

The First Iran, the Second Iran, and the Potential for Political Change

Raz Zimmt | August 14, 2023

Recent weeks have seen a spirited public debate within the Islamic Republic concerning the participation of many Iranians in Shiite religious ceremonies and the significance of such activity for the status of religion in Iranian society. The debate is unfolding against the background of profound trends in Iran over the past few decades, including rapid secularization, the erosion of clerical authority, Westernization, and modernization. Nonetheless, these trends do not necessarily indicate a full shift toward secularism as understood in the West, nor do they imply that the Iranian public is poised to advocate actively for revolutionary political change. Conversely, displays of religious beliefs should not be automatically interpreted as expressions of support for the regime's policies or an endorsement of the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic. Any attempt to view Iranian society in a generalized and all-encompassing manner, without acknowledging its complexity and diversity, could impede endeavors to garner the backing of the "silent majority" for political change. Relying exclusively on secular and pro-Western groups and organizations that strive for revolutionary change might lead to misguided and oversimplified evaluations driven by wishful thinking. This, in turn, could complicate the establishment of a broad-based coalition comprising sectors with different and at times conflicting perspectives that are all working toward political transformation.

On July 7, 2023, Iran commemorated Ghadir Day: according to Shiite belief, on the 18th day of the final month in the Muslim calendar of the year 632, the Prophet Mohammed delivered a sermon in the Ghadir Khumm oasis, situated between Mecca and al-Medina, and announced that his successor would be Ali bin Abi-Talib. Ceremonies were organized nationwide under government auspices and are estimated to have drawn millions of participants. The most significant event occurred in Tehran, featuring a ten-kilometer parade stretching from Imam Hussein Square to Azadi Square.

The festive parades sparked a spirited public debate on the significance of broad participation in religious ceremonies and the status of religion within Iranian society. Supporters of the regime, primarily in the conservative faction, interpreted the events as further manifestation of the profound and widespread religious devotion characterizing the society and evidence refuting claims of inclinations toward secularization within the Islamic Republic. Conversely, critics of the regime contended that attendance at the parades does not constitute proof of the society's religiosity, nor does it signify public support for the regime and its policies.

For instance, the conservative newspaper *Vatan Emrooz* [argued](#) that the participation of millions of citizens in the Ghadir parades refutes assertions made by both internal and external critics of the regime that the Iranian public, particularly the younger generation, is distancing itself from religious beliefs. Indeed, the paper argued, the extensive turnout by various segments of the population for religious ceremonies testifies to the profound influence of religion on society and its role in strengthening national unity, despite the concerted efforts by Iran's adversaries to undermine religious traditions and destabilize internal cohesion. Similarly, the pro-regime daily *Kayhan* [asserted](#) that the Ghadir ceremonies underscore the intensifying attachment to religion. It contested claims by opponents of the Islamic Revolution who argue that religion's prominence in Iran is waning, and with it, public interest in religion. According to *Kayhan*, events on the ground do not support these claims. The active participation of the public in religious events, including pilgrimages to Shia holy sites, commemorations of Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Destiny) at the conclusion of Ramadan, and observances marking the deaths of Shiite imams, is evidence that religion's status is not in decline. The newspaper criticized most of the media outlets associated with the reformist faction for failing to cover the Ghadir ceremonies, and contended that the participants in the religious processions represent the authentic voice of the Iranian people.

In contrast, critics of the regime within the reformist-pragmatic faction contended that the Ghadir parades were orchestrated by the government using state funds. They viewed these events as an exploitation of public resources, which ultimately serves to further politicize religion and erode its standing. These critics attributed the substantial turnout at the ceremonies to the fact that attendees were enticed with a variety of complimentary goods and benefits. The reformist daily *Etemad*

[reported](#) that along the route of the rallies in Tehran, there were booths dispensing free food, candies, and toys, and offering medical and educational services, as well as legal guidance, to those in need. This report aimed to underscore that a considerable portion of the participants were present not for religious reasons, but rather driven by personal gains. The news website *Khabar Online* [asserted](#) that the majority of attendees did not outwardly display their religious convictions during the ceremonies, and therefore, their presence did not necessarily indicate the strength of faith within society. Similar critiques emerged following the Ghadir rallies organized by the government the previous year. An article in the reformist newspaper *Hammihan* [noted](#) that the government arranged these religious events for political motives and to substantiate claims of religiosity among the public. The paper questioned why citizens were not attending Friday prayers at the numerous mosques, many of which remain empty, if their religious devotion was as pronounced as it was purported to be.

Profound Trends in Iranian Society

The ongoing public debate regarding the Ghadir rallies has unfolded within the context of profound trends shaping Iranian society in recent decades. Among these trends is a rapid [process of secularization](#), compounded by a decline in the [status of the clerics](#). Undoubtedly, the excessive politicization of religion in Iran, the regime's inability to address the economic and social challenges faced by its citizens, and widespread corruption have together eroded much of the once-widespread public support for the revolutionary regime. More significantly, these factors have diminished the appeal of religion to many individuals. Public opinion surveys provide evidence of evolving religious behavior and levels of conservatism among the Iranian populace. A case in point is a 2020 poll conducted by the Iranian polling institute ISPA, which [revealed](#) that 47.4 percent of Tehran's residents do not observe fasting during Ramadan. The decline in religious observance is notably evident in the disregard for Islamic dress codes, particularly concerning the mandatory veiling of women, and the decrease in mosque attendance. A [study](#) conducted by the Majles Research Center in the summer of 2018 found that 70 percent of women did not strictly observe the practice of wearing the hijab. Between 10 and 15 percent of women disregard these norms, while only 13 percent strictly adhere to this requirement.

In tandem with the process of secularization is a discernible, ongoing decline in the stature of the clergy in Iran. This is partly attributed to their association with

the Islamic regime and its perceived injustices. Another contributing factor is the relatively favorable economic conditions enjoyed by many clerics, coupled with their tendency to keep their distance and limit their interaction with the general public, which creates a notable separation between them and ordinary citizens. The substantial deterioration in the standing of religious leaders is further driven by the regime's efforts to exert control over the academic religious establishment, whose independence has been significantly compromised by the process of politicization, which has rendered the religious establishment dependent on government backing. These trends have not escaped the observation of the clerics themselves. In a recent [interview](#) with the daily *Hammihan Online*, reformist cleric Rasul Montakhebnia acknowledged that numerous young people were growing distant from Islam and the clergy. He underscored that for centuries, the clergy's primary mission had been to propagate religion and set a personal example, with limited involvement in governmental matters. However, following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, clerics became engaged in the state's affairs and actively participated in its institutions. Montakhebnia argued that this shift does not serve the interests of Islam or its clergy. They lack the requisite skills for such involvement, find themselves blamed for national issues, and are compelled to neglect their religious and social duties due to their commitments to the government. Before the Revolution, the clergy stood with the citizens, but now many perceive themselves as superior to the general populace.

These processes are intertwined with the trends toward Westernization and modernization within Iranian society. Heightened exposure to Western influences encourages the adoption of a more permissive Western lifestyle, particularly among members of the younger generation, who often reject the values of the Revolution. While the eagerness to embrace Western technology and consumerism does not in itself lead to ethical and ideological transformations, exposure to Western culture contributes to more liberal perspectives. Many young individuals openly defy the regulations of the Islamic Republic, especially concerning their private lives. This is exemplified through their consumption of Western products and their participation in covert parties hidden from the watchful eyes of authorities. In the past, such activities were confined to a relatively small segment of Iranian society, primarily among the youth of the urban middle and upper classes in larger cities. However, due to processes of urbanization, the emergence of new media (internet and cellphones), and the expansion of public transportation within and between major cities, these phenomena have extended their reach to increasingly broader segments of the population. As Hashemi's [research](#) demonstrates, starting from the 1990s, the consumer culture has permeated lower social classes, and cultural and

recreational pursuits, which were once limited to a small elite, are now prevalent in less affluent areas like southern Tehran and even in villages. Although socioeconomic disparities along geographic lines persist, Western innovations are becoming more accessible across all regions.

The Meaning of Secularization and Religiosity in the Islamic Republic

At the same time, these profound societal changes do not imply that the Iranian public is embracing secularism in the conventional Western sense. Researchers Yousef Ali-Abazari, Abbas Varij Kazemi, and Mehdi Faraji [emphasize](#) that the majority of the population remains religious, albeit more distant from the religious establishment. They argue that proclaiming “the demise of religion” in Iran is incorrect, as religion continues to command a central position in daily life, and the symbols, teachings, and institutions of religion are still deemed significant. Secularization does not necessarily translate into a decline in faith or religious consciousness; rather, it is manifested in the reduction in the authority of religious institutions and clergy. Despite Iranian society remaining substantially influenced by religion, even devout adherents display reduced enthusiasm for participation in communal religious practices, such as public prayers.

Partial reinforcement of the assessment lies in a series of surveys conducted in recent years by ISPA, which delved into public attitudes toward religious matters. These surveys reveal that an overwhelming majority of the Iranian population (composed almost entirely of Muslims) remains steadfast in their adherence to religious principles. In a [survey](#) from 2016, more than 75 percent of respondents stated that they felt either close or very close to God; the corresponding figure in 2009 to the same question was 63 percent. Significant shifts in public attitudes toward disrespect for Islam are not readily apparent. In 2016, 85 percent of respondents expressed strong aversion toward anyone insulting the Prophet Muhammed (in comparison to 91.4 percent in 2009) and 86 percent conveyed strong aversion toward anyone insulting the Qur’an (compared to 94.5 percent in 2009). During the COVID-19 crisis, an [ISPA poll studied whether](#) the pandemic impacted the significance of religion and God in individual lives. Results revealed that 47 percent reported an increase in importance of religion, 48.4 percent noted no change, and only 3.5 percent indicated a decline. Consequently, it is evident that many Iranians continue to turn to religion, particularly during challenging times, as they still perceive it as a source of solace and protection, including

against diseases. Moreover, religion provides them with a sense of collective identity, a vital aspect during times of emergencies.

The fact that a significant number of Iranians still identify themselves as religious may help explain some of the criticisms aimed at extreme displays of opposition to religion and the clergy. One of the expressions of the protests following the tragic death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 was that of young people [knocking the turbans](#) off clerics' heads in public spaces. These actions ignited fervent debates on social media. Numerous individuals voiced support for these gestures, characterizing them as an integral facet of the broader protest against the regime and a manifestation of the increasing dissent against the religious leaders governing the Islamic Republic. In contrast, others contended that it is vital to differentiate between valid protests directed at the regime and offensive actions against all religious individuals. Responding to a video depicting young people in Tehran removing a turban, one person decried this behavior as inappropriate and disrespectful toward religious attire. He labeled the conduct as reflective of Islamophobia rather than an expression of freedom. Another emphasized the importance of the protest movement distancing itself from extremists and striving for greater unity with the general public. Even reformist political activist Saeed Shariati took issue with this behavior on his Twitter account, [stating](#) that remaining silent in the face of attacks on citizens in the street due to their religious clothing would be misguided. This is especially true given that many of them supported the protests.

This does not connote that Iranians who identify themselves as faithful or religious necessarily endorse the regime's policies or wholeheartedly adhere to the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic. For instance, opposition to the compulsory hijab can be found even among individuals who do not in principle oppose wearing the hijab, including some members of the clergy. In May 2015, Islamic cleric Hojjat-ul-Islam Mohammad Reza Zaeri expressed [unusual dissent](#) against the mandatory hijab. He stated that the authorities should acknowledge and rectify the error of this policy, implemented after the Revolution. In an interview on an Iranian news website, Zaeri contended that it not only failed to encourage women to wear the hijab but in fact prompted the opposite outcome. Many people supported his statements on line, lauding his bravery and concurring that the government should not interfere in the matter of the hijab. One commentator mentioned that his two daughters consistently donned the hijab

while visiting the United Arab Emirates, where it is not obligatory. The protestors who took to the streets following Mahsa Amini's tragic death included [women wearing headscarves](#) who voiced opposition to government policies.

An article published after the Ghadir parades on the Asr-e Iran website, affiliated with critics of President Ebrahim Raisi's government, [asserted](#) that public participation in the Ghadir events is not unexpected due to the unique reverence of Imam Ali among Muslim believers. For these believers, he stands as an exemplar and symbol of justice and courage. However, this participation is not evidence of support for the actions of specific governments. Many participants in fact oppose government policies that have resulted in sanctions and heightened impoverishment. In addition, given the limited avenues for public celebrations, numerous citizens seize every available opportunity to partake of festive events such as the Ghadir celebrations. These types of occasions should be organized to commemorate national days alongside religious festivals. In a website interview, Ahmad Mazani, another cleric and former reformist member of the Majlis, [emphasized](#) that while citizens' attendance at religious ceremonies might reflect their religious conviction, it should not be misconstrued as an endorsement of government actions. He underscored that political inclinations can only be truly gauged through free elections, public opinion surveys, and referenda. Nasser Imani, a conservative political commentator and activist, also [argued](#) that a distinction exists between religious affiliations and political viewpoints. In relation to the Ghadir events, Imani noted that some citizens who strictly observe religious practices harbor substantial reservations about the conduct of state affairs. Thus, their participation in public ceremonies does not necessarily indicate endorsement of the government's performance.

The assertions by Mazani and Imani prove themselves when considering public participation in events of an ideological nature, such as the commemoration of the Islamic Revolution's anniversary. Over the years, Revolution Day parades have evolved from politically and revolutionarily charged events into vibrant carnivals that largely serve as opportunities for family entertainment during a national holiday. They often feature street fairs and social gatherings. Even the funeral in January 2020 of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, drew a multitude of individuals who might not inherently embrace the regime's policies. The funeral procession, spanning several days and traveling through various towns en route to Kerman, Soleimani's birthplace, was

accompanied by millions of Iranians. These massive crowds led to a stampede resulting in the deaths of dozens and hundreds sustaining injuries. Sociologist and reformist political activist, Mohammad Reza Jalaeipour, [characterized](#) the funeral as Iran's largest public event in two decades, but underlined that among the attendees were ordinary citizens not affiliated with any specific political faction. Some individuals were even critical of the Revolutionary Guards' actions on domestic and foreign matters. However, they paid respects to Soleimani for his involvement in the Iran-Iraq War and his efforts against ISIS. Others attended to express their condemnation of his assassination, which was widely regarded as a political act of terror by the United States. The complex sentiments surrounding Soleimani became evident through the defacement of his portraits by activists a few days after the funeral. This act of protest targeted the regime's dissemination of misleading information regarding the circumstances of the Ukrainian aircraft crash on January 8 following a missile launched by the Revolutionary Guards Air Force, leading to the loss of numerous lives. Religious ceremonies are also occasionally leveraged to voice dissent against the regime. For instance, during rallies as part of the Shiite 'Ashura ceremonies in July 2023 across various Iranian cities, [anti-regime sentiments](#) were expressed. During the 2009 protests (the Green Revolution), following allegations of presidential election fraud, demonstrators used Shiite days of mourning (Tasu'a and 'Ashura) to mobilize support for the opposition.

However, displays of secularization and antagonism toward religious practitioners should not immediately be construed as readiness to engage in political change. The gap between the regime's institutions and the public, particularly the younger generation, continues to widen steadily. Concurrently, there is a surge in severe criticism directed at the Islamic Republic, leading to a diminishing public faith in state institutions and a heightened sense of disillusionment. This trend becomes especially evident through the more frequent and intense waves of protest observed in recent years. These protests often escalate into outbreaks of violence, accompanied by slogans condemning the very existence of clerical governance. Nevertheless, the escalating sense of despair frequently propels citizens to seek alternative methods to grapple with the reality. These include [emigration](#), political indifference, a heightened inclination towards escapism, and distressing social problems such as suicide and drug addiction. Furthermore, certain segments of the Iranian populace remain apprehensive regarding revolutionary change that might precipitate political chaos. In the eyes of many Iranians, the potential alternatives to the current regime appear even bleaker, with possibilities ranging from civil war to the disintegration of the country's territorial integrity or the

Revolutionary Guards seizing power in the event of political collapse. Consequently, they might find temporary contentment in the pursuit of better economic circumstances and a gradual reduction of government interference in their daily lives.

The “Silent Majority” as the Catalyst for Political Change in Iran

Iranian society is intricate, and since the Islamic Revolution has experienced far-reaching demographic and cultural changes. Some of these shifts have been shaped by global phenomena, such as the internet and social media, while others are the outcomes of local developments. The processes of Westernization, modernization, and secularization have yielded diverse and at times even contradictory political effects. Exposure to modern Western culture has led to individualization and the adoption of more liberal perspectives, yet the trend toward a consumer-oriented and leisure-driven culture can at times reinforce the younger generation's inclination toward political disengagement. Demographic trends also have conflicting political ramifications. Despite the regime's efforts over the past decade to encourage higher birth rates as a countermeasure against an aging society, the birth rate continues to decline. While most young Iranians are distancing themselves from the values of the Islamic Revolution and questioning the conservative religious establishment, the aging population tends to favor gradual change, political stability, and economic advancement over revolutionary upheaval. According to sociologist Abbas Kazemi, many middle-aged adults identify with the younger generation participating in protests. However, they are constrained from joining them due to family and work commitments.

The key to initiating political change in Iran relies significantly on the capacity to enlist what Hamidreza Jalaeipour refers to as the “silent majority.” In an article published in July 2023, the Iranian sociologist [estimates](#) that some 70 percent of Iranians comprise this silent majority. They are distressed by the authorities' actions and align with the civic aspirations of the youth. At the same time, they differ in their stance from radical groups, particularly those located outside Iran, that advocate the regime's overthrow through violent means. In an interview, Jalaeipour [argued](#) that Iranian society is a “kinetic society” (*jame'eh-ye janbeshi*), rather than a “revolutionary society” (*jame'eh-ye enghelabi*). Reflecting on the latest wave of protests, he observed that the majority of demonstrators in 2022 were middle-class youths aged 15-25. Efforts to shift the protests from a civil movement toward a movement seeking regime change, with the endorsement of foreign

media, proved ineffective, because the majority of the populace declined to engage in a violent revolutionary endeavor. While numerous citizens are dissatisfied with the government, they concurrently harbor hostility toward the radical opposition situated abroad, including royalist or terrorist organizations. Jalaeipour arrests that these protests have not progressed into the revolutionary phase. He also indicates that Iranian society remains unprepared for a revolution, partly due to its multidimensional – and not bipolar – nature.

Certainly, adopting a generalized approach toward Iranian society that overlooks its inherent diversity could impede endeavors to secure the support of the “silent majority” for political transformation. In recent years, Israel itself has not concealed its intentions to undermine the Iranian regime's stability. For instance, in October 2021, a senior political official [acknowledged](#) that the Israeli security services had devised a strategy where pressure from the Iranian public, though not inclined to embrace alterations to their way of life, could potentially impact the Iranian nuclear program. This revelation followed a cyberattack that disrupted fuel supplies within the country. The argument proposed that lengthy queues at gas stations might prompt the “privileged North Tehran residents” to pressure the government into abandoning its nuclear ambitions. In April 2023, a few months following the onset of a wave of protests in Iran, Reza Pahlavi, the son of the deposed Shah, visited Israel at the invitation of Minister of Intelligence Gila Gamliel. The visit was also interpreted as an indication of Israel's intentions to aid the exiled Iranian opposition in its efforts to oust the regime.

Teaming up with pro-Western and pro-Israeli secular organizations that strive for a revolution in Iran might appear intuitive and evident, yet it remains uncertain whether these groups possess the capacity to effect the desired transformation. The prospects of political change in Iran hinge significantly on the capability to construct an inclusive coalition that encompasses sectors with varying and even contradictory perspectives. A notable weakness within the recent wave of protests was the absence of considerable social and economic population segments, including workers from major industries and the service sectors, who refrained from participating in the predominantly teenager and university student-led demonstrations. Challenging the regime's stability in a substantive manner necessitates the establishment of a comprehensive national coalition. This coalition should be able to unite diverse groups such as workers and pensioners, who prioritize economic enhancement and social equity, alongside politically

astute groups like students who stand as advocates for political and civic liberties. Such a coalition must embrace the intricate tapestry and variety of Iranian society. Distinguishing between “the regime” and “the people” is insufficient, as a populace exceeding 85 million cannot be approached as a uniform group.

Just like other human societies, Iran is composed of a diverse population encompassing deeply religious believers and secular individuals. It includes supporters, critics, and adversaries of the regime; young liberal students as well as young anti-Western hardliners; urban-educated middle classes aspiring for change, and traditional middle and lower classes who may prefer maintaining the status quo, especially without resorting to violent and revolutionary means. This intricate constellation results in a multitude of distinctions in political viewpoints, ideological interpretations, values, and priorities. An Iranian citizen can observe Ramadan and also commemorate [Cyrus the Great Day](#), oppose the obligatory hijab and simultaneously view the hijab as a meaningful religious, national, and societal emblem. They can both protest against the regime and celebrate the national football team's triumph, voice disapproval of Iranian aid to Syria while opposing American sanctions. They may dissent from the regime's stance on destroying Israel and at the same time object to the policies of the Israeli government. An oversimplified analysis neglecting the diversity of Iranian society is a formula for misguided assessments that often lead to the adoption of failed strategies.