

## INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS OF POLITICAL MODERNIZATION IN IRAN AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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**Annotation:** *The article examines the establishment of a new theocratic system of governance following the Islamic Revolution, focusing on the institutional and ideological foundations of the post-revolutionary political order. It analyzes the processes through which Iran's domestic and foreign policies were transformed in response to revolutionary objectives, constitutional restructuring, and shifting power relations among key political institutions. Particular attention is given to the mechanisms through which religious authority was integrated into state governance, reshaping the balance between elected and unelected bodies within the political system.*

*In addition, the article provides a comprehensive analysis of the pragmatic political orientation adopted during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997). It explores the economic reform agenda pursued in the post-war period, including policies of reconstruction, partial market liberalization, and efforts to reintegrate Iran into the regional and international economic environment. The study also addresses the gradual process of societal liberalization, highlighting changes in state–society relations, the relative expansion of technocratic governance, and the reconfiguration of elite competition within the framework of the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, the article examines initiatives aimed at strengthening presidential authority and enhancing executive capacity, while assessing the structural constraints imposed by the theocratic nature of the political system and the enduring influence of religious institutions on policymaking.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, "Second Republic," societal liberalization, reforms.*

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran abolished the monarchy and established a new model of a religious-political system in the country. Since the foundation of the Iranian state on theocratic principles, its political system has undergone certain transformations. The gradual liberalization of the political system indicates the modernization of the state structure in Iran.

Since the 1990s, Iran's foreign policy has undergone transformation under the influence of internal and external factors. Changes in the international and regional landscape, as well as shifts in the military-political environment, necessitated the revision of Iran's foreign policy concepts and the search for new areas of cooperation. Under these circumstances, the slogan "Neither East nor West – Only Islam," which had been one of the key principles of Iran's foreign policy from 1979 to 1989, lost its

relevance. Iran's traditional foreign policy concept, aimed at maintaining a balance between two rival powers, became inadequate in the emerging new world order.

The first phase of political system reform coincided with the period following Ruhollah Khomeini's death and the election of a new Supreme Leader. In 1989, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a proponent of pragmatic foreign policy, was elected president, allowing for a further moderation of Iran's domestic and foreign policies. The radical rhetoric of the 1980s, which emphasized the implementation of a global Islamic revolution, faded from Iran's foreign policy discourse. Under these circumstances, Hashemi Rafsanjani focused his efforts on liberalizing the national economy. Notably, he proposed the establishment of the Council of Jurists to oversee government activities and develop the country's development strategy. Interestingly, while the Iranian Constitution provided for the creation of such a council, this provision had never been implemented in practice<sup>185</sup>.

During his presidency, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani sought to strengthen presidential power. This was because various structures within Iran's state administration directly interfered in the activities of the executive branch, hindering the implementation of large-scale reform programs. His supporters in parliament proposed abolishing the constitutional two-term limit on the presidency. However, all attempts by reformist bloc representatives in parliament to consolidate the president's position and expand his powers did not yield the expected results.

Western researchers refer to Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency as the period of the "Second Republic" or the "Commercial-Bourgeois Republic"<sup>186</sup>. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's pragmatic liberal course, adapted to domestic and foreign policy, led to the initiation of the socio-political liberalization process based on the ideas of Islamic modernism.

Although a law regulating political party activities was passed in 1981, other parties were officially banned until the dissolution of the Islamic Republican Party. The new stage in the formation of political parties was characterized by their alignment around two clerical political associations: the Society of Combatant Clergy, which held a conservative stance, and the Association of Combatant Clerics, which leaned to the left. Under the patronage of the former, the Front of Followers of the Imam's Line was established, bringing together 17 smaller conservative parties and organizations. Clerics continued to dominate all political processes. Some researchers refer to the 1990s as a period of transition from authoritarianism to "decorative democracy", as during this time, Iranian society began to express a desire to break free from the ideological oppression of the ruling elite<sup>187</sup>.

According to Iranian experts, this process can be explained by the desire of certain politicians to give the theocratic system a republican appearance. However,

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<sup>185</sup> Dunaeva E. The Political System of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Challenges of Liberal Modernization // "Vostok (Oriens)," 2016, No.1. – С. 113.

<sup>186</sup> Ansari.Ali M. Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Chance. – Gingko Library, 2019. P. 54.

<sup>187</sup>Hossein Bashirieh, An Introduction to the Political Sociology of Iran: The Islamic Republic Period, Contemporary Perspective, 2002, p. 192. (in russian)

even when using the term "decorative democracy," it is important to consider that initiatives to increase political transparency and liberalize the economy originated from clerics who held power. Additionally, the formation of a new party required the approval of the Supreme Leader, and candidates for elections were nominated by the clergy.

At the same time, during the ongoing Islamic Revolution, some representatives of the Shiite clergy who supported the ideas of Islamic modernism advocated for limiting the theocratic component in political life while preserving the Islamic system.

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the influential figures in the reformist bloc, was among the closest associates of Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, and Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. Iranians referred to Hashemi Rafsanjani as "Amir Kabir"<sup>188</sup>. He demonstrated remarkable determination and leadership qualities during the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979. Alongside statesmen such as Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, Mohammad Beheshti, Hossein-Ali Montazeri, and Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, he participated in the establishment of the republic and its institutions, including the formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The large-scale reforms implemented by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani played a crucial role in transforming Iran's governance system and conceptually reshaping the country's domestic policy. Notably, as a pragmatic politician, he continuously adjusted his views and approaches based on current events and circumstances. His perspectives evolved in response to societal and global developments and, at times, were shaped by political dynamics. Throughout his career, he applied unconventional approaches to solving critical issues facing the country. Despite the shifts in his political stance, he consistently maintained a strong religious faith<sup>189</sup>.

The presence of two rival groups within Iran's government—conservatives and reformists—and their conflicts over strategic domestic policy issues hindered the development and implementation of a consistent and stable political course. Nevertheless, President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani managed to overcome conservative opposition in key foreign policy matters essential for Iran's broader reforms, particularly in efforts to normalize relations with the United States<sup>190</sup>.

In the early 1990s, the international and regional military-political situation required Iran's Supreme Leadership to redefine the country's development strategy based on current realities. Key factors included rebuilding the war-torn economy after the Iran-Iraq War to achieve sustainable economic growth and overcome the domestic financial crisis, revising demographic policies, creating new job opportunities, strengthening social protection, and ensuring social mobility for the youth. To address

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<sup>188</sup> Amir Kabir (full name Mirza Takikhan Amir Nizam) - Prime Minister of Iran from 1848 to 1851. He implemented important reforms in the country's socio-political life. In particular, in 1851, he founded the higher educational institution "Dorulfunun".

<sup>189</sup> Koklikov V.O. Religious Activities of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani // Bulletin of RSTU. Series "Political Science. History. International Relations." 2020. No. 4. - P. 203-217.

<sup>190</sup> Orlov E.A. The Islamic Republic of Iran: a return to the idea of a regional power // New trends in the foreign policy of the IRI (90s)... Ukaz. soch. 1998. - P. 95.

these urgent issues, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani needed to push his internal and foreign policy concepts through a conservative-dominated parliament for approval.

Iran's Supreme Leadership was divided over the country's future domestic and foreign policies. The majority believed that in order to end Iran's international isolation and put the country on the path of economic recovery, it was necessary to abandon religious rhetoric in foreign policy. However, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and his supporters, including the parliament speaker, continually faced resistance from hardline anti-Western factions. In response, Rafsanjani emphasized: "Radical rhetoric will not force Iran to work any better... Iran must achieve its foreign policy objectives without making new enemies"<sup>191</sup>. He faced opposition from Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and other radical conservatives, who believed that cooperating with the West was an insult to Islam. However, the realistic assessments of events by pragmatic clerics were not taken into account<sup>192</sup>.

From the mid-1990s, there was a noticeable increase in political activism among the population. Various political parties and non-governmental organizations with different political platforms began to emerge. During the 1996 parliamentary elections, high- and mid-level pragmatic officials who supported Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's ideas in the executive branch formed a new public organization—the "Constructive Party" (Bunyadgaran). The activities of this party contributed to the growth of liberal sentiments in society, the activation of social movements, and the expansion of citizen participation in politics.

In conclusion, an analysis of the political development of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the late 1990s and early 2000s shows that no fundamental structural changes were implemented in the state governance system. Despite the preservation of the dominance of the theocratic authority, the process of political liberalization continued. The institutionalization of political parties and public organizations, the increasing political activism of citizens, and the gradual shift in public sentiment in favor of democratization indicate ongoing changes. However, this period of liberalization, which differs from Western models, remains complex and uncertain, with escalating contradictions within the power structures.

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(Hossein Bashirieh, An Introduction to the Political Sociology of Iran: The Islamic Republic Period, Contemporary Perspective, 2002, p. 192.) (in russian)