

The Relationship between the Centre and Periphery in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Implications of Change and Succession for the Country's Political Stability

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolving political landscape in Iran, particularly in the context of center-periphery dynamics and the anticipated post-Khamenei era. Rather than focusing solely on the activities of Masoud Pezeshkiyan, the article delves into the broader processes, promises, and conflicts that define the current political climate. It examines the conflicting groups within Iran, the ongoing struggle between reformists and conservatives, and how these dynamics are shaping the country's future, particularly as the nation approaches a possible transition of leadership after Ali Khamenei. The article uses center-periphery theory as a key framework to examine the concentration of power and resources in Tehran and other central regions, as opposed to the deprivation of peripheral regions. This theoretical approach helps to illustrate how these inequalities have fostered deep-seated tensions and social injustices that are exacerbated by the country's ethno-religious diversity. In the context of the post-Khamenei era, the article discusses how the possible succession of Mojtaba Khamenei, the Supreme Leader's son, could affect these dynamics. Mojtaba's growing influence within conservative circles raises significant concerns about the future of political reform and the potential for increased centralization of power. The article explores how this scenario could affect various ethnic groups and minorities, particularly those in the peripheral regions who have been historically marginalized. The discussion includes an examination of the promises made by different political factions, including reformists who advocate greater decentralization and inclusion of ethnic minorities, and conservatives who generally support the status quo of centralized control. The potential for these promises to be fulfilled—or not—under a new leadership is critically assessed. The article also considers the role of ethnic

minorities and marginalized groups in this political transition. It analyzes how these communities could either influence or be influenced by the changing power dynamics in a post-Khamenei Iran. The potential for these groups to play a more prominent role in the nation's political future is weighed against the challenges posed by deeply entrenched power structures and persistent ethnic and religious discrimination. Finally, this article provides a detailed examination of current political tensions in Iran, focusing on the implications of the center-periphery divide, the potential post-Khamenei transition, and the role of ethnic minorities in this evolving landscape. It highlights how the promises of political reform, the conflicts between competing factions, and the looming power shift could help shape Iran's future, particularly in terms of social justice and the inclusion of marginalized communities within the broader national framework.

Keywords

Iranian Politics, Centre-Periphery Dynamics, Post-Khamenei Era, Mojtaba Khamenei, Ethnic Minorities in Iran, Political Reform, Conservative vs. Reformist Conflict, Power Centralization, Social Justice in Iran, Marginalized Communities, Leadership Transition, Iranian Ethno-Religious Tensions, Masoud Pezeshkiyan, Political Promises, Political Succession in Iran

1. Introduction

Following the helicopter crash involving Ibrahim Raisi, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the electoral phase commenced with remarkable swiftness in Tehran. In a relatively short period of time, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, through the Guardian Council, permitted the candidacy of a reformist candidate from the left wing. This occurred in consideration of the fact that, since last year, the composition of the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Assembly of Experts has been closely aligned and coordinated with Ali Khamenei. A review of the data indicates that the majority of seats in the 12th term of the Islamic Consultative Assembly is held by a coalition known as Shana (Council of Revolutionary Forces), which has secured 58 seats. Subsequently, the reformists hold 40 seats. The People's Coalition of Revolutionary Forces (OMANA) occupies the third position, with 16 independent candidates, while the "Morning of Iran" front is in fourth place, with 11 independent candidates. The coalition with the fewest independent candidates in the parliament is that of the Unity Council of Islamic Revolutionary Forces, which has four candidates. A review of national surveys indicates a 4% decline in voter turnout following the announcement. In the second round of the ninth parliamentary elections, voter turnout in Tehran was approximately 24%, with approximately 1.2 million individuals casting their votes. In the second round of the elections in Tehran, the leading candidate was Bijan Nobaveh, who received approximately 491,799 votes. In comparison to the 12th term parliamentary

elections, this statistic indicates a notable decline, particularly when the election proceeded to the second round. A voter turnout of 8% was recorded in Tehran during the second round of the elections, with Bijan Nobaveh once again emerging as the leading candidate, having secured 271,094 votes (*Donya-ye-Eghtesad*, 2022).

In the second round of the ninth parliamentary elections, the leading candidate in Tehran received approximately 10% of the votes. However, when the total number of eligible voters in Tehran is considered, the percentage of votes cast for the leading candidate in the second round is reduced to 3%. During this period, voter turnout in the parliamentary elections fell below 50%, and in some cities, such as Tehran, it even dropped below 10%. This low turnout is indicative of a general lack of interest and engagement with the government and current political issues. Furthermore, the disqualification of numerous candidates and the manipulation of the Assembly of Experts elections demonstrated that the primary objective was to manage the succession crisis through organizational cleansing within the system, rather than to address the public's concerns and address existing shortcomings. In the Assembly of Experts, individuals with ties to Mesbah Yazdi, such as Mirbagheri, Mohammadi Araqi, Araqi, Tohidi, Shabestari, Namazi, and Dulabi, were elected. Notably, half of the new members are aligned with the radical conservative wing and Mesbah Yazdi's faction. In addition to the political factionalism between the Principlists and Reformists, and the broader schism between them, which contributed to the weakening of the Reformist movement or its shift towards the centre-right following Hassan Rouhani, a new division emerged within the country. While the traditional centre-periphery dichotomy, characterized by its tenets of Principlism and Reformism, retained its prominence, a geographical, ethnic and even sectarian centre-periphery discourse began to emerge. It became apparent that a redefinition of power dynamics at the middle and upper levels of the country was necessary. Pezeshkiyan was a product of this discourse, but over time, while maintaining some elements of this discourse, he increasingly aligned himself with the classic Centre-periphery discourse. This, in turn, prompted the radical Principlist faction to intervene in order to preserve both positions. The election of this candidate, regardless of the surrounding speculation, brought to the fore the issue of succession during this pivotal period in Iranian politics, and served to highlight the role of other marginalized groups (*Asr Iran*, 2024). In this power struggle, the emergence of a new force from the periphery to moderate the Centre could give rise to concerns among both radical nationalists and Islamic universalists. This situation gives rise to the question of whether the ruling authority will exploit this movement not merely as a tool, but in a more substantial manner. Furthermore, it gives rise to the question of whether the existing imbalance between the Centre and periphery will serve to exacerbate the situation in the future.

2. Statement of the Problem

In the 1970s, Immanuel Wallerstein, a prominent development theorist, introduced

a new concept and paradigm in development thought, known as the World-Systems Theory. Wallerstein, rejecting the bipolar system perspective, advanced the argument that the world is a more complex entity than can be adequately categorized as a system comprising just two poles: The Centre and the periphery. He posited that a considerable number of nations do not align neatly with the conventional notions of the Centre or periphery. Consequently, Wallerstein proposed a “three-pole system” comprising the Centre, the periphery, and the “semi-periphery” within the global system (Wallerstein, 1974). Wallerstein put forth the proposition that the contemporary world system necessitates the inclusion of a semi-peripheral section for two principal reasons:

A bipolar world system comprising a small, high-ranking section and a large, low-ranking section in opposition to each other could rapidly result in the collapse of the system. “*The principal political instrument to avert this crisis is to establish a ‘middle section’ that, rather than focusing on its inferior status relative to the upper section, compares its superior status to that of the lower section.*” (Wallerstein, 1974)

This enables capitalists to reallocate their investments from declining leading sectors in the Centre to growing sectors in the semi-periphery, thereby protecting themselves from the effects of repeated shifts in leading sector positions (Wallerstein, 1990).

Furthermore, semi-peripheral countries act as a buffer for core countries, preventing peripheral countries from perceiving the significant disparity between themselves and the core, thus preventing revolts. Wallerstein asserts that the absence of these sections would result in the rapid descent of the world system into a state of political and economic crisis. The stabilisers of the world system serve to prevent direct confrontation between the core and the periphery, thereby averting the system from becoming a dichotomy of weak and strong poles. Such a structure prevents the polarization of conflicts between the core and the periphery (Martinelli, 2005). They serve as vital connecting bridges and stabilizing forces within the global system. Although they are more autonomous than the periphery, they remain dependent on the core. Such entities frequently form alliances with the core and seek military support from them.

In light of this analytical framework, Wallerstein posits that the Third World should not disengage from its relationship with the West and the Western industrial system. Instead, it should maintain this relationship while ensuring that it does not become subject to Western colonialism and dependence. The tripolar space of international relations within domestic politics is analyzed by Martin Lipset. In his book *Political Man*, Lipset, a prominent theorist of democracy, sought to examine the classic notion that “the wealthier a country, the more likely it is to achieve democracy.” He emphasised the existence of a strong relationship between economic development and democracy, using data published by the United Nations. The theory put forth by Lipset to elucidate this relationship was founded upon a class-based explanation. He posits that economic development has a

beneficial impact on the lower, middle, and upper classes of society. The lower class, which possesses the social conditions conducive to political extremism, tends to espouse a broader and more reformist perspective on politics in conjunction with the realization of economic prosperity and the concomitant reduction of social distance.

The upper class, which perceives the ascendance of the lower classes as a menace, is more amenable to the extension of certain liberties to the lower class when it discerns the existence of adequate resources for redistribution within society (resources generated by economic growth).

In Lipset's analysis, economic development exerts the most substantial influence on the status of the middle class. As a consequence of their greater propensity to join voluntary political organizations, members of the middle class create a force of solidarity that serves to balance state power and facilitate increased political participation among citizens. Lipset posits that a sizable middle class serves to mitigate societal conflict by rewarding moderate and democratic parties and punishing extremist ones (Martinelli, 1990).

Since the formation of the Constitutional Movement, which marks the beginning of the modern era of Iranian history, three distinct political currents have emerged in Iranian politics.

The "Reformist" current, which was known as the "Democrats," sought radical reforms to the political and social structures of Qajar-era Iran and had a modernist orientation under the leadership of Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh.

The "Traditionalist" current, which adopted the name "Proponents of the Constitutional Monarchy," opposed constitutionalism and any significant transformation of Iranian society. This current espoused a nationalist orientation and was led by Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri.

The "Moderate" current, also known as the "Moderates," sought to reconcile tradition with modernity. They endorsed constitutionalism but held the view that "Western knowledge should be introduced to the East in a digestible form" or, as Allameh Dehkhoda proposed, "adopting cultural civilization while preserving Iranian culture." These were the selective thinkers who neither wholly accepted nor entirely rejected the West and tradition. In contrast to the traditionalists, they did not perceive the entirety of the West as a threat to be rejected. Similarly, they did not view the entirety of the West as inherently positive and to be embraced unreservedly, as the Democrats did. The Moderates based their principle on the concept of "selection and integration."

The immaturity of Iranian thinkers and politicians, coupled with the interference of central powers in the global system, resulted in the failure of the first experience of political modernity in Iran (constitutionalism) in practice. This led to an outcome that was contrary to its initial intention, namely the authoritarian modernism of Reza Shah. Subsequently, these three currents have persisted in Iranian politics, exhibiting fluctuations in influence. At times, the Reformist current has held power, and at other times, the Traditionalist current has

done so. In this context, it can be argued that the eclipse of the moderate current has contributed to the fluctuations observed in the Iranian political experience in contemporary times, due to the monopolization of power by the two reformist and traditionalist currents. This event occurred during the Constitutional era, when the Moderate current was subjected to significant pressure from both the Traditionalist and Reformist currents. This pressure culminated in armed attacks and the assassination of Moderate figures, such as Abdullah Behbahani, by the Reformists, who were operating under the name “Democratic Party.” The loss of these extremist actions was suffered by all three political currents at the time, leading to the rise of Reza Khan. Not only did Khan not believe in constitutionalism, but he also became the hope and aspiration of Iranians after a decade of political and economic turmoil in Iranian society (1911). Therefore, the “eclipse or blossoming of moderation” can be considered the Achilles’ heel of the Iranian political sphere.

In the context of the third millennium, which is characterized by the proliferation of information and communication technologies, the global system can be conceptualized as comprising three distinct categories: The Centre, the periphery, and the semi-periphery. Each of these three categories of countries possesses an independent identity and defined borders relative to one another. However, the continued existence of these countries is contingent upon the maintenance of political and economic ties. The domestic manifestation of these three categories of countries in the global system in Iranian society is evidenced by the existence of three distinct currents. These can be further subdivided into three categories: principlist, moderate, and reformist. The three currents possess distinct political identities, yet their organic ties within the Iranian political system can mitigate political turbulence and enhance the system’s equilibrium. If we consider Iranian political society to be comprised of three categories—the center, periphery, and semi-periphery—we can identify the Principlists as the center, the Reformists as the periphery, and the Moderates as the semi-periphery of Iranian politics by examining the distribution of power. In this interpretation, the Principlists are the most powerful, the Reformists are the least powerful, and the Moderates occupy a position somewhere between these two extremes. A review of social realities indicates that the Principlists possess a high potential for power with a relatively limited social base, the Reformists have a low power potential with a broad social base, and the Moderates have a medium power potential with a social base that is higher than that of the Principlists but lower than that of the Reformists. Therefore, the Principlists occupy the position of the Centre in the Iranian political system, the Reformists the position of the periphery, and the Moderates the position of the semi-periphery (in terms of power acquisition and benefit potential).

In light of the fact that these three political currents constitute an integral part of the Iranian political system, it is imperative to delineate the distinctive characteristics of the system itself. This entails establishing the independent identity and

mutual interaction of the aforementioned three political currents. It is not feasible to envisage a political current existing in isolation within a system, distinct from other political currents, without taking into accounts the position of other political currents and their potential and actual role. Conversely, the future of any given political current within the system is not predetermined. In the system, there is a hierarchy of political positions, with each political current occupying a specific level depending on its power status.

Consequently, the Principlist current has considerable influence, is highly structured, and is situated in close proximity to the centers of hard power. A portion of their power is derived from exerting pressure on the peripheral reformist faction. The Reformist Current is oriented towards areas that offer less potential for power acquisition. Reformists' emphasis on the participatory aspects of the system resulted in a relatively low return on investment in terms of power. The absence of robust economic and political foundations renders them susceptible to instability and weakness in their power structure. The Moderate current is neither aligned with the principlists, who possess power and are situated in proximity to the centers of power, nor with the Reformists, who are devoid of power. It lacks an extensive social support base that characterizes the Reformists and a limited social support base that characterizes the principlists.

It is important to recognize that power structures are inherently unbalanced and unequal. Those, belonging to the Principlist current who are aware of Talcott Parsons' cybernetic hierarchy, will realize that maintaining their position cannot be achieved solely through the use of hard power. Similarly, those belonging to the Reformist Current must understand that elevating themselves within the power structure cannot be achieved with only soft power. The analysis of the world system reveals that the hierarchical structure of power is unequal; however, this structure is not static. Ascending and descent are inherent in the structure.

However, the crucial element in this configuration is the moderate current, which ensures the dynamism of the tripartite power structure. In the event of a crisis of credibility affecting elements of the "Principlist Centre, there is a destination and refuge in the form of moderation in the semi-periphery, which shares principlist characteristics. This ensures that the departure of those Principlists from the Principlist center does not result in complete discredit among their peers. Similarly, the Reformist periphery has the opportunity to join the moderate semi-periphery, thereby increasing its proximity to positions of power and benefiting from the advantages associated with such a position. Consequently, the Moderate semi-periphery can be regarded as the "shield of principlism and the wing of Reformism". The concept of moderation allows those with reformist ideologies to pursue power acquisition while providing a safeguard for those with principlist beliefs to prevent them from adopting reformist tenets. Some reformists may be able to retain their social bases while simultaneously enjoying political power within a moderate semi-periphery. Conversely, principlists may be able to expand

their social base without compromising their positions of authority. Thus, the Moderate semi-periphery offers opportunities to both the Principlist center and the Reformist periphery.

However, a moderate semi-periphery serves as a mechanism for the political system to prevent crises through its capacity for mediation and buffering. The Moderate semi-periphery acts as a buffer for the Principlist center, preventing the Reformist periphery from directly confronting the Principlist center, and preventing the political system from polarizing into two distinct poles: a powerful principlist center and a powerless Reformist periphery. This middle section of the political system can serve as a source of optimism for the reformist periphery, preventing a potential slide from collapsing by mitigating political confrontations. In this way, a system is created in which the social power gap is not unsolvable and the ladder of power, despite its unequal nature, will be meaningful to all. The Moderate semi-periphery serves as a connecting bridge and stabilizing force within the political system.

In the current situation, beyond this dichotomy, the increasing spatial and social injustices in the peripheries and margins have gradually transformed the ideological dichotomy into a center-periphery dichotomy. Spatial injustice in Iran stems from two main factors: the natural, cultural, social, and economic conditions of each geographical location (the inherent characteristics of regions) and the political economy of space, including the decisions made by politicians and economic planners. The peripheral regions, consisting of 16 provinces, and the central regions, consisting of 14 provinces (including Alborz Province), form the spatial-political structure of Iran. Approximately 50% of the country's area and 50.7% of its population are located in the peripheral regions, indicating that 50% of the country's development should be concentrated in the peripheral regions in order to maintain regional balance within Iran's spatial structure. However, the concentration of resources and services in the center has led to the marginalization and deprivation of certain provinces. This issue is not limited to geographical discrimination; other factors such as cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences can also be evaluated within this framework (Dadashpour & Shojaei, 2022). Mohammad Reza Nikfar, in his interview with Babak Mina, states:

“A few decades ago, roughly until the late 1970s, there were a number of theories that claimed to fully explain the center-periphery divide, both globally and regionally and nationally. Today, these grand theories have been reduced to points to be considered. What can be learned from them is to focus on important factors, although none of them alone can explain everything. From this perspective, we can say that none of the dominant theories of growth were completely wrong, but they were completely wrong in claiming to be able to fully understand and explain the issues”. (Nikfar, 2024)

The Iranian Revolution was significant in debunking the grand theories; it was not a revolution that arose from a single primary contradiction, nor was that contradiction the only explanation for its emergence, course, and fate. It seemed that

the periphery rose up against the center, which was one aspect of the revolution. The center-periphery split also played a role within the revolution: the split between the upper and lower echelons within the center itself. When we talk about the center, we mean both the geographical center and the central social strata. The 1979 revolution seemed to be several revolutions in one, with different currents working together, trying to outdo each other until one took a decisive role. The revolution was an eruption of political, social and cultural resentments and envy, and it failed because it did not result in a distribution of power and opportunities that would have brought a significant degree of satisfaction and reconciliation. The resentments and envy have accumulated, taking on new layers, and are now balanced in a way that represents an explosive accumulation of pressure.

The subjugation under Islamic capitalism is a continuation of the subjugation under capitalism that emerged during the era of the Shah. The Islamic Republic has plowed the field of social relations in Iran, creating social mobility, failing to meet expectations and promoting a certain class as a privileged layer based on the criterion of being “in” or “out”. Describing discrimination in Iran solely through the center-periphery model fails to see the whole reality. Iranian society is fragmented. A fragment of the whole may suffer from discrimination because of its marginal existence, but within that fragment, there may still be a privileged layer and a deprived layer.

The fragmentation of Iranian society is related to the history of the center-periphery relationship, the preferential system of capitalism, the pronounced discriminations of the system of Velayat-e Faqih, and the social mobility that began in the late 1960s and was intensified by the revolution. In the process of social mobility, a group of people moves from one social sector to another, acquiring certain qualities of the new sector but not fully integrating into it. Such mechanisms lead to the fragmentation of each sector. The corresponding psychology and ethics of this fragmentation, with its privileges and simultaneous deprivations, is characterized by strong hatred, jealousy and depression. People are running but not getting anywhere, colliding with each other, lashing out, and ultimately losing their energy.

We are faced with a series of questions. We call this complex the problem of fragmentation. The problem has layers. A layer is an abstract concept that may not be visible. It potentially explains the prioritization of one set of issues over another. When we talk about economic infrastructure, we do not mean that there is something physically present, like the foundation of a building, with a complete and self-contained representation. It is not like that. Its manifestation appears in different things, from the purely economic to the purely cultural.

Social movements in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution have typically taken the form of revolts from the periphery against the center, often led from the margins. Although social issues and freedom have become key aspects of these movements, after the Green Movement in Iran, we encounter a deep discontent

in civil movements (Hasanzadeh, 2024).

This dissatisfaction, although spread throughout the country, has also led to internal divisions within the system. The protests of the Mahsa Amini Movement or “Women, Life, Freedom”, the movements in Azerbaijan around football or Lake Urmia, and the protests against the water crisis among the Arabs of Khuzestan, all show the deep rifts in terms of minimal overlaps. In addition to these discriminations and protests, the emergence of factions representing Turks and Kurds in the parliament, and the distancing of Arabs, Baluchis, and to some extent Sunnis from the center, indicate an effort within the center-periphery nature of the system that is slightly different from the center-periphery nature of the lower class. This difference is oriented either toward distancing from the center or toward reconciliation with it. Masoud Pezeshkiyan, given his pre-election discourse on Turks, Kurds and Sunnis, was one of the government’s agents in line with this center-periphery discourse.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the political and socio-economic dynamics surrounding the centre-periphery relationship in Iran, with a specific focus on the role of Masoud Pezeshkiyan. The research is focused on elucidating the manner in which power dynamics, ethnic identities and ideological factors exert a pivotal influence on the configuration of the political landscape in Iran. This qualitative approach is selected to facilitate an in-depth examination of the intricate and multifaceted aspects inherent to the political challenges and economic disparities encountered by Azerbaijani Turks and other ethnic minorities in Iran. It aims to elucidate the manner in which these elements interact with the broader power structure.

3.1. Data Collection

The research is based on the analysis of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consulted include official statements, speeches, and policy documents pertaining to Pezeshkiyan’s political activities. These were obtained from public records and archives of Iranian government publications. Secondary sources include academic articles, books, and media reports that provide contextualization and analysis of the broader Centre-periphery dynamics in Iran. To contextualize the analysis within the context of power, ethnic, and ideological dynamics in Iran, historical and sociopolitical data were gathered from reputable sources.

3.2. Data Analysis

The data were subjected to a thematic analysis, with the objective of identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across the collected sources. This method permitted the categorization of data into principal themes, including economic inequality, ethnic rights, political struggles and the impact of centralized power

on peripheral regions. The analysis focused on a comparative approach, examining Pezeshkiyan's political efforts alongside the outcomes of local elections in Iran. In particular, it aimed to elucidate the role of ethnic and ideological factors in shaping electoral outcomes, and to contextualize these outcomes within the broader power dynamics of the Iranian political system. By analyzing the results and trends observed in various local elections, the study provides insights into the manner in which the political landscape in Iran is influenced by, and in turn influences, the ethnic and ideological composition of the electorate.

This approach offers a comprehensive insight into the intricacies of Pezeshkiyan's political strategies and their alignment or divergence from the broader trends observed in Iran's electoral processes, particularly in the context of local elections where ethnic identities and local issues play a pivotal role.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

In light of the sensitive nature of the topic, particularly with regard to ethnic rights, political struggles and sectarian dynamics, all sources were subjected to a process of review with a view to maintaining academic integrity and impartiality. The research was conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards in the treatment of all sources, ensuring that the analysis was objective and respectful of the subjects involved.

The study was constrained by a number of significant limitations, primarily due to the challenging environment for conducting research in Iran. One of the most significant challenges is ensuring the reliability of the data. Official government data are frequently not to be relied upon, as they can be manipulated or altered to align with the state's narrative. This presents a significant obstacle to obtaining accurate and impartial information. Moreover, the collection of data independently is not only challenging but also carries a significant risk due to the high level of state surveillance and the dangers associated with conducting unauthorized research. In some instances, data are accessible solely through unofficial channels, where they may be sold, thereby raising questions about their veracity and dependability. The security concerns in Iran also restrict the scope of data collection, as researchers must navigate a landscape where their safety could be at risk. Consequently, the findings of this study must be interpreted with caution, acknowledging the potential biases and inaccuracies in the available data. Despite these challenges, the study strives to provide as accurate and comprehensive an analysis as possible, given the constraints.

4. Who Is Mirbagheri?

Mohammad Mehdi Mirbagheri is a name frequently mentioned among the candidates in the 14th presidential election and widely discussed. In the days preceding the election, some of Mirbagheri's supporters on social media proposed that he run for the presidency. However, on 4 June, his office issued a statement urging restraint in continuing these invitations and calling for the search for "faithful and

revolutionary” candidates among the younger generation of revolutionary elites. This search was to be based on “the revolutionary and ethical approach of Martyr Raisi” and the establishment of a “revolutionary government.” The statement highlighted that, as a member of the Islamic Revolution Front, Mirbagheri endorses the candidacy of revolutionary figures who espouse ambitious objectives and possess an understanding of the complexities inherent in nation-state management (Azar, 2024).

Mohammad Mehdi Mirbagheri was a supporter of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In the 2013 presidential election, he expressed support for Saeed Jalili and was also one of Jalili’s principal supporters during that period. In the course of the electoral campaign, supporters of Masoud Pezeshkiyan appealed to Mirbagheri’s views with a view to persuading voters to cast their ballots, and in particular to secure a majority in the second round of voting. They warned that the views espoused by Jalili were similar to those of Mirbagheri, and that if the electorate did not exercise its franchise, the future of the country would be bleak. The election results and the approximately 10% increase in participation in the second round demonstrated the efficacy of the strategy of choosing between the two least preferable options, which has been described as a choice between “the worst choice” or the lesser of two evils. Pezeshkian’s election and media team effectively utilized this propaganda space. Mohammad Mehdi Mirbagheri is regarded as the spiritual father of the Paydar Front and a follower of Mesbah Yazdi’s ideology. Some commentators have even drawn parallels between him and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda. There is a paucity of information available regarding this 63-year-old cleric, with only general details about his date of birth and religious education being accessible (Aftab News, 2018).

The most significant source of information regarding Mirbagheri is a propaganda poster created for the 2015 Assembly of Experts election. Mohammad Mehdi Mirbagheri’s parents relocated to Qom due to their affinity for the Ahl al-Bayt (Family of Purity). He was born in this religious city in 1961. Upon completion of his secondary education, he commenced his religious studies in 1975. From 1981 onwards, he studied jurisprudence under Musa Shobeyri Zanjani and principles of jurisprudence under Kazem Haeri and Hossein Vahid Khorasani. He was also taught by Mirza Javad Tabrizi, Mohammad Taqi Behjat, Hasan Hasanzadeh Amoli, and Abdullah Jawadi Amoli. Notwithstanding his renowned instructors, he was most profoundly influenced by two others. He attended philosophy and logic classes taught by Mesbah Yazdi and benefited from the fundamental theories of Muniruddin Hosseini Hashemi on “applied philosophy,” “methodology of religious sciences and philosophy,” and “principles of jurisprudential ruling,” which informed his thoughts on Islamic government and the guardianship of the jurist. In addition to his studies, he taught basic and intermediate religious courses between 1980 and 1990. He has been teaching advanced jurisprudence and advanced principles of jurisprudence since 1993, a position he continues to hold. Mirbagheri is regarded as one of the country’s leading

propagandists and participated in the television programme “Samte Khoda” (Towards God) for a period of two years. It is reported that during his youth, he was politically active during the Pahlavi government and participated in the Iran-Iraq War. However, the precise details of his involvement, including the year, region, and duration of his participation, remain uncertain. Following the revolution, he engaged in awareness activities against “secular and anti-revolutionary movements” and in support of “movements loyal to values and the guardianship of the jurist.” Since 2000, he has served as the head of the Islamic Sciences Academy and as a member of the board of trustees for several revolutionary organisations and religious schools. He was elected to the Assembly of Experts from the Alborz region in 2015 and from the Semnan region in December 2023.

Mohammad Mehdi Mirbaqeri, the head of the Qom Islamic Sciences Academy, is one of the leading theorists regarding the relationship between science and religion. His speeches and writings indicate that he distinguishes between religious and non-religious sciences and is a staunch proponent of Islamising universities and expanding the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist. Mirbaqeri asserts that it is imperative to develop indigenous interpretations of all concepts devoid of Islamic foundations. “These objectives must be pursued with scientific jihad. The initial step is the indigenization of science and the optimal utilization of knowledge. This will facilitate the attainment of scientific excellence and a leading position in scientific production, as well as the achievement of scientific self-sufficiency and independence.” (Najmi, 2024)

He endorses the concept of “purification” and, in 2010, articulated the following: “As a result of the purification, cleansing, and high purity that occurs within the Islamic Revolution, the internal turmoil within the Islamic Revolution will decrease. This will facilitate the establishment of a social system of Guardianship.”

Mirbaqeri is an advocate for stringent limitations on internet usage, perceiving it as a “Satanic trap.” It is a fallacy to assume that when the Imam Mahdi (the Twelfth Imam of the Shiites) arrives, he will utilise modern technology such as mobile phones, satellites and the internet. Such things are, in fact, traps set by Satan; when the light of truth spreads throughout the world, these deceptive devices will be gathered up and destroyed (Mirbaqeri, 2024a).

His perspectives on the “apocalypse” and the “front of truth and falsehood” are evident in his discourses during the initial ten days of Muharram in 2017 at the Faiziyeh school in Qom. He stated, “We adhere to the tenet of peace, yet we recognize that a durable peace can only be achieved through a protracted struggle and a dedicated commitment to jihad.” “It is only through continuous jihad and the elimination of falsehood that lasting peace can be achieved.” (Mirbaqeri, 2024a) Furthermore, he stated that it is simplistic and inadequate to claim that they are proponents of peace. He asserted that peace can only be achieved through the elimination of dissension and the pursuit of a prolonged conflict, emphasizing the

necessity for unwavering commitment and no concessions. In the structure of the Islamic government, according to his view, there is minimal state intervention and maximal intervention by the “Guardianship,” which in practice serves as the executor of the orders of the Guardianship of the Jurist. Consequently, he does not consider the leadership of the Assembly of Experts to possess the requisite authority to oversee the activities of the Assembly. Instead, he advocates for the Assembly to provide support to the leadership, with the objective of activating the functions of the Assembly and working towards the establishment of the discourse of the Guardianship of the Jurist, as well as the implementation of the demands of the leadership. One of the most frequently discussed views regarding Molla Jalaleddin Rumi is his statement at the Faiziyeh school in Qom in 2009, in which he asserted that the world cannot be governed by Rumi’s mysticism. He further questioned the rationale behind the praise heaped upon this book by certain eminent scholars. The book explicitly opposes Ali; peace be upon him. The text in question considers the father of Ali, peace be upon him, to be a polytheist. He asserted that they are aligned with the adversarial forces in this cultural conflict and represent an interpretation of Islam that is compatible with the values and norms of the United States. It is unlikely that any government will emerge from this mysticism. The mysticism of Imam Khomeini is a mysticism born from government and war.

4.1. Mirbaqeri’s Political Positions

There are numerous similarities between the ideas of Mohammad Mehdi Mirbaqeri and Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi. However, while Mesbah Yazdi established the “Imam Khomeini Institute” and trained students who subsequently held various executive and legislative roles, the Islamic Sciences Academy was primarily focused on theoretical advancement and projects related to the Islamization of sciences. Mirbaqeri holds the view that Mesbah Yazdi played a pivotal role in “shielding the boundaries of Islamic culture” and preventing the erasure of clear demarcations within Islamic culture. He also considers Mesbah Yazdi to have been highly effective in training students. Following Mesbah Yazdi’s demise in December 2020, the Paydari Front, a group identified with radical conservative ideology, shifted its focus towards Mirbaqeri, regarding him as the successor to Mesbah Yazdi in the political sphere. His political activities and statements during the parliamentary and presidential elections held last year and this year, respectively, have attracted greater attention and elicited responses on social media. Mirbaqeri, in his capacity as a proponent of Saeed Jalili, exhorted the populace to cast their ballots for a political entity that does not espouse the advancement of development, but rather, advocates for the pursuit of independence and the advancement of Islamic-Iranian development, as well as the establishment of a novel global order predicated on the emergence of new power centres, rather than the continued dominance of Western powers. In his view, the Iranian Islamic Revolution has fostered global self-awareness, become a rival to the East and West,

precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union, and brought Western civilisation to the brink of collapse. He posits that the current state and nation system will collapse within the next ten years. On 23 July 2023, in Qom, during the closing session of the “Ibrahim Nation” series of meetings held at the Astane Quds Razavi Cultural Centre, Mirbaqeri stated: “The difficulties faced by our people, including rising prices and shortages, are not widely known. Similarly, the challenges associated with turning away from contemporary global culture and establishing a new Islamic culture on a global scale, as well as taking a firm Islamic stance against the United States and the Soviet Union, are not widely understood. Our people have chosen this path and are proud of it, despite the difficulties, sacrifices, and hunger that it entails.” These statements regarding the “choice of hunger” have given rise to a great deal of debate. In response to Mirbaqeri’s remarks, political analyst Abbas Abdi wrote, “If you observe a trace of hunger and hardship on this individual’s face, it would be beneficial to inform the public.” Such statements are typically the domain of those who enjoy a life of abundance and prosperity; those who experience hunger and hardship are unlikely to contemplate such matters. Social media users wrote that the result of empty and costly slogans like those espoused by Mirbaqeri is poverty, misery, and widespread disbelief in God and the Prophet among the new generation. They called on him to abandon his “delusions and stubbornness,” noting that the Islamic Republic of Iran has become a “lesson” to the world due to the quality of its governance. They argued that this governance has resulted in the destruction of both welfare and the people’s spirituality (Mirbaqeri, 2024b).

Media activist Habib Ramazankhani posits that the media bears the primary responsibility for promoting and disseminating Mirbaqeri’s ideas and perspectives. Ramazankhani characterises Mirbaqeri’s ideas as “backward” and “Talibanism of Iran” and states that labelling a critic as “Taliban” does not imply a similar approach to that of the Taliban, such as measuring beards and enforcing the wearing of burqas on women. In contrast, the Taliban represents a symbol of backwardness and a radical interpretation of religion. This affiliation is not a distant possibility given this approach (Azar, 2024).

4.2. Mirbaqeri’s Leadership Succession

During the Iranian presidential elections, Mohammad Mehdi Mirbaqeri was frequently identified as a potential candidate. Despite invitations from members of the Assembly of Experts, including Alireza Arafai and Mohsen Araki, to run for the presidency, he declined the offer. Some political activists have suggested that this decision indicates that Mirbaqeri views himself as being positioned for a role higher than that of the presidency. Those who oppose Saeed Jalili have alleged that the Paydari Front’s objective is to transfer the ultimate stronghold, the succession of Ali Khamenei, to Mirbaqeri following the attainment of the presidency. They therefore urged the electorate to vote for Masoud Pezeshkiyan in order to prevent this scenario from materialising. Some experts view Mirbaqeri and the Paydari

Front as integral components of the existing political system. In his writings, Babak Khattī asserts that Mirbaqeri and Mesbah Yazdi have served the hard power core of the Islamic Republic over the course of many years, through their advocacy of the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist. Furthermore, Khattī does not believe that Mirbaqeri's and Jalili's positions were adopted with the intention of destabilising the system. Mirbaqeri is renowned for his political stance against Western modernisation and his advocacy for Islamic-Iranian development. He posits that the Iranian Islamic Revolution has had a profound impact on the world, and that Western civilisation is on the brink of collapse. Mirbaqeri's positions have been subjected to harsh criticism on various social media platforms, with his speeches perceived as a means of deflecting attention from economic and political concerns. Such critics also posit that Mirbaqeri's regressive views evoke those of the Taliban (*Tasnim News Agency, 2024*).

4.3. Mojtaba Khamenei, Pezeshkiyan and Leadership Preparation

Mojtaba Khamenei was born on 17 September 1968, in Mashhad, and is the second son of Ali Hosseini Khamenei. He is recognised as one of the most secretive and influential figures in Iran. However, despite his prominence, little information is available about Mojtaba Khamenei. This article aims to provide an overview of his background and context. According to official Iranian sources, following the completion of his secondary education at Alavi School, Mojtaba Khamenei proceeded to attend the religious seminary in Qom. During this period, he engaged in studies under the tutelage of distinguished scholars, including Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and Lotfollah Safi Golpayegani. Information from sources close to the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) and security agencies indicates that Mojtaba Khamenei participated in the Iran-Iraq War. According to these reports, Mojtaba Khamenei was deployed to the frontlines at approximately 17 years of age, where he joined the Mohammad Rasulullah military group's Habib bin Mazaher battalion. Subsequently, several members of this battalion went on to become prominent figures in the Iranian intelligence and security apparatus, frequently associating with Mojtaba. These include individuals such as Alireza Panahian, Mehdi Taeb, Ali Fazli, and Hassan Mohaqqueq (*Veysi, 2024*).

As recalled by IRGC commanders, Mojtaba Khamenei participated in a number of operations, including Beit-ol-Moqaddas 2, 3, and 4, Mersad, and Valfajr 10. He requested that commanders refer to him as Hosseini. During the Mersad operation, he was primarily engaged in the gathering of intelligence for the benefit of the commanders (*Donya-ye-Eghtesad, 2022*). At that time, Ali Khamenei was not yet the Supreme Leader, and Mojtaba was not regarded as a potential future leader of the system. Consequently, IRGC commanders, including Ali Fazli, contemplated the possibility of his demise during the conflict. "The loss of Mojtaba's life would not be a significant issue; however, should he be captured, it would undoubtedly result in a considerable loss of propaganda value for our

side.” Mojtaba Khamenei’s secretive and influential nature has remained consistent from the wartime period to the present day. He would perform his prayers in a reserved manner, in the privacy of remote tents, avoiding the gaze of others, a practice that has persisted throughout his current status. Mojtaba Khamenei is the son-in-law of Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel. In 1997, following the completion of Zahra Haddad-Adel’s secondary education, Khamenei’s wife, Mansoureh Khojasteh Bagherzadeh, initiated contact with Zahra’s family to propose marriage. Haddad-Adel states that the engagement and wedding preparations proceeded in this manner. During the wedding ceremony, Mojtaba Khamenei was not attired in the traditional clerical dress. His father has stated that he was preparing to undertake studies in Qom and would subsequently adopt the clerical garb. The nuptials were conducted at Khamenei’s domicile, with the majority of attendees being members of the bride’s family. The union resulted in the birth of three children: two sons and a daughter (Veysi, 2024). Some rumours have been circulated about Mojtaba Khamenei, including the suggestion that his first child was born in London at a significant expense. However, Haddad-Adel has denied this, stating that the children were born in an ordinary hospital in Tehran.

For several years, Mojtaba Khamenei has been acknowledged as the principal advisor to his father and a prominent figure with considerable influence in political and security matters. It is thought that he played a significant role in the suppression of the “Green Movement” following the 2009 presidential elections. There is considerable debate within Iranian political circles as to whether Mojtaba is being groomed to become the country’s future leader. Only time will tell how this issue will evolve. During the wedding ceremony, Mojtaba was not attired in

the traditional clerical garb, which attracted the attention of his father. He commented, “Mojtaba is not a cleric; he aspires to pursue studies at Qom and subsequently become a cleric. It would be prudent to inform his daughter of this intention.” The wedding ceremony of Mojtaba and Zahra was held at the residence of the leader during Mohammad Khatami’s presidency, with the majority of guests belonging to the bride’s family. Among the officials in attendance were Mohammad Khatami, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, and Hadi Khamenei. Hashemi Rafsanjani curtailed his meeting with Abdollah Nouri and promptly departed from his office on Kushk Street for the leader’s residence (Burs News, 2009). The marriage has resulted in the birth of three children to date: two sons and a daughter. A number of rumours were circulated regarding the birth of their first child. These included the suggestion that, due to fertility issues, Mojtaba and Zahra, accompanied by a full protection and security team, including Said Emami (one of the main suspects in the serial killings), went to a hospital in London, where the child was born at a cost of over one million pounds. However, Haddad-Adel was unequivocal in his denial, stating: The child was born in an ordinary hospital in Tehran at a cost of 500,000 tomans. The attending physician was Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi, who had

previously served as Minister of Health. A review of the memoirs and narratives of security and Sepah (IRGC) officials indicates that, beginning around 1997/1998, Mojtaba gradually assumed the role of an informal aide and a pivotal figure in the handling of various tasks at the Supreme Leader's residence, a process that persists to the present (Najdi, 2024). In closed political systems, those who attain positions of authority are individuals who have demonstrated trustworthiness; the closer they are to the centre of power, the more trusted they become. Mojtaba Khamenei observed the fate of Ahmad Khomeini, despite the fact that Mojtaba's role in relation to Ali is more significant than that of Ahmad in relation to Ruhollah. For example, while Mansour Khamenei frequently spends time with his mother, Mojtaba is situated to his father's right, and his actions are now frequently considered by many to be part of a process of "training for leadership" (Najdi, 2024). Since the mid-1990s, those in proximity to the Leader's residence and numerous officials within the system have been aware of Mojtaba Khamenei's growing influence in political and security matters. Frequently accompanied by Sepah veterans and commanders, including those from the "Habib ibn Mazaher" battalion of the "Mohammad Rasulullah" division, who currently operate predominantly in the domains of security and election management. One of their initial projects was to oversee the 2005 elections, under the guidance of the Leader and, notably, his son Seyed Mojtaba. This resulted in the ascendance of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an almost unknown figure from Sepah Pasdaran (IRGC). In the aftermath of the election, Hashemi Rafsanjani experienced a political setback but chose to remain silent. In contrast, Mohammad Karroubi did not reserve his opinions and, following his famous nap, was the first to mention Mojtaba Khamenei's involvement in the election. In an open letter, elections and Ahmadinejad's rise to power were addressed, resulting in significant changes to the election results. In response, the Supreme Leader made the following observation: "He is not a son of an Agha; he is the Agha himself." It is possible that this response may be interpreted differently in the present context. For several years, Ali Khamenei has had alternative plans for this son, potentially viewing him as the next leader of the system. Four years after Karroubi's revelation, Mojtaba's name was brought to the fore once more in the context of the protests against the disputed 2009 presidential election results, in which Ahmadinejad was declared the winner. The demonstrators chanted, "Mojtaba, even if you die, you will never be Leader." During this period of significant political unrest, numerous reports emerged concerning Mojtaba's increasing involvement in the suppression of the Green Movement. These reports included allegations that Mojtaba had been holding private meetings with the leaders of the Green Movement. A review of the recollections of numerous responsible individuals indicates that Mojtaba had already engaged in political and security-related activities several years' prior, requesting reports from officials and institutions and influencing decision-making processes. To illustrate, on 21 January 1998, Akbar Nabavi, a member of the editorial board of Resalat newspaper, informed Hashemi Rafsanjani during a private meeting that: Agha Mojtaba requested that we present

an analysis of the situation at universities. Additionally, he exerts considerable influence within the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), whose directors are personally appointed by Khamenei. These individuals are acutely aware that in numerous instances, their counterpart and the individual who appointed them is his son. For instance, Mohammad Sarafraz, the former head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), states in his book that since 1997, Mojtaba has convened a group of information and security managers at the Leader's residence. This group is effectively regarded as a "state within a state," and its inaugural lesson was "a crisis every nine days" for Seyed Mohammad Khatami's government (BBC Persian, 2022).

Additionally, Abdul Ali Ali-Askari has frequently discussed direct and urgent telephone calls from Mojtaba. He recounts, "Before dawn, I received a call from Haji Agha Mojtaba, which surprised me. Upon my response, he articulated the news in a composed and straightforward manner, stating that Haj Qasem had been killed at Baghdad airport". (Rasouli, 2022) Senior Sepah officials have on numerous occasions discussed Mojtaba's unique role in providing support in matters pertaining to the military and security. For instance, in a document that was leaked from a meeting between Sepah commanders and Ali Khamenei, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of Sepah's aerospace forces, expressed gratitude to Mojtaba Khamenei for his invaluable assistance in financing Sepah's drone and missile programmes. Mojtaba's ascent up the power ladder is not solely attributable to his connections within the security apparatus. Since 2009, he has also invested a significant amount of time in Qom's religious seminaries, with the objective of securing the favour of the clergy. For several years, Iranian state media have referred to Mojtaba as an "Ayatollah" and have disseminated links for enrolling in his Fiqh classes. Nevertheless, no reports have been published to date concerning the number of his followers. Additionally, there have been occasional references to Ali Khamenei seeking counsel from the clergy in Qom regarding his son's Ijtihad and Marja status. For instance, in October 2010, a group of teachers and students from Qom and Najaf penned an open letter asserting that Khamenei's visit to Qom was intended to secure Ijtihad permissions from Marjas for Mojtaba. In the clerical and security apparatus of the Islamic Republic, there is a prevailing belief that the system must be maintained in its current state, and that any significant changes should be avoided. In this context, there has been a notable focus on the similarities between Mojtaba and his father. A particularly notable phrase that has been frequently reiterated in the memoirs and anecdotes recounted by officials within the system in recent times is: "Mojtaba is an exact replica of his father." For example, Mojtaba's brother-in-law, Farideddin Haddad Adel, has stated: "His views and perspectives are entirely aligned with those of the Leader, and we are confident and assured in this regard." (Didban Iran, 2023) Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Mojtaba exercises direct control over Ali Khamenei's financial empire. According to individuals with knowledge of the government's inner workings, at least 60% of Iran's economy is managed by conglomerates

under Ali Khamenei's control. These include entities such as the Mostazafan Foundation, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, and the Quds Shrine. To gain an understanding of the significance of these figures, it is illustrative to cite the 2016 financial report of the Mostazafan Foundation, which declared the foundation's total assets to be 56 trillion tomans (IRNA, 2017).

On the 9th of Esfand (Iranian calendar), Mahmoud Mohammadi Araqi, a member of the Assembly of Experts, revealed that there had been a discussion within the "three-member committee" of the Assembly regarding one of Ali Khamenei's sons, who he claimed was "of a high scholarly level." Although Mohammadi Araqi did not directly mention Mojtaba Khamenei by name, in recent years there has been extensive promotion of the claim that Mojtaba Khamenei is a "Mojtahed" and teaches advanced seminary courses—claims that are intended to justify his religious qualifications to hold the position of "Vali-e Faqih" (Supreme Leader). While Mohammadi Araqi asserted that Ali Khamenei has prohibited the mention of his son's name as a leadership candidate, there has been no public statement or document from Khamenei himself opposing his son's potential leadership. In 1980, Ruhollah Khomeini, in a letter to then President Abolhassan Banisadr, openly opposed the appointment of his son, Ahmad Khomeini, as Prime Minister, writing, "I do not intend for those associated with me to take on these responsibilities." Despite the public revelation of Mojtaba Khamenei's possible succession and the controversy surrounding it, both Mojtaba and his father, Ali Khamenei, have remained silent on the matter. Given that the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic comments on even the smallest issues in the country, the lack of denial regarding the reports of his son's potential leadership has drawn the ire of critics of the Islamic Republic. In August of last year, Mir Hossein Mousavi, the last Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic, who has been under house arrest since 2009, warned about the possibility of a hereditary leadership in Iran and wrote, "For thirteen years, there have been rumors of this conspiracy. If they are truly not pursuing it, why do they not deny such intentions even once?" Over the past decades, the Supreme Leader has gradually sidelined or silenced the first-generation figures of the Islamic Republic. He has not only left no rivals from that generation but also removed from the political arena relatively different figures who were seen as potential successors. In such a cleared-out landscape, the primary advantage of the possible leadership of Mojtaba Khamenei for his father is that it would greatly reassure him and his close circle about the fate of the Islamic Republic after the current leader. Aside from superficial similarities, it is likely that Khamenei and his associates, particularly senior military commanders, see the continuation of the current political and security situation more assured under the potential leadership of Mojtaba Khamenei than under anyone else. However, the biggest challenge to such a prospect is persuading public opinion and, more importantly, the political class in Iran. Many activists and even some former officials have warned that they would not tolerate Mojtaba Khamenei's

potential leadership or that such a choice would not be sustainable. On February 28, Mahmoud Mohammadi Araqi, a member of the Assembly of Experts, revealed that there had been a discussion within the Assembly's "three-member committee" about one of Ali Khamenei's sons, who he said was "of a high scholarly level".

Although Mohammadi Araqi did not directly mention Mojtaba Khamenei by name, in recent years there has been extensive promotion of the claim that Mojtaba Khamenei is a "mojtahed" and teaches advanced seminary courses-claims intended to justify his religious qualifications to hold the position of "Vali-e Faqih" (Supreme Leader). While Mohammadi Araqi claimed that Ali Khamenei had forbidden the mention of his son's name as a leadership candidate, there has been no public statement or document from Khamenei himself opposing his son's potential leadership.

In 1980, Ruhollah Khomeini openly opposed the appointment of his son, Ahmad Khomeini, as prime minister in a letter to then-President Abolhassan Banisadr, writing, "I do not intend that those associated with me should assume this responsibility. Despite the public revelation of Mojtaba Khamenei's possible succession and the controversy surrounding it, both Mojtaba and his father, Ali Khamenei, have remained silent on the matter. Given that the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic comments on even the smallest issues in the country, the lack of a denial regarding reports of his son's potential leadership has drawn the ire of critics of the Islamic Republic. Last August, Mir Hossein Mousavi, the last prime minister of the Islamic Republic who has been under house arrest since 2009, warned of the possibility of hereditary leadership in Iran, writing, "For thirteen years there have been rumors of this conspiracy. If they really are not pursuing it, why do they not deny such intentions even once?" (Mousavi, 2022). Over the past decades, the Supreme Leader has gradually sidelined or silenced the first generation of figures in the Islamic Republic. Not only has he left no rivals from that generation, but he has also removed from the political arena relatively different figures who were seen as potential successors. In such a cleared landscape, the main advantage of Mojtaba Khamenei's possible leadership for his father is that it would greatly reassure him and his close circle about the fate of the Islamic Republic after the current leader. Superficial similarities aside, it is likely that Khamenei and his associates, especially the senior military commanders, see the continuation of the current political and security situation as more secure under the potential leadership of Mojtaba Khamenei than under anyone else.

The biggest challenge to such a prospect, however, is convincing public opinion and, more importantly, the political class in Iran. Many activists and even some former officials have warned that they would not tolerate Khamenei's potential leadership or that such a choice would not be sustainable.

As the Jebhe-ye-Paydari (Stability Front) faction and Mirbaqeri gained power, Mojtaba Khamenei sought to weaken the hard-core power structure associated with Mirbaqeri and Mesbah Yazdi by developing a center-periphery discourse. He

attempted to reconcile Khamenei's version of Islam with the Islam of Azerbaijan in Iran, using an approach rooted in social discrimination to legitimize his authority by rallying new and revolutionary forces. These forces, which he considered revolutionary but had long been deprived of the regime's core sentiments, could potentially align their ideological and ethnic ties through this center-periphery discourse. Masoud Pezeshkian, one of the proponents of this discourse within the Islamic Republic, was seen as the most suitable person to satisfy both the reformists and prevent further radicalization within the conservative faction. He had influence among Turks and Kurds and maintained a positive view on the issue of religious minorities, although many of the promises made to the periphery remained unfulfilled after the elections.

5. The Core-Periphery Theory and Pezeshkiyan

One of the writers who provides a relatively suitable framework for understanding regional structure is John Friedman. In a departure from an exclusive focus on economic matters, he turns his attention to the interconnections between regional polarization, mutual influences and the development of theoretical frameworks. Friedman posits that every country comprises a central area and peripheral regions. This city system is a reality in which central regions develop and peripheral regions are defined based on their connections to the Centre. The central regions exert influence on their peripheries, imposing their dominance upon them.

As Brookfield remarks in his commentary on Friedmann's work, central regions are more innovative and form part of higher-level systems, which can yield positive results in regional development. Nevertheless, the attainment of these outcomes will be contingent upon the expeditious propagation of the central region's innovative impulses to the periphery, concomitant with a diminution in the reliance on the centre (Brookfield, 1975).

5.1. Friedmann's Model Is Founded upon the Following Principles

Firstly, the relationship between the Centre and the periphery can be conceptualized as a colonial relationship, whereby the emergence of a polarized structure is typically accompanied by the displacement of key production factors, such as foreign exchange and raw materials.

Secondly, as long as the periphery remains primarily engaged in the production of agricultural products and minerals, the trade relationship will be in favour of the centre.

Thirdly, the intensification of regional disparities gives rise to political pressures, which in turn facilitate the redirection of resources that were previously allocated to the centre, with the objective of achieving a per capita income in the periphery that is approximately equal to that of other regions within the country.

In such a framework, the question arises as to the mechanism by which the

development of peripheral regions may be either stimulated or halted. As in the growth pole theory, two opposing forces move from the centre to the periphery: one that is favourable for the development of the periphery and another that is unfavourable. The transfer of capital from the core to the periphery, the purchase of raw materials for industrial use, the designation of the periphery as a tourist destination, and the acquisition of peripheral products by the core can be regarded as favourable flows. Myrdal refers to this phenomenon as the “spread effect,” whereas Hirschman terms it the “trickle-down effect.” The operation of these two forces gives rise to the formation of new centres in the periphery. The second force, which is unfavourable for the development of the periphery, includes the outflow of labour and capital from the periphery to the centre, the inability of economic activities in the periphery to compete with central products, and the psychological effects and isolation that result from the backwardness of peripheral culture. Friedmann posits that the dissemination of more developed values and norms from the centre to the periphery is a crucial aspect of development. Myrdal refers to this force as the “backwash effect,” whereas Hirschman terms it the “polarization or attraction effect.” From the perspective of regional development, it is of great importance to maintain a relative equilibrium between these two forces. In the event of polarisation, the periphery will remain an underdeveloped region, wholly dependent on the centre. However, should the spread effect prevail, integration will occur, thereby creating a relatively unified spatial system, and the periphery will become obsolete. The greater the degree to which the centre relies on the products of the periphery for its own development, the more pronounced the spread effect will be (Friedmann, 1966). There is a divergence of opinion as to the mutual outcome between these two forces. Hirschman posits that the centre will inevitably have to address congestion, resolve supply shortages and expand its market. At this juncture, conscious and deliberate policies can play a pivotal role in strengthening the spread effect. However, Gunnar Myrdal is sceptical about this, arguing that without state intervention, this process will not reduce differences. Furthermore, if intervention is to occur, it must commence at the early stages of development (Hirschman, 1958).

5.2. A Critical Analysis of the Core-Periphery Theory

In his seminal article, “Growth Poles and the Critique of Core Theories in Regional Planning,” Durant offers a compelling evaluation of this theory:

Of the theories presented for critique, the core-periphery concept, as described by Friedman and discussed by others, offers the most promising perspective. By encompassing the entirety of the economic landscape of a given region, rather than focusing on specific points or areas, the identification of sub-regions within the periphery, based on the issues they are facing, represents a valuable step forward. The model’s capacity to align with observed economic development patterns over time renders it a compelling theory of spatial development. Furthermore, incorporating non-economic variables into this field of study represents a

promising avenue of inquiry. Nevertheless, the specific value of the core-periphery model in specific cases remains constrained by the relative development of the system. However, as it considers the system as a whole, rather than separating its parts for individual study, it is a valuable tool for regional planning. It is important to acknowledge that, as with numerous other regional planning theories, this places undue emphasis on the external and urban aspects of regional production. It is evident that while shifts from the periphery to the Centre and the ensuing interactions and conflicts may provide impetus for development in the periphery, in the absence of structural changes, the periphery will lack the capacity to respond to and react to external stimuli. The city's role as a driver of innovation and development will be reinforced by accounting for the costs associated with change, which will facilitate the transformation of the periphery and integration of spatial development.

5.3. The Position of Turks in Iran within the Core-Periphery Theory

Iran is a country with a diverse ethnic population distributed across its historical and geographical boundaries. One such ethnic group is the Turkish people. The Turks, who constitute a significant proportion of Iran's ethnic population, are predominantly concentrated in the country's northwestern regions, particularly in the Azerbaijani provinces. The Turks in Iran have played a significant role in the country's social and political life, both historically and culturally.

The Core-Periphery Theory offers a valuable framework for analyzing the social and economic development processes in Iran. In accordance with this theory, the central regions (such as Tehran and other major cities) are more developed economically, politically, and culturally, whereas the peripheral regions (which are often inhabited by ethnic minorities) are less developed in comparison to the Centre. This disparity is associated with the concentration of economic resources and political power in the central regions.

The Turks in Iran serve as a prototypical illustration of the core-periphery relationship. The exploitation of resources in peripheral regions for the development of central regions constrains the potential for growth and development in the periphery. In this context, the Turkish population residing in the Azerbaijani provinces is experiencing a lag in economic and social development in comparison to the central regions. The issue of unemployment, the quality of education and the provision of healthcare services in the regions where Turks live, are of greater concern than in the central regions.

Furthermore, the marginalization of the Turks is evidenced by the erosion of their national identity and cultural preservation. The language and culture of the Turks have been subjected to a certain degree of pressure from the central government of Iran. Nevertheless, the Turks have pursued a variety of avenues to safeguard and advance their linguistic and cultural heritage, undertaking a range of initiatives in this regard.

In recent years, a number of development projects have been initiated with the objective of reducing the existing asymmetry between the central and peripheral regions of Iran. Nevertheless, the extent to which these projects have been successful in improving the social and economic conditions of the Turks remains a topic of contention. The Turks continue to face challenges in seeking greater influence in Iran's social and political spheres, as well as in protecting their rights.

Consequently, the position of the Turks within the context of the Core-Periphery Theory in Iran represents a significant aspect of the country's social and economic structure. It is imperative that the development of the regions where the Turks reside and the safeguarding of their cultural rights be integral components of Iran's comprehensive development strategy. It is imperative that the aforementioned steps are taken, not only for the benefit of the Turks, but also to ensure the rights and welfare of all ethnic groups.

5.4. Pezeshkian and the Expansion of Core-Periphery Theory in Iranian Society

Pezeshkian was particularly well-acquainted with the Iranian Kurdish community and even possessed knowledge of the Kurdish language. This familiarity, coupled with his profound comprehension of Azerbaijani society, positioned him as a promising candidate to extend the core-periphery theory within Iranian society. His discourses during his tenure as a parliamentary representative and his endeavors to establish a faction for Iranian Turks can be contextualized within this framework. Moreover, despite his unwavering allegiance to Ali Khamenei and his position within the reformist spectrum, these factors rendered him an optimal choice for addressing this matter.

Pezeshkian was not aligned with any particular political faction, and it is noteworthy that there were few instances of criticism or objections to his work. The support of people from Azerbaijan and other deprived regions distant from the Centre, combined with his acceptance by Khamenei, enabled him to ascend to this position, albeit with few votes, thanks to the assistance of the Iranian regime during a period of heightened protests and pervasive discontent with the regime. This position may have offered a degree of hope to people in peripheral regions that are geographically distant from the centre. However, as his campaign progressed and appointments were made by his chosen individuals, it became evident that he was unable to implement significant changes to address issues such as the problem of Lake Urmia, discrimination, the mother tongue, and regional concerns, as initially anticipated. His focus shifted towards pursuing policies that were more closely aligned with Khamenei's political agenda, namely those pertaining to political unity. In the absence of political parties in the country, which impedes the development of technocrats from Turkish and other ethnic groups, the prospect of leveraging this potential appeared to recede further, and over time, hopes diminished.

6. The Role of the Ethnic Factor in the Iranian Presidential Elections

While the ethnic factor has played a role in previous presidential elections, it has not been a significant independent influence on political and social conflicts over the past thirteen terms. The fourth presidential election was distinctive in this respect, as Iranian Turks exerted the most substantial influence on Malek Zangiyān's triumph. In previous elections, particularly when voter turnout was high, ethnic groups aligned with the majority of the Iranian population played a role in the victory of the elected candidate within the context of the main political conflicts of the elections. The lack of robust political competition in Pezeshkian's victory is largely attributed to the decisive influence of swing voters. It is a fallacy and an error in judgment to attempt to categorize the electorate according to their political proclivities. It is estimated that between five and ten percent of Iran's potential electorate exhibits a lack of interest in and mistrust of the political process. Another non-political group comprises swing voters (approximately twenty percent), who are motivated not by political or cultural issues, but by the impact of the election competition on their living conditions and short-term assessments. They make decisions based on their reactions to the performance of the executive or legislative branches. This demographic typically shifts its focus during presidential elections, particularly after eight years of government administration, which is detrimental to the ruling group. The electoral behaviour of this segment is characterised by unpredictability and a lack of political loyalty. To illustrate, during one electoral period, they voted for Khatami, whereas during another, they voted for Ahmadinejad. Consequently, the votes obtained in the presidential elections cannot be attributed solely to the political leanings of the winning candidate; rather, they represent the collective influence of the swing votes. In elections with high voter turnout, the influence of this factor is diminished in comparison to political indicators. Conversely, in elections with low voter turnout, its significance is amplified. In the 2024 elections, in light of the unfavorable economic performance of the Raisi administration and the waning memory of its suboptimal performance during Rouhani's second term, the swing votes were inclined to favor Pezeshkian. Nevertheless, in the 2021 elections, Raisi succeeded in retaining the votes he had secured in the 2017 election, despite a decline in voter turnout. In this electoral term, a proportion of Raisi's eighteen million votes were either not cast or were cast for Pezeshkian. Concurrently, a subset of voters aligned with the opposition and protesters who were dissatisfied with the existing power structure and their inability to achieve their demands. Consequently, as a consequence of the shifts occurring within the Iranian political landscape, the impact of swing votes is gradually diminishing.

The following scatter plot provides illustrative evidence of the role played by Turkish voters in Pezeshkian's victory. The horizontal axis represents the percentage of the population in each province who speak Turkish. The vertical axis represents the proportion of the votes cast for each candidate (Pezeshkian and Jalili)

by the potential electorate (eligible voters) in the second round of the elections.

In order to gain a full understanding of the social base of the candidates in each province, it is essential to consider the proportion of votes they received from the potential electorate. It is erroneous to conclude anything from the accumulated votes alone. For example, the high votes received by Jalili in the Isfahan province do not indicate the existence of a dominant conservative base in that region. This is due to the low participation rate. In the second round of voting, Pezeshkian gained approximately two million, six hundred and sixty-one thousand votes over Jalili in the provinces where Turkish is the primary language. This represents a difference of approximately one million votes more than the difference observed in the first round. In the six provinces where Persian is the primary language, however, this advantage was reversed, with Jalili receiving approximately 839,000 more votes. The discrepancy in the number of votes cast was approximately 275,000 in favour of Jalili in the initial round. This indicates that the increase in Pezeshkian's votes in comparison to Jalili in the second round was 7.3 times greater than the analogous figure observed in the other six provinces. The discrepancy in the voting patterns observed in Isfahan province can be attributed to the relatively low voter turnout, which fell below the fifty percent threshold. However, in the provinces of Khorasan Razavi, Yazd, and Kerman, the official participation rate in the second round exceeded the fifty percent mark. This suggests that the social context for reformists was unfavorable, and their defeat was particularly detrimental. Given that Khorasan Razavi is the birthplace of Jalili, it is reasonable to conclude that this contributed to his success. However, the margin of victory, which was a difference of 551,000 votes in his favour, was unexpected.

In the 2017 elections, however, the situation was reversed. The discrepancy in votes between Hassan Rouhani and Ebrahim Raisi in the aforementioned six provinces was 2.2 times greater than in the four provinces where the Turkish-speaking population is the majority. The impact of ethnic considerations is not confined to the Turkish-speaking population; other Iranian ethnic groups also exerted a significant influence. Additionally, Pezeshkiyan's advantage was evident in provinces with the highest Sunni populations. In light of these findings, it can be posited that the distinctive political sensibility that characterised previous presidential elections was absent in the 2024 electoral process. This situation can be attributed to a number of factors, including the lack of political engagement by the institution of *velayat-e faqih* over the past decade, the internal political crisis within the conservative movement, the acceptance of the absence of politics by the reformists and their subsequent neglect of political issues, the victory of an independent candidate not affiliated with any political faction, and the majority of the Iranian population's decision to boycott the elections.

In essence, those who chose to boycott the elections were engaged in a political act, yet the political sphere either lacked a presence or was relatively inactive during the electoral process. For the first time, the elections were subject to the

influence of ethnic variables and non-political swing votes. The reasons for the mobilisation of Turks during the election period require further investigation.

In conclusion, although Pezeshkiyan has devoted particular attention to the issues of the centre and the periphery, the prevailing dynamics in Iran preclude the possibility of their resolution, and the likelihood of significant change is minimal. This situation will result in the disappointment of our hopes, and consequently, the Turkish issue in Iran will remain unresolved. Iran's social and political structure is founded upon a system wherein the central regions (Tehran and other major cities) amass economic and political authority, while the peripheral regions (frequently inhabited by ethnic minorities) exhibit a paucity of development. Notwithstanding Pezeshkiyan's endeavours to safeguard the rights of Azerbaijani Turks and other peripheral regions, it will prove difficult to implement the requisite systematic changes to eliminate this asymmetry.

7. The General Economic and Political Situation of Iran and the Problems Faced by Masoud Pezeshkiyan

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the political economy of the country underwent a complete transformation. This change is rooted in issues primarily related to the ideological and political orientation of the Islamic Republic, which is markedly different from previous eras. The founders of the bureaucratic system during the Pahlavi era organized political and economic relations according to the international order, particularly in alignment with Western-oriented governments. Economic institutions based on this structure viewed Iran as a country connected to and dependent on the West, with the government controlling most of the economy. With the victory of the Islamic Revolution, however, the link with the Western world that had been the foundation of the country's economic development and dependence was severed, leading to a complete transformation of the nation's political economy. The severing of close ties with the Western world, coupled with structural crises and the shift from strategic alliances with the West to open hostility, fundamentally changed the country's economic policy landscape. As a result, economic policies were redesigned without proper planning of economic institutions, and the remaining institutions of the previous regime continued their traditional policies with minimal changes, without taking into account the new political economy conditions or initiating any movement to change the economic course based on the new circumstances. As a result, Iran's economy has deviated from the path of growth.

In this changed economy, traditional institutions have been privatized in the traditional way, and the private sector has not been updated or prepared to play an effective role in the new political economy of the country. The lack of a strong business presence and superficial privatization has led to a situation where excess liquidity has grown uncontrollably, inflation has emerged as a serious problem, and ultimately economic stability has not been achieved. The absence of a

development policy and strategy adapted to the political economy of the country has resulted in widespread unemployment, uneven income distribution, a sharp increase in liquidity, and inefficient use of productive capacity, leading to the squandering of capital resources. (The tendency toward authoritarianism has led to the adoption of policies inconsistent with authoritarianism in both foreign and domestic policy). In the realm of foreign policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran's orientation is largely ideological, leading to an idealistic confrontational approach and consequently intensifying the international challenges facing the country (Ramazani, 2007). It is said that this is due to the deep and widespread resentment of the Iranian revolution against the political behavior of the United States (Motaghi, 2000), resulting in the squandering of the country's power in the field of foreign policy and the creation of threats. In domestic politics, non-partisan policies have led to the instability of the economic environment in the country, with one of the most obvious examples being the devaluation of the national currency. The devaluation of the national currency, intended for purposes such as reflecting exchange rates, increasing exports, controlling imports, managing floating exchange rates, and the like, has been wasted. In practice, such as in compensating for budget deficits and providing short-term benefits, politicians have both sought to increase inflation and growth while also increasing the country's ranking in the global market, making it extremely difficult to attract foreign investors (Arya, 2015). References to exchange rate fluctuations in Iran indicate that the value of the national currency in Iran's economy has followed a different process (Babazadeh, Dalmi, Atbadi, & Mahmoudzadeh, 2010). "Over the years, the gap between the official exchange rate and the free market rate has gradually widened until monetary authorities, due to the urgency of this gap, have resorted to sudden exchange rate jumps". (Babazadeh, Dalmi, Atbadi, & Mahmoudzadeh, 2010)

Although the policy of sanctions has been implemented by the United States against Iran since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the "continuous mismanagement of medical and human resources in Iran" and the ideological and interventionist approach of Ahmadinejad, along with the decline in global oil prices during the last years of his government, paved the way for these sanctions to have a serious impact on Iran's economy (Maloney, 2010). In this context, one of the issues that Masoud Pezeshkiyan repeatedly emphasized during the election campaigns, especially in televised debates, was the challenges and problems that our country is facing, particularly in the economic field. These challenges have created significant difficulties for the people of our country, making their living conditions more arduous. Therefore, Masoud Pezeshkiyan stressed that he is committed to addressing these economic challenges and problems by relying on an expert and elite team, intending to fulfill all the promises he made to the people in the economic domain.

Despite all this, it seems that Masoud Pezeshkiyan and his economic team will face two significant and meaningful economic challenges in the future. Firstly, the

issue of the budget deficit and the incorrect solutions implemented so far by various governments in our country will be among the most pressing concerns for Pezeshkiyan's government. This budget deficit has resulted in, alongside economic pressures caused by foreign sanctions and continued structural inefficiencies in Iran's economy, a wave of inflation that has been imposed on Iran's economy, making living conditions more difficult for a wide range of people in our country. According to some estimates, the budget deficit of our country last year was around 400 thousand billion Tomans, which is expected to increase this year. This equation seems to attract a significant portion of the focus and attention of the economic team of our new government.

Moreover, without a doubt, Trump's return to the White House will be accompanied by the intensification of economic pressures against our country, even though it was Trump himself and his administration who withdrew from the JCPOA agreement and imposed a flood of economic sanctions and political pressures on our country, creating a wave of challenges for Iran's economy. Therefore, it seems that the government of Masoud Pezeshkiyan and his economic team should prepare themselves for the scenario of Trump's return to the White House and the negative economic consequences of this issue for our country's economy.

On the other hand, the bankruptcy of pension funds has reached such a level that the government has allocated an amount of 453 thousand billion tomans for these funds in the 1403 budget, which constitutes 16% of the country's total budget. To exit this crisis, the government of Ebrahim Raisi decided to increase the retirement age in the Seventh Plan. However, the problem is that the government itself is also indebted to these funds (Majlis Research Center, 2024).

Last year, the government announced that it owed almost 450 thousand billion tomans to these funds, a part of which has been paid, but it is unable to pay the entire debt. The thirteenth government relied on higher taxes to compensate for the budget deficit. In contrast to this approach, Masoud Pezeshkiyan's headquarters promised to reduce provincial taxes. Ali Tayyebnia, one of the members of Pezeshkiyan's economic team, said while explaining the economic programs: "In the field of employment, we should triple the tax exemption. The exemption for salaried employees should also be doubled and adjusted annually according to inflation".

According to the report of the Majles (Parliament) Research Center, the government faces a budget deficit of more than 307 thousand billion Tomans in 1403. According to the definition of this research institution, the budget deficit means the overestimation and possible non-realization of the expected revenues of the government. One of the main factors contributing to the government's inability to realize revenues is the low level of oil exports (Majlis Research Center, 2024).

On the one hand, the imposed sanctions have severely reduced Iran's exports in various sectors, especially oil, resulting in a budget deficit of more than

600,000 billion Tomans for the governments of the Islamic Republic. On the other hand, foreign investment has decreased significantly and Iran's industries have become severely outdated and lack the necessary efficiency due to the lack of modern technology (Fararu, 2024). In recent years, the amount of foreign investment in Iran has decreased drastically; although the president's administration claimed that \$11 billion of foreign investment entered Iran in three years, the statistics presented show that this claim is somewhat exaggerated (Hemmati, 2024).

The Iranian Investment Association reported last year that in the first six months of this year, two billion dollars of foreign investment had been made in the country, with Afghan immigrants leading the way in terms of the number of investments. In reality, these investments are small and more related to remittances from citizens than actual investments (Hemmati, 2024). In fact, the government has considered the entry of immigrants' capital into Iran as an investment. On the other hand, research by the Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly shows that the overall situation of international technology transfer in Iran is unsatisfactory. This report adds: "The main challenges in technology transfer, according to experts, are: limitations in the technology and innovation environment, including weaknesses in the level of technological readiness and innovation in enterprises, weaknesses in the level of technological readiness and innovation in government institutions, weaknesses in the level of technological readiness and innovation in the workforce, weaknesses in laboratory and research networks, and limitations in other institutional and economic environments. Therefore, they consider it essential to adopt policies for technology transfer" (TechRasa, 2024).

The need for technology is increasing day by day, while foreign companies are reluctant to invest in Iran due to sanctions. In reality, investing in Iran is associated with various risks that keep companies and foreign investors away. They know that investing in Iran may not yield the desired results because foreign investments in countries are usually long-term, and the high risk in investment-hostile countries like Iran prevents the inflow of capital.

The absence of foreign banks in Iran, the country's inclusion in the FATF blacklist, currency fluctuations within Iran, and the lack of an adequate insurance and investment risk coverage system are among the factors that deter foreigners from entering Iran. Given the above factors, one of the most critical needs of the Islamic Republic is interaction with the world. Lifting sanctions is a priority for any government seeking to address all these issues. However, there are numerous obstacles to negotiating with the West to lift sanctions. In 2019, the 11th parliament passed the Strategic Action Law on Sanctions and Negotiations, which has made negotiations very difficult for the government (Majlis Research Center, 2024). As of March 5, 2019, in accordance with this law and due to the non-lifting of sanctions against Iran and the non-implementation of the provisions of the JCPOA, Iran stopped the voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol and no

longer allowed inspectors to conduct intrusive inspections. It was later revealed that the Leader of the Islamic Republic was behind this law, which angered the government of Hassan Rouhani.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, due to its unique political approach, cannot expect exogenous accumulation in the short term or create effective capital accumulation with the help of foreign financial resources and investments. Therefore, one of the essential requirements for creating effective capital accumulation is a suitable design for internal accumulation. In this unique approach, the role of the government is to create a multi-level foundation, establish a social structure for accumulation, and use financial intermediation as an effective incentive to attract public participation, which more than anything else reflects the characteristics of a developmental state. On the other hand, the government of Masoud Pezeshkiyan is faced with regional inequalities within Iran, which have exacerbated social inequalities and widened the gap between social classes. In addition to political challenges and influential groups within the Islamic Republic of Iran, restructuring the country's economic system remains one of the most important challenges facing the president.

Official statistics confirm the growing inequality in the distribution of income and wealth, which has favored the wealthy segments of society. These factors, along with inflation, economic instability, and the high proportion of hidden subsidies that benefit the wealthy, have had a significant impact on the economy. Equitable income distribution is one of the key indicators for assessing the economic performance of countries. According to the reports of the Statistical Center of Iran, if one individual in the society holds all the income, the income distribution would be in its most unequal state. Conversely, when all individuals benefit equally from the total income of society, the most equitable state is achieved (Majlis Research Center, 2024). Details of the Gini coefficient and income ratios show that the lower income class has become weaker, while wealth has shifted to the higher income groups. In the past year or two, inflation has been on the rise, with the inflation rate now at its highest level in at least the past eight years, exceeding 45 percent. This issue was highlighted by the head of the Planning and Budget Organization, who cited the budget as one of the factors contributing to this inflation (EcoIran, 2024). It seems that in the years when the Gini coefficient decreased, along with a temporary decrease in inflation and relative stability, the distribution of cash subsidies in those years was not without effect. The distribution of 45,500 tomans in cash subsidies began in 2010, as did the livelihood subsidies introduced in 2019 (EcoIran, 2024). However, among these are hidden subsidies amounting to about 1700 trillion Tomans (Iranian currency, ten times Rial), with the wealthy and high-income class in Iran receiving a significant share. A report released by the Planning and Budget Organization in 2018 showed that in the fuel sector alone, the wealthiest decile received 23 times more subsidies than the low-income decile. The head of the Planning and Budget Organization also recently criticized the status of hidden

subsidies and how they are distributed, stating that those who are financially well-off and own considerable assets receive the most, while a rural individual receives very little from energy subsidies.

The Thirteenth Government claims that the inflation rate registered for May 2024 is 31 percent. Under such circumstances, the average inflation rate in the housing sector, at 41.8 percent, exceeds the overall inflation rate by more than 10 percent. In the housing sector, the plan to build one million units annually during the three years of Raisi's government has failed. Pezeshkiyan also made it clear that what the 13th government claims to be doing is merely issuing permits, and that the government is at an impasse in providing land and financial resources for the housing program.

In the second televised debate with Saeed Jalili, Pezeshkiyan explicitly stated that his government is also unable to fulfill the promise of building one million housing units, and that this promise is essentially a pipe dream within the Seventh Development Plan. Given Pezeshkiyan's candid remarks, it is clear that the housing sector will experience price increases over the next year. This could potentially affect the overall inflation rate. Experts believe that the main challenges facing the Pezeshkiyan government revolve around energy consumption imbalances, banking imbalances and the bankruptcy of pension funds. During his time in parliament, Pezeshkiyan was a strong advocate of liberalizing gasoline prices. During the election campaign, however, he tried to downplay this stance and instead presented his approach as a change in the way energy subsidies are allocated.

Experts believe that by implementing this approach, Pezeshkiyan will move towards the proposal put forward by the Majles (Parliament) Research Center and, as a first step, reduce the quota for vehicles and introduce a three-tier gasoline pricing system with gradual price increases. Possible plans such as transferring subsidies from vehicles to individuals' national identification codes or taking the risk of directly increasing gasoline prices may be among the possible policies of the fourteenth government, each with its own economic and social consequences.

The Ministry of Petroleum of the Thirteenth Government announced in February 2024 that the growing fuel imbalance would force the government to import 5.478 billion liters of gasoline and diesel at a cost of more than \$4 billion ([Radio Farda, 2024](#)).

The increase in fuel consumption and the government's inability to supply gasoline domestically will increase the required budget in the remaining months of 2024 and into 2025, leaving the Fourteenth Government with no choice but to take immediate action to control this imbalance. The issue of money printing was one of the dark spots in the three-year performance of the Ebrahim Raisi administration. While admitting that the growth rate of liquidity reached 42.8%, the 13th government claimed that the growth rate of liquidity decreased in 2023 and 2024, and that it managed to reduce this indicator to 24.3% by implementing policies to

control banking imbalances. On the other hand, some economic analysts claim that by the end of 2023, the thirteenth government had printed 600 thousand billion tomans, which led to a 115 percent increase in the monetary base during the thirty months of the thirteenth government's tenure. The increase in the budget deficit, resulting from the inability of the 12th and 13th governments to repatriate foreign exchange earnings from oil sales, cover current expenses, and pay accumulated debts to pension funds and banks, has created a situation where it is unlikely that the path of printing unbacked money to cover the budget deficit will be halted. Critics of Pezeshkiyan have warned that his government's only solution to the current economic problems is the lifting of sanctions through the revival of the JCPOA. However, negotiations with the West and the United States are not solely within the government's control.

In addition, Pezeshkiyan's opposition to barter oil sales and his criticism of the discounts offered to China may pose further challenges for the government. Pezeshkiyan's failure to immediately revive the JCPOA would undoubtedly pose a significant challenge to the currency market, making the projected rise of the dollar exchange rate to 100,000 toman by the end of 2024, as predicted by economists, the most likely scenario. If Pezeshkiyan's government is unable to show immediate signs of economic growth, it will undoubtedly struggle to restore confidence in the financial markets. Without confidence and hope for improvement, conditions in the currency and stock markets will not change. The government's inability to deliver on promises such as lifting Internet censorship, stopping morality police operations, removing the security atmosphere from universities, and achieving economic stability for citizens who expect rapid improvements following Masoud Pezeshkiyan's victory over Saeed Jalili may lead to a wave of disillusionment, possibly resulting in the continuation and expansion of labor and student protests. The course of economic and social development in Iran shows that many of the processes of unbalanced growth and development have led to the emergence of social, political, and security crises. The social crises in Iran during 1992-2022 cannot be attributed solely to the role of the international media or the actions of dissatisfied social groups. The structure of the state and the nature of the government's socio-economic policies have played a significant role in shaping Iran's political and social crises over the past three decades. Therefore, if the country's strategic policymakers intend to combat threats and social crises, they must pay attention to the state of economic growth and political modernization in Iran. The two research questions posed in this case study of Iran are: 1) What is the relationship between the state structure, the process of economic development and crises during the period 1992-2019; 2) To what extent is the emergence of socio-economic and security crises related to the growth-oriented nature of policymaking and the lack of balancing political and economic institutions? The research hypothesis suggests that the nature of the political structure and the government's economic development policies have influenced socio-economic crises. By emphasizing the theory of historical institutionalism and using qualitative

content analysis and systematic evaluation of Iran's economic development plans, along with an examination of other researchers' findings on economic policymaking, the consequences of Iran's economic policies are assessed. The results indicate that a significant portion of Iran's socio-economic policymaking is directly related to the "restricted order" structure. Although factors such as sanctions and the nature of the international economic system have had an impact in this regard, unbalanced development based on inefficient government economic policies has been a key factor in creating and exacerbating many social crises in the country. Today, Pezeshkiyan is faced with a situation in which he has to deal with social crises stemming from ethnic, religious and class differences between the rich and the poor and the new generation, as well as Iran's economy and society. However, no positive steps have yet been taken to bridge these divisions. However, in order to bring about development and change, or to solve a crisis or disease in a political system, it should be noted that both hardware and software-related dimensions are considered essential. Political culture is considered as the software-related dimension, which is the underlying layer in a political system. First, it is regarded as mental or political culture; in other words, political culture is the manifestation of the current political system in the minds of the people within a particular society. Then we can see its concrete realization in various organizations, political systems, and social structures. Although the political culture always interacts with the political structure and the bilateral interaction between the two is continuous, the experience of history as well as scientific theories have taught us that the change of political culture comes first, otherwise the emergence of social changes and revolutions is not justified (Khosravi & Shahsavari Fard, 2016). This is an issue that Pezeshkiyan can address by focusing on the economy and repairing the political culture, thereby attempting to rectify regional, religious, ideological, and racial discrimination by alleviating economic inequalities.

8. Pezeshkiyan's Proposed Policy Main Features

Pezeshkian entered the political arena with the slogan of justice and the fight against discrimination, along with promises to reform foreign policy and amend laws on social freedoms. Over time, this approach evolved into a slogan of national unity. During his time as a member of parliament, Pezeshkian consistently spoke out against discrimination. His remarks on addressing the problems of Lake Urmia, the inclusion of Sunnis in the government structure, and the issue of mother tongue were central to his discourse. In an interview with the media in June 2024, he stated:

"When we defend ethnicity, we defend Iranians; if I am Baluch, will I be given a position in this country, no matter how brilliant I may be? If there is a conflict with me, it is not their fault; it is my fault for not recognizing their rights. Then we call them ethnic nationalists." (Entekhab News, 2024)

In the course of his pre-election travels and campaign events in Tabriz, Pezeshkian addressed the issue of Lake Urmia. He has provided assurances regarding the

morality police and social freedoms on social media and even referenced these matters during televised debates. His remarks on ethnicities, religions, and sects also encapsulated his stance on the integration of diverse ethnic and religious groups into the country's political landscape. Nevertheless, he has consistently asserted that he is not an expert in economic matters and that this responsibility will be delegated to his expert team. Based on these statements and positions, Pezeshkian's policies can be classified as follows:

8.1. Policies on Social Freedoms, Women, Minorities, Religions, and Ethnic Groups

Pezeshkian was the sole viable candidate representing the reformist faction in Iran. Notwithstanding the presence of other candidates, such as Abbas Akhondi and Jahangiri, the Guardian Council, which operates under the supervision of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, determined that only he was qualified. This compelled the reformists to align their objectives and principles with his character. Pezeshkian had repeatedly asserted that he did not identify as a reformist, or, in other words, that he espoused a "reformist principle." However, his statements on Islamic Republic of Iran television, in which he criticized the handling of the Mahsa Amini issue and expressed discontent with the country's political approach towards the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, distinguished him from the other candidates. Additionally, his opposition to the morality police and the harsh treatment of women by security forces was noteworthy ([Khabar Online, 2024](#)).

However, the appointment of Eskandar Momeni, a military figure, as Minister of the Interior subsequent to the election gave rise to concerns as to the likelihood of reforms being implemented with respect to police conduct. The efficacy of such a policy is uncertain, given the fundamental red line of the Islamic Republic regarding the hijab and women's rights. In terms of ethnic issues, despite Pezeshkian's emphasis on the inclusion of ethnic groups in the country's political structure and his statements on regions and ethnicities, only a small proportion of the cabinet was allocated to Sunni Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities. Notwithstanding protests from some Sunni representatives and even from Pezeshkian's primary electoral base—the Iranian Turks—regarding this matter, Abdulkarim Hosseinzadeh, a Sunni, currently occupies the position of Vice President.

With regard to social freedoms and the domain of cyberspace, the Hijab Bill and the Protection Plan remain in a state of suspension. Given that the parliament is predominantly controlled by principals, even if there is a desire to revise or return these bills, it would be very challenging to do so. In a recent interview, Pezeshkian highlighted Articles 15 and 19 of the Constitution, which pertain to ethnic groups, equality, and the issue of the mother tongue. However, it remains unclear how much power the President has to implement not only these articles but also Chapter Three of the Constitution, which concerns the rights of the

people. To date, none of the presidents of the Islamic Republic have been able to enforce these principles, which have remained dormant (Anadolu Agency, 2024).

8.2. Foreign and Regional Policy

In his article for the Tehran Times (Pezeshkiyan, 2024), Pezeshkian underscored the significance of maintaining equilibrium in foreign policy. Nevertheless, this equilibrium in foreign policy remains consistent with the Iranian Supreme Leader's eastward-focused approach. Despite his criticism of the country's foreign policy prior to the election and his endorsement of the ratification of the JCPOA and FATF as potential solutions to the country's economic challenges, it became evident following his election that his foreign policy would remain aligned with the IRGC's military strategy. His congratulatory messages to the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as his emphasis on Iran's support for proxy forces in the region, reflected Tehran's position that Iran continues to support Iran despite Pezeshkian's presence in office and even the presence of figures such as Javad Zarif. It considers itself a strategic ally of Russia and China. Notwithstanding the ongoing negotiations with the United States and the ongoing conflict in Gaza, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy remains unaltered. In the period preceding the election, Pezeshkian addressed a number of pivotal issues, including proposed alterations to the country's employment system, the concept of meritocracy, and strategies to combat corruption. The aforementioned economic and corruption issues have already been addressed in the relevant section. However, following his election, the focus of this slogan gradually shifted towards the promotion of national unity. By emphasizing national unity, Pezeshkian sought to include all elements of the system, even those from older and opposing groups. This approach, which involved creating opportunities for individuals with such backgrounds, ultimately resulted in the marginalization of his own social and political base. The failure of the previous government to meet the demands of workers, teachers, youth, women, and disadvantaged classes led to the expectation that the current government would implement structural reforms to facilitate the assertion of the rights of these social groups. However, these groups.

As Pezeshkian neared the formation of his government, which included securing the approval of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic and utilizing this approval during a parliamentary vote of confidence for his ministers, he began to deviate from the slogans he had initially adopted. It is not entirely accurate or objective to evaluate a government at its inception. However, in order to provide an accurate and objective analysis of its policies in the context of the center-periphery discourse and the dissolution of the monopoly of power in Iran, it is essential to observe the initial indications and indicators before forming judgments. Nevertheless, the Iranian intellectual community, in conjunction with the academic and political exile community, has been unable to conduct a comprehensive examination of the promises made by Masoud Pezeshkiyan's government. The

analysis primarily focuses on the most pivotal figure in the country, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The influence of the Supreme Leader is intertwined with a number of fundamental issues, including the Seventh Development Plan, the Vision Document, the “Look East” policy, Iran’s regional control and the issue of proxy forces, the nuclear program, and even social freedoms. These issues are inextricably linked to the Supreme Leader and the parallel institutions and councils operating under his purview.

9. Conclusion

In accordance with the centre-periphery theory, one of the principal challenges that Pezeshkiyan will encounter is the uneven distribution of economic and political authority concentrated in the centre and dispersed to the peripheral regions. This constrains the economic and social advancement of peripheral regions, thereby impeding the resolution of their issues. Notwithstanding the support Pezeshkiyan received in the elections, the central government’s reluctance to relinquish this power renders the likelihood of significant reforms remote. Pezeshkiyan’s efforts are of great importance in the defence of the rights of Iran’s diverse ethnic and social groups. However, this endeavour will undoubtedly be a lengthy and arduous one. The prevailing power structures and political dynamics will constrain Pezeshkiyan’s capacity to implement comprehensive reforms. This will ultimately result in the failure of his efforts to achieve the desired outcome and the unresolved status of the Turkish issue. Moreover, it is anticipated that Pezeshkiyan will continue his efforts for a period of between four and eight years. During this period, Mojtaba Khamenei will continue to undertake the preparations necessary to succeed his father, in a manner similar to that of Bin Salman. The preparation of Mojtaba Khamenei for a role on Iran’s political scene will serve to further complicate Pezeshkiyan’s work and hinder the implementation of his reform initiatives. Therefore, despite Pezeshkiyan’s focus on centre and periphery issues, the country’s existing political and economic dynamics will not allow these issues to be resolved. This will ultimately result in the Turkish issue in Iran remaining unresolved and Pezeshkiyan’s efforts not bringing about significant changes. This study serves to reinforce the conclusion that Iran’s political structure is significantly shaped by a centralized power dynamic, with sectarian allegiances and the heterogeneous composition of the population playing a pivotal role. The concentration of power in the hands of a few, particularly within the context of Iran’s theocratic governance, has significant implications for both domestic policy and international relations. In considering the future, it seems probable that the established power structures and the considerable influence of sectarianism will continue to exert a significant influence on the political landscape of Iran. The implications for forthcoming elections, particularly in the context of potential leadership changes, are profound. They may result in further consolidation of power or, conversely, may give rise to new waves of political and social unrest. A comparative analysis of local elections across different regions in Iran reveals significant

regional disparities in political engagement and power dynamics. These disparities serve to illustrate the intricate nature of Iran's political system, wherein local contextual factors can exert a considerable influence on electoral outcomes and broader political trends. The methodological challenges faced in this research, particularly the issues of data reliability and the risks associated with data collection in Iran, underscore the need for more robust and secure methods of gathering information in such environments. Future research could benefit from developing strategies to mitigate these challenges, perhaps through the use of more sophisticated data validation techniques or by fostering international collaborations that can provide additional layers of data verification. This study makes a contribution to the broader theoretical discourse on power dynamics, sectarianism, and governance within heterogeneous societies, particularly in the context of a theocratic state like Iran. By examining the interplay between these elements, this research offers new insights into how such dynamics can influence political stability, social cohesion, and governance structures in complex societies.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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