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Political Power of Iranian Hierocracies

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that the current Iranian regime is no novelty in Iranian history and political thinking, but has two antecedents: the rule of the Sasanians in late Antiquity (3rd–7th centuries) and that of the Safavids (16th–18th centuries) in modern times. After a brief outline of relevant historical events the paper scrutinizes the common features of these three regimes. The comparison includes the analyses of foreign policy, its scope, aim and direction, cultural policy and the relevance of political ideologies, socio-economic policy, religious policy, political structure and mechanisms of decision-making. The results of the comparison are visualized in a table pointing out numerous similarities and remarkable common features throughout the centuries.

Keywords: Iran, hierocracy, comparative politics, religion

Introduction

The nature and causes of the Islamic revolution have been the focus of attention of social scientists for decades, but the answers they have provided for this undoubtedly complex phenomenon emphasize considerably different aspects. There is an enormous amount of literature dealing with the subject.

Some deal with the Iranian revolution within the theoretical framework of Islamism and underline that the Iranian revolution is a manifestation of modern political Islam.¹ These writers are interested in what can be fitted into the theoretical framework of political Islam and pay less attention to the historical and cultural background of Iranian society.

¹ Peter Mandaville: *Global Political Islam*. Routledge: London: 2007: 179-197; Olivier Roy: *The Failure of Political Islam*. I. B. Tauris: London: 1994: 168-183; Olivier Roy: *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma*. Columbia University Press: New York: 2004: 83-88; Mohammed Ayoob: *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*. The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor: 2008: 42-63; Tarek Osman: *Islamism. A History of Political Islam from the Fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Rise of ISIS*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London: 2016:189-216.

Other writings are works of modern historians pointing out Iranian socio-economic peculiarities in detail, while putting less emphasis on ideological features.²

This essay does not belong to either of these types, since it intends to approach the problem rather from the global viewpoint of history.

As we will see, the current system is not the only hierocratic form of rule in Iran, but it has two antecedents during the long history of the Iranian nation. That is why it seems worthwhile to compare and contrast these systems, and to underline similarities and differences between them, which in turn will also provide us with the opportunity to draw more general conclusions.

1. Turning points in Iranian history

A history going back thousands of years could not be told in one article; therefore, I will highlight only some decisive turning points in Iranian history that will help to understand the main arguments of this paper.

1.1 Ancient Iran

Pastoralist tribes speaking various dialects of Iranian languages arrived on the Iranian plateau around 1000 BCE and settled down in Western Iran along the Zagros Mountains. Tribes which later came to be known as Medes settled close to the eastern border of the then powerful Assyrians, a military hegemon of the Ancient Near East which regarded the presence of the Median tribal confederacy both as a military threat and an opportunity to gain horses which the Assyrian army greatly needed. As a result, wars were fought with Assyrian victories, but when the Median leaders formed an alliance with the Babylonians, they were powerful enough to drastically change events.

In a couple of years, the most important Assyrian cities, including the capital, fell into the hands of the allied forces and the last battle in 610 BCE diminished the Assyrian state altogether. The territory of the former Assyrian state was divided between the Medes and the Babylonians, two powerful empires which regarded each other more and more as rivals, not allies. Open hostilities were abandoned, however, and the next decades witnessed an equilibrium of forces in the Near East.³

² Charles Kurzman: *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass.: 2005; Nikkie R. Keddie: *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press: New Haven: 2003: 214-240; Ervand Abrahamian: *Khomeinism. Essays on the Islamic Republic*. University of California Press: Berkeley: 1993; Said Amir Arjomand. *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors*. Oxford University Press: Oxford: 2009. David Menashri: *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*. Routledge: New York: 2001.

³ For more on these wars see: Amelie Kuhrt: *The Persian Empire*. Routledge: London: 2009: 19-46.

This situation came to an end when Kurush (Cyrus), backed by the Persian tribes, revolted against Astyages, the last king of the Medes, and secured his victory on the battlefield near Pasargade with the help of the Median aristocracy changing sides.

With the great wars of Cyrus and his son Cambyses (530–522 BCE), the Persian Empire grew to an unprecedented extent, including territories from Egypt to Afghanistan, and Pakistan to Bulgaria and Greece. Although Darius I and his son, Xerxes, ultimately lost the Greek wars, it was by no means a great disaster for the Persians. The real problems were found within the empire itself: ineffective government, heavy taxation, open revolts and harem intrigues prevented the Achaemenid Empire from stabilizing itself in a radically changing environment (the rise of the Macedonians; the secession of Egypt; and the wars of the governors with each other).

When Alexander sought revenge for Athens, he found a disorganized state which fell to him within a few years. But Alexander seems to have had no strategy for the future, or at least was prevented from acting accordingly by his early death, a consequence of his dissolute lifestyle.

As a result, open hostility broke out between his former commanders to decide succession, with Seleukos emerging as victor (Ipsos: 301 BCE). This is how the Seleucids came to power in Iran and the Near East.⁴

But Seleucid power did not last for long in Iran because they lost more and more territories to an Eastern Iranian tribal federation, the Parnis. The Parnis settled down in the north-eastern province of Iran already known during Achaemenian times as Parthava. They were renamed after it, which is the reason they are called Parthians today. The Parthians annexed Iran and later also Mesopotamia from the Seleucids and under strong leadership by kings, such as Mithridates I (171–138) and Mithridates II (123–87), they established an Iranian empire large enough to be a dangerous rival to the Romans during the coming centuries.

The Parthians restored the Achaemenid Empire without the territories of Egypt, Asia Minor and Palestine, although they did everything to have access to the Mediterranean Sea through Syria and Palestine. The Romans, for their part, wanted to prevent the Parthians from occupying these strategically important territories, both for military

⁴ A classic about this period is Albert T. Olmstead's: *History of the Persian Empire*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1948; fine comprehensive surveys are Richard N. Frye's: *The Heritage of Persia*. The World Publishing Company: Cleveland and New York: 1963: 53-114 and Josef Wiesehöfer's: *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD*. I. B. Tauris: London 1996: 5-102; the work of Muhammad Dandamaev and Vladimir Lukonin: *The Culture and Social Institutions of Ancient Iran*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1989 discusses political, economic and social institutions and various aspects of cultural life; recently Amelie Kuhrt's: *The Persian Empire*. Routledge: London: 2009 covers the topic and the period in the same depth.

reasons and for long distance trade, resulting in unavoidable hostilities. The great Roman-Parthian wars of the first two centuries CE always started with Roman military successes but ended with peace treaties confirming the status quo.

When during the first years of the 3rd century CE Caracalla was defeated by the Parthians, nobody believed this powerful kingdom would soon be destroyed.⁵

Here history repeated itself: as in the case of the Medians, a regional power not overthrown by rival states, its sudden end came from within in the form of a revolt, seemingly unimportant at the beginning but growing very dangerous with the powerful nobility changing sides.

In the case of the Parthians, Ardashir, a local Persian leader in the remote province of Pars, revolted against the Parthian king who was engaged in world politics and paid no attention to his case. But Ardashir's revolt spread as he won more and more battles against other local leaders and in the end established himself as the greatest challenge to the Parthian king. The final battle was won by Ardashir with most of the Parthian nobility on his side. This is how the Parthian kingdom came to a sudden end and the Persian Sasanian dynasty started.⁶

With the coming to power of the Sasanians, the political landscape of Iran changed: the religion of Zarathustra (Zoroaster) evolved more and more into central position both in a religious and political sense; a new Zoroastrian church was established, an ecclesiastic organisation unknown to the Achaemenids and the Parthians.

The Sasanian kings tried to centralise their monarchy, though this effort was hindered by the joint opposition of the nobility (both Parthian and Persian) and the Zoroastrian clergy. Foreign policy, however, remained unchanged, and the strategic importance of the Levant was also acknowledged by the Sasanians, who fought bloody and victorious wars with the Romans during the 3rd century. The celebrated victories of Shapur I over the Romans (244; 259–260) correspond at the same time to the shame of the Roman rulers being captured or killed in the battlefield.

In spite of this, the Sasanians were prevented from occupying Syria and the Levant and with the death of Shapur I, former Persian victories were transformed into heroic stories of the glorious past, yet were unable to prevent the Romans to retaliating for their losses. After decades of warfare the border was established, as in the case of the Parthians, at

⁵ Richard N. Frye's: *The Heritage of Persia*. The World Publishing Company: Cleveland and New York: 1963: 124-168 has a balanced view on the role of the Seleucid's in Iran and the Hellenistic heritage; for the rule of the Arsacids (Parthians) see Frye: 170-197, Wiesehöfer: *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD*. I. B. Tauris: London: 1996: 115-149 and Klaus Schippmann: *Grundzüge der Parthischen Geschichte*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt: 1980.

⁶ The story of Ardashir's coming to power is narrated by a short work full of legends and contradictions called Kar Namag-i Ardashir (accessible in Middle Persian in H. S. Nyberg's: *Manual of Pahlavi vol. I-II*: Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden: 1974.).

status quo ante. During the long reign of Shapur II (309–379), the Sasanian state witnessed remarkable stability and prosperity.

But the next decades proved to be very turbulent both in domestic and foreign policy. The coming of the Huns from the East and the catastrophic foreign policy of Peroz forced the empire to subjugation by the Huns. Peroz's son, Kavad, was also unable to restore law and order and to free Iran from the Huns, while the Mazdakite uprising against the nobility and feudal system contributed to more chaos.

It was left to Khusrav I (531–579) to secure law and order, gain victory over the Huns, and re-establish a state on solid ground both politically and economically. Small wonder that Khusrav was and still is regarded as one of the most talented and celebrated Persian kings. His son, Ormazd, followed the path of his father but was dethroned and killed by conspirators from among the nobility who secured the throne for his son, Khusrav II (590–628). This king opened hostilities with the Byzantines which resulted in a nearly 25-year war ending in 628 with catastrophic consequences: with no territory won the empire suffered heavily. It lost a great amount of military forces and labourers, was ruined economically, and its king was killed in the end by the hands of his own men.

The next decades bear witness to the agony of the dynasty unable to restore order even in its own palace, due to constant harem intrigues, a situation very similar to that of the last decades of the Achaemenids. To press similarities further: with Yazdagerd III, the last Sasanian king, we have a tragic historical figure similar to Darius III: both kings had to face a powerful enemy with a disintegrated, ruined empire. Just as Darius III lost to Alexander, so did Yazdagerd III to the Arab-Muslim army.⁷

1.2 The coming of Islam to Iran

The demise of the Sasanians was perhaps the most important turning point in Iranian history: not only a dynasty disappeared, but Iran as a hegemonic power in the Middle East and a sovereign state ceased to exist.

⁷ For the Sasanian political history books of reference are Richard N. Frye's: *The Heritage of Persia*. The World Publishing Company: Cleveland and New York: 1963: 198-222 and Klaus Schippmann's: *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt: 1990. Josef Wiesehöfer's: *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD*. I. B. Tauris: London: 1996: 151-221 and Touraj Daryaee's: *Sasanian Empire: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2009 discuss in addition to political history also social and economic institutions, religions, the arts and sciences. A classic on Sasanian economic history remains Franz Altheim – Ruth Stiehl's: *Ein Asiatischer Staat*. Limes Verlag: Wiesbaden: 1954; on social history: Ahmad Tafazzoli: *Sasanian Society*. Bibliotheca Persica Press: New York: 2000. A new theory was developed about the fall of the Sasanians by Parvaneh Pourshariati: *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2017.

What is more, the native Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, lost ground against Islam which became dominant within three centuries as more and more individuals and communities embraced Islam.⁸

As a result, Iran lost its former status and became one region of many in the Umayyad Caliphate. After 750, with the Abbasids on the rise, the importance of Iranian cultural heritage grew, symbolised by the new capital, Baghdad, where Iranian influence was heavily felt, most notably in the state administration.⁹

When the power of the caliphate was in a steady decline during the next centuries, we can witness the secession of the periphery, among them Iranian territories, from the Caliphate. This is the reason why local dynasties such as the Samanids (East Iran), the Saffarids (South Iran), the Buyids or Buvayhids (West Iran) managed to establish semi-independent states which remained within the boundaries of the Caliphate and acknowledged the caliph as their supreme lord.

Things changed drastically when the Saljuqids, a confederacy of nomadic tribes of Turkish origin who entered Iran in the first half of the 11th century, captured Baghdad and devastated the Byzantine emperor's army in the battle of Manzikert (1071), a victory of importance for the next centuries.¹⁰ The Saljuqids established their own reign in Iran, converted to Islam but failed to unite the country effectively, although a member of the local gentry, Nizam al-mulk (1017–1092), a genius in public administration, did everything to form an effective government. The last ruler, Sanjar's death (1157) in East Iran marked the end of the dynasty and the beginning of a new power vacuum.¹¹

This power vacuum was brutally filled by the invading Mongols who entered East Iran at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and their conquest was only stopped by the Mamluks in 1260 in Syria. Since the ruling dynasties' power was split according to the territories in their control (e.g. the Golden Horde, the Mongol dynasty in China), the Mongols remaining in Iran formed the Ilkhanid dynasty.

⁸ For the spread of Islam in Iran and the various political and religious resistance against it see Patricia Crone: *The Nativist Prophets and Early Islamic Iran. Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2012.

⁹ For the Abbasids and their administration see Ira M. Lapidus: *A History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2014: 74-85; a classic study of the first Islamic centuries remains that of Michael Morony: *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*. Princeton University Press: Princeton: 1984.

¹⁰ For the political history of these turbulent centuries see Bertold Spuler: *Iran in früh-Islamischer Zeit. Politik, Kultur, Verwaltung, und Öffentliches Leben Zwischen der Arabischen und der Seldschukischen Eroberung 633 bis 1055*. Franz Steiner Verlag: Wiesbaden: 1952:69-111.

¹¹ A detailed overview about the political development during the reign of the Seljuqids is provided by C. E. Bosworth: *The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World AD 1000-1217*. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 5: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1968:1-202.

Established by a grandson of Genghis Khan, Hülegü (1218–1265), this dynasty remained in power for less than a century, with Iran falling into a power vacuum again upon Arpa Khan's death (1336).

The Mongol invasion brought devastation and horror at the beginning but there was also some cultural flourishing at its end. It was Ghazan Khan (1295–1304) who did the most to create a unified and prosperous state from a devastated country by instituting martial rule, stopping plunder and other forms of devastation, and establishing a state administration with the help of Iranian collaborators. His reforms did not last long, however, and Iran became disunited again after a few decades of his descendants' unfortunate rule.¹²

The next unified Iranian government was established only in 1501 with the Safavids coming to power. In the interlude Iran or, properly speaking, some parts of Iran, were governed for shorter or longer periods by Timur and his successors, the Timurids (1370–1506) in the east and the south,¹³ the Qara Qoyunlus (1380–1468) and the Aq Qoyunlus (1378–1508), Turkish nomadic tribal confederations, in the west and the north.¹⁴

The rising of the Safavids was, therefore, an important turning point, marking the end of the period of fragmentation and the birth of a central government. The changes brought about by the Safavids were more complex than this. The Safavids were originally masters of a Sufi order founded by Safi al-Din, a highly respected figure among his contemporaries who lived in Ardabil during the last decades of Mongol rule in Iran. The Safavid order evolved over the next century into an influential and powerful Sufi brotherhood with no direct political aspirations.

When, however, Shaykh Junayd changed policy in the middle of the 15th century, the Safavids entered Anatolian politics, made an alliance with the Aq Qoyunlus and even participated in local wars where Junayd and later his son and successor, Haydar, lost their lives. The Safavids were backed by many Anatolian Turkmen tribal warriors, the Qizilbash who formed the main basis of their army.

With their help the very young Isma'il, the leader of the order, became victorious in these local tribal rivalries and was crowned Iranian king in 1501.

¹² Svat Soucek: *A History of Inner Asia*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2000: 103-122; John Andrew Boyle: *Dynastic and Political History of the Il-Khans*. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 5: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1968: 303-421; for the information of the eyewitness historiographer of the Mongol period see Rashid al-Din: *The Successors of Genghis Khan* (Translated from the Persian by John Andrew Boyle). Columbia University Press: New York: 1971.

¹³ Beatrice Manz: *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2007: 13-49.

¹⁴ H. R. Roemer: *The Türkmen Dynasties*. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 6: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1986: 147-188.

Shah Isma'il, as he was known from this time on, declared Shi'ism as the state religion, causing indignation among the Sunni majority of Iran.

After the successful conquest of modern-day Iran and some parts of Iraq and Afghanistan, the encounter with the Ottomans – who regarded the Safavids with good reason a powerful rival – was inevitable. The battle of Chaldiran (1514) showed the military supremacy of the Ottomans and ruined the myth of Isma'il's invincibility; therefore, the treaty of Amasya in 1555 was concluded in favour of the Ottomans. Safavids were, by contrast, more successful in the eastern frontier where Shah Tahmasb (1524–1576) defeated the invading Uzbeks and annexed some territories in the east around Qandahar.¹⁵

Securing thus both the western and the eastern frontiers, a new Iranian state emerged governed by a former Sufi brotherhood of Turkish origin. But the new regime was more and more Iranicized as local experts were needed to run an effective government. When the capital was later moved from Tabriz to Isfahan, this change was expressed symbolically, too.

The Qizilbash Turkmen warriors, however, did not welcome these changes and tried to regain their former leading positions, even threatening the royal power of the kings. With the liquidation of the Qizilbash leaders, Shah 'Abbas I put an end to this power struggle and secured absolute power for the kings.

With Shah 'Abbas the Great, we have the most capable Safavid king on the Iranian throne, one who effectively strengthened royal power against nomadic influence. He terminated their political and economic privileges, established a more effective central government than his predecessors, reformed the army which enabled him to wage wars with decisive victories, and developed infrastructure by building roads and bridges, thus contributing to the flourishing of local and long-distance trade. He also had a tolerant policy toward non-Muslims but was at the same time intolerant against Muslim heretics. The beautiful city centre of Isfahan as we know it today was also taking shape during his reign.

Unfortunately for the Safavids no such competent king ever emerged from among Shah Abbas the Great's offspring, and the rule of the Safavids started to decline. Deteriorating economically, militarily and politically, Sultan Husain (1688–1726) was unable to stop invading Afghan tribesmen who managed to blockade the capital causing endless suffering for the inhabitants (1722).

¹⁵ H. R. Roemer: *The Safavid Period*. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 6: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1986: 189-350; for recent studies see Andrew J. Newman: *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2006; and Roger Savory: *Iran under the Safavids*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2007 (originally published in 1980): 27-75.

Though the Afghan interlude did not last for long, with the collapse of the Safavids, Iran remained disunited for the rest of the 18th century because neither Nadir Shah (1736–1747) in the east nor the much beloved Karim Khan Zand (1751–1779) in the south-west were able to unite the country.¹⁶

1.3. The Modern Period

Only with Agha Mohammed Khan (1789–1797) and the rise of the Qajars (1789–1925) was there a united Iran again.

The Qajars were no newcomers in Iranian politics: a tribe of Turkoman origin in north-eastern Iran, they had close relations with the Safavids, enjoying prominence during their rule. After the demise of the Safavids, the Qajars contested for power for half a century with the Zands, which they won in the end. The backwardness of Iran became manifest during the Qajar rule which was to be seen not only with respect to the European countries but also to the Ottomans and the Russians.

This is the reason why the Qajars lost all military encounters with the Russians during the reign of Fath ʿAli Shah (1797–1834) and lost considerable territories in the following humiliating peace treaties. Although some efforts of reform were made during the long reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848–1896), notably by the reforming minister, Amir Kabir (1848–1852), his assassination marked also the end of any such policies.

Ineffective governance, harsh rule, corruption, and humiliating concessions granted to foreigners gave rise to an opposition wanting gradual reforms. These demands included a constitution which was granted at the end by Mozaffar al-Din Shah in 1906, after some protests and demonstrations. The first Iranian constitution was modelled on the constitution of Belgium (1831), though political and social circumstances were rather different in Iran. As a result, the constitution did not bring calm into Iranian domestic politics, which became more complicated when the First World War broke out.

Though declared neutral, considerable parts of Persia were occupied by the rival powers (Ottomans, Russians, Britain). No wonder, then, that at the end of the war Qajar rule was *de facto* non-existent, which made it possible for Reza Khan, Commander of only 2,500 Cossacks, to enter the capital in 1921. He became Minister of War that year,

¹⁶ Roger Savory: *Iran under the Safavids*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2007: 76-103, 226-253; John Perry: The Zand dynasty. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 7: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1991: 63-103.

Prime Minister in 1923, and was crowned as king in 1926. He took the name Pahlavi (a hint to the Sasanian period) and this is how the Pahlavi dynasty was born.¹⁷

Modelled on Kemal Atatürk's reforms, a modernization period began which was accompanied by westernization and secularization (expansion of the army, improvement of transport infrastructure, education reforms, new dress code, language reform, renaming the country from Persia to Iran) which met social opposition headed by the 'ulama', who feared to lose their traditional power (education, waqfs, courts). As a result of Reza Shah's pro-German policy during the 1930s British and Soviet forces entered Iran in 1941, and the shah abdicated in favour of his son.

Mohammed Reza took effective control only after 1946 when the Azerbaijan crisis was solved, and the Soviet troops withdrew from Iran. A new crisis soon emerged when Mohammed Mosaddeq, leader of the National Front, became Prime Minister in 1951, and decided to nationalize Iranian oil. This made him very popular in the country, but he was unable to settle all domestic and international problems resulting from this action (the blockade of the British, large debt).

Mosaddeq was finally removed from office in 1953 with the help of the CIA (Operation: Ajax) and sentenced to life-long house arrest. Though this action brought the king back to full control again, it gave rise to enduring nationwide conspiracy theories about hidden foreign manipulations in Iranian politics. Moreover, the coup made the shah a close ally of the USA, his position being denounced by the opposition as a puppet of the Americans (see such caricatures after the revolution).

The king continued the reforms initiated by his father some decades earlier including more educational reforms, land reform, liberalization, and modernization of the army. It was put together in a program called the White Revolution in the 1960s. Being a nationalistic, secular westernization, this program again met the opposition of the 'ulama', this time headed by a young cleric, Khomeini, who was expelled from the country.

The 1970s saw an economic boom fuelled by rising income from the oil industry and at the same time the controversies over the land reform, which made millions of people unemployed. It forced them to settle in cities looking for jobs, more often than not in vain.

¹⁷ A detailed analysis of the events is provided by Gavin Hambly: Agha Muhammad Khan and the Establishment of the Qajar Dynasty. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1991: 104-143; Nikkie R. Keddie: Iran under the Later Qajars. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1991: 174-212; Nikkie R. Keddie: *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925*. Mazda Publishers: Costa Mesa, California: 1999:14-77; Nikkie R. Keddie: *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press: New Haven: 2006: 22-73; Richard Yann: *A Social and Political History since the Qajars*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2019: 1-159.

Thus, as a result of the reforms, Iranian society became polarised between the very few rich and a mass of people living in poverty; therefore, dissatisfaction with the regime grew. Dissenters were silenced with the help of the security agency SAVAK for decades, but repression failed at the end and revolutionary forces were not to be stopped even by imposing martial law in 1978.

Since the army was not in full control of the situation the shah fled the country the next year and made the way free for Khomeini to return.¹⁸

2. Iranian hierocracies in history

2.1 Zoroastrianism

The Avesta, the holy book of the original Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, has several terms to refer to ecclesiastic functions. One of them, *ratu*, designates a peculiar group of priests, who were more than priests performing rituals but had to be regarded rather as spiritual leaders, and whose unquestionable intellectual abilities and social authority gave them absolute power with respect to the people under their care. Besides religious leadership this included legal competence as well, since the *ratu* had the power to excommunicate those who challenged their leadership.

Therefore, as demonstrated by Philip G. Kreyenbroek, the leadership of a spiritual authority is deeply rooted in Iranian tradition and goes back millennia (Kreyenbroek 1994, 3-5).¹⁹ There seemed to be no fundamental change in the *ratu*'s competencies for centuries since in the Sasanian era (224–651 CE): the *rad* continued to be a spiritual leader of those under his leadership, and in line with Sasanian politics, he was also the discretionary judge of sins and crimes committed against religious morality (Jany 2007, 350-352).²⁰ Against this background it is worth considering the political leadership of spiritual authorities in Iranian history.

¹⁸ The modernisation policy of the Pahlavis and its failures and contradictions are analysed by Gavin Hambly: *The Pahlavi Autocracy*. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1991:213-296; Nikkie R. Keddie: *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press: New Haven: 2006: 132-169; Ervand Abrahamian: *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2008: 65-158; see also Vanessa Martin's book on the constitutional revolution: *Islam and Modernism. The Iranian Revolution of 1906*. I. B. Tauris: London: 1989 and her most recent *Iran between Islamic Nationalism and Secularism: The Constitutional Revolution of 1906*. I. B. Tauris: London (British Institute of Persian Studies): 2013.

¹⁹ Philip G. Kreyenbroek: On the concept of spiritual authority in Zoroastrianism. In: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 17 (1994): 3–5. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Jerusalem.

²⁰ Jany Janos: Criminal Justice in Sasanian Persia. In: *Iranica Antiqua* XLII (2007): 350–352. Peeters Publisher: Ghent.

At first sight the Achaemenid period (559–331 BCE) has no place in a discussion on hierocracy since the rule of the Achaemenids was a secular monarchy with no official state religion and, therefore, providing considerable religious autonomy to its subject peoples. Even so we can witness references to the high god Ahura Mazda in the inscriptions of Persian rulers, but it was a common practice for centuries and fits the political traditions of the Ancient Near East.

More significant than this is the so-called *daiva*-inscription of Xerxes (486–465 BCE), a royal edict which orders the destruction of the temples of false gods and forbids the cult of demons (= false gods) as the only sign of religious intolerance in this period.²¹ While it is unclear against which religion's practice the order was issued,²² it is evident that it represents a policy change compared to earlier practice.

The replacement of the secular, agriculture-based Ancient Persian calendar by a fully Zoroastrian calendar in the second half of the Achaemenid era was another step to establish a more religion-based political structure,²³ but the inscription of Darius I (522–486 BCE) and its worldview is of primary importance for our present investigation.

In fact, Darius I came to power through a conspiracy followed by an armed revolt which took Darius almost two years to suppress.²⁴ After his victory, Darius put in writing his own version of the events in the rock inscription near Behistun, in which the king presented himself as a representative of law and order and the favourite of the divinity. This is commonplace in the Near East, but he goes further and condemns his enemies as men of lies. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this rhetoric because in Zoroastrianism lying (Old Persian *drauga*, Avestan *druj*) is one of the most evil acts which is attached to the world of Angra Mainyu (Evil Spirit) and his associates like Azi Dahaka, a fearful dragon who was defeated by the great Iranian hero Thraetaona.

²¹ The Old Persian text is edited by Roland G. Kent in his: *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*. American Oriental Society: New Haven: 1953: 151.

²² The interpretation of the inscription is still subject to debate among Iranists as the word *daiva* (demon) could refer to various entities unacceptable for the Persian king. It could denote foreign gods and their cults (Babylonian or even, Greek gods), or the ancient Iranian pantheon the gods of which were declared demons by Zoroaster in his teaching to highlight the role of the supreme god Ahuramazda.

²³ Muhammad Dandamaev – Vladimir Lukonin: *The Culture and Social Institutions of Ancient Iran*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1989: 290-292.

²⁴ Darius told the story completely different, of course, and his version was accepted also among Iranists. It was Olmstead who expressed his doubts first and pointed at the contradictions in the narrative: Albert T. Olmstead: *History of the Persian Empire*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1948: 109.

In this way the king transferred religious dualism into a concrete political situation elevating the fight for political power to a cosmic level in which Darius represents law and order and righteousness while his enemies the forces of destruction symbolised by the act of lie. In referring to this dualism between the forces of order and destruction Darius implicitly puts himself into the position of Thraetaona and his enemies to the role of Azi Dahaka, the embodiment of lie. Since according to the dualistic Iranian (Zoroastrian) worldview mankind is divided between the righteous (ashavan) and the liars and the wicked, his inscription fits perfectly into the religious understanding of his own society.²⁵

Though modern Shi'ism was developed independently from Zoroastrian dogma, the heritage of age-old Iranian worldview and way of thinking could nevertheless remain alive in some religious and political affairs. It is probably no accident that Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution also fought against several "Satans" (such as the shah and his ally, the United States, together with the Iraqi leader, Saddam Husain), thus making his political adversaries evil creatures.

And while political opponents all over the world fight each other with rhetorical weapons, the elevation of their struggle to a cosmic level is not a general tendency. It was the deeply religious American president, G. W. Bush, who understood the real message of this rhetoric and answered in his own way with the creation of the Axis of Evil.²⁶ From this point on, it was not two rival states (Iran and the USA) any more who oppose each other but two 'Satans' struggle against each other and in such a situation there is no room for compromise.

Small wonder then that after Khomeini's death, this "satanic" rhetoric was dropped from the Iranian political discourse to achieve a less confrontational policy towards the US, and the new American president also put an end to the previous rhetoric.

A more developed example of hierocracy was born in the Sasanian period. Immediately after his military coup d'état, the new Sasanian king Ardashir (224–240 CE) embarked on centralisation on a scale never seen before: he eliminated the previously existing small kingdoms within the empire and established a central administration, which his successors brought to further perfection throughout the centuries. As a result, districts, towns and villages came into being as the basic units of administration.

²⁵ R. C. Zaehner: *The Teachings of the Magi. A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs*. Oxford University Press: New York: 1976: 29-34; Mary Boyce: *Zoroastrians. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, Boston: 1979: 8; Michael Stausberg in his recent monograph analyses in length the religious motivations of the Old Persian inscriptions, notably that of Darius I, and highlights the parallel between Darius and Thraetaona: Michael Stausberg: *Die Religion Zarathustras. Geschichte-Gegenwart-Rituale*. Band 1. Kohlhammer Verlag: Köln: 2002: 168-174.

²⁶ The phrase was used first by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002, that is, some months after 9/11; this is why it was not targeted against Iran on the first place.

At the same time, the Zoroastrian church established its own institutional system, an ecclesiastic organization which had not existed previously. Two powerful persons of the 3rd century, Tansar and Kardir, organised the Zoroastrian clergy into a hierarchical church which was modelled on the state administration: the church was headed by the *mobedan mobed*, the equivalent of the king of kings, followed on the provincial level by the provincial *mobeds*, the structure ending with local *mobeds* in the bottom of the system.²⁷

Establishing organizational structures went hand in hand with the standardization of the religious doctrine: Zoroastrian priests narrowed down the competing readings of Zoroastrian religion, and defined the circle of canonical texts, which was followed by the codification of the Avesta (although complete standardisation was never achieved). Religious practices which were irreconcilable with the new doctrine were eliminated (e.g. the cult of Anahita); this is how a central role was given to the fire cult, an already existent but not exclusive form of cultic activity.²⁸

All of these had the logical consequence that Zoroastrianism, now redefined, was elevated to the rank of state religion and, therefore, the Zoroastrian church presented itself as a powerful political player for centuries. Its influence was further developed when almost the entire legal functions were transferred into the hands of the Zoroastrian priesthood: the various dignitaries of the Zoroastrian church were at the same time judges deciding in civil and criminal cases, interpreting legal norms and the head of the church, *and* the chief *mobed* was the legal advisor to the king *ex officio*. It comes as no surprise that the religious law established by the Zoroastrian priesthood was at the same time the law of the Empire and the fact that not a single royal decree has reached us can hardly be explained only by archaeological misfortune.²⁹

In this world view, there was hardly any place for followers of other religions, and in fact, the persecution of the members of other religions began in the first decades of Sasanian rule, putting an end to the previous tolerant policy.

²⁷ Josef Wiesehöfer: *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD*. I. B. Tauris: London: 1996: 183-191; Touraj Daryaee: *Sasanian Empire: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2009: 123-133.

²⁸ Mary Boyce: *Zoroastrians. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, Boston: 1979: 106-109.

²⁹ For more on Sasanian legal sources and legal theory see Maria Macuch: *Rechtskasuistik und Gerichtspraxis zu Beginn des siebenten Jahrhunderts in Iran. Die Rechtssammlung des Farrohmard i Wahraman*. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden: 1993: 11-15; and Jany János: The Jurisprudence of the Sasanian Sages. In: *Journal Asiatique* 294, No.2, (2006): 291–323. Paris.

The first targets of religious persecutions were the Manicheans, the Jews of Babylonia suffered less, while the situation of the Iranian Christians depended heavily, but not exclusively, on the actual state of affairs of foreign policy, Christian Roman and Byzantine Empires being the rivals of Sasanian Iran.³⁰

The persecution of Christians was achieved by legal means, but these criminal procedures were in the majority of the cases examples of show trials where almost no attempt was made to observe even contemporary Zoroastrian criminal law.³¹

The reign of *mobeds* was a collective rule, and the powerful *mobedan mobed* was not a leader in one person, but the head and representative of the priestly class. There was strong group cohesion within the Zoroastrian church, a caste-like, closed system since it could be entered only by birth. The group cohesion protected members who were in line with the policy of the clergy but eliminated dissenting members as happened with Mazdak, most probably a Zoroastrian priest whose egalitarian teaching attracted the underprivileged. The movement was supported by the monarch Kavad at first (495–531 AD); later, however, when the initially peaceful movement stirred up acts of violence and brought general chaos upon the country, he changed his policy. The movement was suppressed by Kavad's chosen heir to the throne, Khosrav I, in the years before his ascent to the throne of Iran.³²

Political behaviour was determined by religious doctrines and by the interests of the church while consideration of state interests was either of secondary importance or non-existent. Some examples prove that rulers opposing the power of *mobeds* and the nobility were dethroned, blinded, imprisoned, sometimes even killed by the joint effort of both the clergy and the nobility (e.g. Kavad (488-496; 498-531), Hormizd IV (579-590), Khosrav II (590-628), Ardasir III (630)).

³⁰ A short introduction to the history of the Jews in Iran and Babylonia is Jacob Neusner's: *Jews in Iran*. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran* vol. 3(2): Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1983: 909–923. A detailed analysis of the same topic is to be found in his multi volume magnum opus: *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*. E. J. Brill Leiden: 1965-1969; concerning Iranian Christians Jes Peter Asmussen's paper: *Christians in Iran*. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran* vol. 3(2), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1983: 924–948 is a good point of departure but recent scholarship has already challenged some of his views: Richard Payne: *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*. University of California Press: Los Angeles: 2016.

³¹ For the study of these show trials see Jany János: *Criminal Justice in Sasanian Persia*. *Iranica Antiqua* XLII (2007): 373-384. Peeters Publisher: Ghent; source material is the acts of martyrs, which should be treated with extreme caution: Otto Braun: *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer*. Verlag der Jos Kösel'schen Buchhandlung: München: 1915; Georg Hoffmann. *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer*. Leipzig: 1880.

³² Klaus Schippmann: *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt: 1990: 47-52; Touraj Daryaee: *Sasanian Empire: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2009: 26-30.

The queens Buran and Azarmidukht as well as others were in power only for a very short period of time between 630 and 632, leaving the king as the only figure to represent the interests of the Iranian state against lobbying interests, with less and less success as time went on.

This policy did not change even when the decline of the demoralised dynasty and the attacks of the first Muslim groups brought the state to the brink of collapse.³³ The fall of the Iranian state brought about the demise of the Zoroastrian church as well; therefore, this policy was ineffective and self-destructive for both the nobility and the priesthood.³⁴

Efforts to strengthen the power of the clergy were also visible in works on political theory, written by priestly scholars.

One of them, the Letter of Tansar, claims that the heir to the throne was to be elected from among the sons of the dead ruler by the leading officials of the imperial administration and the *mobedan mobed*, but in case of disagreement, it was the *mobedan mobed* whose vote decided. Sources prove that this was far from contemporary political reality and no king left the decision on his heir to any of his officials. Nevertheless, the demand itself speaks volumes about the ambitions of the clergy.³⁵

Despite both theoretical and practical efforts to decimate the king into a shadow figure, the Sasanian monarch remained the most important political figure for centuries. Therefore, we can witness a dual rule of kings and *mobeds*, best expressed in the so-called twin-theory formulated in the Letter of Tansar. Accordingly, religion and kingship are twins born of one womb and never to be separated.³⁶ This is not a fully developed hierocracy like the Caliphate which unites both religious and secular administration but is closer to the Byzantine model with the emperor and the patriarch on his side.

³³ This point and the hostility of the old (Parthian) nobility towards the Sasanians is highlighted by Parvaneh Pourshariati's recent analysis about the fall of the Sasanians: Parvaneh Pourshariati: *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2017.

³⁴ Zoroastrianism was reduced to a minority religion within three centuries while the nobility was outmanouvered and sometimes even killed by the invaders even though they were previously promised important posts and land holdings if they support the new regime.

³⁵ Mary Boyce: *The Letter of Tansar*: Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio ed Estremo Oriente: Rome: 1968: 62.

³⁶ Ibn Isfandiyar: *Tarikh-e Tabaristan* (ed: Abbas Iqbal). Tehran: 1942: 17; for the English translation with introduction and commentary see Mary Boyce: *The Letter of Tansar*: Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio ed Estremo Oriente: Rome: 1968.

2.2. Islam

After the fall of the Sasanians, there was no independent Iranian state for centuries, Iranian territories being incorporated into the Islamic Caliphate. Although the conquering Saljuqids made some efforts to organise an Iranian state with effective administration, they ultimately failed as did the Mongols and the Timurids.

Only the rule of the Safavids (1501–1736) is worth mentioning in a discussion of Iranian hierocracy. The state of the Safavids, born in a power vacuum in Iran, was a turning point because: (1) a central, sovereign Iranian state was established again; (2) political power was seized by an originally Sufi order of Turkish origin, which embraced Shi'ism in the long run and, therefore (3) proclaimed Shi'ism as the official religion of the state in 1501.

Safavid rule represents a more developed form of hierocracy since the head of the Safavid order was at the same time the Iranian monarch; thus the former dual structure of the Sasanian state was replaced by a personal union. It is worth emphasizing that the Iranian state was in fact governed by the head of a religious order, and it was not the king who joined an order, a tiny but important difference. Even Shah Abbas the Great (1587–1629) emphasised that he ruled as the leader of the Safavid order although it is undeniable that whenever the interests of the order and the state were at variance, he gave priority to the latter.³⁷

What is more, the order sometimes even interfered *with* the system of succession to the throne, as happened at the election of Safi I (1629–1642), at the coronation of whom there was a marked emphasis on following the ceremonial rules of the Safavid order. Only after Abbas II (1642–1666), that is, in the last decades of Safavid rule, became the link to the order, an empty formality when the position of the head of the order sunk to the level of a royal title, but monarchs were still regarded as having supernatural power in the eyes of society at large.³⁸

The regime formed after the Islamic revolution (1979) provides the third and most developed model of Iranian hierocracy, which is different from its predecessors in several aspects.

The most important structural difference is that we cannot find either dualism (between the state and the church) or personal union (in the head of a religious order and the state), since the leader of the revolution and the Islamic state (*rahbar*), that is, Khomeini, was not head of any religious order.

³⁷ H. R. Roemer: The Safavid Period. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 6: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1986: 263.

³⁸ *ibid*: 279; 289

This is the most developed form of hierocracy because the leading person of the clergy (*marja'-e taqlid*) is at the same time the supreme leader of the state, organs of state administration being necessarily subordinated to him directly or indirectly.

Overcoming the dual system of the Sasanians the clergy was now victorious over the state which had no leader of its own of equal standing to the *rahbar*. This is the reason why the qualification of the *rahbar* was originally defined so that it had to be the leader of the clergy alone who could fill the position.

The qualification of the *rahbar* was in fact tailored to Khomeini's person, who indeed fulfilled all the requirements. After his death, however, no eligible person was to be found; therefore, the qualifications were modified, thus weakening the theoretical foundations of the system.³⁹

With the advent of the Islamic republic, the revolution eliminated the monarchy because of its alleged anti-Islamic nature, propagated by Khomeini himself, and shaped the constitution in a way that the head of the clergy could have no rival.⁴⁰ The president of the republic is subordinate to the power of the *rahbar*, and since the Prime Minister was no more efficient either, the position itself was abolished during a revision of the constitution.

All of this led to the paralysis of executive power, witnessed time and again in succeeding decades. Legislation by the Parliament (*Majles*) is also subordinate to the power of the clergy as a result of the veto of the Guardian Council, controlled by Shi'a religious scholars.⁴¹

Moreover, the leader of the clergy has been incorporated into the constitution, with his unique qualities of leadership as the underlying principle of the constitution (*velayat-e faqih*). This is more than concentration of power in the hands of one person, codified in the constitution, since *velayat-e faqih* is a religious doctrine as well. Therefore, the *velayat-e faqih* theory, legitimising the leadership of the *rahbar*, signifies a legal and a theological foundation of the system at the same time.⁴²

³⁹ Asghar Schirazi: *The Constitution of Iran. Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*. I. B. Tauris: New York, London:1997: 61-73.

⁴⁰ Farhang Rajaee: *Islamism and Modernism. The Changing Discourse in Iran*. University of Texas Press: Austin: 2007: 122.

⁴¹ For an analysis of the Guardian Council and its critics see Said Amir Arjomand: *After Khomeini. Iran under his Successors*. Oxford University Press: Oxford: 2007: 163-164.

⁴² Abbas Amanat: From *ijtihad* to *wilayat-i faqih*: Evolution of the Shiite Legal Authority to Political Power. In: *Shari'a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context* (ed. Abbas Amanat-Frank Griffel). Stanford University Press: Stanford: 2009: 120-136;

Thus both executive and legislative powers are controlled and sometimes paralysed by the dominant clergy.⁴³

In other words, to uphold dominance and enforce the interests of the clergy takes priority over the proper functioning of state organs: these are already signs of the self-destructive policy of the *mobeds* and the nobility in the Sasanian period.

Similarly, to the rule of the *mobeds*, the current system also represents a collective rule: a group-domination by the politically active members of the Shi'a clergy. This does not include the whole clergy, as there are clerics who turn away from politics and withdraw into the solitude of *madrasas* (in the same way as *herbeds*, the priest-teachers who did not take part in political activities in the Sasanian era), and there are also dissenting clerics.

The latter are sometimes more threatened by the oppressive mechanism of the regime than civilians are, since a separate court has been established for processes against dissenting clerics, and this court passes sentences of imprisonment and capital punishment by the hundreds: up to 1990, 286 clerics were convicted, including 14 death penalties.⁴⁴

This group, constantly changing in composition, rent with inner conflict and fraught with faction-battles, is not a 'party' or any other institution but a conglomerate of learned individuals sharing common values, beliefs and interests protected by both the constitution and its supreme leader. In this respect, it resembles the Sasanian hierocracy, which also had its own supreme leader but lacked, obviously, any constitutional support.

Therefore, the person of the leader was of vital importance for both the Sasanian and the current clergy since it was the leader who protected their common interests against anybody (including the representative of the Iranian state), guaranteed inner cohesion, and punished dissenting members. But the position of the two leaders is different in their respective systems: the leading role of the *mobedan mobed* was a consequence of his position in the ecclesiastic hierarchy while that of the *marja'-e taqlid* is the result of his position in the scientific hierarchy among the learned and, therefore, learning and social prestige are the dominant factor in his selecting.

⁴³ Asghar Schirazi: *The Constitution of Iran. Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*: 86-103; Said Amir Arjomand: *Shari'a and Constitution in Iran. A Historical Perspective*. In: *Shari'a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context* (ed. Abbas Amanat-Frank Griffel). Stanford University Press: Stanford: 2009: 156-164;

⁴⁴ Asghar Schirazi: *The Constitution of Iran. Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*: 153-154.

To achieve the smooth operation of the Sasanian clergy was easier, since a new administrative leader could be created any time to avoid a leadership vacuum, whereas it is not easy to find a genuine spiritual leader, which may lead to leadership crises, as happened after Khomeini's death in 1989.⁴⁵

3. Common features

3.1 Foreign policy

In what follows I will explain the common features of the three hierocratic systems outlined above. For the sake of clarity, I divided them into foreign and domestic issues, although, evidently, there are interactions between these two fields.

In the field of foreign affairs, the first striking phenomenon is the confrontational, offensive policy, most of all during the first decades of a given period, predominantly directed against the West.

The Roman wars of the Sasanians, even though they had antecedents in the Parthian period, were offensive encounters of this kind, which began to lose their intensity after the initial successes of Shapur I (241–270 CE), and ended in defeats and territorial losses at the end of the 3rd century, and resulting in upholding the status quo in the following century.⁴⁶

We can find a similar situation in the early Safavid period when the wars against the Ottomans stopped with the defeat at Chaldiran (1514), establishing the status quo which changed only to the disadvantage of the Iranians with the loss of Mesopotamia.⁴⁷

The foreign policy of the current regime directed against the West also began with a complete change of orientation (the shah being a close ally to the US), hallmarked by the occupation of the American embassy, and it has been going on until the present day on the level of both rhetoric and armaments.

None of these three regimes was able to transform initial, rather symbolic victories into political or territorial advantage in the long run.

- The Sasanians, it is true, conquered some Roman towns near the border but it was the most they could achieve and finally had to withdraw.

⁴⁵ For more on this crisis see David Menashri: *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran. Religion, Society, and Power*. Routledge: New York: 2001: 15-21.

⁴⁶ Touraj Daryaee: *Sasanian Empire: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2009: 2-20.

⁴⁷ Roger Savory: *Iran under the Safavids*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2008: 27-50.

- The Safavids, too, gained some minor victories over the Ottomans due to their surprise attacks and enthusiasm at the beginning but were routed in the battle of Chaldiran.
- The current regime also enriched itself with a symbolic victory over the US with an attack against the American embassy but nothing more was achieved: the hostage crises ended, and Iran found herself on the defensive against Iraq.

The intensity of these early confrontations is in direct relationship to the ideological-rhetorical attacks that accompany them. The anti-West onslaughts of Khomeini (the US as the great Satan) and Ahmadinejad are essentially no different from the inscription of Shapur I in which the Roman emperor is depicted as a dishonest liar (again!) attacking his country.⁴⁸

It is an important question why Iran is so aggressive on the western front and far less belligerent on the others. I think the reason for this is the fact that Iran always had to face stronger attacks from the west, both in a military and in an ideological sense, while she was less vulnerable from other directions.

As mentioned above, during its history Iran had to face strong military competition from the west which she was unable to overcome (Roman-Byzantine advances, the military supremacy of the Ottomans, the military predominance of the West).

As far as ideology is concerned, Iran had to face strong ideological and religious competitions coming from the west against which she had to protect herself. During the Sasanian period, ideological unity (Zoroastrianism) had to be established against Hellenistic, post-Hellenistic, and Christian Rome. Similarly, Shi'ism became the official religion because it markedly separated Iran from the Sunnite-Hanafite Ottomans. In modern times, the program of re-Islamization against secular westernisation is in line with the previous policies.

No such attacks were perceived from the east from whence no concurrent ideologies threatened with victory. Therefore, foreign policy toward the east was no more than defence against the nomads (Massagetes, Huns, Turks, Mongols, Uzbeks) for two thousand years. Hinduism did not enter Iran, Buddhism reached only Merv on the eastern border, and conquering Turkish-Mongol people adopted Iranian culture (embraced Islam) instead of forcing their own belief on the Iranian population.

Soviet Communism as an ideology was not perceived to be as dangerous as Western ideas already present in Iran during the Pahlavi regime. No surprise, then, that the Soviet Union was the lesser evil for Khomeini: Iran shared a common border with the Soviets but none with the Americans.

⁴⁸ The text is edited by Michael Beck: *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*. E. J. Brill Leiden: 1978: 294.

This offensive but at the same time self-defensive foreign policy was accompanied by a cultural policy which emphasized Iranian heritage in general and the Iranian religious tradition and included the denial and occasionally the demonization of the outside world. The cultural policy of the Sasanians was strongly built around the first organized Iranian religious tradition, Zoroastrianism, both in domestic and foreign policy.

Legitimacy, social structure, legal system and cultural life were all in line with Zoroastrian religious demands as were foreign and religious policy. The latter included a harsh denial of Christianity (the leading ideology of the West) in the form of both apologetic writings and prosecution of Iranian Christians.⁴⁹

Shi'ism, when declared to be the official religion of the Safavids, had a similar function: it displayed a marked separation from the Ottomans, the rival from the West and from the less dangerous Southern power, India. Thus, it is religious ideology again which separates Iran from the other powers. But it had the consequence that Iran became more and more isolated from both the Muslim societies and the Western world.

It is symptomatic that among Safavid rulers it was only Shah Abbas the Great who was acquainted with the contemporary trends of international politics and who took some steps to strengthen his rule with diplomatic efforts among the nations.⁵⁰ In the modern period, the anti-Western rhetoric of writer Al-e Ahmad (*gharbzadegi*: 'west-struckness')⁵¹ became one of the most important messages of the Islamic revolution, reduced to a few brief slogans understandable for all, emphasising the need to forget about foreign ideas and to return to the genuine Iranian cultural heritage.

The current regime had chosen for the third time in Iranian history to isolate its country from the world with the help of religious ideas and it is the opposition, quite logically, which is more receptive to foreign, mainly Western, ideas (democracy, human rights, etc.).

These rejectionist policies resulted in losing touch with contemporary global trends and Iran found herself sooner or later in a fight against powers of unequal strength. Byzantium was stronger than Sasanian Iran in every respect (it was not by accident that it survived the Sasanians by 800 years), just as the Ottoman state was more modern than that of the Safavids in all decisive factors.

⁴⁹ Touraj Daryaee: *Sasanian Empire: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2009: 69-80.

⁵⁰ Roger Savory: *Iran under the Safavids*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2007: 104-128.

⁵¹ Lloyd Ridgeon: *Religion and Politics in Modern Iran. A Reader*. I. B. Tauris: London, New York: 2005: 166-173.

The rejectionist policy of the current regime manifests itself in the wilful breach of the norms and values of the international community (hostage crises, the denial of the Holocaust) and the effort to build up a coalition with partners which share also an anti-Western political line for whatever reasons (e.g. Venezuela under Chavez). Despite this there is no doubt about the regional power of Iran when governed by hierocracies: the Sasanians were such a regional power and what is more, they were the only dangerous rivals to Rome and Byzantium.

The regional power of the Safavids cannot be questioned either, although they were less dangerous to the Ottomans than the Sasanians were to the Romans. The regional power of Iran today cannot be doubted either; nevertheless, their more ambitious plans certainly raise questions.

A similar continuity may be seen in the efforts to reach the Mediterranean Sea for both geopolitical and economic advantages.

Already the Parthians fought desperate wars against Rome for the possession of Syria, which the Sasanians continued in vain for centuries. The Safavids were prevented in their similar intentions by the loss of Mesopotamia to the Ottomans, and in the modern period states like Syria and Iraq stand in the way of these ambitions.

It is, of course, no accident that the current Iranian foreign policy is very active in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, participating in a complex matrix of regional conflicts in order to achieve the upper hand and it is again the western powers (most importantly the United States) which hinder Iran from doing so.

3.2 Domestic policy

Coming to domestic affairs, it is also important to point out that each hierocratic system seized power by military means. Both the Sasanians and the current regime acquired supremacy by armed revolts against the previous regimes (Parthians, Pahlavi government). The Safavids, too, seized power with weapons, although they filled a power vacuum in Iran rather than revolting against an established power.

A further similarity is that in all three cases the leaders of the new system were believed to have supernatural powers, and they did not neglect to emphasise this. In his inscription, Shapur I presented himself and his founding father, Ardashir, as the descendant of gods, the interpretation of which causes considerable trouble to modern scholarship but seemingly less to his contemporaries.⁵²

⁵² For text edition see: Michael Beck: *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*. E. J. Brill Leiden: 1978: 281-283; Touraj Daryaee thinks that early Sasanian rulers were vested with religious authority which they lost only in the fourth century as Shabuhr II (30-379) was the last king who claimed a lineage from

In a similar vein, Shah Isma'il I saw and represented himself as a kind of a supernatural being, a claim unconditionally accepted by his followers.⁵³ This is exactly why the defeat at Chaldiran was a turning point in Safavid history, since it was more than a military collapse in a battle against the Ottomans: it was the charisma of Isma'il that was destroyed.

Despite this, later kings also demanded a certain superhuman status, the acceptance of which was made possible by a religious system built upon a peculiar combination of Sufism, folk Islam and Shi'ism. The situation was essentially similar in the case of Khomeini as well. Although he never made claims to a supernatural position, his followers attributed a charisma to him which made his leadership unquestionable. His supernatural position was replaced by his standing as *marja'-e taqlid, rahbar* and the constitutional superpowers granted him by the Iranian constitution. Moreover, he was referred to as Imam, a title reserved for the Twelve Imams, a novelty which some clerics believed was on the edge of blasphemy.⁵⁴

Outstanding personalities were decisive in the chain of events or, to put it differently: the establishment of the hierocracies was rather the personal achievement of the leading figures than the result of a popular uprising or the attempt of the powerful clergy to achieve dominance.

Sasanian history began with the revolt of Ardashir against his overlord, the Parthian king, which was no more than a successful attempt to seize power by an overly ambitious petty local leader which was not backed by the *mobeds* at that time. What is more, the establishment of the Zoroastrian church and its incorporation into the state administration took place only subsequently, in a long and systematic process which reached its peak only towards the end of the 3rd century. Neither can we find the Shi'a clergy behind Isma'il I, a lonely hero with a small group of enthusiastic followers fighting for power.

Since Iran was overwhelmingly Sunni at this time, obviously no Shia clergy existed to back Isma'il's movement. To overcome this shortcoming, Safavids had Shi'a legal scholars, the *Amilis*, brought in from Syria to work on the ideological foundations and the power structure of the new system which lasted for several generations.⁵⁵

the gods for himself, see his *Sasanian Empire: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. I. B. Tauris: New York: 2009: 20.

⁵³ H. R. Roemer: The Safavid Period. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 6: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1986: 214.

⁵⁴ Ervand Abrahamian: *Khomeinism. Essays on the Islamic Republic*. University of California Press: Berkeley: 1993:35.

⁵⁵ Rula Abisaab: *Converting Persia*. I. B. Tauris: London: 2004: 8-10.

The current system is not different in this respect, since the Islamic revolution was fought not by the Shi'a clergy as a group but mostly by Khomeini himself, who was supported by a variety of different social groups, while the clergy was divided on the issue of whether or not they should give up their traditional apolitical attitude and take part in everyday political activities. The victory of the revolution reinforced the position only of the politically active clerics again as a result of a longer process.

Behind these regime changes there were no socio-economic considerations, attempt at economic reform or even rhetorical references to such aims. Under the early Sasanians, socio-economic conditions deteriorated compared to the less rigid and repressive Parthian rule, which had not established a caste-like social structure as its successor did. Isma'il I, too, was not in the least concerned with the wellbeing of his subjects, had no intention to be so, and his followers did not support him because of any such demand. Abbas the Great was the single ruler among the Safavids who tried to revive agriculture, industry and commerce, but his successors created such chaos in these fields that the state lacked enough economic-military power to oppose the Afghan invaders.⁵⁶

The Islamic revolution was not born out of the intention to eliminate poverty either, although it is true that the revolution was backed predominantly by the impoverished, mostly urban, population who were no beneficiaries of Pahlavi modernization. Should they have any hopes for economic progress, these were soon dashed since, as of today, the presidency of Rafsanjani was the only brief period during which economic considerations received any attention.⁵⁷

As Khomeini put it: “*Economics is for donkeys*” and “*We did not make a revolution to slash the price of watermelon.*”⁵⁸

Though President Ahmadinejad emphasised again the issues of economics during his presidency, this policy did not change the fundamental orientation of the regime. Basic issues remained what they were for decades: the role of the *rahbar* and that of the clergy in politics, the interpretation of Islam, the role of the state in society and the struggle for more international influence.

⁵⁶ H. R. Roemer: The Safavid Period. In: *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 6: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1986: 269-270; on the policies of Abbas the Great see Roger Savory: *Iran under the Safavids*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2007: 76-103.

⁵⁷ Said Amir Arjomand: Shari'a and Constitution in Iran. A Historical Perspective. In: *Shari'a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context* (ed. Abbas Amanat-Frank Griffel). Stanford University Press: Stanford: 2009: 56-71; David Menashri speaks about a Thermidor turn in these years, see David Menashri: *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran. Religion, Society, and Power*. Routledge: New York: 2001: 61-73.

⁵⁸ Vali Nasr: *The Shia Revival. How Conflicts within Islam will shape the Future*. W. W. Norton: New York: 2007: 134.

Opposition thinkers such as Soroush, Shabestari, Kadivar and others do not criticize the regime on grounds of what they perceive as bad economic policy but present a different religious understanding of Shi'ism, another interpretation of Islamic law and have dissenting views on the role of the clergy in politics and democracy.⁵⁹

3.3 Ideology

Another remarkable common feature of these three systems is a strong ideological unity guarded by unbending rigor. To explain this one may often come across the argument that without such an ideological unity it would be impossible to keep together a state like Iran with her enormous size and geographical division. No doubt, there is considerable merit in this argument, but it should be qualified since the empires of the Achaemenids and the Parthians were significantly larger than the states run by the hierocracies and they still managed to survive for altogether 700 years.

To understand this, we should bear in mind that the Achaemenid and the Parthian states were decentralized, being a conglomerate of local autonomies attached to and controlled by the court, a system which could function without any compulsory ideology. By contrast, hierocracies always attempted to create a centralized government (with varying success) which was backed in fact by a similarly centralized ideology in order to eliminate local autonomies and secessionist movements. If the central governments were able to protect the unity of the country with political and military means, Iran remained intact. When, however, the government failed to do so, the country fell apart into different smaller territorial units. This happened after the fall of the Sasanians and the disintegration of the Safavid state resulted in the same end.

Closely connected to this ideological centralization we can find the policy of declaring the primacy of religious law. In the Sasanian period, Zoroastrian law functioned as state law as well, and in the modern period we can also witness Shi'a law being the foundation of Iran's legal system. More importantly, the entire legal function was concentrated in the hands of the clergy: in the Sasanian period, jurisdiction was administered by the clergy, with different priests (*rad*, *mobed*) in charge of particular courts, and the whole system was controlled by the *mobedan mobed* with his theoretical and practical directives.

⁵⁹ Abdulkarim Soroush: *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam. Essential Writings of Abdulkarim Soroush*. Oxford University Press: Oxford: 2000; see also his *The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge*. In: Charles Kurzman: *Liberal Islam. A Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press (USA): 1998: 244-252. Mehdi Bazargan: *Religion and Liberty*. In: Charles Kurzman: *Liberal Islam. A Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press (USA): 1998: 73-84. Mohsen Kadivar, also in exile, published numerous works about a different understanding of Islam and human rights but these are relatively unknown in the West because they are only in Persian. Studies based on excellent research in this topic are Mehran Kamrava's: *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2008 and Farhang Rajaei's: *Islamism and Modernism. The Changing Discourse in Iran*. The University of Texas Press: Austin: 2007.

In principle, the head of the legal system was the monarch as the supreme judge, but in the absence of a well-organised system of appeals, it did not work. People had the chance to appeal to the king only twice a year during two religious festivals, but this clearly inoperative system was eliminated in the 5th century, and the king lost his last opportunity to alter the corrupt or unlawful decisions of his officials to the advantage of the society.⁶⁰

A similar tendency can be observed in the Safavid period as well: under Shah Sulayman, in 1683, the right to appeal to the monarch was abolished, with the result that society lost its last legal hope to correct an unlawful or wrong judgment.⁶¹

The present-day court system is also under the influence of the '*ulama*', especially the special court of the clergy, which is under the exclusive control of the *rahbar*, with the task of charging dissenting clerics.⁶² The *rahbar* therefore fulfils the same function in the modern legal life as the *mobedan mobed* did previously, since his statements are regarded as theoretical and practical guidance for courts.

These systems are also characterised by a tendency to diminish the inherent pluralism of the official religion by attempting to elevate one single interpretation to canonical status while neglecting others, although the regimes never fully succeeded in this effort. For example, Sasanian Zoroastrianism highlighted the fire-cult and abolished the cult of goddess Anahita even though the ruling dynasty had strong ties to this cult, but was unable to diminish Zurvanism, a Zoroastrian 'heresy' even followed by some Sasanian kings.⁶³

The current system also emphasises a legalist-normativist understanding of Shi'ism and tries to downplay other interpretations, although they are deeply rooted in Islamic tradition and were taught in *madrasas* for a long time. Contemporary thinkers such as Montazeri, Soroush, Kadivar, Shabestari, and former Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, clerics and intellectuals who backed the Islamic revolution and the Islamic regime for years or even decades, developed rival interpretations of Islam to the current, legalist-normativist reading in previous years.⁶⁴ But these ideas were regarded as onslaughts on the official religious understanding and these persons were treated immediately as enemies although they previously belonged to the inner circle of power.

⁶⁰ John R. Perry: Justice for the Underprivileged: The Ombudsman Tradition in Iran. In: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 37 (1978): 204.

⁶¹ Rula Abisaab: *Converting Persia*. I. B. Tauris: London: 2004: 94.

⁶² Asghar Schirazi: *The Constitution of Iran. Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*: 153-154.

⁶³ R. C. Zaehner: *Zurvan. A Zoroastrian Dilemma*. Biblo and Tannen: London: 1972.

⁶⁴ See note 59.

If pluralism within the official religion was not tolerated, the status of other religions deteriorated even more. Some religions were allowed to exist (Judaism, Christianity) while some others were not.

It is interesting to note here that religions having nothing (or little) to do with the official religion were treated much less harshly than those which came into being as a result of a schism within the official religion. Mazdakism was brutally uprooted in the late Sasanian period. Followers of Manicheism, a very complex religion built upon Iranian tradition were persecuted during the entire Sasanian period.

Meanwhile, a few atrocities against the Jews and Christians were in the spotlight of Sasanian wrath when the rulers believed that foreign policy demanded punitive actions against them (since they could easily be charged with loyalty to the enemy, that is Rome and Byzantium). In the Safavid period we can occasionally observe the persecution of Sunnites (Abisaab, 2004, 24-27; 33-35), but the Baha'is, followers of a new religion deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, were denied any protection and are not members of tolerated religions according to the current constitution.

It is not to say, of course, that followers of tolerated religions were treated equally with members of the official religion but at least they could operate, although atrocities occurred as in the case of Tateos Mikaelian, an Armenian priest murdered in 1994.⁶⁵

Advocates of foreign ideologies are treated similarly to adherents of non-official religions irrespective of whether they are for Western (democracy, human rights, political pluralism, etc.) or non-Western (e.g. Soviet-type socialism) thought. The Iranian communist party, the Tudeh, was outlawed at the very beginning of the Islamic republic irrespective of the fact that it was also a member of the broad coalition against the shah's regime.

Similarly, advocates of Western thought are believed to be or at least denounced as Western agents collaborating with foreign powers against Iran, a charge with serious consequences. This helps us understand why leaders of the green opposition demanding more democracy and openness hastened to declare publicly that they respect the underlying principle of the Iranian constitutional system, *velayat-e faqih*, although this undermines their own program, since this very principle is the most important obstacle in the way of further democratisation.

Another common feature of these systems is that they represent a collective rule. The present-day regime is not a one-party system or a personal dictatorship, and to interpret the power of the *rahbar* as a one-person leader or a dictator would be to misunderstand the situation.

⁶⁵ Eliz Sanasarian: *Religious Minorities in Iran*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2000: 125-126.

The *rahbar* is only the leading representative of the clergy, its political and ideological leader and the guardian of the hierocracy. The *mobedan mobed* used to have the same position: as the head of the Zoroastrian church he represented its interest at the royal court, influenced political decisions and guaranteed the ideological unity. But powerful Zoroastrian clergy was a relatively narrow circle: just as not every priest was involved in politics in the Sasanian era, not every cleric participates in political activities today. The functions of local, low rank priests and clerics are reduced to local leadership and propaganda: as earlier it used to be the provincial *mobeds* who fulfilled these roles, today it is the imams of the Friday prayer sent to the countryside who do the same.

Besides political advantages, all three systems provided economic advantages, too, for their members. The *mobeds* were in a privileged position in the Sasanian era in an economic sense as well, and they did not hesitate to support the monarch if the protection of the existing feudal order was at stake. The Safavid period was not at all different; the privileged status of Shi'a legal scholars, judges and high-ranking officials, and the financial advantages provided for them by the *vaqfs* (pious "endowments"), were in sharp contrast to the miserable plight of peasants who were close to starvation in a year of poor harvest.

It is no accident that when chronicles wanted to emphasize the scope of sufferings, they claimed that not even members of the '*ulama*' had enough to eat. In this context the proverbs, satires parodying the hypocritical behaviour of the '*ulama*' are understandable together with the increasing enthusiasm for Sufism, which can be interpreted as a non-political, religious opposition to the dominant Shi'a normativism. No wonder that this development gained strength in the last decades of Safavid rule, that is, during the time of disintegration and economic collapse.⁶⁶

Today, too, the hypocritical behaviour of the mullahs comes up against constant criticism, the social and economic positions and the autocratic way of exercising power meet increasing social opposition. The socio-economic dissatisfactions logically manifested themselves in a religious disguise in these hierocratic systems. The Mazdakite movement in the Sasanian period started as a religious reform supported by the destitute, the impoverished peasants who had lost their lands. Nowadays, leading thinkers of the opposition started a religious discourse to point out the shortcomings of the current regime and to elaborate their own religious and political vision. The programs of Soroush, Kadivar and Shabestari urge a religious reform, highlighting the reconsideration of the principle *velayat-e faqih*. No wonder that the regime answers in a similarly religious way: labelling every member of the opposition collectively as hypocrites.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Rula Abisaab: *Converting Persia*. I. B. Tauris: London: 2004: 97-99.

⁶⁷ Mehran Kamrava: *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 2008: 120-173.

Conclusions

As outlined above, the three hierocratic systems share a variety of common features in their composition, domestic and foreign policy, socio-economic structure and power base. It is not to say, of course, that they are identical in every respect. Perhaps the most remarkable difference is that the hierocracy of the Sasanian period manifested itself in a dual system, with parallel and competing competencies between the Zoroastrian church and the state.

The Safavid system was already monistic in the sense that the leader of the Safavid order was at the same time the head of the state, this personal union guaranteeing a coordinated relationship between the two, with the interests of the latter in mind whenever the two clashed.

The current system differs from its forerunners in that it emphasises the priority of the hierocracy: the leader of the clergy is at the same time the supreme leader of the Iranian state and every state organ (including the president, the government and the legislative) is ultimately under his direct or indirect control. Being, however, a collective rule, it is small wonder that important positions in the economy, the media and the judiciary are in the hands of the clergy and its non-cleric allies.

When the interest of clerical rule is at variance with the proper function of state organs, it is in most of the cases that the former one gains the upper hand and dominates. This is the reason of the numerous dysfunctions in the government and the legislature, known by both Iranian politicians and society.

But I think it is not what Khomeini originally had in mind. Studying his *fatvas* and decisions we can find numerous examples to prove that the leader of the revolution gave priority to the interests of the state. In his opinion the only thing that matters is the interest of the Islamic state, and this is the only one which must be taken into consideration. Shocking some in his audience he once declared that the government of the Islamic state has the right to override even Islamic legal regulations such as the pilgrimage, if that is what the interests of the community, that is, the Iranian state, require (Schirazi 1998, 64).⁶⁸

In other words, Khomeini resembles rather a Safavid ruler, while his current successors are uncertain as to what strategy to follow. This loss of orientation is the most important cause of the fragmentation within the ruling elite which can be perceived even by outsiders.

I outline the results of the comparison in the table that follows:

⁶⁸ Asghar Schirazi: *The Constitution of Iran. Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*: 64.

Issues of systemic comparison	Sasanian period	Safavid period	Islamic republic
Head of the state	Monarch	Head of the Safavid order	Leader of the clergy: marja'-e taqlid and rahbar
Position of the leader of the clergy	Head of a church, vertically structured	Head of an order and ruler	Leading jurist of the clergy and rahbar
Religious standing of the first leaders	King is supernatural (god): Ardashir I; Shapur I	Supernatural: Isma'il I	Imam, charisma and above the constitution: Khomeini
Origin		Wars with rivals	Armed revolution
Clerical backing of the movement	No priests behind the revolt	No Shi'a clerics behind the movement	Clerics being divided concerning active role in politics
Political ideology	Twin-theory: state and church are twins	Shi'ism	<i>Velayat-e faqih</i>
Status of state religion	Trying to abolish immanent pluralism and to establish one canonical interpretation	Immanent pluralism narrowed	Trying to abolish immanent pluralism and to establish one canonical interpretation
Clerical positions	Court, judiciary, teaching, propaganda, intellectual elite	Court, judiciary, teaching, propaganda, intellectual elite	State organs, judiciary, teaching, propaganda, intellectual elite
Privileges for the hierocracy	Political and economic privileges	Political and economic privileges	Political and economic privileges
Economic policy	No priority	No priority	No priority
Religious policy	State religion; others tolerated or persecuted	State religion; others tolerated or persecuted	State religion; others tolerated or persecuted
Cultural policy	Inward looking; internationally isolated	Inward looking; internationally isolated	Inward looking; internationally isolated
Foreign policy	Offensive in the early decades	Offensive in the early decades	Offensive in the early decades
Orientation of offensive foreign policy	West; only defensive in other directions	West; only defensive in other directions	West; only defensive in other directions

Issues of systemic comparison	Sasanian period	Safavid period	Islamic republic
International standing and aim	Regional power; confrontations with rival local and global enemies (Rome) to achieve more	Regional power; confrontations with rival local and global enemies (Ottomans) to achieve more	Regional power; confrontations with rival local and global enemies (US, Iraq) to achieve more
Head of the state	Monarch	Head of the Safavid order	Leader of the clergy: marja'-e taqlid and rahbar
Position of the leader of the clergy	Head of a church, vertically structured	Head of an order and ruler	Leading jurist of the clergy and rahbar
Political system	Centralized; opposition non-existent or paralyzed	Centralized; opposition non-existent or paralyzed	Centralized; opposition non-existent or paralyzed
Political style	Oppressive; backed by unquestionable religious-political ideology	Oppressive; religious-political ideology is less rigorous	Oppressive; backed by unquestionable religious-political ideology
Forms of opposition and dissatisfaction	Politically motivated religious reform: Mazdakism ending in crushed popular uprising	Non-political religious disguise: Sufism	Politically motivated religious discourse: Soroush, Shabestari, Kadivar

The end of such a long essay brings the question of what to learn from all this. In answering this question, one should avoid two mistakes.

The first would be to think that we can infer from historical examples directly to future events and can tell the future only because we have parallels in the past, however strong these parallels may be. *Historia est magister vitae* is a commonplace, although with merit, but is insufficient to build up theories or worse, policies, upon it.

The second mistake would be to forget all about these remarkable structural similarities. As I have demonstrated, these came into being not by accident but as inherent features of the Iranian hierocratic regimes. If we understand these, in fact very complex and sometimes contradictory socio-economic and political factors, we can have a better understanding of current Iran, which enables us to see things as they are.

Now we see an Iran with a relatively stable system (the green movement is over, a current Arab spring having no impact at all) although handicapped by a variety of systemic contradictions and social dissatisfactions. The current hierocracy is, just like its forerunners were, a centralized – both in state administration and ideology – and strongly-controlled state which rules out any debate over fundamental issues. State organs function despite numerous dysfunctional aspects, the territorial integrity of Iran is in no danger while the opposition is divided and powerless.

This was the model of the previous hierocracies, too, which managed to survive for many centuries and their collapse was brought about by their own unsolved inner contradictions in the long run. External attacks (Arab-Muslim armies, invading Afghans) only put an end to the agony, being consequences rather than causes.

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