bills are subject to the veto of the Council of Guardians.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female MPs</th>
<th>Clerical MPs</th>
<th>Total MPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Majles (1980–1984)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Majles (1996–2000)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Majles (2000–2004)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Majles (2004–2008)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Institutions of the Islamic Republic

- Council of Guardians
  - Six members of the ulema and six lay Muslim lawyers.
  - Ulema appointed by the Leader; lawyers nominated by the Judiciary but approved by the Parliament
Institutions of the Islamic Republic

- Expediency Council
  - “A council for determination of what is in the interest of the regime”
  - Collective body for arbitration of conflict
  - Anchored in constitutional revision of 1989
  - Leader appoints over 30 members of this council
  - Help the leader formulate overall state policy
- An honestly undemocratic Constitution
- Multiple power centers
Formal Constitutional Power Structure in Iran

**Nation**
- President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (elected for four years; max. 2 terms in office)
- Assembly of Experts (majles-e khobregan)* 86 clerical members (elected for eight years)
- Parliament (majles-e shura-ye eslami) 290 representatives (elected for four years)
- Council of Ministers 22 ministers (confirmed by Parliament)
- Supreme Leader* Ali Khamenei (lifetime appointment)
- Council of Guardians (shura-ye negahban) 12 members

**Head of the Judiciary***

**6 Clerical Members of the Council of Guardians**

**Expediency Council** (31 members)

**Voice and Vision (Radio and Television) (seda va sima)***

**Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps***

**Commander of the Regular Military (artesh)**

**Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces***

**Commander of the Law Enforcement Forces (niruha-ye entezami)***

**Head of the Supreme Court*** (five-year term)

**Chief Public Prosecutor*** (five-year term)

**6 Lay Jurists in the Council of Guardians** (appointed on advice of Parliament)

Function of Council of Guardians:
1. Determine compatibility with Islam of laws approved by Parliament
2. Monitor all elections (preselects candidates)
3. Interpret the constitution

*As of April 2000, these power centers are dominated by the traditionalist right

Elections and Parties

- The Pre-revolutionary legacy
  - Very limited competitive elections
  - Suffrage for women
  - Minimum voting age 15

- Post-revolutionary parties
  - Islamic Republican Party
    - Factionalism
    - Khomeini could arbitrate
    - Ideological differences became the basis of factional politics

- 1990s
  - Khatami’s election; more political parties appeared on the scene
Elections and Parties

- Presidential elections
  - 1980 first ever presidential election
    - Victory of a lay Islamist: Banisadr
      - Impeached by Parliament and deposed by Khomeini in 1981
      - His successor and prime minister killed by a bomb two months later
  - The next four elections: Khomeini associates
    - Result: participation went down
  - Khatami – “outsider”; appealed to those who had been humiliated by the regime
    - Promised greater cultural openness and personal freedom
  - 2005 elections: arch conservative mayor of Tehran, Mahud Ahmadinejad
    - Some question as to voter fraud allegations
Elections and Parties

- Parliamentary elections
  - Divided into multimember constituencies
  - Largest is Tehran with 30 MPs
  - Each voter can write down the names of as many candidates as there are seats in a constituency.
  - Top vote-getters in each constituency are elected provided they receive over 50% of the total vote.
  - Second round determines the remaining MPs from among the runner-ups.
Electoral Participation

Source: Compiled by Arang Keshavarzian.
Elections and Parties

- Elections of 2004
  - Council of Guardians disallowed about 2,000 reformist candidates, including about 80 sitting MPS (unprecedented)
    - Call for a boycott of the election
    - 50% of the population still went to the polls
Elections and Parties

- Local elections
  - Constitution of 1906 provided for elected local government councils but these were never constituted.
  - Similar provision of the 1979 Constitution first put into action in 1999.
    - Iranians for the first time went to the polls to elect city, town, and village councils.
    - Reformists won control over most councils; stymied by conservatives
    - Voters stopped participating.
    - Elections in 2003 – only 15 turnout in Tehran- even though the freest election in Iranian history. Mostly conservatives voted. Result: very conservative council
  - December 2006 new elections
    - Participation increased; Ahmadinejad conservatives won only a few seats; rebuke for the President’s handling of the economy.
Political Culture

- System level
  - Iranian nationalism/ancient Persia
  - Vanguard of the Islamic world’s struggle against Western domination
  - Ethic nationalism has become stronger among Iran’s non-Persian populations
  - “right” to develop nuclear energy
    - Government used this issue to shore up their legitimacy.
Political Culture

- Process level
  - Islamic revolution increased participation in politics
  - Some disaffected
  - Extreme individualism and lack of trust of government
    - Long history of despotism
  - Periodic emergence of charismatic leaders
Percentage Expressing Very Great Trust

Political Culture

- Policy level
  - Oil: Iranians have tended to expect the state to provide welfare and material well-being for everybody and alleviate the gap between rich and poor.
  - Corruption
  - Suspicion of private enterprise
  - Populism
Political Socialization

- Educational system
- The military
- Religion and religious institutions
- Mass media
- Family and social groups
### Percentage of People Describing Self as “a Religious Person”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 16.6**

- **Religion is very important in life.**
- **Participation in religious services more than once a week.**
- **Think of yourself as "above all a Muslim."**
- **Think of yourself as "above all a nationalist."**

Comparison across Egypt, Jordan, and Iran.
Recruiting the Political Elite

- Who governs Iran?
  - Under the Shah
    - Small class of educated and secular Iranians who had personal loyalty to the monarch
  - Under the Islamic Republic
    - Personalism
    - Revolutionary pedigrees
    - Clergy recruited into the state
    - Nonclerical parliamentarians and ministers tend to emerge from educational and military institutions
    - Many of the new elite have come from the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij.
  - Kinship ties
Interest Articulation and Aggregation

- Forms of interest articulation and aggregation
  - Noninstitutional
    - Clientelism and patron-client networks
  - Institutional
    - Voting
    - Weakness of party organizations
      - Unable to maintain party organization and formalized links to the citizenry
- Institutionalized groups
- Professional organizations
- Nonassociational social groups
- Demonstrations and public protests
Policy Formulation

- State institutions mentioned in the Constitution
  - In theory, no state policy may contradict Islam, so those who determine this have a preponderant voice in setting policy.
    - The Leader
    - The Expediency Council
    - The National Security Council
    - The Council of Guardians
    - Executive branch and parliament
Policy Formulation

- State institutions not mentioned in the Constitutions
  - Supreme council for the Cultural Revolution
- Power centers and the difficulty of coordination
  - Multiple power centers so policies are often not coordinated
  - Judiciary
  - Revolutionary Guards
Policy Formulation

- Economic policymaking
  - One of the most contentious topics
    - 1980s liberal approach: private sector and market mechanisms
    - Mixed results
    - Led to hardship and therefore faced opposition
    - Khatami’s efforts limited due to economic foundations’ and parastatal organizations’ autonomous and privileged access to resources and markets.
Comparative Growth Rate

Policy Outcomes

- Incoherent policies
  - Sometimes paralysis
  - Example of cultural policy: banning of music

- Spreading progress and prosperity
  - State educational system astonishingly good
    - Science and literacy
  - Birth control
  - Health care
  - Roads and the provision of basic services
### Comparison of Development Indicators, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Population Growth</th>
<th>Life Expectancy</th>
<th>Infant Mortality (before age 1)</th>
<th>Access to Sanitation (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>66 million</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>70 million</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>67 million</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>148 million</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1 billion</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1.3 billion</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>102 million</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>136 million</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Literacy/Men</th>
<th>Literacy/Women</th>
<th>Education as Part of GNP</th>
<th>GNP/Capita $</th>
<th>GNP/PPP $</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2,010</td>
<td>7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2,240</td>
<td>6,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1,390</td>
<td>3,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>2,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>2,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>4,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6,230</td>
<td>8,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PPP: Purchasing Power Parity.
Policy Outcomes: Islamicization of Society

- Alcohol consumption banned except for the non-Muslim minorities
- Veiling enforced in public spaces
- State committed in theory to the minimizing contact between unrelated men and women
- Religious content of education is vastly expanded
- Gruesome physical punishment to chastise adulterers, homosexuals, and other offenders of religious morality
- Outwardly a success; but underneath the surface – bootlegging, prostitution (driven by poverty), over 2 million Iranians are drug addicts, corruption
- Religious practice has become more private
  - Ant Clericalism
Policy Outcomes: Gender Relations

- Legal restrictions on women’s rights
- Many ad hoc discriminations instituted by the Islamic Republic
  - Fields of study closed to women
  - Women’s sports restricted; attire incompatible with veiling
- Women increasing their participation in public life
- Many are working outside of the home
- 60% of the student body at universities’ restrictions on what they can study having been gradually lifted
- More novels- written by women
- Women compete in sports but at locations to which men are not admitted
- Mal-veiling
- Islamic feminism
Policy Outcomes: Foreign Policy

- Under the Shah
  - U.S. an ally
- 1990s “national interest”
- Third Worldist
  - Desire to escape the hegemony of Western world
- Main issue confronting current Iranian diplomacy is the nuclear program.
Iran and Its Challenges

- Faced many challenges and has survived
- Reopening of the debate: What is the proper relation between religion and politics in Iran?