

PART IV

**Twenty-first-century
autocrats**

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ALI HOSSEINI KHAMENEI

Routinizing revolution in Iran (born 1939)

Kjetil Selvik

Ali Hosseini Khamenei is a proven master of political survival. At 82, he is the longest-serving head of state in the Middle East. His career is as long as the Islamic Republic of Iran has existed. Having first served as president for eight years, he became Supreme Leader (*rahbar*) in 1989. Khamenei was no strongman when he came to office. Both as president and early in his political career, other politicians overshadowed him.¹ However, he built his power step by step and has become the unrivaled political authority in the country. In the process, Iran has moved toward an increasingly closed form of autocracy.² Khamenei's rule has been marked by recurring manifestations of political opposition and strong international tensions, especially with the United States. A mainstay of his survival strategy has been to instrumentalize the conflict with the outside to overcome the pressures from below for change.

This chapter analyzes how Khamenei consolidated his rule and the political consequences of his survival strategy. I argue that he has capitalized on the institutional and ideological legacies of his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, as well as on the high potential for repression in revolutionary regimes. Khamenei has invested in nonelected and parallel revolutionary bodies, maintained strong emphasis on the Islamic Revolution's ideology, and recruited a new generation of followers to the ruling coalition. I outline the tensions arising from this routinization of the organizational structures, aims, and elite selection mechanisms of the revolution and the wish of the Iranian population to change the country's course.

Khamenei has a multifaceted experience and background.³ He was born in Mashhad in 1939 as one of eight children of a poor religious scholar. While studying religion in Qom, he became part of Ayatollah Khomeini's opposition movement. He was influenced by the writings of the Egyptian Islamist theoretician Sayyid Qutb. At the same time, he interacted with secular opposition intellectuals and had a strong interest in music, poetry, and novels. In Ganji's assessment, "no

other present-day *marja* (senior ayatollah) or prominent *faqih* (Islamic jurist) has such a cosmopolitan past.”⁴ Khamenei is an intellectual and revolutionary who was influenced by Third Worldism. During the 1960s and 1970s, he was arrested six times by the shah’s secret police, endured torture, and spent several years in jail.⁵

Rise to supremacy

After the overthrow of the shah’s regime, Khamenei became deputy minister of defense in the new Islamic Republic and supervisor of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). His career could have been short. The radical opposition group People’s Mujahedin of Iran targeted him in a 1981 assassination attempt, mutilating his right arm. However, Khamenei survived and went on to become the Supreme Leader. What explains his remarkable resilience?

Khamenei’s political survival must be analyzed in the context of the regime he presides over. The Islamic Republic of Iran grew out of a social revolution, which has marked its politics profoundly. Revolutionary regimes have special attributes, which make them resilient to external and internal pressures.⁶ According to Lachapelle et al. (2020), the violent conflicts triggered by their efforts to transform the state and the existing social order leave four legacies that enhance authoritarian durability. First, the fight against counterrevolutionaries tends to foster a cohesive ruling elite. Second, revolutionaries take control over the army, police, and intelligence forces and reduce the likelihood of a military coup. Third, the struggle to fade off internal and external existential threats facilitates the creation of a vast coercive apparatus. Fourth, revolutionary and postrevolutionary conflict enables regime elites to “wipe out rivals and alternative centers of power: institutions or social classes whose power, resources, or legitimacy can serve as a basis for mobilizing opposition to the regime.”⁷

Iran differs from the standard comparative model in some important respects. The country’s most eye-catching uniqueness is its religious appearance and religious justification for the state. This followed Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership in the revolution and was written into the Islamic Republic’s constitution.⁸ The founding concept was *velayat-e faqih*, prescribing the guardianship of the Islamic jurist (the Supreme Leader who, according to this Shia political thought, has custodianship of the Iranian people).⁹

Another characteristic is that electoral politics have played a more prominent role in Iran than is commonly the case in revolutionary regimes. The Islamic Republic holds competitive elections for both legislative and executive positions and has done so regularly since the revolution. Suffrage is universal, voters have had real (though increasingly limited) alternatives to choose from, and there has been uncertainty about the election result. Historically, there have been high electoral participation rates.¹⁰

Moreover, as a consequence of the electoral contest and a convoluted institutional structure factionalism is rife in the ruling group.¹¹ Parallel state organs create overlapping authorities, checks and balances, and havens for competing interests.¹²

The attempt to combine an Islamic State with electoral democracy resulted in a political regime that is charged with built-in tensions. Starting with the constitution, it oscillates between provisions for “divine rule” and arrangements for the rule of the people.¹³ As Brumberg explains, the dissonant legitimation principles have been institutionalized in competing political offices.¹⁴ For example, the legislature is divided between the popularly elected Parliament and the Guardian Council, which oversees the compatibility of laws with the *sharia*. Equally, the executive power is divided between an elected president and the “Leader of the revolution.”¹⁵

Khamenei was a trusted follower of Ayatollah Khomeini and held influential positions from the beginning of the revolution.¹⁶ Nonetheless, his rise to leadership was not a foregone conclusion. Khomeini had intended for another of his followers to become his successor, the left-leaning Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri.¹⁷ However, a counter-coalition comprising Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khamenei, and Khomeini’s son Ahmad worked against Montazeri’s candidature.¹⁸ Shortly before his death, Khomeini fell out with Montazeri, who had criticized the 1988 mass execution of political prisoners.¹⁹ Rafsanjani orchestrated a meeting in the Assembly of Experts in which Khamenei was selected as the new Supreme Leader.

The choice of Khamenei was controversial because he did not possess the necessary religious qualifications. According to the constitution, the Leader of the Islamic Republic should be a *marja-e taqlid*, meaning a religious “source of emulation.” However, Khamenei was not an ayatollah – he only held the middle-rank title of *hojjat ol-eslam*. His credentials were first and foremost political. For this reason, when the Assembly of Experts selected Khamenei, it required a (post factum) amendment of the Iranian constitution.²⁰ The operation created a legal and religious legitimacy problem for the new Leader from the start.²¹

Filling the shoes of Khomeini was difficult. Khamenei lacked his predecessor’s charisma, popular support, and authority among the revolutionary elite. He had not led the revolution, did not carry the same theological weight, and was perceived to be part of factional disputes where Khomeini had been above them. That made him vulnerable to attacks from his political opponents. Moreover, Khamenei took office in the shadow of President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Known as a favorite of Khomeini, and coming with a clear political program, the president appeared as the stronger part. He used his authority as the elected president to set the course for the Second Republic.

Throughout Khamenei’s long rule, tensions with succeeding presidents have been a constant. A structural explanation is that the Leader seeks to preserve the existing system, whereas the people vote for presidents who promise political change. The drive for reform was felt from Khamenei’s early days in office. By the end of the first revolutionary decade, the Iranian population was tired of radical ideologies and the devastating war with Iraq. Hashemi Rafsanjani sensed the people’s fatigue and championed an “adjustment” (*ta’dil*) of the Islamic Republic. It consisted in a departure from the foreign policy goal of exporting the Islamic Revolution, a turn toward market economy, and less state intervention in cultural and social affairs.²²

In 1997, the push for reform turned to the nature of the regime itself when Muhammad Khatami won presidential power in an electoral landslide.²³ Underpinning Khatami's rise was a social and intellectual reform movement that had developed a democratic interpretation of the Islamic Republic.²⁴ It criticized the theocratic idea of divinely ordained leadership and emphasized the republican foundation of the regime instead. Khatami made a case for strengthening civil society, arguing that the people needed space to invigorate the Islamic Republic. Externally, he represented Iran with a smiling face and called for the "dialogue of civilizations."²⁵

For Khamenei, the popular eagerness to move out of revolution mode was a problem. His political *raison d'être* was to defend the Islamic Revolution and its regime. By fortune, he had become the "Leader of the revolution," but the position's continuing relevance was in question. The voters had switched to Thermidor mood and expressed political preferences that made the Supreme Leader seem out of tune. To put it succinctly, Khamenei faced the task of establishing his (revolutionary) authority at a time when revolutionary slogans were beginning to lose their appeal. He did not have Khomeini's charisma to sway the masses, and he lacked a political program that a majority of the Iranian population would subscribe to. Khamenei's shortage of soft power might not be such a problem if it was not that the Islamic Republic was an ideologically legitimated regime. However, the Leader's power was based on a *doctrine* – the guardianship of the Islamic jurist – and a doctrine needs persuasiveness to be effective.

Keys of authoritarian survival

Khamenei developed a survival strategy based on the resources at his disposal. He inherited three key assets from the first revolutionary leader. First, he had wide institutional powers. Second, he had access to an ideology legitimizing his having and using these prerogatives. Third, he took over a robust repressive apparatus. Through deft deployment of these resources, he overcame the double threat of street protests and the rejection of his rule from within the regime.

Khamenei has a range of powers in the Iranian political system, and many are granted by the constitution. Among many other authorities, the Supreme Leader has the right to determine the general policies of the Islamic Republic, command the armed forces, declare war and peace, reject the suitability of first-term presidential candidates, and appoint and dismiss important officeholders. Among such officeholders are the six clerical members of the Guardian Council; the Head of the Judiciary; the Head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting;²⁶ the Chief of Staff for the Armed forces; the Chief Commander of the IRGC; and the Commanders of the three regular military branches.²⁷

In addition, from Ayatollah Khomeini Khamenei took over a network of clerical commissars throughout the state apparatus. Every government ministry is set up with a personally appointed representative of the Leader, ostensibly to provide ideological guidance, in practice constituting networks of patronage and control.

Sometimes, the Supreme Leader's representative can be the ministry's real authority. There are also clerical commissars in the military and security services, in the Foreign Service, as in a host of revolutionary and religious organizations.²⁸ Khamenei furthermore appoints personal representatives to Iran's 31 provinces who counterweight the government-appointed province governors (*ostandar*). They manage Khamenei's provincial constituencies, pass on messages to the governors, and lead the Friday prayer congregations.

The Leader also has vast economic resources at his disposal. His personal office oversees the activities of parastatal revolutionary foundations (*bonyads*), which are subsidized by the government budget, pay no taxes, and engage in economic transactions and investments without public insight.²⁹ Intended to serve the revolutionary goal of social justice, these foundations passed from central government control to the authority of the Supreme Leader after 1989.³⁰ The more business-oriented ones have developed into multibillion-dollar conglomerates, employing tens of thousands of people, the Mostazafan Foundation being the emblematic example. The Leader moreover benefits from the responsibility for collecting the alms tax and administering Pious Endowments (*awqaf*). The most prominent endowment, Astan-e Qods-e Razavi, is the biggest land owner in Iran's second-largest city Mashhad and the wider Khorasan province.³¹ Khamenei's office also manages a secretive business conglomerate called Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam (*setad-e ejrai-ye farman-e hazrat-e emam*). It was created at Ayatollah Khomeini's order in 1989 to deal with abandoned and/or expropriated properties from the 1979 revolution and has gained court authorization to continue confiscating properties under Khamenei. According to Reuters, the Headquarters (*setad*) has used its special status to build up a massive real estate portfolio and expanded into other sectors of the economy, including finance, telecommunications, and oil, as well.³²

The ideological foundation of Khamenei's rule is a combination of anti-imperialism and political Islam. He has remained committed to Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary vision of resisting domination by colonializing powers, especially the United States and Israel, by awakening the Muslim community and implementing Islam in every aspect of life.³³ Khamenei sees Iran as the frontrunner of a global revolt against imperial subjugation that is bound to dethrone the hegemon in the end. The Islamic Revolution was the breakthrough of the movement of downtrodden nations, and the Islamic Republic is its embodiment. To advance this mission, internal unity must be maintained at all cost. Political dissent is equated with running errands for the forces of oppression.

The nature of religious guardianship in the Islamic Republic is a contested issue. Khamenei promotes the idea that his authority as the Islamic jurist is absolute (*motlaq*). The justification is a 1988 speech by Ayatollah Khomeini where he stated that government in the form of absolute guardianship was "one of the primary injunctions of Islam . . . with priority over all secondary injunctions, even prayer, fasting and *haj* (pilgrimage)."³⁴ The practical implication is that the Supreme Leader stands above the law. By contrast, the reformist interpretation insists that the Leader is limited by the popular will and the constitution.

To counter the push for reform, Khamenei emphasizes the sanctity of the revolution and magnifies external threats against it and Iran. He portrays submission to the Leader as a matter of defending true Islam. Khamenei works systematically to get the message across. His ideological production is significant,³⁵ and he regularly addresses state officials, social and professional groups, and the population as a whole. The Supreme Leader's words are amplified through a battery of media channels from the state broadcaster to Press TV, Ofogh TV, Mardom Khabar Internet TV, his websites, and social media accounts. Propagandists in mosques, the religious seminaries, the judicial system, the Basij force, and the information arms of the IRGC also parrot him.³⁶

Khamenei attaches great importance to culture, arguing that a nation's strength and the international battle for hearts and minds are rooted there. The aim of the Islamic Revolution was to liberate Muslim societies from the treacherous influence of the West, and this cultural jihad, he exhorts, must never stop. When Rafsanjani used his presidential powers to steer Iran out of isolation and liberalize the economy and social restrictions, Khamenei developed a discourse on the dangers of "cultural onslaught" (*tahajum-e farhangi*). He admonished defenders of the Islamic Republic to remain alert and not be lured into the enemy's trap. In response to Khatami's political opening, he further stressed the necessity of keeping the cultural resistance up. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, he warned that the West was targeting Iran with a "soft war" (*jang-e narm*).³⁷

Although Khamenei found a blueprint for survival in Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology, he could not lean on the ruling coalition that his predecessor brought together to the same degree. Among the elites that had governed the Islamic Republic in the first revolutionary decade, a significant portion questioned Khamenei's authority. These elites had revolutionary credentials enabling them to participate in elections, operate political parties, express their views in national media, and hold public office.³⁸ They also had connections in the clerical and security establishments that made it challenging to repress them.

Khamenei set out to progressively marginalize recalcitrant elites and reshape the ruling coalition, focusing on politicians, the clergy, and the security forces. He facilitated the rise of a new generation of revolutionaries with definite loyalty to him. The Khatami-led heydays of the reform movement were also a time of reorganization and countermobilization among Iran's conservatives, resulting in the emergence of a neoconservative political faction. It consisted to a large degree of young recruits who had served as the Islamic Republic's bulwark in the security apparatus, armed units like the Basij militia, and the Ansar-e Hezbollah vigilantes.³⁹ Having fought the so-called enemies of the Islamic Republic on the ground, these foot soldiers criticized the old guard of leniency and demanded an ideological return to the original values of the Islamic Revolution, meaning strict moral enforcement, social justice, and anti-imperialism. Mahmud Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential elections chased the reformists from office and put the neoconservatives in charge of the government.⁴⁰

Support in the clergy is essential for a ruler who claims legitimacy with reference to religion, but Khamenei faced resistance in Qom from the start.⁴¹ Top-rank ayatollahs would not recognize him as a scholar entitled to make religious rulings.⁴² Critical theologians attacked the very concept of guardianship of the Islamic jurist.⁴³ Khamenei responded to this challenge by undermining the traditional independence, self-regulation, and pluralism of the religious seminaries and subjecting them to tight political control. He bureaucratized the education system and changed the financial structures in ways that radically increased the clergy's dependence on the state.⁴⁴ The Leader invested in the tutoring of students, offering salaries, housing, and other social benefits in exchange for political loyalty.⁴⁵ Khamenei's policy has led to a massive growth in the overall number of clerics who find work in government offices, religious organizations, and security agencies.⁴⁶

The security forces form the third pillar of Khamenei's ruling coalition. Above all, he relies on the IRGC. The IRGC is a parallel military organization to the regular military, characterized by its ideological outlook.⁴⁷ Since the inception, its role has been to safeguard the Islamic Revolution and its regime.⁴⁸ The Guards protect against a possible military coup and repress political dissent. They have developed an intelligence structure that works in parallel to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. In his Last Will and Testament, Ayatollah Khomeini warned the armed forces, including the IRGC, against involvement in politics.⁴⁹ However, after Khamenei resorted to them to contain the reform movement, it became common for former IRGC officers to take political office.⁵⁰ The Basij organization is a subdivision of the Guards used for rallying support for the regime and exercising social control. It counts 1–2 million active members, according to Golkar.⁵¹

The cornerstone of any authoritarian regime is the ability to repress political opposition. Revolutionary regimes have special prerequisites for solving the task, as noted earlier. Khamenei has exploited the full potential of the coercive apparatus he took over. He relies on a panoply of institutions and actors spanning from the aforementioned IRGC and the Basij to the police, vigilantes, multiple intelligence bodies, prisons and detentions centers, the judiciary, and the extraconstitutional Special Court of the Clergy and the Islamic Revolutionary Courts. Most escape oversight from the elected state offices and answer to the Supreme Leader directly.

Khamenei's coercive apparatus has proven its force and resolve on repeated occasions. The first big test was the showdown with the Khatami-led reform movement. Confronted with a president who expanded the freedom of the press and the space for organizing civil society outlets, the judiciary found its place as the Leader's front line of defense. To the dismay of the reformist-dominated government and parliament, the Chief Justice closed reformist publications and dragged reformist politicians and clerics to court. In parallel, the IRGC and regime thugs repressed student protests.⁵² The second and even bigger test was the 2009–2010 confrontation with the Green Movement. Citizen perceptions of fraud in Ahmadinejad's reelection as president for a second term inspired mass protests and a civil rights movement.⁵³ The regime responded with a calibrated mix of beating protesters,

detaining key activists, and putting prominent reformist politicians on trial. The movement's leading figures (and Ahmadinejad's election opponents), Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were placed under house arrest. Then, in 2017–2018, leaderless demonstrations broke out across the country denouncing the government's economic policies. Their demand was no longer reform but overturn of the political system.⁵⁴ The security forces repressed the uprisings harshly. Likewise, the November 2019 protests against a sudden rise in fuel prices were met with an iron fist. Investigation by Amnesty International revealed that 304 people lost their lives.⁵⁵

In all these crisis situations, the security forces stood with Khamenei. Contrary to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, where parts of the coercive apparatus abandoned the heads of state in the wake of the 2011 uprising, Iran's repressive agents followed orders. A key to Khamenei's success was the ideological selection – and continuous indoctrination – of his repressive agents. In the forces that protected him he cultivated a consciousness of being his vanguard.⁵⁶ Iran's international isolation and siege mentality facilitated this task. Domestic problems and dissent were attributed to outside enemies. Moreover, the ideological orientation and parallel-to-the-state-nature of key security forces also meant that their destinies were tied to the Supreme Leader. Were it not for the claimed necessity of protecting the Islamic Revolution and its regime, an organization like the IRGC could be merged with the regular military and subjected to control of the elected politicians.

The price of success

Khamenei's survival strategy has had far-reaching consequences for both Iran and the politics of the Islamic Republic. In the following I concentrate on the weakening of elected institutions, domestic and international conflicts, and the growing securitization of the political order.

Although the Islamic Republic was never a liberal democracy, elections have historically been a potent political force. Many times they have impacted the overall orientation of Iran and often produced unforeseen results. During Khamenei's rule, however, trust in the electoral institutions has been weakened and the parliament and presidency's weight in the political game has been reduced. Crises like the contestation of Ahmadinejad reelection have undermined the electoral institution's legitimacy, and the Supreme Leader has increased the political influence of unelected bodies. Lack of support from the majority of voters forced Khamenei to rely on the institutions for which he nominates the leaders directly. On the one hand, he invested in parallel revolutionary institutions like the parastatal foundations, the IRGC, and the Basij. On the other hand, he relied on support from the judiciary and the Guardian Council when presidents with a popular mandate put pressure on him.

The Guardian Council's interference in the electoral process has greatly increased under Khamenei. During Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership, the examination of candidates for parliamentary elections was undertaken by the Ministry

of the Interior, and the Guardian Council could merely veto the ministry's decisions. However, starting in 1991, the council claimed broader authorities⁵⁷ and built capacity for vetting candidates on a bigger scale.⁵⁸ In 1988, 19.3% of a total of 2001 registered candidates were disqualified in Iran's parliamentary elections.⁵⁹ In 2016, 48.6% of 12,123 registered candidates were denied the right to run.⁶⁰ The electoral engineering hit a new low in the 2021 presidential election. All serious competitors to Ebrahim Raisi were excluded from the race, including two-term ~~President Mahmoud~~ Ahmadinejad, former parliament speaker Ali Larijani, and the ~~First Vice President~~ under Rouhani Eshaq Jahangiri.

Another illustration of the growing reach of unelected institutions is the shadow government that Khamenei has built around his personal office. It has long been common for Iranian religious leaders to run a "house" (*beit*) where a representative, usually a son, would coordinate with the religious leader's constituency. Ayatollah Khomeini let personal communication and appointments pass through his son Ahmad but kept the house relatively small. Khamenei, for his part, has created an extensive bureaucracy in the Leader's office. He has entrusted carefully chosen specialists with different files in security, religious, economic, and political affairs. According to Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani, they

perform such functions as lobbying MPs and cabinet ministers (often behind the scenes); convey the wishes of the Supreme Leader to interested parties; serve as troubleshooters and go-betweens with political, military, and intelligence officials; [and] conduct sociological studies of the citizenry's needs and grievances.⁶¹

A group of trusted confidants oversees the work of these shadow cabinet members.

A second consequence of Khamenei's survival strategy is domestic and international conflicts. By doubling down on revolutionary bodies and agendas, against the wishes of the majority population, the Leader has alienated wide segments of society from the regime. He has narrowed the Islamic Republic's support base by politically excluding reformists and clamping down on various social movements. The violent repression of protests has generated legitimacy crises and radicalized the opposition's actions and aims. The conflict levels are particularly high with regard to ethnic minorities, such as Iranian Arabs, the Baluch, and the Kurds.⁶²

Internationally, Khamenei has done his part to maintain the conflictual relationships with the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, although threats and provocations go both ways. The fact that he has based his survival on promoting a revolutionary Islamic ideology and strengthening militia organizations means that the stabilization of Iran's international relations has been difficult to achieve. Khamenei did consent to negotiations with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany on Iran's nuclear program and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, beyond the signing of the JCPOA, he ruled out further normalization with the United States.⁶³ In the Middle East, Khamenei has nurtured deeper ties with Bashar al-Assad in Syria and non-state armed groups

in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.⁶⁴ This policy has significantly increased Iran's influence in the Arab region, but the influence has come at a price. For instance, it was a central motive for US president Donald Trump's sanctions campaign against the Islamic Republic in 2018–2020 and also for Israel's airstrikes against the IRGC in Syria and Iraq and sabotage operations inside Iran.

Along with this spike in domestic and international conflicts, Khamenei's survival strategy has led to increased securitization of the political order in Iran. This has occurred in the sense that subjects are "moved out of the sphere of normal politics into the realm of emergency politics," where they can be treated without democratic procedures.⁶⁵ Moreover, security elites have gained more prominence in Iran's political and economic life. Khamenei instrumentalizes outside threats against Iran to discredit the internal opposition against him and enable him to deal with these forces as a security matter. He mobilizes the coercive apparatus against regime critics, comparing their task to a war. The pursuit of an internationally contested nuclear development program has both facilitated and contributed to this securitization of politics. It has enabled Khamenei to maintain a state of emergency while at the same time scoring brownie points for the progress being made.

Securitization of the political order also manifests itself in the growing influence of security elites. Khamenei's reign has led to a striking rise of actors with a background in the military or other parts of the security establishment, in both politics and the economy. The main producer of these ascending elites is the IRGC.⁶⁶ Many leading politicians began their careers as guardsmen.⁶⁷ The IRGC has also built a business empire on Khamenei's watch.⁶⁸ Companies like the flagship construction conglomerate Khatam al-Anbiya pay no taxes and have privileged access to state contracts.

Conclusion

Khamenei owes his political survival to a routinization of the Islamic Revolution in Iran's political regime – first and foremost because he inherited a position that was tailor-made for Ayatollah Khomeini, was the institutionalized expression of the first Leader's charisma and came with wide-ranging powers in the constitution and beyond. Moreover, Khamenei has responded to attacks from his peers and the opposition in society by investing in other legacies of the revolution. He has leaned on parallel revolutionary organizations, reemphasized the Islamic Revolution's mission, and applied loyalty to the Leader as criterion in reshaping the ruling elite. Not least has he put the repressive capacity of a revolutionary regime to use. Khamenei's remarkable longevity as ruler is, at the end of the day, a reflection of the authoritarian durability of revolutionary regimes. The continuous external pressures on Iran through sanctions and military encirclement have facilitated his task with controlling society and mobilizing the coercive apparatus. Routinizing revolution would not work in the absence of external and internal enemies. The political consequences of Khamenei's survival strategy have been a weakening of elected institutions, an increase of domestic and international conflicts, and a

growing securitization of the political order. The Supreme Leader has undercut popular support for the Islamic Republic by deepening the impact of revolution at a time when the Iranian population demands something else.

Notes

- 1 Notably Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi (1981–1989) and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997).
- 2 Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi, *Power and Change in Iran: Politics of Contention and Conciliation*, Indiana Series in Middle East Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 19.
- 3 Yvette Hovsepian-Bearce, *The Political Ideology of Ayatollah Khamenei: Out of the Mouth of the Supreme Leader of Iran* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 4 Akbar Ganji, “Who Is Ali Khamenei: The Worldview of Iran’s Supreme Leader,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92 (2013): 26.
- 5 Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).
- 6 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “The Durability of Revolutionary Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 24/3 (2013): 5.
- 7 Jean Lachapelle et al., “Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability,” *World Politics*, vol. 72/4 (2020): 571.
- 8 Asghar Schirazi, “The Constitution of Iran,” in J. O’Kane (tr.), *Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (London: Brill, 1997), 1997.
- 9 Encyclopaedia Iranica, “Constitution of the Islamic Republic” (accessed February 27, 2021): <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/constitution-of-the-islamic-republic>.
- 10 Nigel Parsons, *Electoral Politics in Iran: Rules of the Arena, Popular Participation, and the Limits of Elastic in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute Policy Briefs, 2010).
- 11 Walter Posch, “The End of a Beautiful Friendship? Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Principalists,” in *Iran and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honour of Mohammad-Reza Djalili* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2013), 50–78.
- 12 Arang Keshavarzian, *Contestation Without Democracy: Elite Fragmentation in Iran* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).
- 13 Article 2 anchors the Islamic Republic in belief in “*the One and only God (. . .), His exclusive Sovereignty and Legislation, and the Necessity of Submission to His Commands.*” Concomitantly, according to Article 6, “*the affairs of the State shall be managed by relying on public opinion, through the elections.*” See Islamic Parliament of Iran, “Constitution” (accessed March 2, 2021): <https://en.parliran.ir/eng/en/Constitution>.
- 14 Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- 15 The Leader is selected by the (elected) Assembly of Experts.
- 16 Among other, Khamenei was a member of the Revolutionary Council (1979–1980), deputy defence minister (1979–1980), Friday prayer leader of Tehran (1980), president (1981–1989) and member of the first Assembly of Experts (1983–1989). See Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosch Rahimkhani, *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 548.
- 17 Sussan Siavoshi, *Montazeri* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 18 Bahman Baktiari, “Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran,” in *The Institutionalization of Factional Politics* (Gainesville: University Press de Florida, 1996); Saeid Golkar, “Iran After Khamenei: Prospects for Political Change,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 26/1 (2019): 75–88.
- 19 Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

- 20 Khamenei was also promoted to Ayatollah and referred to as the “Supreme leader of Muslims” see Encyclopaedia Iranica, “Constitution of the Islamic Republic.”
- 21 Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 22 Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 23 A.M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After* (London: Longman, 2003).
- 24 Yadullah Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism in Iran: An Intellectual History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 25 Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*.
- 26 Which operates independently of the elected government and holds monopoly of domestic radio and television services.
- 27 The Leader moreover nominates the members of the Expediency Council (*majma'e tashkhis-e maslahat-e nezam*), which sets overall policies for the regime. Created in 1988, it was designed to bypass the bickering between the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Guardian Council, which obstructed the law-making process. The idea of ‘expediency’ refers to the principle of *maslahat* (public interest) in Islamic jurisprudence, associated with the Sunni legal tradition until then. The Expediency Council has effectively become the supreme legislative authority in instances where the Parliament and the Guardian Council are unable to agree. This means that the interests of the regime can overrule the restrictions of the sharia, as defined by the Guardian Council. Although such conflicts with Islamic Law are seldom in practice, the possibility strengthens the scope of ‘absolute’ leadership.
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