
How Coalitions in the Islamic Republic of Iran Maintain the Regime's Stability

A Review of the Competition Among Coalitions and Blocs of Power in Post-Revolution Iran

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The founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran based the ruling structure of the new state on three main political coalitions, organized to preserve its stability and to avoid potential revolutions. The complexities of these coalitions and their relation to the Supreme Leader of Iran remain opaque. The main goal of this research is to understand the structure of these coalitions and their role in stabilizing the regime for over thirty-seven years.

I investigate how Iran has maintained its stability for over three decades, despite inherent social division and the influence of many coalitions with different interests. I use *The Dictator's Handbook*,¹ which demonstrates a framework and a theory for leaders' political landscapes, and provides a consistent analysis regarding the importance of political coalitions in maintaining stability for both democratic and non-democratic² societies. Iran, being a theocracy with a supreme leader who has power over all social institutions, can be used as a case study for the theory of *The Dictator's Handbook*.

While applying the book's theory to the Iranian theocracy with small coalitions, one would expect to observe constant revolts of disenfranchised groups against the dictator. However, I argue that several small coalitions in Iran with complex structures franchise various small groups of supporters, and therefore divide the society into an amalgam of ideologies that is less likely to create an assembly against the regime and a mass revolution. I similarly argue that in Iranian society the regime will maintain its stability, and gradual reforms are more likely to occur. This paper focuses on two key points:

1. How the factional rivalry, in alliance with the Leader, affects the winning coalition's size and the stability of the regime.
2. The effect of the Leader's health on maintaining the stability of both regimes as well as that of the coalitions.

In order to demonstrate these points within the Iranian context, a brief analysis of the winning coalitions' structure and size during the Shah period and during the era of the Islamic Republic is provided. Both the pre-revolution and post-revolution power structure will be briefly presented. Furthermore, an analysis of the post-revolution era with a focus on the coalition building, their size and competition among them will be provided. Lastly an analysis on the role of the Iranian coalitions, their size and their supporters in maintaining stability for the regime will be discussed.

¹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

² A Modern definition of Democracy based on Webster dictionary is a form of government, where a constitution guarantees basic personal and political rights, fair and free elections, and independent courts of law. Similarly, it is referred to a system with equal rights and opportunities for every individual. Whereas, in a non-democracy, in contrast, the leader or leaders are not chosen by the populace and do not have accountability to them. Because an authority, and not the people rule the state, such governments are called authoritarian, according to Patrick H. O'Neil's "Essentials of Comparative Politics." The specific type of authoritarian state is dependent on who wields the power. One common form is "totalitarianism", which, O'Neil explains, features a leader or small group of leaders who ruthlessly seek to combine the economy, society and state according to a powerful central ideology. North Korea can be a modern-day example of a totalitarian regime. Specific forms of government may include military rule, as in a junta; personal rule, as in a dictatorship; monarchical rule, as in a kingdom; religious rule, or theocracy; and bureaucracy, as in an authoritarian technocracy. It is possible for states to be hybrid forms, or what O'Neil calls, "illiberal," having the surface forms of a democracy.

THEORY OF *THE DICTATOR'S HANDBOOK* AS APPLIED TO IRAN

After the 1979 revolution, Iran became a theocracy based on Islamic and revolutionary ideology, with a Supreme Leader as a guardian of this theocracy, alongside a constitutional governing system with various small coalitions. The ruling structure in Iran is divided among three main coalitions: the pragmatists, the conservatives, and the radicals. These coalitions create a social divide among the citizens of the Islamic Republic, as each has a slightly different interpretation of revolutionary Islam and have mutually exclusive circles of supporters. The Supreme Leader is considered the highest position in the Iranian power structure and balances the rivalry between the coalitions in order to ensure a stable, revolutionary, and a theocratic Iran.

The theory laid out in *The Dictator's Handbook* assumes that leaders' interest in political survival drives everything they do and that leaders have to meet the needs of their most valuable allies in order to maintain their power. Therefore, a leader must manage the struggle for power among political coalitions to garner support and maintain a position of power. In order to stay longer in office, leaders must sustain a winning coalition drawn from the "Selectorate"—the individuals whose support is essential to a leader's survival in office.

*In small-coalition polities like dictatorships, leaders can stay in power through the judicious use of private rewards. However, in some dictatorships various Selectorate members competing for loyalty can be observed, while in others, there are few Selectorate members and the dictator is vulnerable to them.*³

On the contrary, in a democracy, the Selectorate is large, but so is the winning coalition. In large-coalition polities, leaders need to distribute public goods in a larger size so as to satisfy the voters and to govern longer.⁴ Dictators only need to promote the right people within a small coalition, however, revolutions occur when there is not enough money to circulate and to keep people off the street or to pay the army.

Not all of the theoretical framework of *The Dictator's Handbook* is applicable to the Iranian case study, however, the authors' theory on coalition building is an essential factor in maintaining power in Iran, both before and after the revolution. This study of the Iranian winning coalitions illustrates the complex layered structure of the country's ruling system and the competition among these coalitions for alliance with the Supreme Leader.

A CLASSIC MONARCH BEFORE 1979

By investigating Iran's political structure before the revolution of 1979, we can better understand the political structure that allowed for protest, revolt, and change throughout Iran's social classes. This chapter provides an account of the political factions, which existed under the reign of Shah that precipitated unrest, and suggest that the Shah's inability to manage the interests and size of these coalitions led to Iran's political instability and eventual demise.

During his thirty-seven⁵ years of ruling in Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi experienced various crises, which in some cases seriously endangered his kingship. He was forced to leave Iran in 1953 when the Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh,^{6*} attempted to restructure the ruling system. With the assistance of the British and Americans through a coup d'état⁷ the Shah saved his

³ Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵ Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1912-1980), the shah of Iran from 1941 until his overthrow by the Iranian revolution in 1979.

⁶ Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953 and popular leader of Iran's movement for oil nationalization.

⁷ Saeed Kamali Dehghan and Richard Norton-Taylor, "CIA admits role in 1953 Iranian coup," *The Guardian*, last modified August 19, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/19/cia-admits-role-1953-iranian-coup>.

rule. When various oppositions reinforced and mobilized against him, the Shah had to alternate between numerous strategies to maintain his power. For example, he employed the Mobs, the Army, and the intelligence service SAVAK to oppress its opposing mobilization. Eventually, the Shah's political mismanagement and the increased pressure of the oppositions led to a mass revolution in 1979 which forced him to leave the country for good.

An analysis of the Shah's behavior and the structure of power in the latter years of his kingship illustrates the mistakes in coalition building he committed as a last resort to maintain and stabilize power. Perplexed by Western values and Eastern values, the Shah created a society that promoted a partially liberal, westernized middle class with cultural freedoms and the more traditional social groups ruled by arbitrary political despotism.⁸ In order to maintain his personal rule, the Shah narrowed down his winning coalition size. The Shah abated his winning coalition into limited high ranking members of the Army, the intelligence service, the royal family, the elites, the neglected growing middle class, and the majority of educated Iranians who later joined the opposition movement. The mass middle class, the intellectuals, merchants, and religious clerics who were all left disenfranchised for years created an opposition against the Shah that led to his overthrowing in 1979.⁹

Within the last months of his rule, the widespread rumor of the Shah's health problems was largely responsible for revoked support from his most important loyalists. A leader's health is considered a crucial factor for them to stay in power and to maintain their loyalists and supporters. The essential backers and loyalists needed assurance of continuous rewards from the leader or they would turn their support towards the next best incumbent.¹⁰ This is an important reason why dictators keep their terminal illnesses secret because a "terminal ailment is bound to provoke an uprising, either within the ranks of the essential coalition or among outsiders who see an opportunity to step in and take control of the palace."¹¹

The Shah's health problem was never officially announced. When he was diagnosed with "Lymphocytic blood disease" in 1974, it became the policy of the Shah, his three male confidantes, and his French physicians to keep the Shah's illness strictly confidential.¹² The Shah was worried that if the western powers learned about his sickness, they would abandon their support and use it against him.¹³

The Shah's mismanagement of the 1979 crisis turned the crisis into a full-scale revolution. Nonetheless, his small coalition-building, exclusion of Iran's extended middle class, religious clerics, merchants, and the increased rumors of his health problems were all important factors that led to his overthrowing.¹⁴ The Shah's failure to manage and maintain the coalitions during his rule points to their significance in Iranian politics. His regime's attitude towards them is in stark contrast with coalition building in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has enabled the Islamic Republic to survive a greater number of crises in competence of the Shah.

COALITION-BUILDING IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Although the Islamic Republic has experienced several economical instabilities, sanctions, and war since its foundation, an investigation of the ruling structure and the coalition-building in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Shah era provides an understanding of the reasons for

⁸ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 336.

⁹ Mohammad Ghaed, About Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, 10-14. <http://www.mghaed.com/ay/Ayandegan.list.htm>

¹⁰ Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*, 30.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 26.

¹² Assadollah Alam, Dr. Abdul Karim Ayadi and Dr. Abbas Safavian.

¹³ Milani, *The Shah*, 370.

¹⁴ Milani, *The Shah*, 387.

regime survival. By analyzing coalition-building in Iran after the 1979 revolution, the position of the Supreme Leader, and the rivalry among coalitions, I suggest that the structure of the Iranian ruling system is aimed to prevent mass revolutions and is more likely to observe gradual reforms.

After seizing power in 1979, the charismatic leader Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) and his inner circle restructured and organized the Islamic Republic of Iran's ruling system with themselves at the top of the power structure. In the early years of revolution, the clerics concentrated on implementing Khomeini's revolutionary ideology. This required the replacement of their early supporters and factions with more reliable loyalists. Through mass executions and extreme violence, the Islamic Revolution Party and its allied factions erased all the early supporters of the revolution who differed with Khomeini ideologically.¹⁵ With the Islamic revolutionary ideology prevailing, the new republic evolved into a theocracy. In the 1980s its ruling party developed and divided into three main factions: the pragmatists, the radicals, and the conservatives. To maintain the stability of such a complex theocracy, three factions remained within the regime as the main coalitions, and each provided privileges for their small winning coalition of supporters and loyalists.¹⁶

The pragmatists held executive power and ran the state while advocating for economic development, improving ties with the West, and supporting Iran's modern middle class of government employers, technocrats, professionals, and major components of the business community. The radicals were mostly outside of the government and gained support from younger militant clerics and religious revolutionary student associations. They promoted stern adherence to revolutionary ideas and the export of the Islamic revolution. They emphasized the need for Iran's economic independence and rejected better relations with the West. Though less vocal than the other two, the conservatives were equally influential. They received support from conservative clerics, merchant circles, and the traditional middle class. Conservatives recognized the pragmatists on issues such as economy, but sided with the radicals on ideology and culture. Hence, they advocated the strict application of Islamic norms in legal, social, and cultural arenas, along with the enforcement of private property, freedom for private enterprise, and increased economic interaction with the world.¹⁷

With experiences gained from the revolution and mistakes learned from the previous regime's coalition building and army structuring, the founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran created various armed forces to prevent any possible coups. Originally, their greatest concern was the military Artesh, or the standard army. Hence, the founders created the Basij, a paramilitary volunteer militia, and Sepah, the Army of the Guardians of Islamic revolution, which contained various creeds of Islamic revolutionary groups. This built various layers of military to control any unexpected opposition or "deviant movements."¹⁸

Each of the discussed coalitions, with their various armed forces held their own circle of loyalists and electorates, each with slightly different ideologies regarding revolutionary Islam. Therefore, these three coalitions were in constant competition with one another to ally with the Supreme Leader. This resulted in the dissolution of the remaining two coalitions, securing stability for the regime with minimal reforms.

THE SUPREME LEADER

Understanding the position of the Supreme Leader in the Iranian ruling structure is important to see how this position balanced power among the coalitions. The Supreme Leader

¹⁵ David Menashri, preface to *Revolution at a Crossroads* (DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1997).

¹⁶ Menashri, *Revolution at a Crossroads*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 71.

was able to ally with certain groups, isolate other coalitions, manage the size of the Selectorates, and, moreover, maintain the regime's status quo.

According to the Iranian constitution, the Supreme Leader's role is defined as responsibility for "delineating the general policies" of the state and "supervising the execution of those policies."¹⁹ While Ayatollah Khomeini, the charismatic founder and the Supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, reconciled the legal logic of the modern state with the traditional logic of Shi'ite Jurisprudence, the question of succession remained problematic.²⁰ As his death approached, Khomeini had to promptly solve the issue of his potential replacement in order to guarantee a smooth succession and a balance among coalitions. Since there was no theologian endowed with both religious and revolutionary credentials who appeared fit for the succession, Khomeini and his disciples opted for a less prominent but fully loyal cleric to be the future Supreme Leader in order to avoid a struggle for succession after his death.²¹

In 1989 after the death of Khomeini, Ali Khamenei was selected as the Supreme leader of Iran by the religio-politicians who had the majority of the Assembly of Experts.²² The Assembly, under the influence of the leader of the pragmatist faction of the revolution Akbar Rafsanjani,²³ elected Khamenei despite disagreements about his lack of religious qualifications.²⁴ Ali Khamenei's selection as the Supreme Leader and the subsequent smooth transfer of authority was an evident sign of political stability.²⁵ Although clerics were still in charge, the prominent theologians no longer exercised ultimate authority.

Khamenei, who had lesser religious rank, was promoted to the position of the Supreme Leader by the religio-politicians. From here on, the winning coalition's size began to dwindle and separate from the supreme religious clerics.²⁶

The Supreme Leader is the highest-ranking position and is considered the most powerful element of the ruling system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The responsibilities of the Supreme Leader include demonstrating his high position in the hierarchic Iranian ruling system by building or eliminating coalitions and factions. Similarly, the Supreme Leader balances power and rivalry among political coalitions in order to maintain the status quo of the regime.

The Supreme Leader has the authority to appoint, inaugurate, and supervise certain offices. The Supreme Leader inaugurates the President, Chief of Justice, Members of Expediency Discernment Council, half of the Guardian of Council members, and the provisional head of the three branches of the state (Judiciary, legislature, executive). He has control over the heads of important cultural and governmental offices such as the heads of national TV and radio, the head of the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans, the head of law enforcement, and the head of the Friday Prayer Imams. In addition, he has supreme authority over the top military commanders of Iran's army, navy, and air forces. Military branches include the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Artesh), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Sepah), the IRGC Quds Force, the Basij Organization, and intelligence and counterintelligence. Similarly, the

¹⁹ Iran Constitution, art. 110.

²⁰ According to the Shi'i tradition, which is embodied in the 1979 Iranian constitution, the Supreme Leader supposed to be the most learned and righteous "faqih". Yet for Khomeini's succession the most prominent theologians were not politically suited, and the religio-politicians lacked the proper religious credentials. Similarly, the leading theologians of the rank of "Ayatollah 'uzma" (grand Ayatollah) did not fully identify with Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine, and none of Khomeini's loyal followers had the prominent religious standing, the charisma, nor the political authority of Khomeini himself to qualify for the succession.

²¹ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 16.

²² The Assembly of Expert is in charge of supervising the Supreme Leader and confirming him in his position for a term of eight years, without prohibition to the number of terms.

²³ Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (born 1934) is an influential Iranian Politician and was Iran's fourth president.

²⁴ Menashri, *Revolution at a Crossroads*, 13.

²⁵ A detailed discussion of Khamenei's nomination, and the reasoning given for his selection, see Menashri, "Iran", pp. 350-3. Khamenei was thereafter referred to as Ayatollah.

²⁶ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 17.

declaration of war and peace is within the authority of the Supreme Leader and a two thirds majority of the Parliament.²⁷

THE PRESIDENT IN THE IRANIAN RULING SYSTEM

In the Iranian power structure, the president is the head of the government and the highest popularly elected official in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although he must be inaugurated by the Supreme Leader, the president reflects the votes of the majority of the Selectorates. Since the revolution, each of the Iranian presidents unofficially represented different coalitions and their strategies. Each presidency represented a coalition and the attempt to reward a small group of Selectorates with minimal cost to their local needs. Furthermore, the Supreme Leader avoided expanding its winning coalition and abolished any factional divisions and increases of the Selectorate's circle so as to maintain the Iranian theocracy at less cost.

The president is responsible for appointing his cabinet and ministers subject to the approval of Parliament,²⁸ signing treaties and agreements with foreign countries and international organizations, administering national planning and the budget, and overseeing state employment affairs. The president does not hold full control over Iran's foreign policy, the armed forces, and the nuclear policy. These matters are ultimately the responsibility of the Supreme Leader.

In the Iranian ruling system, the competition between each coalition turns the maximum eight-year term of presidency into a period of policy implementation favored by the winning coalition. However, the Supreme Leaders constantly favored smaller, less costly winning coalitions whose priority was the oppression of the public and the expansion of the revolutionary Shi'a Islam in the world.

Lastly, the position of the president remains limited to each coalition's representative whose election demonstrates the popularity of each coalition among Selectorates and voters. Knowing that the public elects each president, every president aims to meet the minimal needs of its electorates to strengthen the electorates' support for the winning coalition.

FACTIONAL DIVISIONS AND STRUGGLE FOR POWER

During the first years of its rule, the Islamic Republic of Iran, tried to promote the Islamic revolutionary ideology that differed from the traditional interpretation of Islam. Introduced by Khomeini, revolutionary Islam promoted the unification of religion and politics and emphasized the revolutionary mission of religion, its combative justice, freedom-seeking, pro-unprivileged, and justice and equality-seeking image.²⁹

The Islamic revolutionary image suffered from various dissensions with each coalition competing for supremacy while promoting its own version of the initial ideology. Moreover, since every coalition had its own army, electorates, loyalists, and supporters, each bloc maintained their loyalty and promoted their needs by encouraging different images of revolutionary Islam.³⁰ Therefore, Iranian society remained an amalgam of various ideologies that could not unify against the theocracy through mass protests and hence, assured the stability of the regime.

In the course of the ensuing power struggle among the three main factions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 was the beginning of a

²⁷ Iran Constitution, art. 110.

²⁸ Iran Constitution, chp. XI, sec. 1-2.

²⁹ Behzad Navabi, "Islamic Revolution: Its Roots and Consequences," *Asr-e-Ma*, February 1996.

³⁰ Menashri, *Revolution at a Crossroads*, 57.

novel factional division. Khatami belonged to the revolutionary elite that sought to bring top-down institutional changes to the ruling system. His movement attempted to reform from within the regime and promoted a liberal Islamic image that gathered a new group of supporters and loyalists to itself. Khatami attempted to expand the winning coalition's size and its Selectorates by creating a more democratic structure in the Iranian society. Although his attempts failed in the end, they were successful in many areas.³¹

The politically deprived Iranian upper and middle class, the youth, and the disenfranchised pragmatists and modern clerics joined Khatami's novel reformist coalition. Since Khatami attempted to divide the pragmatist coalition, his presidency became problematic and costly for the Supreme Leader. Khatami's reformist faction aimed to reward a larger size of the winning coalition with high popularity among its disenfranchised supporters. Therefore, the Guardian Council and the conservative coalition, including the Supreme Leader's hardliners, turned against the reformers and diminished the movement's power at the law-making phase. The rift between the reformists and the hardliners during the Khatami presidency was a delayed but typical pattern of revolutionary power struggle to maintain the Islamic Republic of Iran as non-democratic theocracy.³²

The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 reinforced the Supreme Leader's dominance in the Iranian ruling system because the Supreme Leader favored the coalition of the military-security elites and conservatives. Subsequently, he let their candidates run for president.³³ Similarly, the Supreme Leader intensified his financial and bureaucratic control over the religious institutions and established a surveillance apparatus under leadership that undermined the autonomy of the Grand Ayatollahs and the Shi'a clerics. Therefore, with all the financial resources at his disposal, Khamenei enhanced his position to control and manipulate the "impaired hierocratic authority structure" and to decrease the size of his winning coalitions. This created a group of large disenfranchised unified Selectorates for the first time after the revolution.³⁴

Khamenei reinforced his ties with the conservative coalition and the Revolutionary Guards armed forces. He eliminated rewards to the reformists, pragmatists, and clerics. With the conservative, radical coalition coming into power, nuclear strategies became a central focus in order to assure a stable regional standing for the regime and to export revolutionary Islam outside of Iran. On the other hand, the United States and the West imposed severe sanction measures on Iran's economy, which decreased the GDP.³⁵

Ahmadinejad's economic populism against Western sanctions was based on the Supreme Leader's instructions to rule over the economy and to circumvent the pragmatist coalition. Ahmadinejad could not silence the deprived coalitions and the Iranian population. With the expansion of the extra-legal power of the Supreme Leader, the conservative coalition, and their supporters, the trends toward reform and democratization initiated by Khatami reversed. The detachment of the Supreme Leader from the clerics, reformists, pragmatists, and their electorates sustained and gradually created a strong opposition movement.³⁶

With the reelection of Ahmadinejad in 2009, the combination of deprived coalitions around Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Mousavi and a great number of despondent anti-Ahmadinejad electorates triggered unexpected massive demonstrations. For the first time since the revolution, the disenfranchised coalitions, their loyalists, and their Selectorates allied to regain power. Although the

³¹ Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors*, 93.

³² *Ibid.*, 95.

³³ Alex Kireev, "Iran. Presidential Election 2005," *Electoral Geography*, last modified 2007, <https://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/i/iran/2005-president-elections-iran.html>

³⁴ Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors*, 176.

³⁵ Afshin Molavi, *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Journey to Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

³⁶ Molavi, *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Journey to Freedom*, 183.

Supreme Leader underestimated the extent of the discontent from below and overlooked the reformists' large number of Selectorates, he managed to control the situation with widespread violence.³⁷ As is characteristic of small coalition theocracies, the Iranian Supreme Leader, alongside the allied coalition, utilized severe methods of oppression to subjugate the masses of excluded Selectorates.

With various small coalitions and factions at the center of the Islamic Republic's ruling structure that each promoted a different kind of Islamic revolutionary ideology, the Islamic Republic of Iran managed to create a heterogeneous Selectorate group that deterred revolts and maintained the status quo. As larger groups of people are disenfranchised, revolutions usually occur in small coalition societies. Using various military forces of oppression, the Islamic Republic of Iran created a society that maintained a large amalgam of small groups and loyalists similar to the characteristics of a stable, large-sized coalition society where mass revolutions are not likely to occur.

CONCLUSION

With its strategic location in the Middle East, its oil reserves, and its recent attempts to access nuclear energy, the Islamic Republic of Iran is undoubtedly an important political player to be analyzed. More than three decades after the revolution, the stability of the Islamic Republic of Iran remains an enigma. Its power structure, decision-making process, and exact politics are ambiguous, while the struggle over the revolutionary path and absolute power continues among its coalitions.

The ruling structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran is comprised of small winning coalitions with slightly different ideological definitions of "revolutionary." This prevents loyalists and electorates from cooperating with one another, thereby creating a mass opposition to destabilize the regime. The coalitions include three groups: the pragmatists who manage the economy, the conservatives who lead the armed forces, and the radicals who protect the ideology of the Islamic Revolution.

In order to understand the Iranian post-revolutionary ruling system and to see how its coalitions' structure maintains the stability of the regime it is important to first grasp the complexity and structure of Iran's coalitions. The complexity arises from the ways the winning coalitions managed to eliminate their early rivals to create a theocracy with a religious leader on top and the ways they created various layers of armed forces to prevent coups and revolutions.

The three winning coalitions created the Supreme Leader's position at the beginning of the Islamic Revolution as a symbol of the theocracy and the revolution's ideology. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 ended his all-powerful, charismatic style of leadership. His death called into question the essence of the religio-political guardianship of the revolution and the very nature of clerical rule. However, in the mid-1990s, the second Supreme Leader empowered himself by solely supporting the conservative coalition and their armed forces, thus disenfranchising the other coalitions by recruiting his own technocrats.

The Western economic sanctions against Iran not only crippled the conservatives, but also paralyzed the country's economy entirely, assembling a large group of disadvantaged opposition. For the first time since the revolution, the disenfranchised coalitions, their loyalists, and their Selectorates allied to regain power during the presidential election of 2009 through large-scale revolts, but they were violently suppressed by the conservative armed forces. The Iranian Supreme Leader has been successful in maintaining his power and control over the Iranian theocracy by

³⁷ Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors*, 191.

keeping the dominant coalitions small and divided to reduce the possibility of an alliance among them and by reinforcing the regime's overall stability for over three decades.