

Conceptual Approaches To The Study Of The History Of Iranian Political Parties

Koraboyev Murodjon

Senior Lecturer at Oriental University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article analyzes the theoretical and methodological foundations of studying the history of Iranian political parties. The research employs modern scientific methods such as institutional, civilizational, and elite theories to reveal the peculiarities of the Iranian political system. The author characterizes Iran's party system as a model of "hybrid" and "controlled pluralism," emphasizing the dominance of informal political networks and religious-ideological factors over formal institutions. The article provides a comparative analysis of historical transformations from the Constitutional Revolution to the modern era and scientifically substantiates the necessity of an integrative methodology in studying Iranian political processes.

Keywords: Iran, political parties, methodology, hybrid system, Islamic revolution, informal networks, controlled pluralism, elite theory.

Introduction: The study of Iran's political landscape and the evolution of its party institutions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries possesses a distinctly interdisciplinary character, situated at the intersection of Political Science, History, and Sociology. The unique architecture of Iran's political system, grounded in the symbiotic interaction between religious and secular institutions, renders its analysis within the exclusive framework of classical Western political models methodologically insufficient.

Institutional and civilizational approaches facilitate a systematic examination of the complex nature of the "party-faction" system in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where informal networks and religious-ideological movements often prevail over formally institutionalized political parties. These characteristics distinguish Iranian political parties from party structures observed in many other political systems.

Within the study of political parties, the institutional approach has traditionally constituted one of the principal methodological foundations. In this framework, political parties are regarded as formal mechanisms of the state and integral institutions within the decision-making process. In classical political science, the methodological basis of this approach was developed by Maurice Duverger. In his seminal works,

Duverger associated the formation of political parties directly with electoral systems—particularly majoritarian and proportional systems—as well as with socio-class divisions within society. According to Duverger's interpretation, the institutional environment, especially electoral legislation, functions as a determinant shaping both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of party systems.

Iranian scholar Hamid Alviri, however, reinterprets this institutional approach within the local Iranian context, arguing that the instability of party institutions in Iran derives from constitutional constraints and informal agreements among the upper echelons of political power. This perspective demonstrates the necessity of examining not only formal legal norms, but also the actual political behavior of actors operating within the system.

In political science, the typologization of party systems occupies a significant place within the theoretical framework proposed by Giovanni Sartori. Sartori identifies the number of political parties, the degree of ideological polarization, and the nature of political competition as the principal criteria for analysis. Nevertheless, although this classical approach proves effective in the study of democratic systems characterized by pluralism and stable legal orders, it

encounters methodological limitations when applied to Iran's hybrid political environment.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, political actors frequently manifest themselves not in the form of classical political parties, but rather as ideological factions, religious networks, and informal elite groupings. For this reason, the neo-institutional approach, particularly the institutional theory advanced by Douglass North, has been adopted as a key methodological foundation of this research. North conceptualizes institutions not merely as formal legal norms, but also as "informal constraints" regulating human interaction, including traditions, behavioral codes, and customary practices.

Within the Iranian context, these informal institutions—namely religious elites, the clerical establishment, patronage systems, and inter-clan personal networks—play a central role in political decision-making processes. This phenomenon reinforces the functional weakness of formal institutions and contributes to the governance of political processes through semi-informal or semi-hidden channels.

This issue has also received considerable methodological attention in Persian-language scholarship. In particular, the prominent Iranian political scientist Hossein Bashiriyeh characterizes Iran's political system as a "semi-institutionalized political space". According to Bashiriyeh's analysis, although formal state institutions such as parliament and government formally exist, their activities are significantly constrained or directed by informal political networks and group interests. Consequently, political competition shifts from the institutional sphere to the level of informal inter-group struggle, thereby creating serious methodological and practical obstacles to the stable development of democratic institutions.

According to Bashiriyeh's interpretation, the predominance of informal patron-client relations within the political sphere constitutes one of the principal barriers to sustainable democratic development, the elimination of which requires fundamental institutional reforms.

Another important dimension of the present research is the historical approach, which is based on the analysis of the evolution of Iranian political parties through specific retrospective stages. Within this framework, political actors are examined not as static structures, but as dynamic phenomena shaped by socio-economic transformations, external geopolitical influences, and internal monarchical reforms.

Analyzing the modern political history of Iran, Ervand

Abrahamian traces the roots of Iran's party traditions to the Constitutional Revolution (Mashrutiyat) of 1905–1911. During this period, the Iranian political arena witnessed, for the first time, the emergence of groups possessing relatively modern organizational structures, including:

- Ejtemaiyune Amiyun (Social Democrats);
- Anjomane Maxfi (Secret Society);
- Komitehe Inqilobi (Revolutionary Committee).

In Persian historiography, scholars such as Abbas Iqbal Ashtiyani and Ahmad Kasravi interpret this period as a stage marked by the awakening of civic consciousness and collective political responsibility within Iranian society. The Constitutional Revolution consequently stimulated the formation of political parties and organized political groups in Iran.

During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941), however, political parties were subjected to strict state control and were effectively eliminated. Reza Shah regarded political parties, within the framework of centralized authoritarianism, as structures threatening national unity. Although the period of relative political pluralism between 1941 and 1953 was characterized by the rise of influential movements such as the Tudeh Party of Iran and the National Front of Iran, the 1953 coup d'état—commonly referred to as the August Crisis—abruptly interrupted this process.

The proclamation of the single-party Rastakhiz Party by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1975 officially marked the end of multiparty politics in Iran and led to the consolidation of political monopoly. This development accelerated the covert consolidation of opposition forces around traditional religious authorities and representatives of the clerical hierarchy. In turn, these processes contributed significantly to the acceleration of the Iranian Islamic Revolution.

Russian orientalist Vitaly Naumkin considers the 1979 Islamic Revolution to be the most significant transformational turning point in the evolution of Iran's party system. In his view, the revolution replaced the artificial party models of the monarchical era with the dominance of religious-ideological factions and informal political elites characterized by patronage-based relations. This transformation methodologically shifted political competition away from formal institutions toward informal networks of loyalty and allegiance.

The concept of "institutional rupture" advanced by Naumkin characterizes the transformations within Iran's political architecture not as an evolutionary process, but rather as a radical systemic transition. According to this approach, a functional rupture

emerged between the old political institutions—such as the monarchy and formal political parties—and the new foundations of legitimacy based upon Islamic governance and a theocratic legal order.

In analyzing the genesis of political parties, the sociological approach interprets them as the direct product of transformations within the social structure of society. The concept of “social cleavages,” developed by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, constitutes one of the principal methodological foundations for explaining the stability of party systems. According to this theory, every political actor forms its electoral base by representing a particular pole of existing social conflicts within society.

In Iran, however, these divisions differ substantially from Western class-based models and are instead characterized by the confrontation between fundamentalism and secularism. Social stratification in Iranian society possesses distinctive economic and cultural dimensions. In particular, conflicts of interest among the bazaar class, the religious establishment, the secular intellectual elite, and the rapidly expanding youth population have significantly shaped the trajectory of political processes. As emphasized by Nikki R. Keddie, the 1979 Revolution was largely the result of the mobilization of these diverse social groups around a common political objective. Likewise, the prominent Iranian sociologist Mansoor Moaddel underscores the role of religious values as a major driving force in the formation of Iranian political movements and parties. Thus, the religious clergy in Iran had already emerged as a decisive political force prior to the Revolution itself, rather than only in its aftermath.

A civilizational approach also possesses fundamental methodological significance for understanding contemporary political transformations and party processes in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Within this framework, political institutions are interpreted not merely as organizational mechanisms, but as evolutionary products of a particular geopolitical and cultural-historical environment. In particular, Samuel Huntington, in his conceptual theory of the “Clash of Civilizations,” argues that political systems and perceptions of authority formed within the sphere of Islamic civilization differ fundamentally from Western political models. According to Huntington, these distinctions derive directly from the foundational system of social values and religious-ethical principles characteristic of Islamic societies.

From this perspective, evaluating the dynamics of political parties and movements in Iran exclusively through the classical paradigms of Western liberal

democracy does not appear methodologically sufficient. Indeed, the internal motivations and ideological platforms of political groups within Iranian society have largely developed through the interaction between national civilizational particularities and Islamic traditions.

Within the political architecture of the Islamic Republic of Iran, state governance and party activity are inextricably linked to Islamic doctrine, particularly to the legal-philosophical principles of Shi’a Islam. The ideological foundation of this system is constituted by the theory of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), systematized by Ruhollah Khomeini. This doctrine defines the legitimacy of political authority not solely on the basis of popular sovereignty, but primarily through religious-juridical authority, that is, divine legitimacy.

The findings of this research demonstrate that the institution of Velayat-e Faqih functions as a supreme constitutional filter that determines the strategic “rules of the game” for all political actors in Iran. Consequently, every political group operating within the Iranian political sphere—whether liberal-oriented “reformists” (eslah-talaban) or conservative “fundamentalists” (usul-garayan)—is compelled to conduct its political activity within the doctrinal boundaries of this framework and in accordance with the principles of the existing constitutional order.

In the study of political parties and their functional capacities, the comparative approach represents one of the most effective methods for ensuring analytical objectivity. This approach enables the Iranian political system to be examined not only within a regional framework, but also against the broader background of global transformations in party politics. The classical political scientist Giovanni Sartori proposed the typologization of party systems according to the number of parties and the degree of ideological distance among them, emphasizing that the stability of a political system depends directly upon these mechanisms of interaction. From this perspective, the analysis of the Iranian model requires attention not merely to the numerical composition of parties, but also to their hierarchical relationship with the supreme centers of political authority and to the level of ideological consensus operating within the system itself.

Iran’s contemporary party system differs fundamentally from the classical models of multiparty politics characteristic of Western Europe. Political parties in Iran do not function as rigidly centralized organizational institutions; rather, they manifest themselves primarily as ideological blocs and

temporary factional alliances. In his foundational studies on party systems, Maurice Duverger analyzed the influence of electoral systems on party formation and noted that, in states possessing distinctive religious-legal frameworks such as Iran, the classical distinction between “cadre parties” and “mass parties” undergoes substantial transformation.

Iranian scholars, particularly Abbas Abdi, characterize the functioning of political parties within Iran’s power structure as a “mechanism regulating competition within the system”. Observations indicate that factionalism in Iran should not be interpreted merely as a sign of institutional weakness; rather, it constitutes a distinctive civilizational mechanism for preserving consensus among political elites and maintaining a balance among competing interest groups.

Based on the foregoing analysis, it may be concluded that party processes in the Islamic Republic of Iran should be examined not through the paradigms of Western liberal democracy, but rather through the prism of Iran’s national-religious particularities. In this context, political parties in Iran perform less the classical intermediary function of transmitting societal interests to the state and more the role of mobilizational instruments that legitimize the ideological foundations of political authority among different social strata. This characteristic renders them closer to “ideological-political corporations” than to conventional political organizations in the classical sense.

In the history of Iranian statehood, the period between 1903 and 1979 represents a complex and multifaceted stage of transformation extending from the Constitutional Movement to the Islamic Revolution. During this period, the comparative dynamics of Iran’s party system in relation to other Arab and Islamic countries became particularly evident through the struggle between personal rule and ideological pluralism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first political organizations that emerged in Iran as a result of the Constitutional (Mashruta) Movement—such as Firqeye Demokrate Iran (Democratic Party of Iran) and Ijtimoiyun-Amiyun (Social Democrats)—demonstrated ideological similarities with the Young Turks movement in the Ottoman Empire and the Wafd Party in Egypt. Nevertheless, the Iranian model distinguished itself even during this early period through its synthesis of religious and secular elements, setting it apart from other political processes in the region. As noted by historian John Foran, although Iran’s early political parties advocated secular reforms and modernization, they were consistently compelled to engage and

negotiate with the influential clerical establishment. This circumstance fundamentally differed from the comparatively radical secularist principles that characterized political developments in Egypt and Turkey. Indeed, this factor later provided the essential foundation for the emergence of the Islamic element as a central force within Iran’s political arena.

Iranian scholars, particularly Abdul-Hadi Haeri, argue that the attempt to preserve a balance between constitutionalism and Islamic values constituted the core essence of Iranian party politics during this period.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Iranian party system, even in the earliest stages of its development, remained institutionally connected with traditional religious institutions. Consequently, political pluralism in Iran evolved not as a purely secular phenomenon, unlike in several other Islamic states of the region, but rather in an “Islamic-political” form. Thus, political parties in Iran developed not merely as organizations modeled on Western patterns, but as complex structures reflecting the historical and cultural layers of Iranian society itself.

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