



WHY THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC HAS SURVIVED

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In 11 February 2019, the Islamic Republic will celebrate forty years of political life in Iran. It has been the first experience of a modern Islamic State in the world. In other words, the rise of the Islamic Republic in Iran could be seen as the first political experience in institutionalisation of political Islam.

However, in the last two decades, several political unrests have highlighted that parts of the society, particularly new generations, are not in conformity with the Islamic Republic's main policies - both on the socio-economic and political levels. The student protests of 1999 and 2003, the "Green Movement" of 2009 and the late 2017 demonstrations, are examples of this inconformity. This underlines the importance of the generational shift in which the new generations are claimed to be far from the revolutionary ideologies which transformed the country from a monarchy to an Islamic Republic forty years ago.

Despite all the political turmoil, the Islamic Republic has managed to survive to date. Its hybrid political system can be identified as the most important reason behind its survival. In this short analysis, the peculiar hybridity of the Islamic Republic's political system will be examined. This hybridity allows the system to remain flexible in moments of crisis and to swing between authoritarianism and limited competition from time to time, depending on the ongoing political and social circumstances. In other words, this flexibility and hybridity has made the system more vigilant and adaptable to the continuous change of political demands, primarily coming from the bottom of society. This has also allowed the Islamic Republic to flex muscles and adopt repressive measures in times when society demonstrates signs of assertiveness, challenging the Revolutionary ideologies.

Here below this commentary will emphasise some key points about the hybridity of the Islamic Republic.



At first glance, Iran might fall into the category of theocratic regimes but, beyond appearances, it seems to be more mixed in nature. In fact, after the Revolution, the regime that emerged was the result of a compromise between the initial Islamist forces and the secular groups such as the nationalists and the leftists.

The ideal political model of ayatollah Khomeini, mainly outlined during his lectures in Najaf between 1969 and 1971, was that of a government in which the constitutional foundations were exclusively based on Shiite Islamic principles, with no presence of any Republican form. The pressure of secular-nationalists, liberals, moderate Islamists and the Marxists forced ayatollah Khomeini to reach a compromise, establishing the 'Islamic Republic'. The particular configuration of this political system, composed of institutional bodies which are the expression both of the Islamic and the Republican sides, emerged from this compromise.

It can be seen as a sort of cohabitation between two worlds: the Institute of the Supreme Leader, the Council of Guardians, the Assembly of Experts, the Expediency Discernment Council and the Judiciary represent the body of the Islamic State, while the President of the Republic and the Parliament constitute the heart of the Republic.

The Islamic part expresses God's will, as it is mainly appointed after an internal co-optation within the elite, whereas the Presidency of the Republic and the parliament are the mouthpiece of the popular will. However, on the strength of his charismatic power, ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in enhancing the Islamic part in the Constitution.

The Iranian system can be considered a hybrid system for two reasons. The first reason is linked to the fact that the regime is the result of a compromise between the religious and secular forces of the 1979 Revolution. It is a compromise that, after the

death of Khomeini in 1989, has been primarily expressed through the dual nature of the executive, consisting of the Supreme Leader, representing the religious elite in power, and the President of the Republic. The second reason is the way in which the regime, despite the prevailing authoritarian context, allows some limited, but particular, space for political competition.

Unlike other Middle Eastern regimes which hold electoral competitions (such as Egypt, Jordan or Morocco), elections in the Islamic Republic are related not only to the Parliament but also to governmental positions. The Islamic Republic is characterised by dual executive power which is shared, although not equally, between the Supreme Leader and the President of the Republic.

The presidency is subject to electoral competition. Thus, in this case, what is at stake is a monocratic governmental position. This creates a competition, not only among mid-level political elites (local notables, provinces or tribal representatives and supporters of special interests), but also national leaders who control some of the main political factions and institutions of the country. This competition among personalities and leaders has no equal in other Middle Eastern countries. These personalities are not the leaders of organised structures similar to political parties, nor are appointed by them, but rather they operate as representatives of the main components of the political regime.

Different kinds of plebiscitary systems exist. On one hand, there are systems where elections are meant to legitimise, apparently freely, the undisputed leader (such as Venezuela's former leader Hugo Chavez). On the other hand, there are partially multi-party systems, where the predominant party allows some freedom of action to other parties without the guarantee, however, of a genuine competition (eg, Russia and many Central Asian republics). In Iran, the



competition – within the limits permitted by the religious authorities such as the Council of Guardians – is effective, but it is not centred on parties.

The second feature of the competition in Iran is the particular mechanism of the pre-selection of candidates. If the population is perceived as particularly tense and hostile to the regime, then the Supreme Leader can choose, through the Council of Guardians, to adopt less strict criteria in the pre-selection stage. Thus allowing some moderate or reformist candidates – but always belonging to the Islamic entourage – to overcome this first barrier and act as a relief valve during and/or after the elections.

Included in this strategy are the elections of former President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and that of the current President, Hassan Rouhani, whose elections were crucial for the survival of the Islamic Republic. Otherwise, in the event that there was the need to exert a stronger political control, moderate or reformist candidates would already be vetoed by the Council of Guardians, leaving room for an internal competition among conservative forces. In this sense, the main competitive arena is represented by the election of the President of the Republic. Nevertheless, slated parliamentary elections should not be underestimated. The latter are still an indicator of the public moods and political interests of the country. The various parliamentary forces create the coalitions that express the balance of power within the system.^[1]

The genuineness of the competition is shown by at least two factors. It is shown firstly by the endorsement of a diverse set of social and political forces towards the various candidates. This demonstrates their anchorage to specific and real interests, making sure that the candidates are not just the expression of abstract or ideological positions, unhinged from social reality.

There is, therefore, a link between the intra-elite struggles and social conflicts. In this way, a connection between the institutional and the social arena is created, engaging a significant part of society in political competition – for instance, the confrontation between Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the election campaign in 2009 and the televised debate of the eight presidential candidates in 2013.^[2]

In addition, authenticity is demonstrated by significant developments that have characterised political communication, such as public debates with the dynamism and dialectical characteristics which are typical of consolidated representative democracies – for example, the Presidential elections of 2005 and 2009. In fully authoritarian systems, in fact, elections are not held or they are so strictly controlled that electoral fraud is made superfluous.

Another fundamental aspect of the Iranian regime is its asymmetrical responsiveness^[3] connected to policy changes, while it is not able to guarantee the same responsiveness in relation to significant changes in the polity.^[4] On the one hand, due to the first type of responsiveness, in certain political phases presidential elections can play an inclusive function, especially with respect to certain economic and social issues. On the other hand, when expectations and political demands focused on regime change remain unheard, they may threaten the political system. This can broadly happen in two ways: firstly, by raising expectations for change that, if frustrated, can create problems of political legitimacy, and second, by opening the door to possible changes that can trigger out-of-control dynamics of regime change.



[1] Other areas of the competition, in addition to the parliamentary and presidential elections, also concern the local level at least for large urban centres, most notably the city of Tehran. In some cases this competition, at the local level, rewarded non-Muslim candidates, such as the case of the Zoroastrian city councilman elected in Yazd. See Yazdi News, 27 Khordad 1392/2013, http://yazdinews.ir/SC.php?type=component_sections&id=1&t2=DT&sid=4367

[2] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAxfJmOHk4A> and Fars News: <http://www.farsnews.com/media.php?nn13920310000464>.

[3] The term responsiveness indicates the level of reactivity to the interests and demands of society by political institutions. In other words, this concept measures the correspondence of political outputs with political inputs.

[4] The term policy refers to the procedures and the contents through which the various public policies are decided, while polity refers to the organisational and institutional structure of a given political regime.