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# What Will Tip the Scale?: Toward a Theory for Understanding Democratic Transition in Iran

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# What Will Tip the Scale?: Toward a Theory for Understanding Democratic Transition in Iran

## **Abstract**

The world watched Iran in 2009 to see what the aftermath of its presidential election would hold. It seemed as if the stage was set for regime change - all requisite factors appeared to be present. Yet the theocratic Iranian regime that has been in place since 1979 remains as entrenched as ever. This leaves us at an interesting juncture. What is the reason for this entrenchment? What explains the fact that the 2009 election did not spark a successful democratic transition? I posit that Iran has an additional factor that must be taken into account when considering democratic transition: its institutional structure. It is not enough for the opposition to coalesce around a symbolic figure - they must coalesce around a real leader with enough power to push for democratic change. However, if this leader is to arise out of the system, he or she will likely be tainted by the system through which power was gained. This phenomenon will stunt any push for change that might come from within the ranks of the elites. As the result of a systematic examination of normal mechanisms for the occurrence of regime change, this study concludes, then, that a push must then come from elites outside of the system if Iran is to achieve democratic transition.

## WHAT WILL TIP THE SCALE?: TOWARD A THEORY FOR UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN IRAN

Sara Ghadiri

*Abstract: The world watched Iran in 2009 to see what the aftermath of its presidential election would hold. It seemed as if the stage was set for regime change – all requisite factors appeared to be present. Yet the theocratic Iranian regime that has been in place since 1979 remains as entrenched as ever. This leaves us at an interesting juncture. What is the reason for this entrenchment? What explains the fact that the 2009 election did not spark a successful democratic transition? I posit that Iran has an additional factor that must be taken into account when considering democratic transition: its institutional structure. It is not enough for the opposition to coalesce around a symbolic figure – they must coalesce around a real leader with enough power to push for democratic change. However, if this leader is to arise out of the system, he or she will likely be tainted by the system through which power was gained. This phenomenon will stunt any push for change that might come from within the ranks of the elites. As the result of a systematic examination of normal mechanisms for the occurrence of regime change, this study concludes, then, that a push must then come from elites outside of the system if Iran is to achieve democratic transition.*

### IRAN 2009: WHAT HAPPENED?

The world watched Iran in 2009 to see what the aftermath of its presidential election would hold. It seemed as if the stage was set for regime change – all requisite factors seemed to be present. The economy was faltering, divisions were arising within the elite, parts of the opposition had coalesced, large portions of the population were mobilized in protest, and the international and expatriate communities had become involved. Add to this litany the fact that there existed a history of active struggle for democratic rule, a relatively homogeneous population, few border contentions, high literacy rates, movement towards modernization, and high urbanization, and nearly every typical indicator of a transition seemed to be in place. Yet the long-standing Iranian regime remains as entrenched as ever. This leaves us at an interesting juncture. What is the reason for this entrenchment? What explains the fact that the 2009 election did not spark a successful democratic transition? In order to understand what is required to tip the scale in favor of democratic transitions in Iran, we must examine factors that tipped the scale in other cases, and then attempt to understand why it is that Iran does not follow these models.

The goal of understanding regime transition in Iran is framed by the context of understanding the influence of factors that could cause regime change in Iran, along with predicting what factor or factors will tip the scale towards democratic transition. In this study, I first analyze and assess the current status of the aforementioned factors that can tilt a regime towards transition or indicate that a regime is headed towards a transition. I then posit that the institutional structure through which the most powerful Iranian leaders have arisen was purposefully designed to parcel out just enough power for them to have political influence, yet

still keep each one from truly realizing enough power to convince any other faction that they ought to lead. Upon examining this institutional structure, I find one factor vital to Iran achieving a democratic transition: A clear leader must emerge who can organize the opposition, either by virtue of his own power or the conglomeration of power to which he has access, all while avoiding becoming tainted by the system through which that individual gained power.

In order to achieve a successful democratic transition, political scientists must first attempt to understand the concept of democratic transition. For this study, a democratic transition refers to a precise moment in time in which a regime “makes a qualitative leap in levels of democracy, either from an authoritarian regime to an electoral democracy or from a semi-autocratic regime to a more democratic system.”<sup>1</sup> With this definition in mind, where does Iran stand?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2005, Michael McFaul noted that Iran has “the best structural endowments for democracy that is still ruled by an authoritarian regime.”<sup>2</sup> McFaul’s observation sets an interesting tone for this inquiry. Iran employs a three branch institutional scheme, but exhibits several idiosyncrasies. There is a two-part leadership between the President and Supreme Leader in the executive. In addition to these two institutions, Iran’s executive branch includes the Assembly of Experts, Expediency Council, and Council of Guardians.<sup>3</sup> Inherent in this large executive is the illusion of checks and balances, because all power lies either directly or indirectly in the hands of the Supreme Leader. Another of its idiosyncrasies comes in the fact that Iran also has elections. The candidates for all elections, however, must first be screened by the half-cleric, half-jurist Guardian Council. These elections do feature high turnout and high public interest, and while recently of questionable validity, they still present a potentially democratic institution that could function liberally were it given the opportunity.

I first examine the literature on democratic transition. The broad-based theories that currently exist generalize based on cases that share a common geographical location. These theories, however, are often not generalizable to other geographic areas. In spite of this, these theories can still be examined and used to extract factors that have triggered transition in other countries as a starting point. This framework can then serve to evaluate the factors at play in Iran. This approach acknowledges that there are several factors that tend to predispose regimes towards democratization. Although these vary based on time or place, they can be separated into four categories of factors: economic, political, social-cultural, and geographic.

In the economic category, the greatest factor is the strength of the economy.<sup>4</sup> A weak economy, signaled by high unemployment, high inflation, and low growth, is often seen as the fault of the government. Haggard and Kaufman also note that in years preceding democratic

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<sup>1</sup> McFaul et al. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> McFaul 2005.

<sup>3</sup> CIA World Factbook 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Haggard and Kaufman 1997.

transitions, patterns of declining growth and increasing inflation tend to be evident.<sup>5</sup> Though economic crises are neither necessary nor sufficient to cause a transition, poor economic performance reduces inter-elite bargaining power and strengthens anti-regime opposition movements. Even where economic crises are not the source of factional conflicts between hard- and soft-liners, however, they are likely to widen them.<sup>6</sup> Economic factors such as these surface so prevalently in situations of regime transition that they seem to be the only factors that can be generalized across geographic areas.

In terms of political factors, almost all of the studies on development and democracy focus on the interests, choices and strategies of political actors. Furthermore, most research on transitions focuses on the interests and strategies of regime and opposition elites, along with the constraints facing them.<sup>7</sup> Political factors for regime change vary widely and include domestic and international features. For example, opposition cohesion can point to a regime that may be tipping towards transition.<sup>8</sup> Institutionally, a two-ballot electoral system can often be helpful in producing a successful transition, and have been helpful, especially in Africa.<sup>9</sup> O'Donnell and Schmitter's theory states that divisions within the authoritarian regime itself cause change.<sup>10</sup> This model fits many Latin American transitions, but not post-Soviet ones. Contrary to their theory of internal divisions of the regime, however, elite pacts, or agreements between elite leaders, also might facilitate successful transition, as has been the case in Africa.<sup>11</sup> There is, however, little support for the second theory outside of that continent.<sup>12</sup> Additional political factors for regime transition include international engagement and external pressure, though the extent to which those are relevant varies widely by geography and by case.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Bratton and van de Walle, as well as McAdam et al., have pointed to popular mobilization and contentious collective action as a cause of democratic transition.<sup>14</sup> Bratton and van de Walle note that collective action often played a critical role in pushing African authoritarian rulers to initiate liberalization.<sup>15</sup> If this trend holds in Iran, it is possible that we could see these protests play an important role there as well. Work by McAdam et al. makes the stronger claim that democratization and contentious collective action are inseparable. In fact, McAdam et al. argue further that "democratization, then, never happened without contention;" however, they also note that there are "only certain cases in which contention causes democratization."<sup>16</sup> Popular

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Geddes 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Van de Walle 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Geddes 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Bunce and Wolchik 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Beissinger 2002, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Bratton and van de Walle 1997.

<sup>16</sup> McAdam et al. 2008, 269, 272.

mobilization and contentious collective action did not cause transitions in Latin America; they did, however, force elites to begin negotiations in Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup>

There are also social-cultural factors that might tip the scales in favor of democracy, including a history of active popular struggle for democratic rule, a homogeneous population, and high literacy rates.<sup>18</sup> McFaul also points towards movement towards modernization and high urbanization as explanatory factors for transition. This category, however, has less literature devoted to it. Recent work is being done on the impact of social media and the Internet in relation to the socio-cultural organization of protest movements, but much still remains unanswered about how new media “digital democracy” contributes to pushes for democracy across the world. It is certainly clear that the increased prevalence of Facebook, Twitter and other Internet sites are changing the way people communicate, and that has some sort of impact on democratic transitions.

The geographic considerations for regime transition focus mostly on having a set of clearly defined state borders and a clear sense of who is a part of the state.<sup>19</sup> McFaul also indicates the importance of having few border contentions. This category essentially establishes that countries that are involved in external conflict or border disputes are less likely to transition, as transitions do not occur as commonly during wartime. This is a well-studied factor, but Iran does not have border disputes that would make this an issue.

In addition to these bodies of literature surrounding specific groups of factors, Geddes notes that “it seems as though there should be a parsimonious and compelling explanation of the transitions, but the explanations proposed thus far have been confusingly complicated, careless about basic methodological details, often more useful as description than explanation, and surprisingly inconsistent with each other.”<sup>20</sup> Most of the generalizations that have been proposed have failed either to accommodate the details of the real-world variation or to explain that variation. To combat this, many attempts have been made to classify types of authoritarian regimes in order to better understand them and generalize based on those types. There are current theories and models that seek to separate these types of regimes, most popularly Geddes' division of authoritarian regimes into personalistic, militaristic, or single-party regimes, and Howard and Roessler's tree typology categorizing countries using the relative freedom of their elections.<sup>21</sup> Geddes notes that military regimes are those where a group of officers decide who will rule and exercise some influence on policy, while single-party regimes' access to political office and control over policy are dominated by one party. In personalist regimes, access to office and the fruits of office depend solely and completely on the discretion of an individual leader.<sup>22</sup> Iran's constitution, however, enshrines both guardianship and popular rule in the constitution, and puts far more power in the hands of the people and individuals other

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<sup>17</sup> Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Ulfelder 2005; McAdam et al. 2008.

<sup>18</sup> McFaul 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Rustow 1970.

<sup>20</sup> Geddes 1999, 117.

<sup>21</sup> Howard and Roessler 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Geddes 1999.

than the Supreme Leader than a traditional personalist regime.<sup>23</sup> It also has no political party system that would give rise to a single-party regime, and the Supreme Leader is not a military general, nor did his power come about because of a military coup.

Howard and Roessler, on the other hand, divide regimes into five classifications: closed authoritarian, hegemonic authoritarian, competitive authoritarian, electoral democracies, and liberal democracies. These categories are defined by freedom of elections and status of civil liberties and move from most restrictive, closed authoritarian, to most free, liberal democracy. Howard and Roessler differentiate competitive authoritarian regimes from hegemonic authoritarian systems by identifying cases where the winning party or candidate received over 70% of the popular vote. Ahmadinejad won the 2009 election with 63%,<sup>24</sup> which would put Iran in the competitive authoritarian camp. However, there were wide allegations of fraud in this election, in addition to the candidate vetting system, which calls into question how truly "competitive" these elections are. It seems, then, as if it is unfair to label these elections as competitive. As it has been shown, Iran evades both of these classification systems, and, even when forced, appears as a hybrid or seems to be caught between two categories. Existing classification schemes concerning regime type and factors for regime transition do not encompass the unique situation in Iran. I thus reject these classifications and approach Iran as a case study on its own.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR IRAN'S 2009 ELECTION

The presidential election of 2009 cannot be considered as a harbinger of reform or revolution without understanding the underlying dynamics of the election. This election was pitched by the Western media as a powerful impetus for the democratic movement. For context, we must take a historical perspective. Iranian elections have always been a struggle between reformists and conservatives. Reformists, also called soft-liners, "seek more expansive powers for republican institutions," while conservatives, or hard-liners, "support the absolutist power of the Supreme Leader and related unaccountable institution."<sup>25</sup> In 1997, Iran saw the election of its first "reformist" president, Mohammad Khatami. In 2000 it saw a reformist victory in the Majles (also called the National Assembly, or Islamic Consultative Assembly), including the solidification of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Khordad Coalition, a coalition of 18 reformist groups that was formed after Khatami's 1997 win.<sup>26</sup> In 2001, Iran saw Khatami's reelection. However, 2004 saw widespread allegations of fraud in the parliamentary elections.<sup>27</sup> In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a "true believer in the antidemocratic and anti-liberal dictates of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini" and hard-line conservative, was elected. Ahmadinejad

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<sup>23</sup> Tezçür 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Ansari 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Posusney and Angrist 2005, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Boroumand and Boroumand 2000.

<sup>27</sup> McFaul 2005.

represents the most conservative of the factions in Iran gaining power.<sup>28</sup> The 2008 parliamentary elections were marred by the mass disqualification of reformist candidates.<sup>29</sup> With this electoral history, Iran approached the 2009 elections.

Four candidates for the presidency were cleared to run in 2009 by the Guardian Council. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the sitting president, was backed by the Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Mohsen Rezaei, also a conservative, was deemed the pragmatic and technocratic successor of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Mehdi Karroubi, a long-time politician and reformist cleric, campaigned on nationalization of the oil industry. Mir Hossein Mousavi, another leader in the reformist camp, was designated as the ideological successor to Mohammad Khatami. These candidates illustrate the main elite cleavages that exist in Iran.<sup>30</sup> One side champions a fundamentalist, confrontational approach to domestic as well as international problems. Internally, the fundamentalist group works to suppress all dissidents, even among its own allies, and quell any voice of moderation. Internationally, it pushes an aggressive and uncompromising program. In contrast, the opposite camp, the reformists, favor an open society at home, one that is able to move on a democratic path, albeit step-by-step, while pursuing a rational and clear diplomatic approach to Iran's international problems. Even with these broad groupings, however, four candidates surfaced in the election. While they can be grouped into reformists and conservatives, stark ideological differences existed between each individual candidate, even those from the same side of the ideological divide.

Mousavi was and is the most publicized of the reformist candidates. However, he was and is not the most "reformist." He marketed himself as a "religious intellectual" dedicated to lawfulness and advancement of Iran, both economically and socially. His campaign materials expressed that his platform consisted in "coming to make an Iran far from lies, superstition, and backwardness."<sup>31</sup> His revolutionary credentials allowed him to pass through the candidate vetting system of the Guardian Council, and his status as a *sayyid*, or direct descendant from the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), solidified his religious credentials. Once he passed through, he stated that he would push for the same policies that Khatami had espoused: equality of the sexes, freedom of speech and other civil liberties, and the resumption of relations with the West, provided that Iran would not suffer great costs because of it. His base was made of the urban middle class, professional elites, women, and young voters.<sup>32</sup> They were well educated, and many of them had relatives that have left Iran in favor of economic or academic opportunities elsewhere. Many groups printed individual campaign literature supporting Mousavi,<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Tezçür 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Milani 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Settād-e Javānān-e Hamieh Khātami 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Esfandiari et al. 2009.

<sup>33</sup> During my visit to Iran from May 2009-July 2009, I personally collected campaign literature from all four candidates. The references to campaign materials regard materials that were collected and translated between May 30, 2009 and June 12, 2009. Please see contact author for images and translations of campaign materials.

including workers groups, student and youth groups, and martyr groups.<sup>34</sup> In addition, he had the support of filmmakers, actors and actresses, athletes, and a group of reformist-leaning clerics.<sup>35</sup> His popularity was partly due to the fact that he was not a cleric, and partly the fact that he, as the most prominent reformist, was not Ahmadinejad.

In a manner unusual for an Iranian election, Mousavi's wife was also quite prominent during the campaign, and has remained prominent since. She appeared often on his campaign literature, and has appeared with Mousavi and spoken in public as well. She has been described as a "Michelle Obama-like figure" and has her own political credentials, including a PhD in Political Science from one of Tehran's premier universities, as well as a chancellorship at the premier women's university in Tehran.<sup>36</sup> She is an ardent supporter of women's rights, though also has revolutionary Islamic credentials. Her influence in this structure is unclear; however, it is clear that her prominence in this election gave the Mousavi campaign credence in his women's policy as well as strengthened his support among women.

Karroubi, the other reformist, had a slightly different platform and base. His policies were and remain the most reformist, even more so than Mousavi. His advisers are among the country's most respected reformist technocrats, and he ran on a specific program of reforms targeted at specific electoral groups such as women, students and non-Persian minorities.<sup>37</sup> Along with policies supporting fiscal responsibility and strengthening the rule of law, Karroubi promised that, if elected, "he would sign Iran up to international protocols on women's rights, and would end patrols by the country's religious police, who enforce Islamic dress codes for women."<sup>38</sup> Karroubi has the support of both the largest student group and the largest group of university graduates who came out of that activist student group.<sup>39</sup>

Another candidate, Rezaei, represented the military faction within the right-wing movement, and was the face of the pragmatic conservative movement that included former President Rafsanjani for this election. Rezaei's agenda included criticism for Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric and "games of chicken" in the international sphere. He mentioned reducing military service from two years to one, and also promised to incorporate more ethnic minorities in his cabinet. His economic agenda revolved around better management of oil revenues and more robust economic planning. He also wanted to develop Iran by easing relations with the West and being less confrontational. Rezaei had largely technocratic support, and as a technocrat himself, ran as the "architect of the Iranian economy."<sup>40</sup> His support base in the election, which continues even after the fact, was made of conservatives who were dissatisfied with Ahmadinejad's carelessness in politics and economics, yet were still staunch

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<sup>34</sup>The martyr community in Iran holds a significant amount of clout in politics. The government entitles veterans, martyrs, and their families to special benefits and recognition. Their support is "revolutionary support" and the individual who can capture this support has important social capital.

<sup>35</sup> Summary Testimony of Actors/Artists, Athletes, Religious Scholars, and Families of Martyrs 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Esfandiari et al. 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Esfandiari et al. 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Laban-Mattei 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Esfandiari et al. 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Rezaei Campaign Flyer 2009.

supporters of the regime and individuals within it. Their issue was more with Ahmadinejad himself and less with the status quo.

Among all of the 2009 candidates, Ahmadinejad's platform was (and remains) best known. He ran largely on his agenda and his populist past record. Ahmadinejad supports very seclusionist policies, and advocates for programs that have alienated Iran in the international sphere, including the nuclear program. He is best noted for his "clampdown on all forms of dissent - on press, on women, on bloggers, on dual nationals--and for strengthening the role of the revolutionary guards and the revolutionary guard culture that has developed with the former commanders and former members."<sup>41</sup> Allegations abound that Ahmadinejad used state funds for travel, and for "bussing in supporters from one district to another so he looks like he has big crowds at many events."<sup>42</sup> Local papers also reported during the run-up to the election that his government handed out "gold coins, cash and 400,000 tons of potatoes to rally support."<sup>43</sup> Allegations of corruption abound even beyond this. For example, during the campaigning period, Mousavi campaign materials raised questions for Ahmadinejad regarding where \$207 billion in oil revenues went.<sup>44</sup>

Ahmadinejad's base in the election was drawn from the lower class, both in rural areas and among the urban poor. His populist policies of handouts to individuals either in the form of money, loans, or food, have endeared him to these classes. These families are often also the families of martyrs or have members in the Basij, the paramilitary force that was responsible for some of the violent clashes during the protests. Their support is crucial to the maintenance of the existing power structure, as control of the paramilitary force is paramount for suppressing dissidents in the streets.<sup>45</sup>

However, the matters at stake in this election should not be confused. None of the candidates spoke of any serious overhaul of the Islamic system. They were, and are, all fully committed to the idea of the Islamic republic. A nuanced examination suggests that the concepts of "Islamic-ness" and "republican-ness" were actually in question. The broad-based ideological coalitions that exist in Iran continue to follow the patterns suggested by this election. They are thus split between the reformist and conservative camps. However, there remains no complete unification within these movements. Additionally, it is important to note that, strictly speaking, there are not organized political parties in Iran that parallel those that exist in other countries. The "parties" that exist are largely ideological coalitions around political figures, and thus the nature of the political system is largely centered on individual players within the system. Several conservative groups have come together under two separate coalitions, which are called the United Front of Principlists and the Broad and Popular Coalition of Principlists.<sup>46</sup> Some conservative groups remain outside either coalition. Similarly, several reformist groups,

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<sup>41</sup> Esfandiari et al. 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Settād-e Javānān-e Hamieh Khātami 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Esfandiari et al. 2009.

<sup>46</sup> CIA World Factbook 2010

such as the Islamic Iran Participation Front (also known as Mosharekat) and the Mojahideen of the Islamic Revolution came together as a reformist coalition in advance of the 2008 Majles elections.<sup>47</sup> Another influential reformist group is the National Trust Party, of which both Mousavi and Karroubi are members, though the group supported Mousavi in 2009.<sup>48</sup> These facts present Iran against an unusual backdrop as compared to other cases examined in the literature about regime transition. From this point, I move to the analytical portion of this study, in which I examine the presence of factors for regime transition within the Iranian case, and note the circumstances of their failure to produce typical regime transition.

In our consideration of the political climate, it is important to also note the history of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's reign in Iran. Khamenei rose to power after the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. His religious credentials have been questioned--when Ayatollah Khamenei took the seat of Supreme Leader, the constitution was amended to allow the post to be held by a lower-ranking theologian, as he did not have the religious rank of Khomeini.<sup>49</sup> He has often been at odds with high-ranking clerics regarding his interpretations of Islam and his place as Supreme Leader is more fragile than he would admit. In the months preceding the 2009 elections, he had clashed individually with Khatami, Mousavi, Rafsanjani, Larijani, and even Ahmadinejad. It is his precarious position that set the stage for the 2009 election.

## IRANIAN REGIME CHANGE ANALYSIS: FACTORS FOR TRANSITION

### METHODS

Because of the unique nature of the Iranian case, a case-study approach examining the specific factors for transition in the aftermath of the 2009 elections serves as the only theoretical approach that allows the depth required to fully understand Iran in the light of the literature. Iran has not, to this date, had a truly successful democratic transition. Yet, as McFaul et al. note, a "serious analysis of the external influences on internal change cannot focus only on cases of democratic development, but must also look at instances of regime change when the outcome was not democracy."<sup>50</sup> Comparative studies in general rarely use Iran because of its uniqueness, and this trend holds true in group case studies regarding democratic transition. I have thus selected Iran on its own for two reasons: first, because the fragile nature of the politics of the region suggest that this topic requires inquiry that can only be comprehensively achieved through a case study, and secondly, because examining factors for a democratic transition is just as necessary where they did not succeed as where they did. Because I am assessing a certain point in time as the "tipping point" for democratic transition, all of the data that will be used to assess the aforementioned economic, political, and social factors for democratic transition is from three months prior to three months after the 2009 election.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> British Broadcasting Company 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Mc Faul et al. 2008, 8.

## ECONOMIC FACTORS FOR TRANSITION IN IRAN

Iran faces a number of significant economic challenges. Internal challenges include: the large role of oil export revenues in financing government spending and vulnerability to oil price fluctuations, dependence on gasoline imports to meet domestic energy needs, high inflation, unemployment and poverty levels, reported domestic economic mismanagement, and widespread economic inefficiency.<sup>51</sup> The central role of oil exports makes the economy quite volatile and vulnerable to changes in oil price. For example, the price of oil dropped 38% between 2008 and 2009, leaving Iran with budgetary problems, and giving credence to the rentier state theory. This theory states that in countries that are largely dependent on the export of one commodity, the revenues from that commodity are used to co-opt groups through patronage or placate large swaths of society with public aid.<sup>52</sup> Political instability can be expected when there is a downturn in commodity revenue and the state no longer can use that revenue. In the cases of oil crises in the 1970s, populations that were plunged into poverty blamed their governments and gradually took the risk of demanding change.<sup>53</sup> It would not have been unlikely, then, for a similar effect to have taken place with the drop in oil prices in 2009.

On June 9, 2009, in the days preceding the election, an inflation rate of 23.6% was released by the Central Bank of Iran. Unemployment figures had skyrocketed from 10.5% in 2005 to 17% in 2009.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, the International Monetary fund had projected that Iran's economy would expand less than it had in previous years, up by only 3.2% in 2009, which is down from 4.5% in 2008 and nearly 8% in 2007.<sup>55</sup> Real GDP growth was estimated by the IMF to have decelerated to 2–2.5% in 2008-09, from almost 7% in 2007-08.<sup>56</sup>

These economic problems spread dislike of Ahmadinejad to the lower and middle classes as well. "Dismissing opposition to Ahmadinejad as a north Tehran phenomenon, limited only to affluent urban areas, is insulting to the millions of middle-class Iranians who have suffered the most under his tenure."<sup>57</sup> Affluent Iranians, much like affluent individuals anywhere, are not affected as sharply by high inflation and unemployment. It is people of modest or low income who feel the pinch when an economy begins to falter and slides into stagnation. These are the people who end up in the streets protesting, which will be discussed in the next section.

Not only do economic downturns cause public discontent, but they can also cause elite fragmentation over policy. Lisa Anderson points out that "divisions between 'hardliners' and 'softliners' are not necessarily linked directly to differences over economic policy". However, "even where economic crisis are not the source of factional conflicts...they are likely to

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<sup>51</sup> Ilias 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson 1999.

<sup>53</sup> Geddes 1999.

<sup>54</sup> New York Times 2009.

<sup>55</sup> International Monetary Fund 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Moaveni 2009.

exacerbate them.”<sup>58</sup> This points to an important interplay between factors, further confusing the possibility of assigning causality. Most significantly, though, economic downturns generally spell trouble for the ruling government.

These factors present the necessary economic platform for democratic transition: the state of the economy, especially inflation and unemployment, had led to widespread discontent. As Anderson notes, “for incumbents, deteriorating economic performance cuts across social strata and affects a wide swath of society.”<sup>59</sup> The abysmal economic conditions in Iran, then, are widespread and far-reaching, therefore presenting us with the requisite platform to provoke a democratic transition. Yet in 2009 even with these economic factors in mind, Iran failed to achieve a democratic transition. Continued evaluation of possible triggers and indicators thus becomes necessary, and my analysis hence moves to the examination of political factors.

### POLITICAL FACTORS FOR TRANSITION IN IRAN

As a framework for this political discussion, van de Walle noted several suggestive patterns in his analysis of African cases of transition. He showed that opposition cohesion is positively correlated with opposition electoral victory, though it “is not a cause of transition but rather a consequence of a growing probability of transition due to a number of interrelated factors.”<sup>60</sup> This study, therefore, focuses on opposition cohesion as a predictive indicator for transition. The Iranian opposition is loosely consolidated as what is known as the “Green Movement” or the “Green Wave.” It has three symbolic leaders: Former President Mohammad Khatami, Former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, and the sixth Speaker of the Parliament (Majles) Mehdi Karroubi. The opposition movement began with the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the development of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Khordad Coalition. This coalition is a very loose association of factions that includes moderate right and democratic-Islamist groups. In the 2009 election, the coalition had come together around former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi. He was deemed a “smart move to garner votes from the anti-Ahmadinejad elements within the Islamic right while at the same time inoculating the reformist movement against accusations to be essentially counterrevolutionary.”<sup>61</sup> This rejuvenated the coalition, which had suffered defeat in 2005 when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was first elected president. It appeared as though the opposition was coming together. Even after the elections, these candidates both filed petitions protesting the election results, citing similar ballot inconsistencies. They made several public appearances together, and pushed for an investigation into the election.

Secondly, van de Walle notes that the majority of the cases examined that had successful electoral transitions took place in two-round systems (TRS). This means that in a case with TRS, we might be more likely to find a transition. A two-round system, as described by the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, works in the following manner: The first round is conducted in

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<sup>58</sup> Anderson 1999, 96.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>60</sup> Van de Walle 2006, 78.

<sup>61</sup> Posch 2009, 1.

the same way as a single-round plurality/majority election. In the most common form of TRS, this is conducted using FPTP. A candidate or party that receives a specified proportion, normally an absolute majority of valid votes, is elected outright, with no need for a second ballot. If no candidate or party receives an absolute majority, then a second round of voting is held and the winner of this round is declared elected. Van de Walle notes that two-round systems “facilitate opposition unity.”<sup>62</sup> Iran uses this system, and the 2005 election was pushed to the second round. Had the election of 2009 been pushed to a runoff between Mousavi and Ahmadinejad, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Karroubi’s followers would have thrown their support behind Mousavi, as both of them come from same group and both draw support from within the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Khordad Front. The election, however, rife with allegations of fraud, did not go to a second round. In my travels, I heard it widely theorized that the fraudulence in the election was perpetrated for just this reason.

As suggested by varied authors throughout the literature, no transition is embarked on without some kind of internal division within the regime itself.<sup>63</sup> This happens most often in cases of single-party electoral hegemonies. Since 2005, Iran has become more like one of these electoral hegemonies, mostly because of the alleged fraud of 2009. If we take Iran as one of these hegemonies, we can examine the role of the fragmentation of the elite in Iran. Currently, there are four main leaders within the regime in Iran: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani and Expediency Council chair Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

During Ahmadinejad’s first term as president, a split developed within the conservatives. The split places pragmatic conservatives, led by Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, against an emergent ultra-conservative faction led by Ahmadinejad. This division has only become more inflamed in the final years of Ahmadinejad’s last term and has been exceptionally vicious since the June presidential vote.<sup>64</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei had tried to remain above the factional politics of Iran. He has generally preferred to pit various blocs against one another to perpetuate his own top position in the Iranian political system. The election fallout from 2009 was so intense because of the popular discontent, however, that Khamenei was faced with the choice of intervention or the potential loss of his position. The Supreme Leader, in a risky but calculated move, came out in support of Ahmadinejad and the hard-liners, angering parts of the conservative ideological group.<sup>65</sup> This backing prompted Rafsanjani and his pragmatic and technocratic conservative followers to come out against the Supreme Leader and instead ally with Mousavi's reformists.<sup>66</sup> Khamenei's outright support of Ahmadinejad exacerbated this and other divisions.

The last player in this complex milieu is Iran’s current speaker of parliament, Ali Larijani, whose family now controls two of the three branches of the Iranian government — Ali

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<sup>62</sup> Van de Walle 2006, 88.

<sup>63</sup> O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Strategic Forecasting (STRATFOR) Intelligence 2009.

<sup>65</sup> STRATFOR 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

controls the legislature while his brother, Sadegh, heads the judiciary. Ali Larijani has emerged publicly in opposition to Ahmadinejad, often finding himself at odds with Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric. He was also one of the few regime officials to publicly warn that many Iranians questioned Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2009 presidential election.<sup>67</sup> The Larijani-Ahmadinejad split exemplifies the ideological rift in the conservative camp as well, framing pragmatists against fundamentalists over Ahmadinejad's behavior.

Besides the split between political leaders, there has also been a split between the leading clerics in Iran. Following the election of 2009, many of the most powerful ayatollahs, including Hossein Ali Montazeri, Yousuf Sane'i, Jalaluddin Taheri, and Hossein Mousavi-Tabrizi, "openly defied Khamenei, dismissed the election, and either called for a fresh vote or else implied that even that would no longer be sufficient."<sup>68</sup> In the aftermath of the election, Khamenei began to have trouble with many senior clerics in the holy city and seat of Shia Islam, Qom. The Supreme Leader has also been publicly denounced by Grand Ayatollahs Bayat Zanjani and Vahid Khorasani, who refused to meet him during his 10-day visit to Qom.<sup>69</sup> There was also discontent from Grand Ayatollah Safi Golpayegani, Makarem Shirazi, and Sobhani over the handling by Khamenei's office of the 10-day show in Qom, where "private" meetings turned into photo opportunities and displays of the Supreme Leader's authority.<sup>70</sup> The level of discontent from such a large number of these clergymen hints at a certain weakness for Khamenei. He must have the support of these individuals in order to maintain his power, and divides within these religious leaders could also hint at trouble lurking beneath the surface.

These ayatollahs have significant clout with the general population, many of whom look to the ayatollahs for guidance in life as well as in religious matters. The most politically significant intra-clerical rift is between Rafsanjani and Khamenei. Rafsanjani has repeatedly challenged decisions by Khamenei, and Khamenei has responded threateningly to him. This split has extended through the senior clerics, as they have taken either the side of Rafsanjani or Khamenei. Three more Grand Ayatollahs—Javadi Amoli, Shobeiri Zanjani, and Makarem Shirazi—have "politely" criticised Khamenei for not challenging Ahmadinejad's non-deferential behavior toward Rafsanjani. Grand Ayatollah Mousavi Ardebili did not visit the Supreme Leader on the latest trips to Qom either, because of how Rafsanjani has been treated by Khamenei.<sup>71</sup> It is not only the split in the political elite that is present in Iran, but also in the religious elite. Even with splits in both of these elite groups, we are still at a loss for a reason why transition did not occur.

Geddes (1999) notes that little evidence was found to support the claim that pacts increase the likelihood of democracy. They may have had that effect in isolated cases, and Geddes notes that "we cannot rule out the possibility that the likelihood of both pacts and stable democracy is increased by the existence of well established, coherent parties" that can make and

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<sup>67</sup> Wright 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Milani 2009, 12.

<sup>69</sup> Bozorgmehr 2010.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

adhere to pacts.<sup>72</sup> Because Iran does not have an established party structure, a discussion of pacts in reference to parties is not particularly relevant, and is not a transition factor that we can consider in this case.

International engagement and external pressure are also factors that are of consequence to democratic transition. Levitsky and Way posit a theory of leverage and linkage to explain the effectiveness of international intervention in democratic transition. International actors exert leverage in different ways, including political conditionality and punitive sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and military intervention. Leverage raises the cost of repression, electoral fraud, and other government abuses. However, Western leverage over electoral authoritarian regimes is “rarely sufficient to convince them to democratize.”<sup>73</sup> According to Levitsky and Way, leverage is “most effective when combined with extensive linkage to the West.”<sup>74</sup>

The United Nations issued a non-binding resolution condemning the post-election protests and the crackdown on protesters. In addition to the UN, the United States also passed resolutions condemning Iranian actions regarding the election. On June 19, 2009, ABC News reported that President Obama warned Iran that “the world was watching.” Major European politicians, including Gordon Brown, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Angela Merkel also issued statements condemning the actions.<sup>75</sup> The UN General Assembly passed Resolution A/C.3/64/L.37 on October 29, 2009, which condemned the government response to the protests. This resolution, which passed with 74 yes, 59 abstain, and 48 no votes, contained an explicit reference to the 2009 elections, in that it expressed “particular concern at the response of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran following the Presidential election of 12 June 2009 and the concurrent rise in human rights violations.”<sup>76</sup> The leverage factor, then, is present.

The West, though Iran would fain admit it, does have linkages in the case of Iran, but not by the usual methods of trade, foreign investment, or mutual involvement in international organizations. Iran has a very large diaspora community in many European countries as well as the United States. The Iranian diaspora population, based on a compilation of the most recent national censuses from major receiving countries (excluding Turkey), is estimated in the range of two to four million, with an estimated 691,000 to 1.2 million in the United States alone.<sup>77</sup> This community was involved in the protests in the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as other European countries, and many send sizeable remittances back to Iran.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the expatriate community runs radio broadcasts, internet sites, and satellite channels that are routed into the country both legally and illegally, and the BBC now supports a Persian service. Because the leverage and linkage between Iran and the West is unusual, it is difficult to say whether it can be thought of as extensive enough to meet Levitsky and Way’s requirements.

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<sup>72</sup> Geddes 1999, 140.

<sup>73</sup> Levitsky and Way 2005, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Sciutto and Marquez 2009.

<sup>76</sup> UN General Assembly 2009, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Hakimzadeh 2006.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

What is certain, however, is that the international community was indeed “watching” during these protests. While no military action was undertaken, action was taken through diplomatic channels. This action, however, did not create enough momentum for a democratic transition.

The most internationally prominent feature of this discussion is the protests that occurred after the June 2009 elections in Iran. Protests are examples of contentious collective action, which is defined as collective events which represent “potentially subversive acts that challenge normalized practices, modes of causation, or systems of authority. The case of Iran can be approached with this notion of protests. There are three types of contentious collective action: riots, general strikes, and anti-government demonstrations.<sup>79</sup> Of these three, two occurred in Iran. Most of what occurred in the two months following the 2009 presidential elections were anti-government demonstrations, which are “any peaceful public gathering of at least 100 people for the primary purpose of displaying or voicing their opposition to government policies or authority, excluding demonstrations of a distinctly anti-foreign nature.”<sup>80</sup> Some of these demonstrations, however, degenerated into riots, which are described by Ulfelder as “any violent demonstration or clash of more than 100 citizens involving the use of physical force.”<sup>81</sup>

June 12, 2009 saw thousands of protesters pour into the streets, later clashing with police. On June 15, seven people were killed during a march by Mousavi supporters in Tehran, state media said, and protests broke out in other cities. Tens of thousands of pro-Mousavi demonstrators marched in northern Tehran in June 16. June 20 saw state television report that 450 people were detained during clashes in Tehran in which 10 people were killed. These actions certainly qualify as contentious collective action under Ulfelder’s typology. The question of the political logic behind these protests remains unanswered. The reasons for individuals flooding the streets are numerous, though analysts have been unable to completely explain the mass riots. They were clearly expressions of pent-up frustration and anger at the regime. The extent to which they were instrumentalized by the opposition, however, remains to be seen, though many marched in green clothing, carrying pictures of Mousavi. At this point, it does not appear that the protests were effectively used to channel political motives past the months after the election. These protests, however, did not trigger democratic transition.

We have now examined the economic and political considerations for democratic transition and found them all met. There is still the problem that all factors point to transition. However, there has been no regime change. With the economic and political factors in mind it is now necessary to examine social-cultural factors.

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<sup>79</sup> Ulfelder 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Ulfelder 2005, 320.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

## SOCIAL-CULTURAL FACTORS FOR TRANSITION IN IRAN

There are several social-cultural factors that might tip the scales in favor of democracy, including a history of active struggle for democratic rule, a homogeneous population, and high literacy rates, as well as modernization and high urbanization.<sup>82</sup> Iran has a hundred-year history of active struggle for democratic rule. The norms, traditions, and organizations characteristic of a democratic civil society existed in various forms for most of the twentieth century, and they endure to this day. Most recent in Iran's collective memory is the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This event, as well as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 (which was caused by dissatisfaction with economic stagnation, influence of Western power, results of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, and the Russian Revolution of 1905), in addition to the popularly supported 1953 coup by Mohammad Mossadegh (that prompted the nationalization of the oil in the face of Reza Shah's Western-friendly oil policies), are both examples of the history of popular expression of discontent with the government.<sup>83</sup>

Iran also has a relatively homogeneous population and has maintained a unique national identity even through its long history of invasion and occupation. Though the dominant ethnic group, the Persians, make up only 51% of the total population, literary and artistic traditions have served to unite the populace behind an Iranian identity.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, most of these minorities, including the 24% Azeri Turks, are integrated into Iranian society, participate in politics, and identify with the Iranian nation.<sup>85</sup> For example, of candidates running in this past election, Mousavi is an ethnic Turk, and Karroubi is an ethnic Lor, however, neither of them faced problems regarding their ethnicity in the elections or in their moves toward power.

If we use Lipset's factors of higher levels of education and urbanization and more sophisticated and varied means of communication,<sup>86</sup> it is apparent that Iran is also moving towards modernization. In Iran, 36% of the population of tertiary age is in tertiary education (post-high school education program), up from just 18% in 2002.<sup>87</sup> The overall literacy rate is 77%, and that rate is even higher, 96.6%, among youth aged 15-24. Iran also scores high on many other proxies for measuring modernization, including level of urbanization and density of communications connectivity. 68% of total population lives in urban areas, and the current rate of change in urbanization is 2.1%.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, Iran is incredibly connected in terms of communications density. It ranks seventeenth in the world in number of internet users, twelfth in number of land lines in use, and twenty seventh in number of mobile phone users.<sup>89</sup> High levels of internet use coupled with the extensive use of social-networking sites such as Facebook

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<sup>82</sup> McFaul 2005.

<sup>83</sup> Behnam 1986.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Beehner 2006.

<sup>86</sup> Lipset 1995.

<sup>87</sup> UNESCO UIS 2008.

<sup>88</sup> CIA World Factbook 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

and Twitter, as well as YouTube and large e-mail listservs, indicate that Iran is on the forefront of communication.<sup>90</sup> After examination of socio-cultural factors in addition to all other varieties, it seems that Iranian regime change should have occurred in keeping with the political science literature. We are still at a loss for the explanation of why Iran did not experience a democratic transition in 2009. There must be another factor.

### ANOTHER FACTOR?

I posit that Iran has an additional factor that must be taken into account when considering democratic transition: its institutional structure. The government of Iran consists of a three branch scheme, but with certain additions. As mentioned previously, there is a multi-part leadership in the executive, with the Supreme Leader as head of state and the President as head of government. The executive branch also includes the Assembly of Experts, Expediency Council, and Council of Guardians.<sup>91</sup> Iran has a unicameral legislature, the 290-member Majles. The judicial branch consists of the Supreme Judiciary.

The interaction of the political structure and the elite cleavage structure is of greatest interest in this study, as it is the elite structure that largely leads the ideological factions due to the personalistic nature of Iranian politics. The aftermath of the 2009 elections saw important implications in this structure. I argue that it is this structure that reinforces the fractionalization of the elites, and that this fractionalization prevents a realization of the possibilities in coalition organization.

Within this structure, there are certain elected bodies and certain unelected bodies. The most notable feature of the system is that is that the "Supreme Leader either directly or indirectly controls almost every aspect of government."<sup>92</sup> Of all of the bodies in the executive, the Council of Ministers, Assembly of Experts, Expediency Council, and Council of Guardians, the only one completely elected by the people is the Assembly of Experts. It is important to note, however, that all candidates for all elected officials must first be vetted by the Guardian Council, which is half appointed by the Supreme Leader and half nominated by the judiciary and confirmed by the parliament. The institutional structure is intentionally designed to dissipate power and consolidate power simultaneously. It is clear that the Supreme Leader has considerable power; it remains that the factions in Iran are still quite powerful throughout all of these institutions. How is this possible, and what does this mean for Iran's prospects for democratic transition?

The Iranian system of government is confusing and convoluted. Figure 1 demonstrates this confusing yet ultimately somewhat ingenious structure. The Supreme Leader is the most important official in Iran, but seeks input on policy decision from a small circle of elite advisors, including the President. The President's influence is dwarfed by that of the Supreme Leader,

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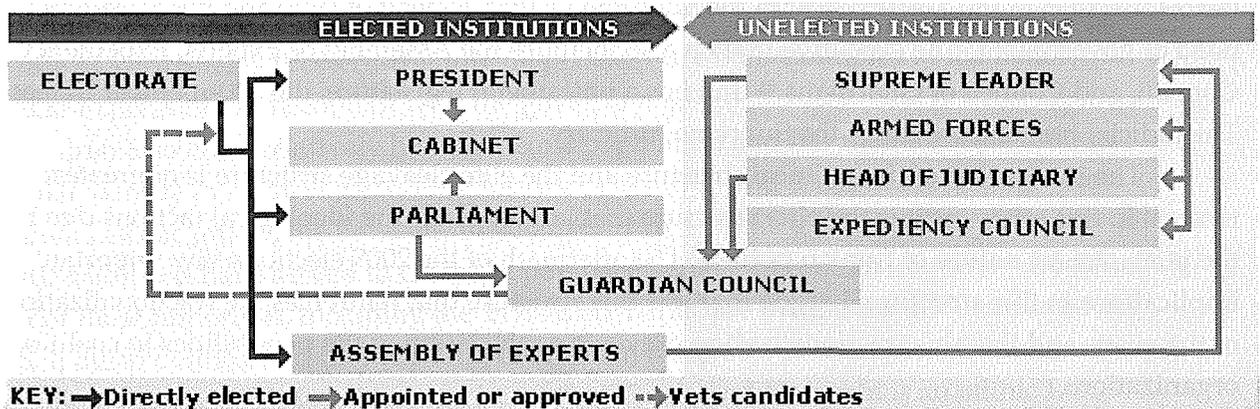
<sup>90</sup> Afshari and Underwood 2009.

<sup>91</sup> CIA World Factbook 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Beeman 2004, 57.

but it is by no means negligible.<sup>93</sup> Though the Iranian president's policymaking power is under the direct oversight of the Supreme Leader, especially in issues of foreign policy, this is not to say the president is powerless. As proven by Ahmadinejad, the president can be the voice and face of the entire nation. The behavior of the president within the international community directly affects the issues that are most important to Iranians, including issues of trade and human rights. Furthermore, the president does actually have the weight necessary to implement domestic economic and human rights policies as he sees fit.<sup>94</sup> This is the kind of power in which all of the individuals grappling for power are interested.

Figure 1: Power-Flow of Iranian Elected and Unelected Institutions<sup>95</sup>



The Guardian Council is key to the Supreme Leader's position, and is the most powerful group in the government. The Council must approve all bills passed by parliament and has the power to veto them if it considers them contrary or inconsistent with the constitution and Islamic law. The Council is currently chaired by Ayatollah Jannati, the most conservative high-ranking cleric in Iran.<sup>96</sup> While the Supreme Leader can change the rulings of the Council, he does so rarely as to attempt to preserve the legitimacy of the body, preferring to instead install like-minded individuals in the positions instead. The Council can also bar candidates from standing in elections to parliament, the presidency and the Assembly of Experts, and thus holds quite a bit of power, as they decide who can and cannot be in the running to gain power. They determine the players in the game, and thus can alter the playing field as well by restricting what role any given individual can play.

The Assembly of Experts is not a particularly active body, but it ought not be cast aside as a do-nothing body. It meets but twice a year, and its sole purpose is to elect a Supreme Leader, monitor his performance, and remove him if he is deemed incapable of fulfilling his duties. There are 86 members in this body, and it is headed by Former President Rafsanjani.

<sup>93</sup> Esfandiari et al 2009.

<sup>94</sup> Whatley 2009.

<sup>95</sup> BBC 2009.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Here, we can see Rafsanjani's strategy. It is unlikely that an Assembly would ever be chosen that would remove Khamenei, because the Guardian Council approves who can and cannot run for Assembly seats. Rafsanjani has been president once, but has tried running for president since then and reached the runoff election in 2005. Since his loss in 2005 to Ahmadinejad, he has moved to pursue other venues for power. Rafsanjani is poised for when Khamenei either passes away or for some other reason falls from power. As head of this committee, he will direct the selection of the next Supreme Leader. Whoever is chosen will owe a great debt to Rafsanjani and thus, Rafsanjani stands to gain very much from a change in leadership. His main goal at present is to remain powerful— he will not endanger his political position any more than he has to for fear of losing his game of time. This means that he will likely not throw weight behind the reformists again while he still perceives a threat.

The Expediency Council is the Supreme Leader's advisory body. It has ultimate adjudicating power in disputes over legislation between the parliament and the Guardian Council. The members, who are prominent religious, social and political figures, are all appointed by the Supreme Leader. In October 2005, the Supreme Leader gave the Expediency Council supervisory powers over all branches of government, delegating some of his own authority as is permitted in the constitution.<sup>97</sup> This body is also chaired by Rafsanjani, and again, we can see him simply waiting for his opportunity to use the political capital he has accumulated thus far to secure even more power.

The Majles is largely a podium for addressing the public. Its powers are severely constrained, and thus the legislation that is passed is mostly irrelevant, for legislatively-driven change is all but impossible given the Guardian Council's oversight. The speaker of the Majles, however, can use his place to make public statements on behalf of legislators. For example, Larijani and Karroubi, who have both held this position, have used it to issue statements and gain public attention. The power of this institution as a legislative body, then, is not as important as the role it plays as a venue to establish the power of the speaker.

While none of the candidates spoke of any serious overhaul of the Islamic system, it is clear that they saw an opportunity to grab power in the system.<sup>98</sup> Whenever such weakness is identified, however, it is sometimes the case that an individual will not join with others and form pacts, but rather sojourn alone. While there is evidence that Rafsanjani has been to Qom to speak with leading clerics on behalf of Mousavi, ultimately he is a pragmatist and a self-server. His silence since the election "may well reflect a desire to hedge his bets so as to protect his influence and power over whoever remains in control."<sup>99</sup>

Karroubi has also moved away from Mousavi following the election, recently choosing instead to pursue a more confrontational policy towards the government, thereby dashing any hopes of a united reformist opposition.<sup>100</sup> When Mousavi announced the creation of a new

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<sup>97</sup> STRATFOR 2009.

<sup>98</sup> Esfandiari et al. 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Newman 2009, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Butters 2010.

movement, the Path of Green Hope, Karroubi said that he would not be joining it.<sup>101</sup> Instead, Karroubi is focusing his efforts on pressuring the government on the allegations of rape and abuse of opposition supporters arrested in the post-election crackdown—an issue to which the Iranian populace is very sensitive. His high moral ground as a cleric allows him the ability to criticize the government on this issue, and the nature of the topic endears him to the people. His success with this approach during the 1979 revolution might lead him to believe that such tactics will be equally successful this time around. This move, however, further splits Mousavi's base of support. Karroubi does not have enough power in the system to be successful alone.

I examined earlier the coalition of the opposition, and examined how the opposition had come together in support of Mousavi. It is because of these powerful figures that the opposition was able to move together as it did before the election. Unfortunately, having such strongly delineated factions within the groups hurts the ability of the opposition to maintain a coalition with a clear and definite leader post-election. The institutional structure has allowed too many heavy-hitters that have gained power in the institutional arena. They have created a body of elites with citizen followers that are not content with the current system, yet refuse to completely defer to or support one individual that could truly push the movement forward for fear of loss of personal power. Though Mousavi is the symbolic head of the movement, the power he would need to sustain the Green Movement is not in his hands. The institutional structure through which he and the other powerful leaders arose parcels out just enough power for them to have a modicum of political clout, yet still keep each one from truly realizing enough power to convince any other faction that they ought to lead. Too many of these individuals (and others, including Khamenei's first choice for the 2005 presidential election and the current mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Qalibaf) do not perceive the political opportunity to form such an alliance without severely losing personal power.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In the time following the June 2009 presidential election, the stage was set. All of the factors that, in other locales, point towards or have caused democratic transitions were present. The economy was down, growth had slowed, oil prices were down, divisions had erupted within authoritarian regime itself, the populace was mobilized and there was contentious collective action in the streets, the opposition moved to support Mir Hossein Mousavi as their candidate in the election, and the international community was engaged with external pressure from the US, UN, and European Union. Iran has a history of active struggle for democratic rule, a homogeneous population, few border contentions, and high rates of literacy, urbanization, and modernization. Had the elite factions been willing to choose one leader and throw all of their power behind him, or if any of the leaders had been able to collect enough individual power to pose a real threat, Iran would have had a tipping factor that, on top of all of the other

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<sup>101</sup> Butters 2010, 2.

indicators that marked Iran as ready for change, plus Khamenei's weakness, might have triggered a democratic transition.

As it stood in 2009, the post-election movement lacked a real leader. The impetus for movement was there—the symbol of movement is Mousavi, but the actors behind the scenes have to stop forcing their way through the door all at once and let someone go first. It is not enough for the opposition to coalesce around a symbolic figure—they must coalesce around a real leader with enough power. This leader, however, if they are to arise out of the system, will be tainted by the system through which they gained power. This will stunt any push for change that might come from within the ranks of the elites. A push must then come from outside. This leaves us with several questions for further research. Who are the players outside of the system? Where are they? What are the extra-institutional powers that players outside of the system can gain? And perhaps most interestingly, what will be the role of further protests in Iran?

There is no answer as of yet. The political landscape in Iran is ever-changing, and Iran analysts have continually posited reasons for the durability of Iran's authoritarianism. Political actors jump from seat to seat, moving from Speaker to President to Expediency Council chairman, attempting to achieve power through as many alleys as possible, yet are continually thwarted by the nature of the institutional structure. The institutions are designed to be debilitating, provoking competitions between actors, thus making it exceptionally difficult to garner enough power to exact change from within the system. As details arise about the nature of the relationships between these elite players, further examination will be required to assess if there is movement within the elites towards alliances, or if it appears that someone has found a way to gain more power outside of the system. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for regime change to come from within the system. Simply by virtue of the fact that all elites must be vetted by the Guardian Council, there will never be actors that will be able to both gain power and unseat the regime. The elites are tainted, and thus any change will be as a result not, as Geddes claims, from elites and their discourse and alliance structure, but from motion outside of the elites. An outside force must be able to gain extra-institutional power that can rival that of the Supreme Leader, and that requires some sort of catalyst, be it a severe miscalculation or misstep by the Supreme Leader, or his death. As is the trend that is evident in the history of Iran, only time will tell.

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