

# Political Theology and the Logic of Power: A Political-Theoretical Analysis of Contemporary Iranian Politics

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the logic of power and political theology in contemporary Iran from the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the present. By constructing a progressive analytical framework based on the theories of Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Niccolò Machiavelli, it examines how the Iranian regime maintains rule despite an ongoing legitimacy crisis. First, drawing on Weber's theory of legitimacy, the paper analyzes the transition from Ruhollah Khomeini's charismatic authority to a hybrid theocratic-republican system. The routinization of charisma into a bureaucratic-religious structure has generated persistent legitimacy deficits, with some survey-based evidence indicating declining public support for theocratic governance. Second, using Schmitt's concepts of the state of exception and the friend-enemy distinction, the study shows how the regime consolidates power during crises. By framing internal dissenters and external actors as existential threats, authorities justify extraordinary measures that override ordinary legal constraints. Finally, from a Machiavellian perspective, the paper examines coercive stability maintenance through institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij. These mechanisms rely on deterrence and controlled coercion to sustain order. The study concludes that while this system enables short-term stability, it produces long-term vulnerability by eroding social consensus and institutional legitimacy.

## Keywords

political theology, Iranian politics, Carl Schmitt, Max Weber, authoritarianism

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## 1. Introduction

This paper takes Iran from the period following the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the present as a case study, employing the theories of Weber, Schmitt, and Machiavelli to construct a progressive analytical framework: First, it applies Weber's perspective on the legitimacy of rule to analyze the crisis of legitimacy facing the Iranian regime; then draws on Schmitt's theories of the state of exception and the distinction between friend and foe to explain how the Iranian regime consolidates its rule during crises through exceptional governance and the labeling of enemies; finally, it applies Machiavelli's ideas on the consolidation of power to analyze Iran's specific coercive stability-maintenance measures and the operations of its national security agencies. Historically, Iran established the Islamic Republic through a national referendum in 1979 [1]. The constitution both emphasizes that laws must be based on Islamic precepts and establishes elected institutions, creating a tension between theocratic and republican legitimacy (i.e., theocracy). Weber [2] argued that any system of

rule must be based on some principle of legitimacy. The Iranian regime initially derived its legitimacy from Khomeini's religious charisma, but following his death, it entered a crisis of legitimacy transition. According to Schmitt's theory, he who determines the state of exception is the sovereign, implying that in the face of major crises, Iran's Supreme Leader can declare a state of exception, mobilize security agencies, and define political opponents through a us-versus-them dichotomy. Specifically, the Iranian regime has long constructed external (the West, Israel) and internal (the court conservatives or heretics) enemies, using continuous foreign wars, the Revolutionary Guards, and purges to strengthen the system and consolidate its power. Machiavelli noted that to maintain order, rulers should be feared rather than loved. In Iran's practice, this manifests as the governance of fear exercised by power institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij: the suppression of protesters and dissidents is precisely an application of Machiavelli's principle of maintaining order through punishment. Finally, this paper assesses the contradiction between the short-term stability and long-term legitimacy of the aforementioned governance model: while the current system has achieved relative stability under strict control, the disconnect from public demands, combined with external pressures, renders its long-term legitimacy extremely fragile (polls indicate that approximately 80% of Iranians wish to end the theocratic regime). This is particularly evident following the 2022 Mahsa Amini incident; the Iranian people have been in a state of extreme dissatisfaction and protest against the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian regime. This situation has persisted through recent escalating friction and military tensions between Iran and Israel, as well as the passing of Supreme Leader Khamenei. His son, Mojtaba, has been called upon to lead during this chaotic period of internal turmoil and external threats. The question now is how he will stabilize Iran's current position in the international arena and consolidate internal political power.

## **2. Historical Background: The Formation and Legitimacy Tensions of Iran's Hybrid Theocratic-Republican System**

In 1979, Iran overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and established the Islamic Republic [3,4]. Through a national referendum held in March 1979, 98.2% of Iranians approved the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The new constitution incorporated the Shia faqih system into the state structure: Article 1 declares that the State of Iran is an Islamic Republic [1]; Article 4 stipulates that all civil, criminal, economic, administrative, cultural, military, and political laws and regulations must be based on Islamic principles, with final rulings made by Islamic jurists on the Guardian Council [3]. Institutionally, Iran features both elected bodies—such as the presidency and parliament—and a theocratic apparatus centered on the Supreme Leader (Velayat-e faqih), forming a hybrid structure where electoral and religious principles coexist. This hybrid system contains a tension regarding legitimacy: on the one hand, it relies on revolutionary myth and religious authority for legitimacy; on the other, it conducts elections (such as for the presidency and parliament) to secure a degree of public endorsement. Academics often refer to this system as a theocratic-republican hybrid [5]. It is precisely within this structure that crises of legitimacy frequently emerge: for instance, during economic or social crises, if the elected government disagrees with the Supreme Leader, a misalignment of authority and public skepticism arises within the system [6]. Recent polls indicate that approximately 80% of Iranian respondents support ending theocratic rule and abolishing the Supreme Leader system, highlighting the regime's profound legitimacy deficit [7].

## **3. Theoretical Framework: Key Concepts of Weber, Schmitt, and Machiavelli**

### **3.1 Weber's Theory of Legitimacy**

Max Weber argued that any system of rule must be underpinned by some basis of legitimacy, otherwise it will be difficult to sustain [8]. He classified types of authority into three ideal types (legitimate authority): traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. Traditional authority relies on long-standing customs (the authority of the eternal yesterday); legal-rational authority relies on written laws and bureaucratic systems; and charismatic authority relies on the leader's extraordinary personality and the emotional convictions of followers [2]. Weber specifically noted that charismatic rule is inherently unstable: it relies on the extraordinary sanctity or heroism of an individual leader, and the continuation of its authority requires sustained support from followers; when the leader dies or their charisma wanes, their authority must be transformed into a traditional or legal form through routinization, otherwise the rule will lose its legitimacy. As he put it, once a charismatic ruler loses his charisma or passes away, the charismatic power system often

transforms into a traditional or legal-rational one [9]. Furthermore, Weber emphasized that legitimacy is crucial to any political order; when legitimacy collapses, stable rule also disintegrates [10].

### **3.2 Schmitt's State of Exception and the Distinction Between Friend and Foe**

Carl Schmitt criticized liberal politics and introduced the concept of the state of exception. In the opening sentence of his book *Political Theology*, he asserted: The sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception (Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet) [11]. This implies that in times of crisis, true power lies with whoever can make decisions that transcend the ordinary legal framework. Schmitt believed that the normal rule-of-law system would inevitably encounter exceptions, at which point someone must step forward to exercise the power of decision. He also emphasized that the essence of politics lies in the friend–enemy distinction: the political community defines itself by distinguishing between friends and enemies, and this relationship implies the possibility of waging armed struggle and even the potential for physical extermination against the enemy [12]. In other words, politics contains a latent element of violence, and political communities often require the concept of an enemy to foster internal cohesion.

### **3.3 Machiavelli's Governance of Power and Fear**

In *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli discussed the methods by which a ruler maintains stability. One of his famous sayings is: Ask yourself: is it better to be loved or to be feared? Since it is difficult to be both, ... it is better to be feared than to be loved [13]. He pointed out that human nature is treacherous, fickle, self-serving, and cowardly; when forced to choose between personal gain and safety, people are prone to abandoning affection and loyalty. Therefore, Machiavelli believed that rulers should prefer to inspire fear in their subjects, for the fear of punishment never diminishes. At the same time, he cautioned rulers against harboring excessive hatred toward the people: while harsh laws and severe punishments may be used in moderation, they should not deprive the people of their property, lest this provoke discontent. Overall, Machiavelli's discourse underscores the importance of maintaining order through strength, discipline, and fear.

## **4. Analysis: The Progressive Application of Three Theories in Iran**

### **4.1 The Crisis of Legitimacy from a Weberian Perspective**

Following the 1979 Revolution, Khomeini leveraged his religious charisma and status as the leader of the revolution to provide the new regime with strong legitimacy. According to Weber's analysis, this constituted a classic form of charismatic rule: the masses obeyed out of faith in Khomeini, rather than solely on the basis of traditional rules or legal procedures [9]. However, after Khomeini's death, the existing charismatic legitimacy faced collapse. The regime sought to transform its authority into new, enduring forms through the constitution and elections (for example, by establishing institutions such as the Supreme Leader system and the Guardian Council), thereby regularizing charismatic rule into legal-traditional rule [14]. For instance, the Iranian Constitution stipulates that the Guardian Council, composed of religious jurists, conducts Islamic constitutional reviews of all laws, and that the Assembly of Experts elects the Supreme Leader—both of which represent institutional arrangements designed to ensure continuity following the waning of Khomeini's personal charisma [15]. Furthermore, scholars point out that although the Iranian system retains electoral forms, since the Supreme Leader enjoys the final decision-making authority granted by the Constitution, its fundamental legitimacy still relies on religious foundations and the spirit of the revolution [16]. Current polls indicate that approximately 80% of Iranians support ending theocratic rule, reflecting a profound crisis in the regime's legitimacy [7]. As Weber cautioned, once the original sources of legitimacy fail, the regime must find new justifications; otherwise, order cannot be sustained. For Iran, the transition from Khomeini's personal charisma to a legitimacy grounded in revolutionary values and the bureaucratic system has been ongoing, but this transition has not been entirely successful, leading to persistent doubts about the regime's legitimacy [17].

### **4.2 The Concept of the Exceptional and the Division Between Friend and Foe from Schmitt's Perspective**

Faced with the aforementioned legitimacy crisis, the Iranian regime often resorts to declaring a state of emergency and defining the boundaries between friend and foe to maintain stability. As Schmitt observed, the

one who steps forward to make decisions in times of crisis is the sovereign [11]. Historically, Iran has long been under the pressure of war and sanctions: the 1980–1988 war with Iraq was termed the Holy Defense, during which the regime utilized nationalist and religious narratives to rally public support and reinforce the Supreme Leader’s decision-making authority; in recent years, Western sanctions against Iran have also been portrayed as an external enemy, enabling the regime to expand its administrative powers in the name of safeguarding national security. Whenever domestic dissent arises—such as the suppression of the left after 1979, the Kurdish uprising of the 1980s, the 2009 Green Movement, and the 2022 Women’s Lives, Freedom protests—the regime declares a state of emergency and deploys the Revolutionary Guards and security forces to suppress it by force [18,19]. Schmitt argued that during a state of exception, the law is temporarily suspended, requiring decisive action by the sovereign; this aligns closely with the reality in Iran, where the Supreme Leader holds the authority to declare war, impose martial law, and issue emergency decrees [11]. At the same time, Schmitt’s Friend-Enemy theory directly addresses Iran’s political logic: domestically, the regime stigmatizes dissidents as traitors and reactionary forces, while externally, it labels the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia as enemies to foster a sense of presence and unity [12]. The underlying logic of legitimacy behind this dichotomy is to externalize conflict and struggle, highlighting the regime’s necessity to safeguard the nation—even if it requires the violent elimination of enemies. As Schmitt once stated, the distinction between friend and foe... implies the ‘real possibility of killing,’ which precisely captures the regime’s ruthless attitude toward political opponents and Islamic activists deemed heretical. Through exceptional governance and the labeling of friend and foe, the Iranian regime has temporarily alleviated pressure on its legitimacy: anyone who questions the Supreme Leader or the Islamic system is deemed an enemy in a state of emergency, thereby justifying repressive actions. However, this model contains inherent contradictions: while it reinforces the regime’s immediate legitimacy, it sacrifices long-term legal order and public trust.

### 4.3 Practices of Coercive Stability Maintenance from a Machiavelli Perspective

Building on the aforementioned crisis of legitimacy and exceptional governance, the Iranian regime has further resorted to fear and coercive stability maintenance, a strategy that aligns perfectly with Machiavelli’s teachings. As Machiavelli observed, People are less reckless in offending those they love than those they fear... the fear of punishment never fades [13]. Iran’s Supreme Leader and its security apparatus (particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, and the Basij militia) effectively rely on this mechanism of fear to maintain order: they have normalized high-pressure law enforcement nationwide, such as deploying force during major demonstrations, conducting swift trials and executions of dissidents in religious courts, and imposing strict controls on the media and civil society [20-22]. These practices align with Machiavelli’s concept of tolerable cruelty (i.e., the moderate use of violence to suppress dissent and maintain rule, without excessively alienating the populace). For instance, Iranian authorities frequently emphasize the legitimacy and necessity of security-related rulings and avoid overt confiscation of private property to prevent widespread resentment, demonstrating the influence of Machiavelli’s principle of instilling fear without provoking hatred [19]. Furthermore, Machiavelli stated that affection is the bond of duty, which often breaks in the face of self-interest; fear, however, endures forever. This perspective suggests that deterrence must be continuously employed to prevent rebellion, which in Iran manifests as high-intensity suppression of counterrevolutionary activities and the promotion of military might. When the public is enthusiastic about jihad or anti-American sentiment, security agencies seize the opportunity to gain legitimacy; and when public fervor subsides, they rely on the need to combat terrorism and internal and external enemies to justify strong-arm control. In short, Iran’s specific stability-maintenance mechanisms—from the Revolutionary Guards’ suppression of demonstrations to the intelligence services’ surveillance systems—are logically consistent with Machiavelli’s power-based governance: maintaining power through institutionalized violence, that is, preserving order with fear as its foundation.

## 5. Conclusion

A synthesis of these three theoretical perspectives reveals that Iran’s ruling elite has constructed a chain of power that originates in religious charisma, is sustained by exceptional measures, and is reinforced by violent repression. This model has effectively suppressed crises in the short term: the constitution and religious doctrine provide the authorities with a justification for legitimacy (Weber); the Supreme Leader can declare martial law and mobilize security agencies at any time (Schmitt); and the powerful armed forces maintain

internal stability and project national prestige abroad (Machiavelli). However, as scholars have pointed out, this stability based on a state of emergency often leads to long-term consequences. The fact that over 80% of the population demands an end to theocratic rule indicates that the regime's mainstream legitimacy has been severely eroded. Although the government has managed to maintain its rule through emergency measures during each crisis, in the long run, such temporary measures cannot replace genuine social consensus. Historical experience also shows that overreliance on violence and the enemy framework to gain public trust can only bring about temporary class stability and fails to resolve deep-seated social contradictions; The normalization of the exception emphasized by Schmitt itself erodes the ordinary legal order. Therefore, although the current framework allows the regime to maintain temporary stability, it is also pushing the regime's lack of legitimacy, economic difficulties, and social divisions to a critical juncture. In the future, whether the Iranian regime can resolve the legitimacy problem described by Weber, or continue to buy time through Schmittian exceptional measures and Marxian coercive stabilization, remains the key to its survival.

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