

# Islamic Republic of Iran

# جمهوری اسلامی ایران



# Outline

- overview of Iran as a comparative case
- political history of Iran
- political culture
- system of government
- political institutions
- social policy: sex and booze

# Axis of Evil?



Hassan Rouhani @HassanRouhani · Sep 28

We support consolidation of power through people's vote rather than arms. We defend the rule of majority that respects rights of minorities.

← ↻ 67 ❤️ 103 ⋮

*Radical Islamist,  
or pro-democracy?*

*Rogue state, or  
regional power?*



Hassan Rouhani @HassanRouhani · Jul 14

To our neighbours: Do not be deceived by the propaganda of the warmongering Zionist regime. #Iran & its power will translate into your power

← ↻ 1.2K ❤️ 1.2K ⋮



Hassan Rouhani @HassanRouhani · Sep 28

We have repeatedly said that the only way to uproot terrorism in MidEast is by targeting its underlying social, economic and cultural causes

← ↻ 123 ❤️ 151 ⋮

*Terror sponsor, or  
progressive ally?*

# Basic Facts

- Area: 1.65 million sq. km
  - ▶ 2.5 times bigger than Texas
- Population: 81.8 million
  - ▶ 8.5 million in Tehran
  - ▶ 73% urban
  - ▶ 18.7% below poverty line
- GDP per Capita (PPP): \$17,100
- Avg. life expectancy: 71 years
- Infant mortality: 38 per 1,000



# Political Overview



Green Movement protester during the riots against the stolen 2009 election (Tehran)

- Administration: Islamic Republic
  - theocracy (Shi'a Islam)
  - representative institutions subjected to control by nondemocratic institutions/actors
- Freedom House: 6.0 (Not Free)
  - weak political rights: unelected institutions can veto candidates, legislation
  - weak civil liberties: state-run media, lists on freedom of association and rule of law

# Who Are Iranians?

- ethnic groups
  - ▶ Persian (61%) - Farsi is official state language
  - ▶ Azeri (16%), Kurdish (10%)
  - ▶ many smaller groups, including Arab and Turkic tribes
- religion
  - ▶ Shi'a Muslim (89%)
  - ▶ Sunni Muslim (9%)
  - ▶ small Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Baha'i



Note the location of the Azeri and Sunni Kurd minorities, which violently resist state control

# Persia: Age of Empires

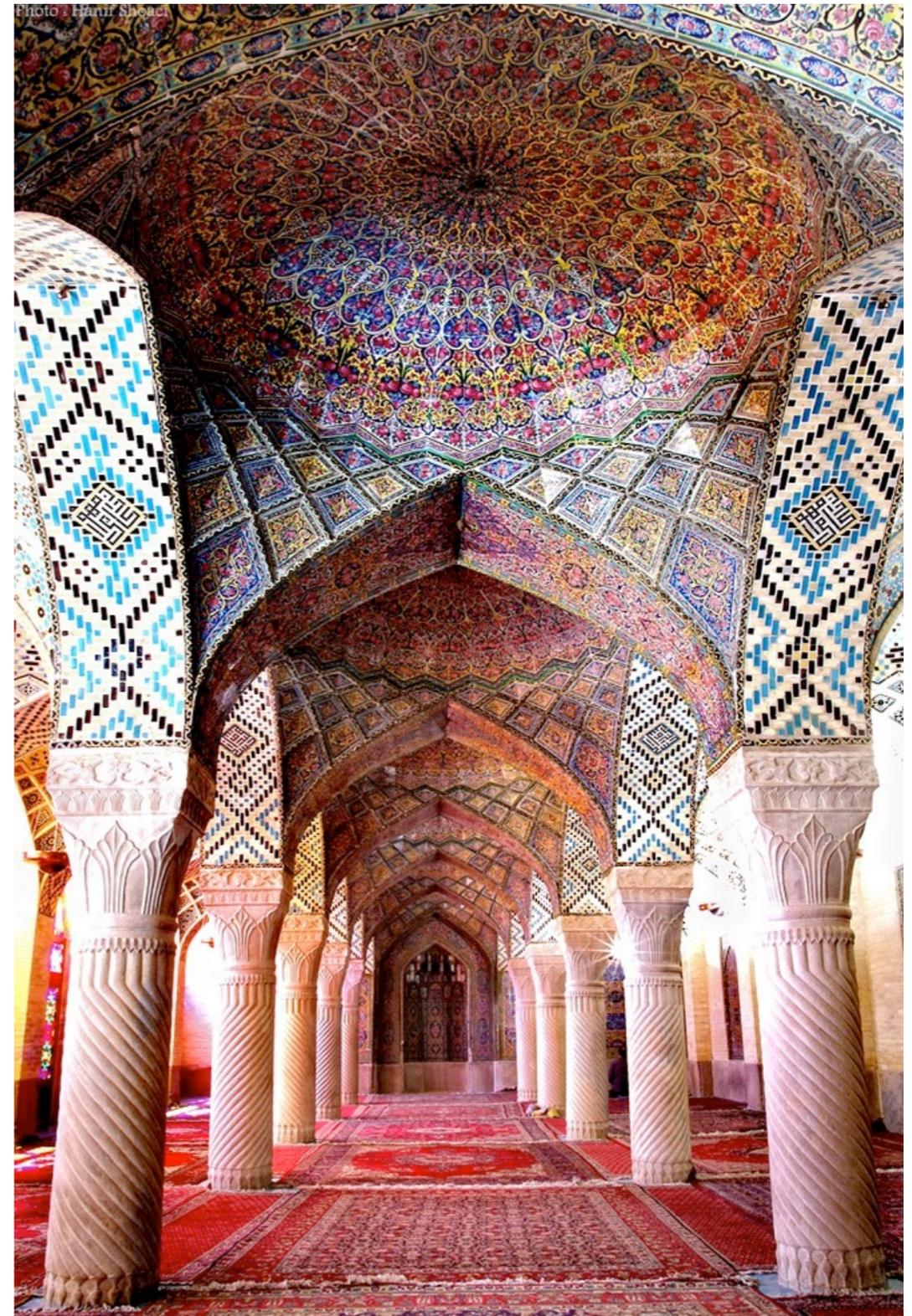
- first Persian empire (Achaemenian) controlled vast areas of the Middle East, North Africa, and Western Asia, defeated by Alexander the Great in 330 BCE
- second Persian empire (Sassanian) conquered parts of the Roman Empire and nearly defeated the Byzantines until Arab Muslims defeated Persia around 641 CE until the Mongols invaded in 1251 CE
  - ▶ this period was the “Persian enlightenment” with great cultural advances
- third Persian empire (Safavid) ruled 1501 to 1722 when Afghans conquered Iran
  - ▶ Shi’a Islam becomes the official state religion
  - ▶ the cultural and technological advances prior to the Mongol invasion were not revived
- decades later, the Turkic Qajars defeat other tribes and warlords to re-create most of the Safavid empire, but are poor rulers and suffer military losses and cannot control internal turmoil - their rule ends in 1925



Achaemenid-era ruins of Persepolis (near Shiraz)



Imam Reza Shrine (in Qom) was a pre-Islamic fortress, has survived for hundreds of years



Example of Sassanid-era design at Nasir al-Mulk mosque interior (near Shiraz)

# Constitutions and Revolutions

- Iran was first non-western state to institute constitutional monarchy after the revolution of 1906
  - ▶ signals failure of Qajar rule, paves way for Pahlavi dynasty
  - ▶ institutes the *Majles* (parliament) as a concession to politically active *ulema*, merchants, and western-educated elites
- military commander Reza Khan Pahlavi consolidates power in 1926 and engages in extreme modernization revolution as new Shah
  - ▶ march towards modernity seeks to rebuild Iranian power through westernization, economic development
  - ▶ it works too well: through the 1940s political liberalization flourishes, weakening the Shah

# Constitutions and Revolutions

- newly appointed Prime Minister Mosaddeq nationalizes the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951
  - ▶ CIA operatives force a coup d'etat in 1953 and Mohammad-Reza Shah Palavi takes the throne; rolls back all liberalization and increases push for modernity
- Islamic Revolution 1979 ends 2,500 years of monarchic rule; creates Islamic Republic
  - ▶ after 1963 moderate and progressive constitutionalists were driven out, radical *ulema* and Islamists take their place leading the anti-monarchists
  - ▶ revolution supported by Islamists (progressive, leftist, radical), students and teachers, merchants, factory workers, public sector employees, and white collar workers

# Contemporary Chaos

- the broad coalition of revolutionaries fell apart after 1979
  - ▶ the radicals “won” the revolution and exclude the more liberal elements of society
  - ▶ Khomeini and the radicals benefit from the U.S. embassy debacle and from Iraq invasion and war 1980-1988
- political turbulence is now the norm, and the death of Khomeini in 1989 does not help
  - ▶ voters approve reform package eliminating prime minister and consolidating executive power in the presidency under moderate Rafsanjani in 1989
  - ▶ reformist Khatami elected president in 1997 due to popular mobilization, but by 1999 political violence, severe rioting, and censorship had peaked

# Contemporary Chaos

- conservatives consolidate power, Ahmadinejad elected president 2004
  - ▶ fear of U.S. invasion post-2003 played into the conservatives' hands
  - ▶ widespread corruption, inflation, and political violence escalate; in 2009 the conservatives steal the national election and Khamenei calls the result “a divine assessment”
  - ▶ the Green Movement protests were anti-regime but not really controlled by the reformist camp; the regime brutally reacted by arresting thousands, killing and injuring dozens
- by 2011 Khamenei was fed up with the corruption and insubordinate actions of Ahmadinejad's conservative faction
  - ▶ elections in 2012 brought conservatives loyal to the Supreme Leader back in control of parliament
  - ▶ in 2013 moderate Rouhani wins presidency in a landslide and embarks on a series of reforms and rapprochement with the west, including the U.S.

they killed my brother because he asked  
"where's my vote"



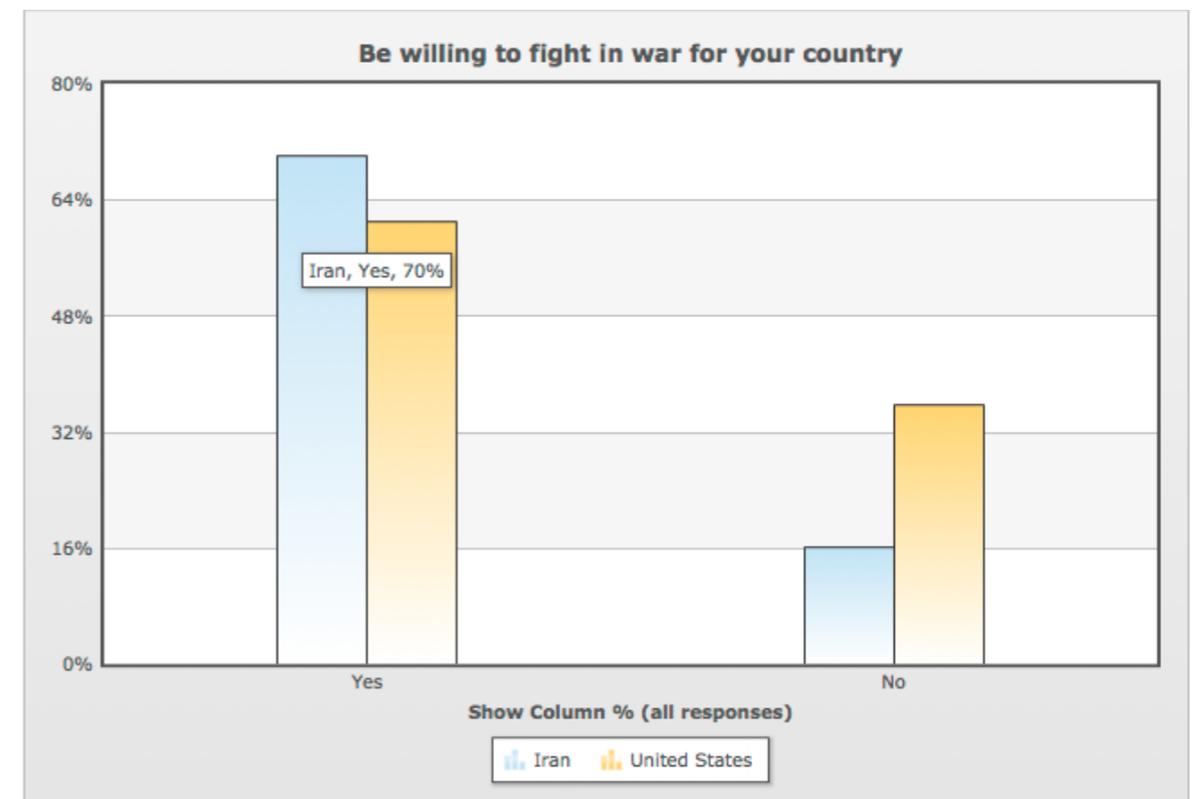
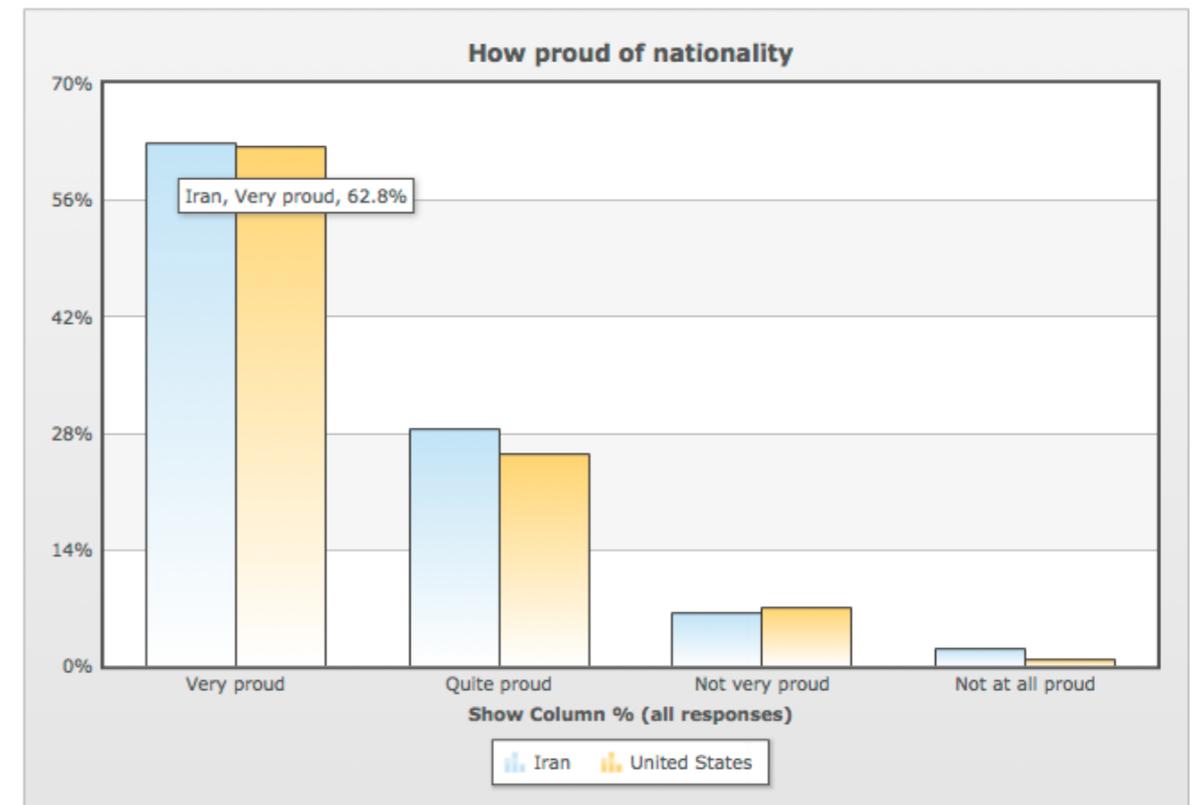
protesters move towards Azadi Tower, Tehran



national police suppress protests following the beating of the opposition leader's son by regime militiamen (*basji*)

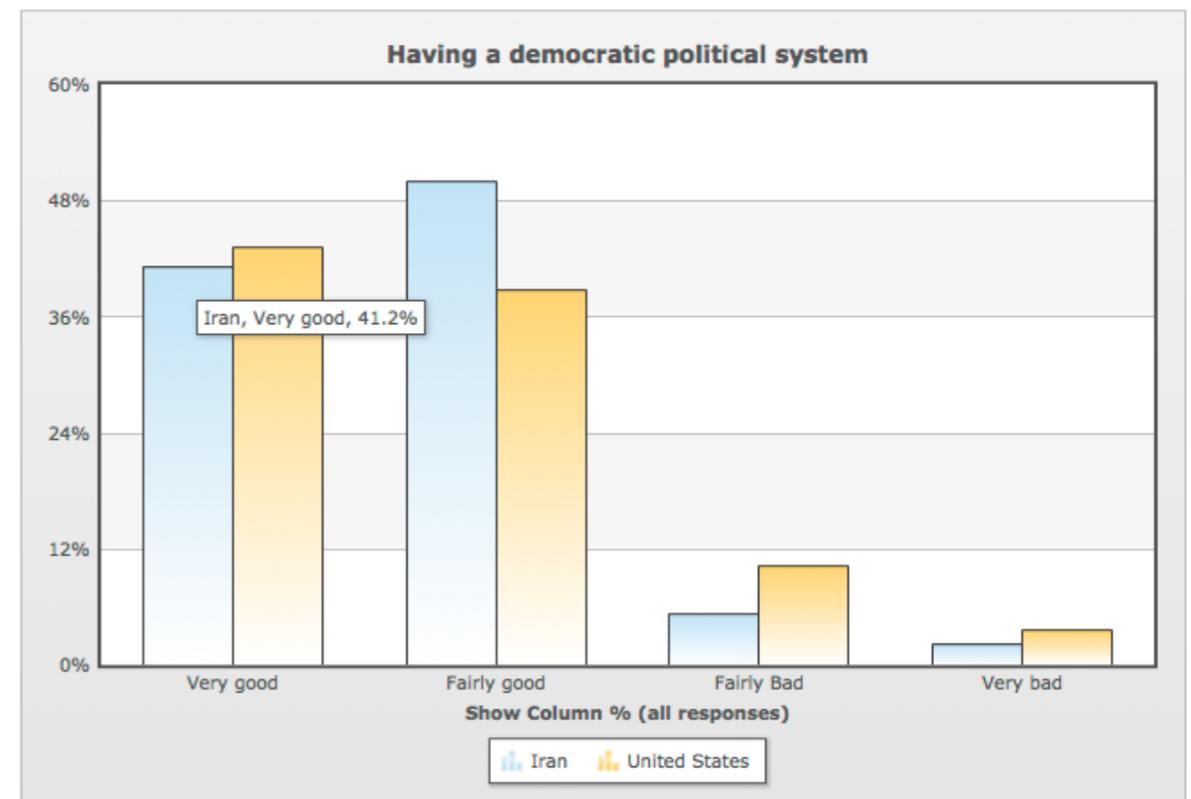
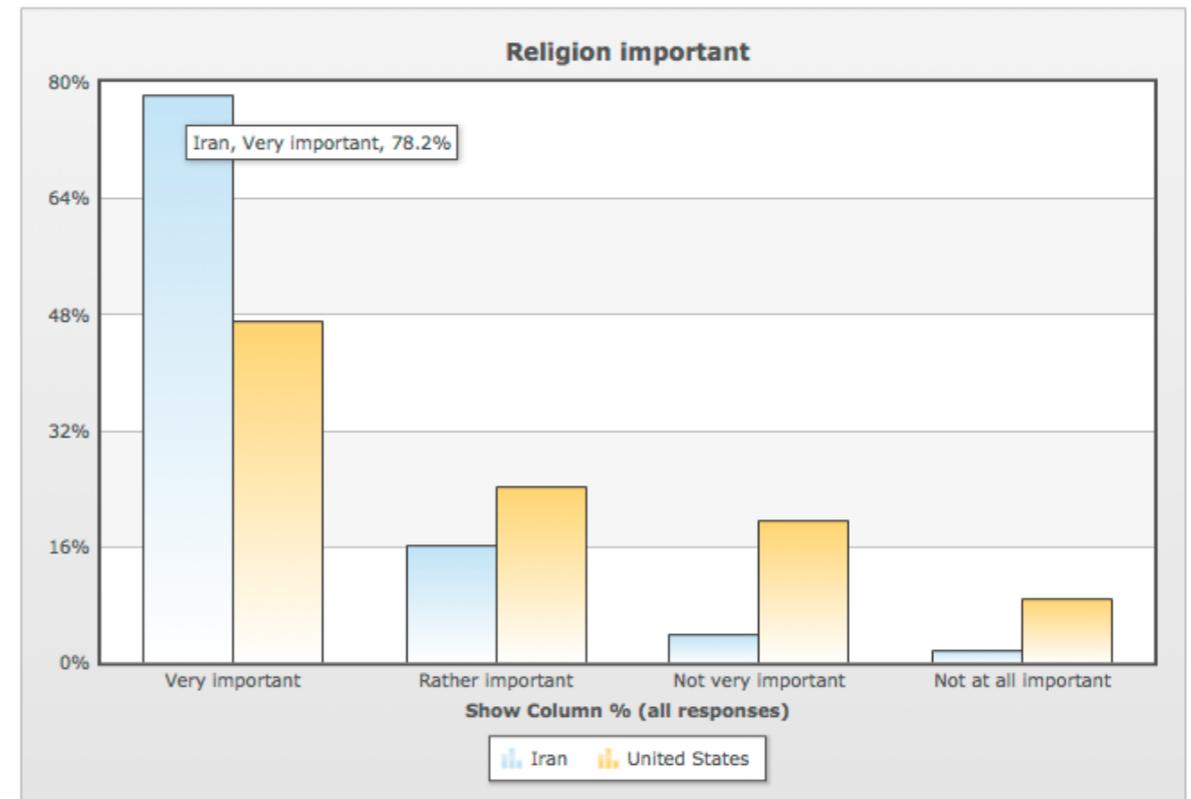
# Political Culture

- Iran's history has created a deeply nationalistic culture which has at times been prone to violence and rhetoric
  - ▶ bloody revolutions and popular anti-regime sentiments
  - ▶ deep resentment of most Sunni Arab states, the U.S. and Israel
- memories of vast empires and pride of distinctive culture and desire to “make Iran great again”
- suspicion of foreign intervention and meddling by U.S. and Arab states
- willingness to sacrifice for Iran, also a product of Shi'a religious tendencies

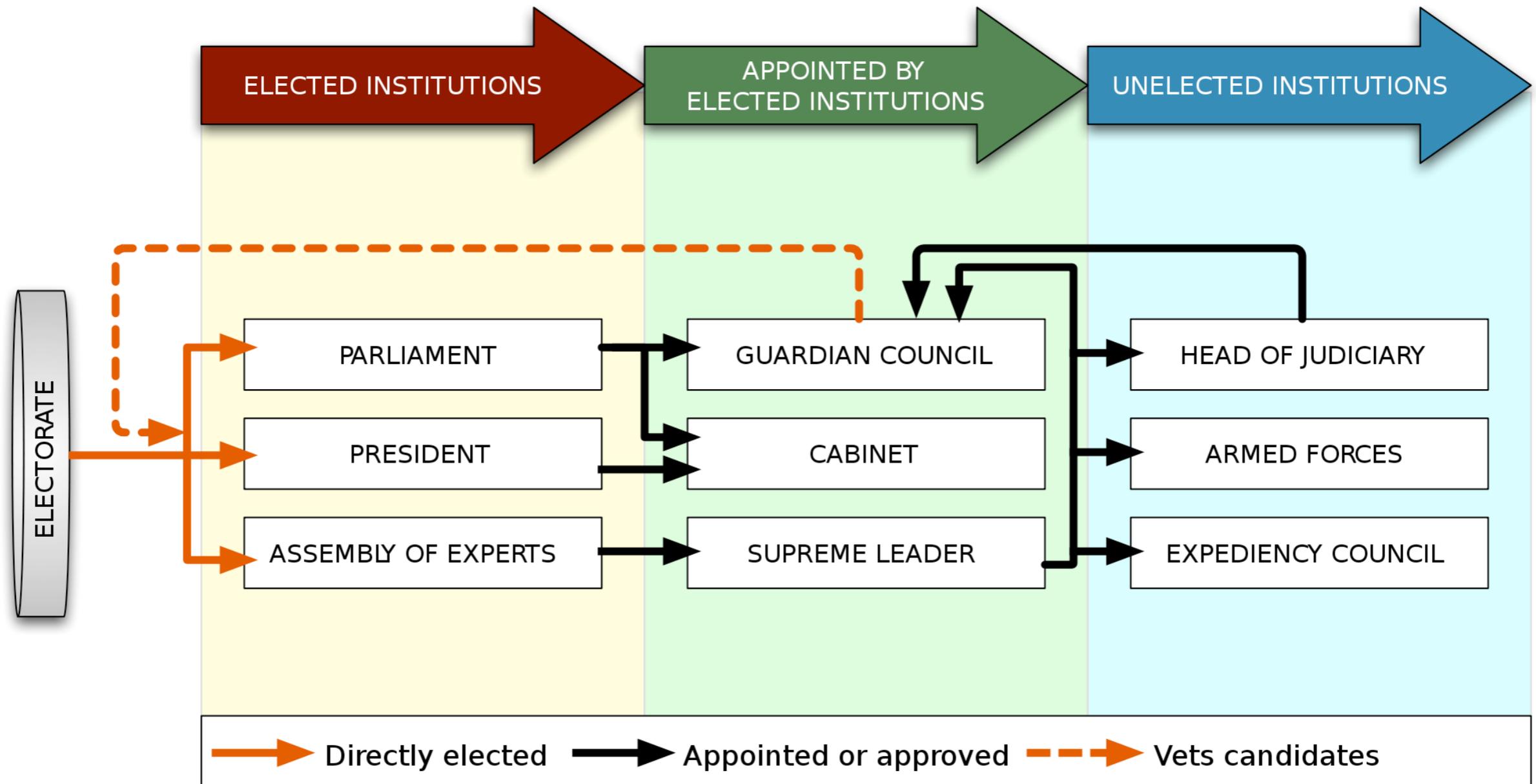


# Political Culture

- Iran's "Twelver" Shi'a religion is not incompatible with politics like Sunni-based "Wahhubbism" (Saudi, al-Qaeda, ISIS)
- martyrdom is popular with Shi'a, and political revolution is seen as a just cause
- political pluralism is a natural tendency since Shi'a support multiple religious leaders and ideals like consensus, inclusiveness, and legalism
- both religion and politics are very important to Iranians, as is having a democratic political system



# System of Government



# The Big Three



Ayatollah  
Ruhollah Khomeini

President  
Hassan Rouhani

Ayatollah  
Ali Khamenei

# Executive Institutions

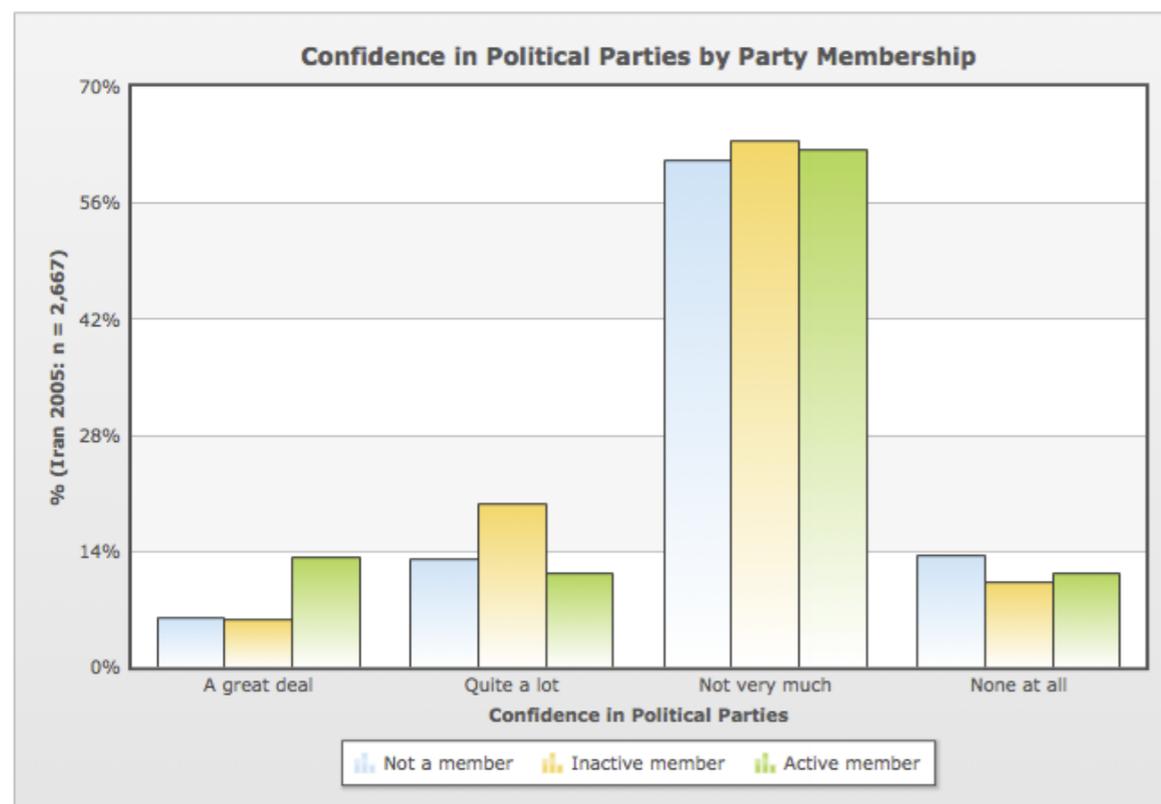
- Head of state/government: Supreme Leader
  - appointed for life by Assembly of Leadership Experts, *ulema* who are popularly elected by universal suffrage
  - the Leader is the highest political authority and source of religious emulation
  - sets domestic and foreign policy agendas; appoints key figures like the Head of Judiciary; appoints own advisory Expediency Council
- Head of government: President
  - elected by universal suffrage every four years with two term limit; must be male and Twelver Shi'a
  - signs bills into law, appoints cabinet, handles executive functions not preempted by the Leader

# Legislative Institutions

- parliament (*majles*): 290 member unicameral body elected by universal suffrage for four year terms
  - ▶ members must be Muslim, but five seats are reserved to represent Christians (3), Jews (1), and Zoroastrians (1); women serve as MPs
  - ▶ has restrained lawmaking capability (by the Council of Guardians)
  - ▶ Khomeini originally envisioned the *majles* as relatively unimportant since Islamic law covers most aspects of society but the legislature has been active “updating” Islamic law for governing a modern state
- Council of Guardians: six *ulema* appointed by the Leader and six Islamic lawyers appointed by the Head of Judiciary and confirmed by the *majles*
  - ▶ enforces the preeminence of Islamic law and the Constitution over new legislative initiatives; ability to vet candidates
- disagreements between these two bodies are settled by the Expediency Council

# Political Parties

- traditional (western) political parties do not really exist in Iran; party organizations are created for election purposes and are then disbanded
  - ▶ instead, there are broad political coalitions representing the political right (conservatives and moderates) and the center (reformists)
  - ▶ the political left is excluded from Iranian politics; left parties have been banned for not adequately representing Islam



- confidence in political parties is rather low, even among members
  - ▶ patronage/vote buying is widespread and eclipses typical party functions
  - ▶ party platforms are broadly similar and do not challenge the regime

# Coalitions

## *Principalists*

Leader, President  
182 majles seats

### *Conservatives*

Civic nationalism, Islamic democracy  
Social conservatism, strict Islamism



Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran  
(Ahmadinejad)



Islamic Coalition Party



Islamic Society of Engineers

### *Moderates*

Pragmatism, Islamic democracy  
Moderation, economic development



Moderation and Development Party  
(Rouhani)

## *Reformists*

13 majles seats,  
29 Assembly of Experts

### *2nd of Khordad Front*

Civic nationalism, Islamic democracy  
Social liberalism, human rights



Islamic Iran Participation Front (Khatami)



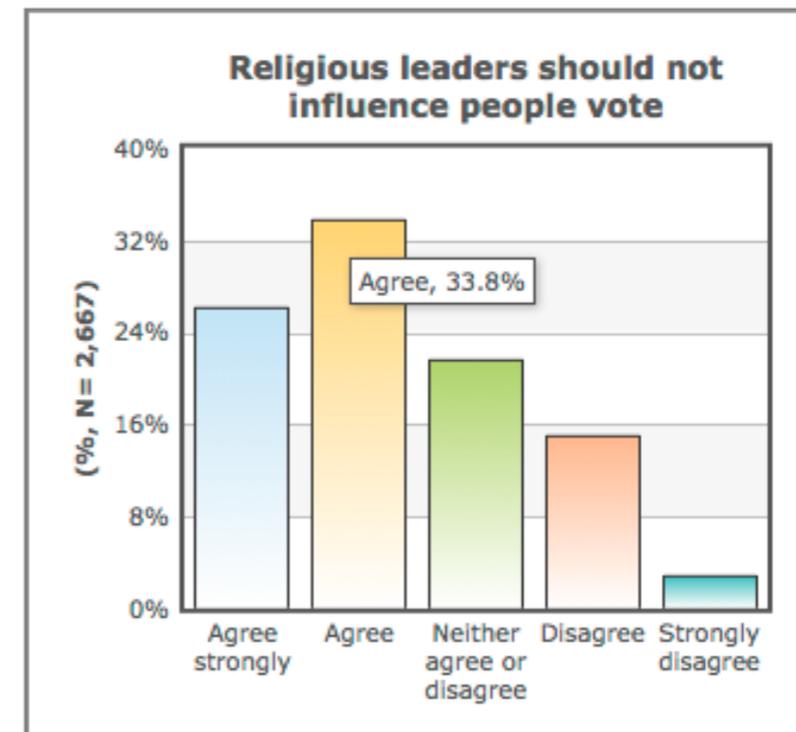
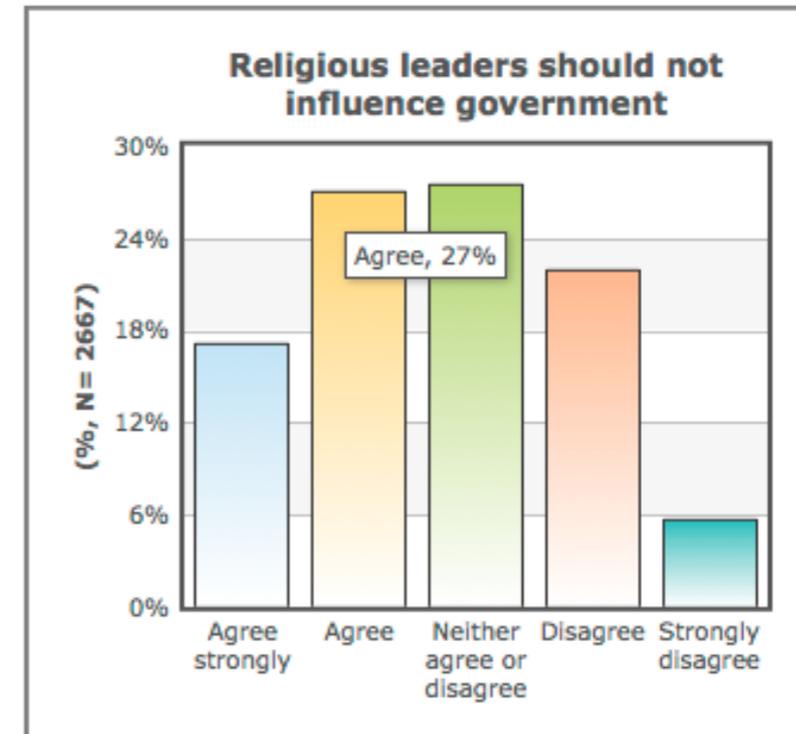
Association of Combatant Clerics



Green Movement (Mousavi)

# The Role of Clerics

- clerics are responsible for overseeing elected “lay” officials, public policy
  - ▶ Iranians are divided on whether this is acceptable
  - ▶ Shi’ism idealizes consensus, but Iranian clerics are divided among the different coalitions
- otherworldly interference in elections is not preferred
- Iranians are growing increasingly distrustful of clerics’ involvement in politics; Rouhani shows this balance



# Gender and Sexuality

- Islamic law dictates much of the social policy governing gender relations but Iran in some ways defies tradition
  - ▶ Islamic feminism leverages Islamic practices to pressure the state for more egalitarian policy outcomes (such as divorce)
  - ▶ in 2005, 17.4% of Iranian respondents to the World Values Survey thought that marriage is an outdated institution (U.S. 12.6%)
- contraception prevalence in 2011 was 77.4%, about 1% higher than the U.S., and Iranian society is becoming more permissive of premarital sex despite laws forbidding it
- official policy is that homosexuality is illegal, but the state provides male-to-female reassignment surgery for free as an alternative to incarceration
  - ▶ in 2005, over 80% of respondents said homosexuality is never justified (U.S. 30%)

# Alcohol and Crime

- Islam prohibits the use of alcohol, and so official state policy is that Muslims cannot make or drink alcoholic beverages
  - ▶ in 2014 alcohol was the second most-used type of drug besides opiates; Iran has the third highest consumption of booze in Muslim countries after Lebanon and Turkey
  - ▶ much like the U.S. during prohibition, the black market meets the demand, through smuggling and illicit production
  - ▶ non-Muslim minorities can make, distribute, and consume in their own communities, but often sell to Muslims illegally
- the state has pushed for the consumption of non-alcoholic beer as an alternative, and controls the production and distribution of majority market share (*Behnoosh/Delster*)

## Additional information on Iran and comparative government

- ▶ Gasiorowski, Mark. (2014). “Islamic Republic of Iran.” In *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Mark Gasiorowski. 7th Edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- ▶ Shadid, Anthony. (2006). “The Iranian Revolution and the Rebirth of Political Islam.” In *The Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Karl Yambert. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- ▶ Multiple selections in “Is Iran Democratizing?” (2000). *The Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 11(4). pp 107-146.