

## The Intellectual Genealogy of the Islamic Revolution of Iran

document type: Research Article

Ali Khaleghi\*

Received: 2024/02/10

Ali Kamali\*\*

Accepted: 2024/07/15

### Abstract

To strengthen and perpetuate the discourse of the Islamic Revolution, familiarity with its intellectual foundations and goals is essential. This article employs Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to argue that before the Islamic Revolution, Iranian political discourse was centered around the idea of "Sultanism." However, this dominant discourse was challenged by two intellectual realms: religious and intellectual. In religious thought, Imam Khomeini's reinterpretation of the principle of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) and his assertion of the incompatibility of Shiism with monarchy rendered his political discourse credible among opponents of Sultanism. In the intellectual domain, while leftist and liberal discourses lost credibility over time, the national-religious discourse of liberal intellectuals (the Freedom Movement) gained traction by better understanding the religious context, aligning with Khomeini's religious discourse to undermine the neo-patrimonialist narrative. The findings indicate that Khomeini's discourse, emphasizing social justice, support for the oppressed, and Islamic unity around Velayat-e Faqih, successfully replaced the Sultanism discourse, achieving a level of success that previous religious discourses had not attained.

### Keywords:

Islamic Revolution, Discourse, Sultanism, Iranshahr, Patrimonialism, Intellectualism.

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\* Assistant Professor, Faculty of Medicine, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author) AliKhaleghi@Sbmu.ac.ir

\*\* Assistant Professor, Faculty of Medicine, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran AliKamali@Sbmu.ac.ir

## **Introduction**

**Problem Definition:** One of the ways to strengthen and sustain the discourse of the Islamic Revolution is to become familiar with its foundational ideas, intellectual contexts, goals, and ideals. Therefore, it is essential to understand the discursive basis upon which the Islamic Revolution was formed. In this paper, utilizing the theory and discourse methodology of Laclau and Mouffe, we argue that although the political discourse of Iranians was centered around the idea of “Sultanism” until the emergence of the Islamic Revolution, with its semantic system and all political signifiers revolving around the king and sovereign, this dominant discourse faced challenges from two intellectual domains (religious and intellectual) in contemporary history. In the realm of religious thought, Imam Khomeini’s new interpretation of the principle of Velayat-e Faqih and the establishment of a new discourse centered on “Islam,” while marginalizing and ultimately eliminating the discourse of “Sultanism,” emphasized the incompatibility of Shia Islam with monarchy and the irrationality of Sultanist thought. This transformed his political discourse into a credible and accessible narrative among the opponents of Sultanism, challenging and marginalizing its legitimacy. Meanwhile, in the intellectual discourse, the leftist and liberal discourses, despite experiencing various ups and downs from the Constitutional Revolution to the onset of the Islamic Revolution, lost their traditional credibility and became marginalized. In contrast, the national-religious discourse of liberal intellectuals (the Freedom Movement) managed to establish a coherent semantic system through a new understanding of the compatibility between religion and democracy, transforming it into a credible and accessible discourse that paralleled Imam Khomeini’s religious discourse and contributed to the collapse of the Sultanist discourse.

**Objectives:** The aim of this research is to examine how the discourse of the Islamic Revolution was formed using the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe. By analyzing the challenges posed to the Sultanist discourse by religious and intellectual spheres, the study demonstrates how the Islamic Revolution discourse, with “Islam” as its central signifier, replaced the Sultanist discourse, and how the religious context and new interpretations of religion and democracy played a role in this process.

**Questions and Hypotheses:** In this writing, we attempt to identify the political discourses prior to the Islamic Revolution to answer the question of what the prevailing political discourse in Iran was and on what basis it constructed its semantic system. Additionally, we will explore what

its marginal and rival discourses were and how these marginal discourses challenged and displaced the dominant discourse. In response to this question, we hypothesize that “Sultanism” was the hegemonic discourse in Iran, and gradually, discourses from religious and intellectual spheres emerged as marginal and rival discourses to Sultanism. Through the articulation of a coherent, credible, and accessible discourse, they managed to displace the dominant discourse from its central position. Accordingly, we will first explain how the Sultanist discourse as the dominant and ruling discourse was formed, evolved, and characterized, and then elucidate the marginal and rival discourses and how they challenged the ruling discourse.

### **1. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

In the present paper, we have attempted to shape the theoretical framework of our discussion by utilizing the discursive approach of Laclau and Mouffe. The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, primarily articulated in their book titled “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,” is considered one of the most significant post-structuralist approaches in analyzing social, political, and cultural issues. This theory is grounded in a combination of Marxism and Saussurean structural linguistics and draws inspiration from ideas of thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Gramsci, conceptualizing discourse as a system of meanings and power relations within society (Soltani, 1383: 155).

In the view of Laclau and Mouffe, “discourse” is a set of signs. Each “discourse” captures parts of the social sphere and, by taking hold of the minds of subjects, shapes their individual and social speech and behavior (ibid, 156). They draw on Saussure’s notion of the sign and illustrate the relationship between language and the world outside language in a triangular form, consisting of the signifier, signified, and referent as its three corners. According to them, the meaning of signs is not derived from referring to the external world and its referents but through the relationships established among the signs within the linguistic signifying system. Any act or phenomenon must be discursive to become meaningful. It is these discourses that produce statements of truth and falsehood. Unlike Saussure, Laclau and Mouffe do not accept the stability of the relationship between the signifier and the signified; rather, they follow Derrida and view signifiers as floating and lacking a fixed signified, acquiring their meaning in the act of application. They also argue that not all signs articulated within a discourse hold equal value; therefore, the most important signs in any discourse are the “central signifiers,” around which other signs and concepts organize and

derive their meaning in relation to them. For example, “freedom” serves as a central signifier in the discourse of liberalism (ibid, 157).

One of the key pillars of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory is “articulation,” a process through which signs interweave and form a semantic system (Soltani, 1383: 156; Kasraei and Pouzesh, 1388: 341). Another fundamental concept in their theory is “hegemony.” Hegemony is achieved when a discourse is able to temporarily stabilize its desired semantic system within the collective consciousness of society, garner public consent, impose its meanings, and marginalize competing semantic systems. However, the other side of hegemony is “deconstruction,” through which the signifier becomes detached from the signified, leading to the collapse of hegemony. In this case, a competing discourse can, through various mechanisms, deconstruct this semantic system and dismantle the established meanings within the collective consciousness of the people. The dominant discourse then loses its hegemony; thus, according to Laclau and Mouffe, the struggle over the creation of meaning always plays a central role. In the theoretical framework of these two theorists, conflict and antagonism overshadow the entire society and serve as its driving force. No discourse can be permanently established; each discourse is in conflict with others that seek to redefine reality and propose different policies for social action. In fact, political discourses are always trying to highlight the “self” while marginalizing or eliminating the “other” (Soltani, 1383: 158-157).

Another concept in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory is “equivalence chain” and “logic of difference.” Discourses use the equivalence chain to eliminate existing differences among elements and contribute to a sort of unity and integration among them. The logic of equivalence simplifies the political space. However, in reality, equivalence can never completely erase these differences. Conversely, the logic of difference points to the characteristic of multiplicity in society and seeks to undermine the equivalence chain by emphasizing differences and creating a new type of articulation; therefore, the logic of equivalence is a condition of any new form of arrangement, because as a result of this process, distinctions are reduced through articulation among signifiers, and they become juxtaposed against the non-homogeneous. Despite all this, differences never completely disappear, and the path for multiplicity and otherness remains always open. For instance, during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, all opposing groups, including Islamic, liberal, Marxist, nationalist, and others, were positioned within the equivalence chain of the revolutionary discourse, and their fundamental differences were forgotten. However, after the revolution, these

same groups, through the process of the logic of difference, brought forth conflicting discourses (Moghaddami, 1390: 102).

Therefore, to utilize Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework in political analysis, one can identify the conflicting or competing political discourses that each attempt to articulate floating political signifiers around their central signifier, marginalizing other discourses and transforming into a hegemonic discourse, within a specific time period and spatial context. Subsequently, by examining the semantic signifiers and central signifier, as well as the overall semantic system of each identified discourse, one can grasp the processes of political and social transformations that have occurred within a society and social system (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2016, 58-59).

## **2. Analysis of Political Discourses Before the Islamic Revolution**

In this text, we aim to identify the political discourses prevalent before the Islamic Revolution to answer the following questions: What was the dominant political discourse in Iran, and on what basis did it construct its semantic system? What were the marginal and rival discourses, and how did they challenge and ultimately dethrone the hegemonic discourse?

We hypothesize that "Sultanism" was the hegemonic discourse in Iran, gradually confronted by emerging marginal and rival discourses from religious and intellectual spheres. These alternative discourses, through coherent, credible, and accessible articulation, succeeded in displacing the dominant discourse. Accordingly, we first explain the formation, evolution, and characteristics of Sultanism as the ruling discourse, then analyze the marginal/rival discourses and their strategies for challenging it.

### **2.1. Sultanism (Patrimonialism): The Dominant Political Discourse**

To summarize the pre-revolution political discourse in Iran, it can be described as "patrimonial" or "neo-patrimonial." This discourse, rooted in ancient Iran, has been interpreted by some scholars as the "Iranian City-State Thought" (Tabatabaei, 1367). After Islam's arrival, it was reconstituted as "Sultanism," and post-Constitutional Revolution, it took a "neo-patrimonial" form.

In this discourse—especially its modern iterations—the "King" (as its central signifier) was seen as God's shadow on earth. He held executive, judicial, and legislative powers, with all state authority concentrated in his person. The Shah's power was independent of social roots, and his monopoly over governance absolved him of accountability. While wielding absolute authority, no law existed to protect public freedoms or limit his

power. Iranian subjects were considered the Shah's subjects, bound to obey him.

Though the Shah's individual authority was seen as a unifying force, it also risked irreversible damage to the nation. Blurring the line between state and royal property further amplified his power—national resources were treated as personal assets, enabling unchecked exploitation (Katouzian, 1372: 7).

Around this central signifier, layers of power were articulated: The Shah's inner circle (wealthy aristocrats and princes holding key offices). Tribal chiefs (controlling vast lands and armed followers). Bureaucratic elites and wealthy merchants. Religious scholars (Ulama), particularly those with public influence. Commoners, peasants, etc., at the bottom (Bashiriye, 1387: 47–48).

The Constitutional Revolution sought to dismantle this patrimonial structure and establish a modern, accountable government. However, due to various factors—culminating in the 1921 coup—a modernized Sultanism (neo-patrimonialism) emerged, eroding constitutionalism and leaving only a ceremonial parliament (Khaleghi, 1395: 84).

The table below outlines the evolution of patrimonial/Sultanist discourse in Iranian history:

The Evolution of Iranian City-State Thought (Sultanism)	
<b>Ancient Persia</b>	Belief in a cosmic order where the king, endowed with <i>farr-e izadi</i> (divine glory), acted as Ahura Mazda's representative on earth. The king's role was to maintain earthly order mirroring cosmic harmony. Society was rigidly hierarchical (rulers, clerics, warriors, laborers) (Rajaei Farhang, 1996: 53–55).
<b>Caliphate Period</b>	After 16 AH (637 CE), Iran became part of the Islamic Caliphate, suppressing Iranian Sultanism. Though localized attempts to revive independent rule emerged during the Abbasids, none succeeded until the Safavid era.
<b>Safavid Era</b>	The Safavids institutionalized Twelver Shi'ism, merging religious and national sovereignty. This revived Iranian Sultanism—now with a theocratic bent (Hinz Walther, 1998).
<b>Qajar Dynasty</b>	Relying on tribal power and Persian monarchic tradition, the Qajars established their rule. Post-Constitutional Revolution (1906), it nominally transitioned to a <i>constitutional monarchy</i> .
<b>Pahlavi Dynasty</b>	Reza Shah's British-backed coup (1921) militarized the monarchy. Mohammad Reza Shah later transformed it into a <i>modern autocracy</i> with pseudo-democratic institutions.

Therefore, despite the transformations that occurred in the elements and signifiers of this discourse throughout various periods of Iranian history, the king and his sovereignty, along with his royal decrees, have always served as the central signifier of this discourse. Concepts such as legitimacy, subjects, obedience, nationalism, constitutionalism, religion, secularism, and modernism have been articulated around the power and authority of the king, creating a hegemonic discourse that has marginalized other discourses.

## **2.2. Competing Discourses**

However, in response to the question of which discourses emerged as competing discourses to the dominant political discourse (Iranian city-state, Sultanism, or patrimonialism) in contemporary Iranian history, and how they were able to displace the dominant discourse from its central position, it must be said that the first competing discourse against Sultanism emerged in the realm of Shiite religious thoughts in Iran. This discourse, by becoming a superior discourse, led to the marginalization and ultimately the displacement of the dominant discourse.

### **2.2.1. Religious Discourses**

According to Shiite political thought, the principle is the non-authorization of authority; no one has authority over others, and only God has the right to govern all beings, including humans: “And you have no protector other than Allah” (Quran 9:116). This is because God is the creator of humanity: “Say, ‘Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is the One, the Subduer’” (Quran 13:16), and He is aware of all their material and spiritual needs: “And We have certainly created man and We know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than his jugular vein” (Quran 50:16). Additionally, God is free from any need for power display: “Indeed, Allah is the Self-Sufficient, the Praiseworthy” (Quran 22:64). Thus, God has authority over all creatures. However, God exercises His authority in two forms: existential (takwini) and legislative (tashri’i). God’s existential authority is exclusive to His divine essence, and whatever He wills becomes reality: “Indeed, Our word to a thing when We intend it is only that We say to it, ‘Be,’ and it is” (Quran 16:40). However, the legislative authority of the Almighty God has been communicated to humans through religious propositions (Sharia) by the prophets. Therefore, the prophets also possess the right to govern humans on behalf of God, as they have been sent by Him and, through their connection to the source of divine authority, are aware of human needs. With their

infallibility, they can best exercise divine authority: “The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own selves” (Quran 33:6). Therefore, the prophets have the right to govern humans and can take charge of all public affairs. After the end of the prophetic era, the principle of the non-permissibility of non-divine authority continues to prevail. Thus, according to Shiites, the exercise of divine authority is only permissible for those who have been authorized by God and His Messenger, are knowledgeable about Sharia and divine laws, and possess infallibility and justice (Sheikh Tusi, 1400: 189). For this reason, Shiites adhere to the theory of infallible leadership (Imamat). However, during the era of the occultation of the infallible Imam, this theory of leadership manifested in various forms based on political and social conditions. The following table briefly introduces these theories.

<b>The Process of Transformation of Political Discourse among Shia in Iran</b>	
<b>The Discourse of Taqiya and Expectation</b>	From the beginning of the occultation until the establishment of the Safavid state in Iran, Shia political thought was marginalized. Therefore, Shia scholars believed in waiting and practicing taqiya (dissimulation) (Tabatabai Far, 1402: 132). They held the belief that we must wait for the appearance of Imam al-Mahdi and entrust political and social matters to the rulers of the time, while observing taqiya.
<b>The Discourse of Cooperation with the Shia Sultan</b>	During the Safavid period, due to their support for the Shia faith and inviting Shia scholars to promote its teachings, some scholars turned to the theory of cooperation with the Shia Sultan. They argued for the guardianship of qualified jurists (faqih) in matters of public interest, adjudication, and issuing fatwas, asserting their representation by the infallible Imam (Kadivar, 1378: 101).
<b>The Discourse of Silence</b>	With the collapse of the Safavid dynasty due to the prevailing political conditions in Iran, religious thoughts regarding political power were relegated to obscurity.
<b>The Discourse of Monarchy Authorized by the Jurist</b>	Due to the mutual need of the Qajar kings and scholars for reciprocal support, Shia scholars, through the interpretation of the absolute guardianship of qualified jurists, granted permission to the Qajar kings to exercise authority on their behalf, due to the impracticality of the jurists' governance. Thus, the king took power as a representative of Sharia (Kadivar, 1378: 234-238).
<b>The Discourse of Constitutional</b>	Shia scholars, including Ayatollah Naini, still believed in the guardianship of qualified jurists, but due to the impracticality of realizing their authority in the existing conditions, viewed the solution to prevent despotism in councils and laws derived from the consensus of Muslim rationalists, thus contributing to the

<b>Monarchy</b>	establishment of constitutionalism (Naini, 1387: 65).
<b>The Discourse of Political Apathy</b>	Due to the disappointment of Shia scholars with the constitutional movement and the repression of Reza Khan, they avoided entering politics.
<b>The Discourse of Islamic Governance</b>	After World War I and II and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the idea of Islamic governance was raised by Sunni thinkers, and in Iran, it was also proposed by Martyr Navab, emphasizing the necessity of Islamic governance (Mirdamadi, 1387).
<b>The Discourse of Guardianship of the Jurist</b>	Imam Khomeini, criticizing religious discourses in Shia, including the discourse of taqiya and expectation, political apathy, and constitutional monarchy, advocated for the political guardianship of qualified jurists, rejecting the rational and religious legitimacy of sultanism, and introduced the necessity of revolution and the establishment of an Islamic government in the form of an Islamic Republic.

As stated in the above table, the religious discourses established by Shia thinkers until the emergence of Imam Khomeini in the political arena of Iran were not competitors to sultanism. They did not engage in organizing an independent discourse during the occultation and mostly adhered to the discourse of taqiya and expectation, in which the “belief in the Imam of the infallible Imam” was the central signifier, and cooperation with the kings was justified on the basis of taqiya and their support for Shia. Consequently, all political issues and concepts were understood through this framework. Thus, the religious discourses were more of an equivalence to sultanism rather than a rival discourse.

Imam Khomeini was the first religious thinker who, by advocating the political guardianship of qualified jurists and criticizing the discourse of taqiya and expectation, and cooperation or permission to the sultan, negated the rational and religious legitimacy of the monarchy, creating a new discourse centered on the “Guardianship of the Jurist in the Age of Occultation,” articulating political concepts around it, leading a full-fledged revolution against the dominant discourse (sultanism) and laying the foundation for a new form of Islamic governance.

Imam Khomeini first drew attention to the political situation in Iran and criticized it in his book “Kashf al-Asrar” (1323). This book was a kind of attack on the policies of Reza Khan and a response to the book “Asrar Hazar Saleh,” written by one of the members of the “Purity Movement,” Ahmad Kasravi. In “Kashf al-Asrar,” he condemned Reza Shah for the

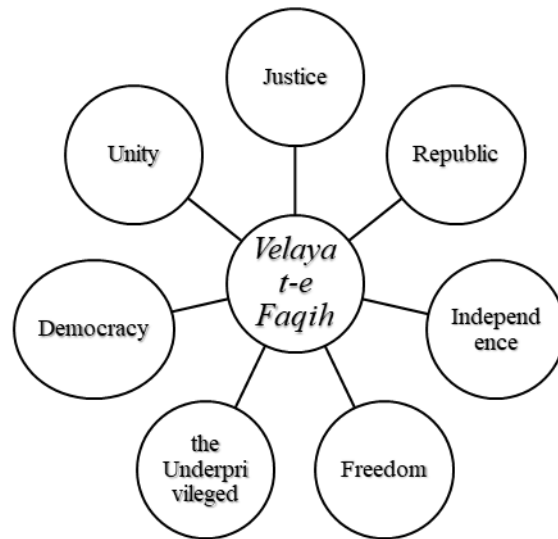
forced unveiling of women “by the spear,” the weakening of the scholars’ power, the promotion of mixed education, and the creation of “centers of corruption” such as cabarets and liquor stores. Contrary to the traditional views of Shia scholars, “Kashf al-Asrar” was filled with passionate defenses of the necessity for scholars to enter the political arena. Imam Khomeini even suggested that scholars should take control of governance, precisely defining the characteristics of their governance: placing governance in the hands of a jurist does not mean turning him into a king, minister, or military commander, but rather that the jurist should have the ability to oversee the executive and legislative affairs of the Islamic community (Imam Khomeini, 1327: 185).

Imam Khomeini directly challenged the political system during the White Revolution of Shah and the granting of capitulation rights. After his forced exile to Turkey and Iraq, he introduced his revolutionary concept of Islamic governance based on certain Islamic principles. Like other Islamic thinkers, he was deeply concerned about the dominance of the West over the Islamic world, the repeated victories of Israeli forces over the Arabs, and the increasing decline of the magnificent Islamic civilization. For him, the illegitimate governments in the Islamic world, many of which he considered puppets of imperialists and Zionists, were complicit in the grand conspiracy to destroy Islam. At a time when defending socialism and nationalism was the norm among Middle Eastern intellectuals and others viewed Islam as a fading religion, Imam Khomeini raised the banner of Islam as the sole force to solve the problems facing the Islamic world (Milani, 1381: 169).

During a series of speeches in 1348, Imam Khomeini introduced Islam as a staunch opponent of monarchy, which was the prevailing form of government among many Islamic nations at that time, and declared that scholars had a divine mission to govern based on divine laws alone. He stated that Islam and politics cannot be separated: the Prophet of Islam was the head of state, commander of the army, and spiritual leader of the community. He suggested that scholars, despite lacking the miraculous characteristics of the Prophet and Imams, should fulfill all their responsibilities, emphasizing that scholars must be interpreters, expounders, and implementers of Islamic laws and traditions (Imam Khomeini, 1378: 18-17).

Thus, Imam Khomeini, centered on the political guardianship of qualified jurists in the Age of Occultation, established a new meaning system of Shia political thought in the form of an Islamic Republic, articulating concepts such as establishing social justice, religious democracy, supporting the oppressed, liberation from global hegemony, comprehensive independence,

and Islamic unity around the central signifier of the political guardianship of jurists.



The new interpretation of Imam Khomeini of the principle of the guardianship of the jurist created a new political discourse in the history of Shia political thought, which was able to present a singular alternative to the monarchy and marginalize and eliminate the sultanist discourse—something that none of the other religious discourses had succeeded in doing before. Moreover, Imam Khomeini's political discourse emphasized the incompatibility of Islamic Shia with monarchy, granting it a special and legitimate status among the forces opposing the Shah. This enhanced Imam Khomeini's reputation as the most audacious opponent of the Shah and as a religious theorist, and most importantly, his beliefs infused the anti-Shah protests with a religious character, seriously challenging the legitimacy of sultanism (Milani, 1381: 174).

#### **2.2.2. Intellectual Discourses**

The next competitor to the sultanist intellectual system can be traced in the realm of new intellectual thought. During the 1340s and 1350s, political repression intensified, and many silent groups became subdued and intimidated by the Shah's power and the unconditional support of the United States for him. However, despite this, a small minority of nationalist, Marxist, and Islamic intellectuals took on the burden of opposing despotism.

Their activities, alongside the revolutionary discourse of Imam Khomeini, managed to politicize a whole generation of Iranians both inside and outside the country, giving rise to new political discourses centered around Marxist and liberal ideas, contributing to the marginalization and destabilization of the foundations of the sultanist discourse.

#### **a) Marxist Left Discourses**

The left discourse in Iran emerged after the Constitutional Movement in the first parliament in the form of the Socialists (Social-Democrats) and outside the parliament as the Equality Party (Kasravi, 1357: Vol. 1, 192). They were more reformists than radicals and revolutionary; thus, they neither had faith in negating sultanism nor found the capability to do so. Following the victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917 (1296 SH), Marxist ideas gradually found their way into Iran, attracting an increasing number of followers. The formation of the Communist Party of Iran was evidence of this (Zibayi, 1343: 129).

After Reza Khan seized power through a British coup, Dr. Taghi Arani, who had become acquainted with socialist ideas in Berlin, returned to Iran in 1309 SH along with a group of like-minded individuals to represent the left in Iran. They were determined to introduce and spread leftist and socialist ideas in Iran. However, since the law prohibiting the promotion of the communist doctrine was enacted by the Parliament in 1310 SH at Reza Shah's order, they launched the magazine "Dunya," which became a social-cultural base for leftist and socialist intellectuals. But before they could achieve anything substantial, in 1316 SH, Arani and 52 of his associates were arrested. After more than a year of interrogation and trial, Arani was sentenced to ten years in prison and died in prison, allegedly murdered (Mokhtari, 1394: 294-293).

Following Reza Shah's forced abdication in 1320 SH, the Tudeh Party, which had been established in 1310 but was suppressed by the government, found an opportunity to re-emerge and expanded its network with Moscow's support, reaching a point where some of its members held ministerial positions in the Qavam cabinet. However, the nationalization of the oil industry by Mossadegh negatively impacted the fortunes of the Tudeh Party. The treacherous policies of the party's leadership towards Mossadegh and their unconditional support for the Soviet Union led to the party's disrepute, as in the minds of many Iranians, the Tudeh Party was nothing more than Moscow's fifth column. After the coup, many party members were killed or imprisoned, and their network within the armed forces was discovered and dismantled. However, some of its leaders fled the country

and relocated the party's central administration to Eastern Europe. In exile, the party established an anti-Shah radio station and, by disseminating revolutionary literature, infiltrated the student movement. Occasional support from the party for the Shah's regime diminished its popular reputation in the 1340s and 1350s. Additionally, the arrests of two high-ranking party leaders named Hossein Yazdi and Abbas Shahriari, known as the "Man of a Thousand Faces," in 1342 SH and 1352 SH negatively impacted the party's standing (Milani, 1381: 151-150).

Following the coup of 28 Mordad and the suppression of the uprising of 15 Khordad, political activists questioned the logic of peaceful coexistence with the Shah. The expansion of movements in Latin America prompted them to engage in guerrilla warfare. In the mid-1340s, two independent Marxist groups began to organize and expand underground networks. The first group was founded in 1343 by Bijan Jazani, a former member of the Tudeh Party youth organization, along with some others. While this group was still in its initial stages of preparation, following their attack on the Siyahkal outpost on 19 Bahman 1349, its members were arrested and executed. The other group was established in 1347 by Masoud Ahmadzadeh, a former member of the National Front, along with several university students. This group believed from the outset that armed struggle was the only way to achieve political salvation. Amir Parviz Pouyan, one of its founders, declared that the only way to break the "spell of the regime's invincibility" and overthrow it was to inflict heavier blows on its body (Abrahamian, 1381: 447-448).

One month after the Siyahkal incident, the People's Fedayi Guerrillas organization emerged from the union of the two aforementioned groups, which became the most famous Marxist organization in the 1350s. Between 1351 and 1357, their actions included the assassination of several high-ranking regime officials and several Americans, bombings of government buildings, hostage-taking, and bank robberies (which they considered a liberation of the people's wealth). The government took the threat posed by the Fedayi Guerrillas seriously, and SAVAK infiltrated the organization and gathered sensitive information, successfully carrying out relatively successful attacks on their hiding places. These attacks resulted in the deaths of 106 Fedayi members (Abrahamian, 1381: 450-447; Milani, 1381: 151-150).

Gradually, the leadership of the Fedayi concluded that their violent actions had not demonstrated the regime's vulnerability as Pouyan had naively imagined. This led to a rift within the organization. By late 1354, one faction (the majority) emphasized educating the masses and establishing

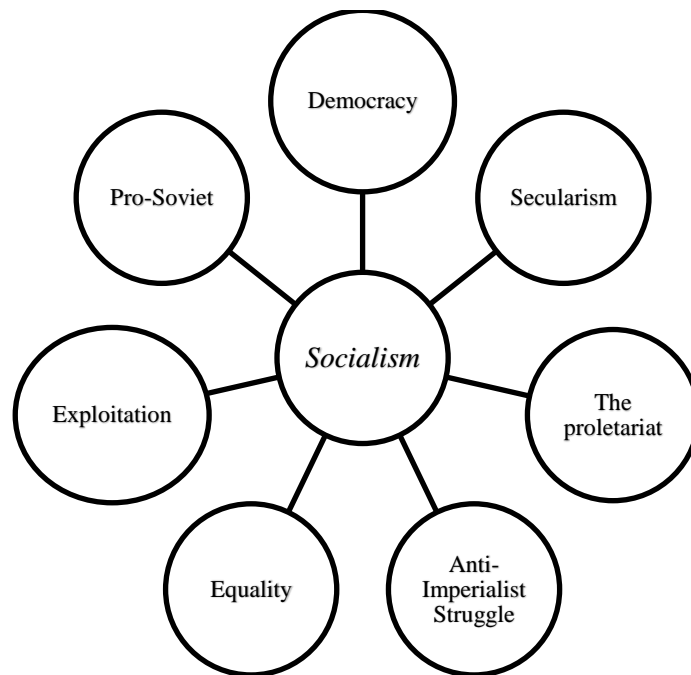
secret groups, while the other (the minority) insisted on guerrilla warfare. Although cooperation between these two factions continued to some extent throughout the remainder of the decade, the Fedayi organization played a lesser role in the struggle against the regime. The organization itself was experiencing a crisis, as many of its founding members were killed or imprisoned, and its human resources dwindled to a small percentage of youth (Milani, 1381: 152).

Another political movement that initially was considered a right-wing movement but later joined the left discourse was the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization. The Mojahedin was founded by Mohammad Hanifnejad and Saeed Mohsen, both members of the Freedom Movement, with the assistance of their close friends Ahmad Rezai and Asghar Badiehzadegan. From the ideological discussions of its founders, it emerged that only a native ideology like Shia Islam could incite the people to revolt against the Pahlavis. Influenced by the writings of Bazargan, Shariati, and Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, they presented a revolutionary interpretation of Shia Islam. The organization's activities included the dissemination of radical literature, bombings of government facilities, bank robberies, and the assassination of prominent regime figures and several American nationals (Haqbin, 1392).

At the height of its popularity in 1354, the Mojahedin experienced a schism within its leadership. A significant portion of the organization concluded that Marxism, not Islam, was the liberating ideology for the masses and should thus become the official ideology of the group. This rift and the coup, during which Marxist elements managed to take control of an Islamic organization, not only weakened the Mojahedin but also exacerbated the long-standing and historical mistrust between Islamic and Marxist forces. Thus, from the mid-1354 to 1358, two factions of Mojahedin existed. By 1357, prominent figures from both groups had been killed or imprisoned (Milani, 1381: 163-161).

In summary, the leftist Marxist discourse in Iran, led by the Tudeh Party and affiliated or splinter groups (depicted below), predominantly exhibited a Marxist and socialist inclination, with other concepts such as support for the working class, emphasis on equality among different classes, struggle against class conflict, fight against the exploitation of the masses, and opposition to imperialism articulated around their fundamental ideas. Although this discourse did not theoretically align well with the sultanist discourse and its components and opposed its semantic system, it was unable to marginalize and eliminate it for the reasons stated. In 1355, Nouraddin Kianouri, one of the main leaders of the Tudeh Party, in an analysis of the

party's impotence, stated, "We did not even have a liaison or unit within Iran" (Kianouri, 1357). Therefore, while the Tudeh Party was the main advocate of Marxism among the disintegrating leftist factions in the 1340s and 1350s, it was unable to marginalize the sultanist discourse or displace it from its central position (Khalighi, 1395: 94).



#### **b) Right-Liberal Intellectual Discourse**

The foundations for the emergence of the "Right and Liberal" discourse in Iran began after Iran's defeat by Russia during the reign of Fath Ali Shah. During this period, individuals like Abbas Mirza focused on compensating for Iran's technological and practical backwardness compared to the West, paying little attention to its theoretical underpinnings. This group of elites, due to their political and social origins, sought conservative and Western-oriented reforms within the framework of the Qajar system. Consequently, they simultaneously advocated for establishing new foundations of law and freedom while supporting the existing authoritarian regime and did not claim

for social revolution. Some of their recommendations and strategies included:

- Bringing experts from Europe to Iran
- Sending individuals to Europe for education and acquiring technical skills
- High-ranking state officials traveling to Europe for exposure
- Activating in foreign relations (Amiri, 1401: 93-80).

After the death of Abbas Mirza, this trend continued through Amir Kabir and deepened and expanded with Sepahsalar, gradually beginning to pay attention to the intellectual and spiritual aspects of Western civilization. After their unsuccessful attempts, they concluded that their failures stemmed from prioritizing the technical and practical elements of Western progress over its theoretical aspects. As Akhoundzadeh stated, "European ideas should precede the experiences and artifacts of the people of Iran" (Adamiyat, 1349: 165). For this reason, the right-wing intellectuals who emerged afterward focused all their efforts on adopting the theoretical civilization of the West and imitating it, replacing the introduction of Western civilization with an emphasis on following its political and intellectual thoughts. Figures such as Moshtashar al-Dowleh, Mirza Malek Makhzan, and Akhoundzadeh engaged in explaining liberalism and paying attention to some of its principles (Amiri, 1401: 99-98). In their writings, the foundation of Western socio-political institutions and the prescription and establishment of such institutions for Iran were posed as their primary goal. They adopted the slogans of Western civilization, placing law and freedom at the core of their demands, deliberately or through negligence, failing to highlight the depth and content of modernity and the new Western civilization to avoid emphasizing the conflict and opposition with religious foundations, instead stressing a plethora of new concepts and values such as freedom, democracy, human reason, and science, leading to the establishment of a secular system indifferent to religion and tradition for future generations in Iran (Amiri, 1401: 144).

During the Constitutional Movement, right-leaning liberal intellectuals, following the trend of establishing democratic governments in Europe and with the relative limitation of despotism and the opportunity that had arisen, naively overlooked the repercussions of their actions and, with extremism, sought to seize all political power and push religion and clergy out of society to fully realize liberalism (Amiri, 1401: 176-175). As a result, former despots returned to the scene with the constitutional movement, and due to increased insecurity, foreign interventions, and fragmentation in various regions, the country moved towards collapse. In the shadow of these

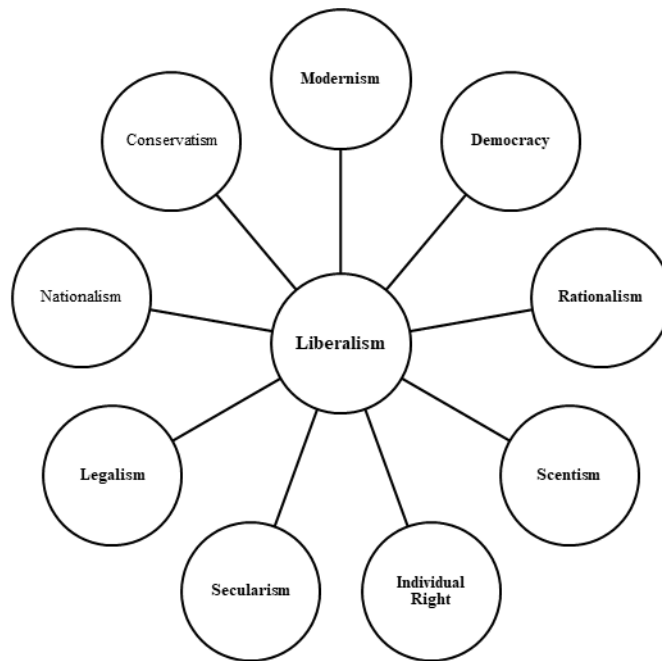
realities, and along with the exploitation of freedom, the people turned away from freedom and constitutionalism, which had yielded no tangible benefits for them (Amiri, 1401: 212-211).

After the failure of the constitutional movement, right-leaning liberal intellectuals turned to benevolent dictatorship, criticizing and delegitimizing freedom, equality, parliament, independent political parties, and free press. They supported Reza Khan, attempting to implement some of his programs. Some of them also deepened and enriched the theoretical and intellectual dimensions of his modernist policies (Ibid).

With the onset of World War II and Reza Khan's departure from Iran, the inexperience of the newly empowered crown prince, coupled with the Allies' desire to keep Iran calm and grant limited freedom in the 1920s, enabled right-leaning liberal currents to maintain an active presence alongside two leftist and Islamist movements throughout the 1920s. In fact, the 1920s can be regarded as a decade of conservative activism by the liberal current in the atmosphere of anti-foreign sentiment prevailing in Iran (Ibid, 213).

The National Front, the main representative of the secular liberal and nationalist movement, significantly declined following the coup of 28 Mordad and the house arrest of Mossadegh, as well as the killing and imprisonment of several of its leaders. Alongside the limited murmurs of freedom in the early 1340s, the National Front found an opportunity for resurgence. The leadership of this front, in Mossadegh's absence, who was under house arrest at the time, faced fragmentation, confusion, helplessness, and a lack of political creativity, rendering its sporadic activities ineffective. However, the most significant blow to the National Front over the long term was the withdrawal of Engineer Mehdi Bazargan and his allies from this front and the formation of a national-religious party called "Freedom Movement." This schism deprived the National Front of most of its connections with the clergy.

In summary, the right-liberal discourse prior to the revolution can be depicted as follows:



As mentioned, Iranian right-wing intellectuals established a discourse during the Constitutional Movement and afterward, modeled on Western liberal ideas, which was based on the principles of freedom and liberalism. Concepts such as individual rights, democracy, secularism, rule of law, rationalism, pluralism, nationalism, and tolerance were articulated around this central signifier. Although the main elements of this discourse were incompatible with certain pillars of sultanism, such as despotism and the personality-centered nature of the monarchy, due to the conservative inclination of the right current, they, despite Mohammad Reza Shah's flight during the national oil movement, were not willing to take radical action to eliminate the sultanist discourse and showed allegiance to the discourse of constitutional monarchy. Therefore, as Milani stated: in the 1340s and 1350s, the National Front was the main representative of the liberal discourse in Iran, acting as a reformist and harmless organization—under the supervision of SAVAK—and remained loyal to constitutionalism and monarchy until the final stages of the revolutionary movement in 1357 (Milani, 1381: 154-155).

However, one of the sub-discourses that emerged from the nationalist and liberal right discourse was the "Freedom Movement," which began its

activities in 1339 with the splintering of Islamist forces from the National Front, such as Engineer Bazargan, Ayatollah Taleghani, and the Sahabi brothers. They introduced themselves as Muslims, Iranians, followers of constitutionalism and Mossadegh. Unlike the National Front, the Freedom Movement positioned itself as opposed to secularism and supportive of the political activity of scholars and the religious (Milani, *ibid*).

“Islamic National Liberalism” was considered the central signifier of the Freedom Movement and was the basis for the articulation of other concepts within this ideology. In fact, the Freedom Movement of Iran emphasized the element of the nation-state within the confines of the Islamic territory of Iran as the central signifier of its discourse, with other concepts such as the independence and national sovereignty of Iran, freedom of thought, expression, assembly, struggle against despotism, advocacy for constitutionalism, respect for the constitution, belief in the connection between religious principles and politics and social life, emphasis on the dual identity of being Iranian and Muslim, rejection of despotic monarchy, absolute socialism and liberalism, and emphasis on realizing constitutional monarchy based on law and authentic Islam being among the floating signifiers that the Freedom Movement articulated around its central signifier (Qajari, 1376: 140-145). Therefore, the carriers of the Freedom Movement discourse, by emphasizing the compatibility between religion and modern sciences, as well as religion and democracy, managed to overlook the existing differences between the elements of Imam Khomeini’s religious discourse and, in a sense, achieve unity and integration, contributing to the marginalization of socialist and traditional liberal nationalist discourses and facilitating the displacement of the sultanist discourse from its center.

### **Conclusion**

Since ancient times, the dominant political discourse in Iran has been based on sultanism. In this political discourse and its transformed aspects, the king was considered the shadow of God on earth. Legislation, execution, adjudication, and the presidency of bureaucratic institutions were in the hands of the king, and all branches of government were consolidated in him. The king’s power was independent of social roots, and by holding all powers, he was free from accountability to anyone and anything. Thus, the Iranian political discourse was initially shaped and articulated around the centrality of the sultan and the king, with all political signifiers deriving their meaning from this concept. Although this discourse was temporarily suppressed with the arrival of Islam in Iran, it was revived and reproduced by the Safavids, who infused it with the color and essence of Shia Islam.

This was also noted by the Qajar kings, who continued the discourse of sultanism with an emphasis on its religious characteristics. Although the Constitutional Movement aimed to limit the absolute power of the king and establish a democratic system, it did not achieve significant success, and a new form of sultanism, namely neopatrimonialism, dominated the political landscape of Iran until 1357.

As discussed in this text, in contemporary history, this dominant (neopatrimonial) discourse was challenged from two intellectual domains (religious and intellectual). In the realm of religious thought, unlike the traditional religious discourses in Iran that had somehow reconciled with the principle of monarchy and its supporting ideas, Imam Khomeini's new interpretation of the principle of the guardianship of the jurist and his theory of the incompatibility of Shia with monarchy turned Shia political discourse into a valid and accessible discourse among the opponents of the sultanist (neopatrimonial) discourse, posing a serious challenge to its legitimacy. Among intellectual discourses, leftist and liberal discourses lost their traditional credibility and became marginalized from the Constitutional Movement until the onset of the Islamic Revolution, while only the national-religious discourse of liberal intellectuals (the Freedom Movement), with a better understanding of the religious context, was able to transform into a valid and accessible discourse and, in alignment with Imam Khomeini's religious discourse, contributed to the collapse of the neopatrimonial discourse. The findings of the research indicate that Imam Khomeini's discourse, by articulating concepts such as social justice, support for the oppressed, and Islamic unity around the axis of the guardianship of the jurist, successfully replaced the sultanist discourse—an achievement that none of the other religious discourses had accomplished before.

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