The Islamic Republic of Iran has steadily exhibited an uncanny institutional capacity to resist democracy that has been absent elsewhere where “Spring” uprisings succeeded in expelling long-standing authoritarian incumbents from office, such as in Tunisia and Egypt. Moreover, the Iranian regime’s remarkable resilience has emerged in spite of the presence of a ruling party, long considered to be the most important institution that sustains authoritarian rule. How has the Iranian regime survived decades of elite factionalism, electoral uncertainty, and recurrent outbreaks of mass popular unrest despite the absence of the very institution that theoretical expectation suggests should make it particularly prone to collapse? What explains the dramatic divergence in democratic outcomes among single-party authoritarian regimes throughout the region?

This dissertation situates Iran within the context of the comparative literature on authoritarian institutions, specifically the role of political parties in prolonging authoritarian rule. Critically, I contend that the coalitional strength of authoritarianism is determined not necessarily by the presence of a centralized ruling party—long considered to be the climax of authoritarianism’s institutional muscle—but by discrete patterns of contentious politics that erupted before the establishment of authoritarian rule. I argue that disparities in the institutional strength of authoritarian regimes are the product of distinct socio-historical patterns that shape state capacity to overcome problems associated with elite collective action and mass mobilization over the long-term. The social, political and institutional norms generated during protracted, ideologically based social conflict—or social revolution—I contend, are more robust sources for sustaining elite collective action amid particularly threatening episodes of contentious politics.

Given that prerevolutionary contentious politics in Iran was grounded in an antiauthoritarian struggle pitting populist social forces against the state, I argue that the coalitional strength of
prerevolutionary social forces would later engender the type of contentious politics that continues to punctuate the postrevolutionary political order: endemic factionalism and popular protest. Simply put, strong prerevolutionary coalitions produced strong postrevolutionary factions.

Yet the Iranian regime’s incorporation strategies are not what we would expect. Whereas almost all revolutionary regimes and postcolonial states born of protracted, ideologically based violent struggle construct broad-based ruling parties to institutionalize their rule, due to factional bickering and the underlying strength of social-democratic coalitions, the Iranian regime was forced to abolish its brief experiment with party-based politics. By leveraging the counterintuitive expectations generated by these dynamics, I aim to bridge the gulf between theoretical expectation of ruling party strength with empirical observation of its ensuing weakness.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is fundamentally concerned with restoring agency to the people of Iran and the wider Middle East who have too often been portrayed as willing accomplices in their own supposed domination. In academic writing, this has taken the form of robbing agency from society by returning it to the state. As is the case with any large undertaking in life, there are far too many people who have been instrumental during the process of dissertation writing, people who I have inveterately “robbed” from. My deepest thanks are first and foremost to my family and particularly my mother, who instilled in me a passion to pursue whatever interested me the most. She never wavered in her support, despite circumstances that often dictated a justification to do so. My late father —Ali, or Amir as mom always called him— was a totemic figure in my life before he passed. His interest in all things politics combined with his towering intellect and his voracious appetite for reading similarly imbued a budding preference for intellectual pursuits. My beloved siblings—Reza and Shirin—never let me rest on my laurels and encouraged me to fully chase my dreams of obtaining a doctorate and pursuing whatever life had in store for me after. To say that I have been lucky in life to be born into such a loving family likely comes off as the most trite of platitudes, but it does not make it any less any true.

This finally brings me to the love of my life, Ozge Tekin, a fellow traveler and doctoral student in the department of political science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. We met as master’s students in Los Angeles and my life has never been the same. I had begun to give up hope that I would ever find someone that had such an earnest commitment to social, economic and racial justice and who would countenance my often ridiculous sense of humor. Against better judgment, she decided to marry me and cast her lot with someone who had little in the way of money or potential employment prospects. She has braved the many lean economic years and
bouts of academic procrastination with nothing but spirited support. I have indeed been luckier than I deserve. We have been more than fortunate to live in the beautiful Hawaiian Islands for the better part of a decade together. Nevertheless, the many injustices that continue to be perpetrated against the Hawaiian people are indicative of the basic fact that many of the political problems that scholars see as being particularly ubiquitous in the global South continue to inexorably afflict the most wealthy countries of the global North.

I would finally like to thank my committee members and particularly Nevzat Soguk, my dissertation chair, for his steadfast support throughout my many years in Hawaii. Farideh Farhi encouraged me to theorize how the absence of political parties in Iran made it ripe for challenging theoretical expectation. Our many discussions on Iran during which far too much coffee was imbibed proved to be a serious boon after all. Tamara Albertini and Manfred Henningsen graciously agreed to sit on the committee at the eleventh hour, and I am grateful to them for doing so. Ehito Kimura was always patient and willing to engage me on the many theoretical and conceptual issues I raised throughout the years, and his encouragement only expanded the horizons of this dissertation. Whatever the merits of this dissertation, they are largely due to the support of my committee members and the love of my family. Its demerits are entirely my own.

A Final Note

During the course of my doctoral studies, I applied for and was fortuitously granted a David L. Boren Fellowship for graduate and language study in Tehran, Iran. The U.S. government—the sponsor of the Boren fellowship—had warned me in advance that although I had been chosen to receive a research and language fellowship for study in Iran, my travel to the Islamic Republic
could potentially face broad restrictions or I might be prohibited from going to Iran altogether. Unfortunately, the latter ended up being the case. I had a very lengthy and detailed research and language project prepared for Iran, which Farideh Farhi, a committee member of this dissertation, had helped me craft. One part of the language component of my fellowship was to enhance my spoken Persian proficiency so as to allow me to engage sophisticated academic discourses that were far beyond my reach. Beyond that, the primary objective of the linguistic portion of my fellowship was to obtain a baseline proficiency in reading and writing that would, if nothing else, cultivate basic competence and allow me to absorb the lively social and political debates that the Iranian press is so renowned for.

The research component was just as important to my dissertation project. Beyond discursive analysis, participant observation, and the opportunity to consult with primary source material that would otherwise be unavailable to me, I looked forward to experiencing “the general atmospherics of life in Iran,” something I fondly recall telling Farideh Farhi. Indeed, every city has a unique rhythm to life. The “conditions of possibility,” a term that Mike Shapiro might appreciate, seem radically different in every city. Living in Honolulu, to be sure, can be limiting for some given the geographic isolation of island life in the middle of the big blue Pacific. But a big mainland metropolis is different than an isolated island city. The conditions of possibility in Iran seemed endless. Nonetheless, I never had the opportunity to discern what those possibilities might be.

I was informed though the U.S. State Department just weeks before my trip that I would not be able to go to Iran. A few weeks after that, the largest demonstrations in the history of the Islamic Republic began. In the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, supporters of challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi accused the regime of massive electoral fraud when incumbent
president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won a landslide reelection victory. The margin of victory announced by the Guardian Council stunned analysts and voters alike, prompting charges from the opposition that the election was rigged. Others accused the Guardian Council—which is officially tasked with monitoring elections—of having not even counted the votes. The decision to hastily announce election results—ostensibly before the full count had taken place—further contributed to the surge of disaffection and rage felt by many Iranians. In the aftermath of these allegations, Iranian citizens took to the streets and began protesting in unprecedented numbers, with some daily crowds estimated in the millions. The state responded with brute crackdown capacity in an effort to quell the protests. I have been asked on a number of different occasions by friends and family whether it was a blessing or bad fortune that would prevent me from traveling to Iran, given the political volatility that had recently erupted. Those who knew my penchant for finding trouble quickly realized the folly of the question.

With my original research project jettisoned, I had precious little time to craft a new proposal and budget, much less select a new country to go to. Persian, while a relatively large language in terms of total speakers, is the official state language of just three countries: Iran, Tajikistan (Tajik), and Afghanistan (Dari). Afghanistan, for obvious reasons then and now, was out of the question, and the Iran option was of course an untenable proposition now. That left Tajikistan. I knew little about Tajikistan and had never met anyone who had visited much less lived in country. I had scarcely any idea how I would construct a brand new proposal, find living arrangements, and design a new program for language study with just a couple weeks to spare. One thing was for sure: The research component of my project was irretrievably jettisoned, and the new project would fundamentally serve to aid the language component of my fellowship. Given this drastic and unfortunate turn of events, it became immediately clear that the country of
study made little practical difference. Since I would not be able to conduct fieldwork in Iran—which was the primary empirical focus of my dissertation—my geographic horizons suddenly swelled, and the conditions of possibility seemed endless. Although Boren requires travel outside the “western” world, I was otherwise unencumbered by any further travel restrictions.

To make a very long story short, I chose Turkey, the native country of my wife. Due to logistical as well as linguistic difficulties that would otherwise have prevented me from traveling there, with my wife’s immense and indispensable support I was able to do what few scholars and still fewer people rarely have the opportunity to do: travel, study and live in a foreign country, on someone else’s dime to boot. It was the experience of a lifetime, and it is due as much to the wonderful people at Boren and NSEP (National Security Education Program) as it is to my wife’s unconditional support.
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Staying Power and Staying in Power

I. The Puzzles, the Paradoxes and the Arguments

“Mass protest is truly unpredictable, not just in advance but also retroactively. The value of confusion that accompanies such phenomena washes out all attempts to link preconditions with outcomes.

Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*¹

Factionalism and Authoritarian Durability

One year before the Arab Spring, a group of disciplinary social scientists published a study entitled “A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability.”² The model attempts to predict global flashpoints of conflict by subjecting some of the most widespread causes of intrastate instability to statistical tests. While the study tested four independent variables, it found that only one—regime type—was able to accurately predict the onset of instability with a two-year lead-time. To lend greater precision to their argument, the authors further subdivided the category of “regime” to identify the specific types of states that were more likely to experience conflict. According to the findings of the model, only *factionalized partial democracies*—or semi-democratic regimes where elites are divided and engaged in factional disputes—were found to have an exceptionally high risk for developing political instability.

The research agenda the authors pursue is ambitious. They pinpoint four theoretical and methodological features that distinguish their model from others. First is its generalizability. Most forecasts attempt to explain and predict the outbreak of specific kinds of contentious

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politics, such as the causes of civil war, the effects of regime type on inter-state war or the impact of authoritarian institutions on democratic transition. The Global Model, by comparison, is designed to predict “violent events such as revolutionary and ethnic wars and the nonviolent failure of democracies.”

Second, the authors emphasize its accuracy relative to other instability indices. For instance, they suggest that their study outpredicts Fearon and Laitin’s seminal study of civil war onsets by a third, and it predicts ‘instability of any kind’ with an overall accuracy of 80%. This is statistically significant and theoretically persuasive—should it withstand empirical scrutiny—for a number of reasons. First, the political science literature on civil war has benefited disproportionateness from Fearon and Laitin groundbreaking work, and it has proven over time to be agenda setting due to its capacity to accurately herald conflict arising due to civil war. Second, whereas Fearon and Laitin constructed their model to only explain incidents of civil war, the Global Forecast ostensibly achieves greater predictive power in spite of the fact that it attempts to forecast ‘all kinds of instability.’ A more narrow empirical focus—civil war as opposed to instability of any kind—should presumably yield better forecast accuracy. This is because Fearon and Laitin must only demonstrate statistically significant causes of civil war, not instability writ large. The Forecast, on the other hand, must achieve equal accuracy by predicting any type of intrastate conflict, irrespective of its origins or cause. This is an order of predictive magnitude greater than Fearon and Laitin.

Following the collapse of authoritarian rule in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Charles Kurzman tested their political forecast against the mobilization outcomes of the Arab Spring. Using the

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3 Fearon and Laitin (2003).
4 Slater and Lai (2006).
5 Wright and Escribà-Folch (2012).
same dataset used by Goldstone et al., Kurzman found only one Arab country—Lebanon—was classified as a factionalized partial democracy in 2009, two years prior to the Arab Spring. But as Kurzman noted, Lebanon emerged largely unscathed from the Arab uprisings despite deep-rooted divisions among the ruling elite. By comparison, widespread scholarly agreement has assigned little importance to factionalism as a factor in the states that did experience authoritarian breakdown. The rapid spillover effect of the Arab uprisings made Lebanon’s comparative quiescence all the more surprising since it should have further exacerbated preexisting factional cleavages and inflamed already simmering sectarian tensions. When it became increasingly clear the revolutionary outcomes of the uprisings did not hinge on elite factionalism, Kurzman tellingly notes that the lead author of the study “switched from prediction to explanation, emphasizing a different causal factor: sultanism.” Pessimistic predictions regarding persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East was not simply a particular methodological malady afflicting the Global Forecast. Other political projections seemed to reinforce a basic theoretical and methodological pattern among social scientists and forecast practitioners regarding the region’s bleak democratization prospects and mobilizational potential.

The use of qualitative evidence to evaluate counterfactuals in quantitative research is well-established, yet in the case of the Arab Spring, few studies have attempted to even casually assess the validity of theoretical claims made in the forecast literature or political projections.

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7 Kurzman (2012) Kurzman used an updated version of the same polity dataset used by the authors of the forecast. See Marshall (2011).
9 The model did not argue that factionalism was the only statistically significant predictor of instability. Instead, it suggested that the risk of instability was extraordinarily higher in factionalized partial democracies. However, the study also suggested “bad neighborhood effects are significant.” Thus, regional instability should have compounded factional divisions in Lebanon to produce increased instability. While Lebanon did experience a degree of spillover from the ongoing conflict in Syria, it did not approach the levels of instability seen in other states. Perhaps more importantly, divisions among the ruling elite only occurred subsequent to the onset of protest. Countries like Yemen and Bahrain, which were nominally destabilized relative to the bellwether transitions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, also suffered from greater levels of domestic conflict than Lebanon.
10 Kurzman (2012): 381.
rendered by social scientists in the democratization literature. Kurzman’s brief interface with the forecast literature is thus significant because it reveals how dominant theoretical expectation was severely challenged and ultimately upended by empirical observation of one of the most significant and watershed political events in recent world history.

One-year after the global model was published, the annual Failed States Index (FSI) was about to release its own report on the state of global political instability. Produced by the Fund for Peace and published by Foreign Policy magazine, the FSI is perhaps the most prominent example of the institutionalization and popularization of security studies devoted to global political forecasting. The index is perhaps one of the most famous efforts to widely disseminate scholarly research on the leading causes of state failure and intrastate conflict to a global audience. Figures from the magazine’s 2015 media kit claim an online global readership of 2.5 million unique visitors each month, including more than 130,000 paid monthly subscriptions. According to its authors, the broad appeal of the index lies in its ability to distill “years of painstaking expert social science research.” Its resonance, however, is not just a function of its parsimony, but also its stated goal of achieving “predictive value.” The FSI acquires its predictive value by collating some of the most widely recognized causes of intrastate instability from various bodies of social science literature. The FSI measures instability by filtering theoretical and empirical research into a ranking system that assigns a score to countries based on their vulnerability to conflict. The end result is a framework governed by twelve indicators of state failure that enjoy widespread support throughout social science. Interestingly, factionalism once again appears as one of the index’s twelve primary variables for determining the conflict

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14 Ibid. 8.
propensity of a given regimes. Although it measures the conflict probability by using a composite scoring system based on a dozen social, political, and economic indicators, the authors of the index suggest that the “analysis of individual variables is just as important as the overall ranking.” There are compelling empirical and theoretical reasons, therefore, to value the predictive logic of any one variable, such as factionalism, as much as the overall ranking.

Given this popular prescription, do the predictive claims of factionalism withstand empirical scrutiny? The Arab Spring again proves to be especially illuminating since data collected for the 2011 edition of the index ended just as the first waves of protest were gathering steam in Tunisia, the epicenter of Arab Spring. What is perhaps most striking about the index’s findings is that they effectively render the exact the same predictions as those of the global forecast: Where high levels of factionalism characterize contentious politics, we should expect to see regimes that have an exceptionally high risk for developing instability, state failure, and thus authoritarian breakdown. Yet, once gain, and paradoxically enough, stronger levels of elite cohesion, not elite factionalism, were better predictors of where political turmoil would emerge. Seemingly counterintuitive, stability among the ruling elite tended to correlate with heightened levels of conflict and social movement activity, whereas factionalism mostly yielded social quiescence and demobilization (see Table 1). In mirroring the findings of the global model, Lebanon was ranked among the “top” 20 most factionalized countries in the world, easily outstripping the comparatively modest scores recorded by Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, all states that suffered a breakdown of authoritarian rule without the prior existence of elite factionalism. Lebanon’s overall score on state failure was also higher than all of the Arab countries that experienced

16 Data collection for the 2011 version of the index ended on December 31, 2010. The self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi, who is widely credited with having precipitated the Tunisian revolution and the subsequent spread of protest across the region, occurred on December 17, 2010.
authoritarian collapse, largely due to the robustness of endemic factionalism and sectarianism. In contrast, Tunisia, the bellwether state of the uprisings, received the lowest factionalism ranking among all Arab Spring states, registering a score similar to relatively stable countries like India and China. Accordingly, its overall susceptibility to conflict placed Tunisia in the bottom half of the index and outside the top 100 of most likely to fail states. In short, instead of predicting authoritarian weakness, the index paradoxically predicted authoritarian durability in the Arab World.

After the Arab Spring, scholars rushed to square the universally unanticipated uprisings with the body of social science research on democratization and social movements. Studies that offered predictive claims before the Arab Spring—like the global forecast and the index—were especially useful vehicles for testing the causal assertions of elite factionalism for two reasons. First, because of their repeated claims of predictive value, both studies were particularly amenable to empirical falsification. Jeff Goodwin, for instance, identified the index as a “particularly egregious failure to predict the Arab Spring” since one of its core objectives is to provide an “early warning of conflict...to policymakers and the public at large.” The findings of the index, according to Goodwin, herald an *African Spring* amid an otherwise *Arab Winter*. Closer inspection of the index reveals that 14 of the “top 25” most factionalized states in the world were indeed from Africa, lending empirical support to Goodwin’s contention that an arc of instability should have emerged across sub-Saharan Africa and not the Arab world.

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17 While Bahrain received a slightly lower score than Tunisia on measures of factionalism (6.6 compared to 6.8, respectively), the Bahraini state, with assistance from neighboring Saudi Arabia, was able to absorb domestic sources of instability, most notably Shi’a protests aimed at the ruling Sunni monarchy. Moreover, Bahrain resembled Arab Spring states in that mass mobilization, not elite conflict, both preceded and prompted regime breakdown. For a comparison of Arab Spring states on key measures of instability, see the *Failed States Index* (2011).

The second factor concerns the methodological framework of both models and their broader relevance to social science scholarship and the empirical puzzle that drives this dissertation. While most observers of the Failed States Index—and to a lesser degree the Global Forecast—analyze their findings, they have rarely been subjected to methodological scrutiny. In order to achieve statistically significant predictive value, both studies necessarily sought to identify and operationalize independent variables (factionalism) that had a proven track record of exerting the greatest influence on the dependant variable (instability). This is the primary methodological burden of both cross-national statistical tests and comparative historical analysis, irrespective of the mode of theorizing (e.g., deductive or inductive). Yet, while Kurzman and Goodwin rightly suggest that both studies failed in their key objective—to accurately predict—they did not address the fundamental methodological pitfall that both models fell victim to. Why were they so ill equipped to predict the very type of phenomena they were so keen to forecast?

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19 To be sure, both Kurzman and Goodwin take issue with the teleological aims of such theorizing. But they do not address the theoretical, conceptual or empirical logic that undergirds the premise of their independent variable.
Table 1. The 2011 Failed States Index\textsuperscript{20}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select Arab Spring Countries</th>
<th>Factionalism Ranking (out of 177 countries)</th>
<th>Factionalism Score (10 is maximum instability)</th>
<th>Overall Instability Ranking (out of 177 countries)</th>
<th>Overall Instability Score (120 is maximum instability)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>68.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>86.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>85.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Lebanon did not participate in the Arab spring.

During the so-called “third wave” of democratic transition, scholars from comparative politics and political sociology found that the collapse of authoritarian rule seemed to follow a comparatively uniform pattern: Its roughly simultaneous nature and its global spillover indicated there was a spatial as well as a temporal component to the spread of democracy throughout the global South. As a result, a growing body of literature emerged which considered the factors that both sustained and weakened the rule of authoritarian incumbents during third-wave transitions. Within this research agenda, democratization scholars found that a single dichotomous variable—\textit{the presence or absence of elite factionalism}—could account for the breakdown of authoritarian rule writ large. This causal pattern—which seemed to be a critical and necessary political antecedent for democratic transition to occur—was first recognized and conceptualized by scholars studying the breakdown of military-led regimes throughout Latin America and

\textsuperscript{20} Source: \textit{The Failed States Index} (2011). Because there are 177 countries in the index, it is almost inevitable that some countries will receive the same score. Thus, while Lebanon is identified as the 20\textsuperscript{th} most factionalized country in the world, it could potentially be as high as 11\textsuperscript{th} if we account for repeat scoring. What is interesting about the index is that states like Egypt, which received a relatively high score (not compared to neighboring countries, but on the aggregate) on metrics of factionalism, were instances of what I term “vertical factionalism,” or factionalism that emerges as a result of bottom-up contentious politics, in this case antiregime mobilization. Thus, elite conflict in Egypt did not materialize until the onset of protest, and factionalism and was not an endemic condition of Egyptian party politics. In short, protest spurred ruptures to elite collective action, not vice versa.
Southern Europe in the 1970s. Beginning with O’Donnell and Schmitter’s pathclearing study *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, almost all studies of authoritarian durability have since focused on the ensemble of survival strategies that incumbent rulers employ to prevent the emergence of factionalism.

With its empirical roots in the nascent democratization of the global South, theories of elite collective action—and by extension elite factionalism—have long enjoyed canonical recognition and near paradigmatic prestige throughout comparative politics and political sociology. With equally well-established patterns of theoretical procurement from disciplinary social science, forecast practitioners and leading security devices such as the index and the forecast therefore drew heavily from the experience of the third-wave of democratic transition. Yet, as the both security indices also demonstrated, and as will be readily apparent, the analytic value of utilizing elite factionalism as an independent variable rests on fundamental theoretical expectations that are increasingly challenged by empirical evidence in the global South. As such, a theoretical predilection towards elite-centered, rational-choice, and voluntarist explanations methodologically predisposes security indexes and the forecast practitioners who design their methodologies to discounting long term sociopolitical factors, such as the role of social forces in facilitating the overthrow of authoritarian regimes, which has an equally propitious track record of spurring momentous political transformation, particularly during watershed episodes of revolutionary, antiauthoritarian struggle. Put differently, by assuming that the ability to predict conflict propensity was broadly a function of elite propensity to unravel authoritarian rule vis-à-vis processes that convoke unbridled factionalism, both the index and the forecast contained a fundamental methodological blinds-pot: They were by definition biased against the potential for

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22 Factionalism was one variable among the dozen used by the index, yet its authors expressly suggest that the predictive power of individual variables is as robust...
urban-based mass mobilization, often the leading causal factor that has historically occasioned the emergence of unanticipated social and political revolution. In the case of the Arab Spring, political instability resulted from mobilization spillover not elite defection. And while the regional spread of antiauthoritarian movements tended to uniformly redound to elite factionalism, elite factionalism only *sometimes* redounded to authoritarian breakdown. In a political world governed by both social and elite agency, the authors of both models placed their bets on the latter. Whereas elite factionalism is a theory of authoritarian incumbents, the Arab Spring proved to be a story of challengers.

The preceding discussion requires two caveats that are best articulated at the outset. First, scholars of the Middle East have already subjected themselves to the type of self-flagellation that typically accompanies unforeseen and dramatic political change. At the same time, others have placed the lion’s share of blame with forecasts since their aims are predictive and not explanatory. That is not the purpose of this dissertation. The Arab Spring was equally surprising to methodological individualists and area experts alike. As one scholar suggested, “astonishing and exhilarating” are more apt adjectives that evocatively capture the collective scholarly response to the Arab Spring.

Second, that most, if not all, forecasts failed to predict the Arab Spring should not be taken as a criticism of the claims of theoretical generalizability of many forecasts and cross-national quantitative studies. This methodological approach has many merits that are beyond dispute and, in some cases, have proven to be pathclearing and agenda setting. What it does suggest is that scholars of all methodological stripes overestimated the causal influence of authoritarian

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26 Geddes (1999).
institutions while underestimating the impact of social forces in facilitating authoritarian breakdown. The forecasts discussed and scrutinized in this dissertation should not be understood as being wholly representative of the diverse theoretical and methodological terrain that represents global forecasting. The models under review present a small cluster of studies that were temporally amenable to empirical analysis because both were published just before the onset of protest. As a sort of stress test of their respective predictive ambitions and explanatory objectives, forecasters and country experts nevertheless make such prognostication irresistible objects of investigation for scholars and students alike. Although content analysis was admittedly subjective and does not exhaust the full range of scholarship produced by scholars of the region or forecasters, it does suggest that they reflect broad trends within both streams of scholarship.

Nevertheless, forecast failure meant that divisions among the rule elite—variously coded and described as factionalism, elite divisions, or elite fragmentation—were ultimately poor predictors for pinpointing where conflict was most likely to emerge. But the Arab uprisings seemingly proved to be the exception, not the rule. Indeed, it is almost an article of faith among specialists of authoritarianism and social movements that factionalism is antithetical to authoritarian persistence. This begs the question: Why are some states able to overcome fundamental problems associated with elite collective action, such as rampant and endemic factionalism, whereas others quickly collapse in the face of them? Problems of elite collective action pose a serious problem for authoritarian rulers. Since it has been empirically well-documented and extensively argued that ruling political parties are the single most important factor influencing both the durability of authoritarian regimes and state capacity to generate elite collective action, the

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27 Huntington (1968) was one of the earliest proponents of this view. Geddes’ (1999) pathbreaking cross-national quantitative study reconfirmed Huntington’s thesis. For similar perspectives on the positive correlation between political parties and authoritarian durability, see Smith (2005), Geddes (2005), Brownlee (2007), Gandhi and
puzzle of factionalism beckons an additional institutional question: *how have some authoritarian regimes continued to persist despite lacking any party-based institutional capacity for cultivating elite collective action, and why do they continue to resist party construction despite the potential pitfalls of unbridled factionalism?*

How authoritarian rulers actually generate elite collective action varies widely. And how well ruling parties perform the critical function of sustaining elite collective during periods of crisis merits additional empirical scrutiny. Another brief vignette from the Arab Spring might prove useful.

In much of the Middle East and North Africa, authoritarian rule continues to be ubiquitously acute. Beginning in late 2010, however, some nineteen countries in the Middle East began experiencing varying degrees of political instability. From small protests and isolated clashes to full blow rebellion and civil war, the sweeping pattern of popular mobilization that saw long-standing autocrats toppled from power refocused scholarly attention on the leading causes of authoritarian breakdown.\(^\text{28}\) The spillover wave of the uprisings forced authoritarian regimes as far flung as Russia and China to take preemptive action to quell the potential spread of protest into their borders.\(^\text{29}\)

In this respect, the ability of dominant single-party regimes during the Arab Spring to resist popular calls for democracy was of In this respect, Egypt and Tunisia in particular drew the interest of Middle East scholars because their brand of authoritarian rule looked like no other countries during the uprisings—except for one another.\(^\text{30}\) Their shared similarities begin with

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\(^\text{28}\) Holmes (2012).

\(^\text{29}\) Koesel and Bunce (2013): 753-768.

\(^\text{30}\) See, for instance, the special issue of *Mobilization* (2012) that examines the Arab spring. Although Syria is also a single-party state, popular mobilization has heretofore been unable to dislodge president Assad from power. Material support provided by Iran to the Assad regime, and Saudi support furnished to the FSA (Free Syrian Army)
what political scientist Barbara Geddes\textsuperscript{31} found was the most durable form of authoritarianism in the world—dominant single-party regimes. In Tunisia, the Neo-Destour party (ND) had gone virtually unchallenged since independence in 1956, a period of over fifty years, and the National Democratic Party (NDP) had lorded over Egyptian party politics for some three decades. Hailed as quintessential predatory states, scholars of authoritarianism were lockstep in the belief that single-party rule, in institutional tandem with the state’s coercive apparatus, had cowed the public into quiescent submission and extracted widespread compliance from the ruling elite. The end result, to cite just one study, was “social control… of the majority of elite and nonelite actors.”\textsuperscript{32}

But the post-uprising picture of Middle East authoritarianism paints a starkly different portrait. Faced with the first serious challenge to their rule, long-standing dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt collapsed in a matter of weeks. Tunisia and Egypt had a combined lifespan of more than eighty years, and both countries were leading examples of preponderant single-party regimes that had demonstrated an uncanny capacity to resist democratization. Yet, while a simple count of years in office gave the impression that these party-led regimes were durable, they were not particularly stable. Thus, this implies that the mere existence of a ruling party, or even its purported durability as measured by years, is a poor predictor of a regime’s stability and its capacity to govern through crises. And although these regimes had well-institutionalized party structures that allowed them to efficiently distribute patronage and therefore garner the long-term

\textsuperscript{31} Geddes (1999). Prior to the Arab Spring, Tunisia and Egypt were variously described as blending characteristics of dominant single-party rule with sultanism.

\textsuperscript{32} Angrist (2004): 230. This statement was made with respect to Tunisia, but corollaries of this perspective are equally consistent with views of Egyptian demobilization.
loyalty of the ruling elite, they were equally ill-equipped to overcome the first threatening signs of contentious politics.

While Tunisia has exhibited a strong break from its authoritarian past, Egypt continues to be roiled by it. Although the NDP collapsed amid Egypt’s Spring rebellion, its institutional patron—the military—continues to enjoy unrivaled dominance as the leviathan of the Egyptian state. Initially dubbed a political “miracle” by some in the euphoric aftermath of Mubarak’s ouster\(^{33}\), the Egyptian’s military’s unnerving capacity to cling to power has come to reflect more of a political nightmare than a political miracle for democratization activists. Where states possessed mass based ruling organizations, as was the case in Egypt, authoritarian regimes—but not the rulers that ran them—were able to survive in spite of open factionalism among the ruling elite. Where authoritarian regimes lacked such organizations, as in Tunisia, popular mobilization and elite defection quickly led to the breakdown of authoritarian rule and the permanent elimination of the \textit{ancien regime}. Thus, party-based rule \textit{per se} was a poor omen of regime stability during the Arab Spring. Tunisia and Egypt had demonstrated a similar capacity to endure prior to the uprisings, but they also demonstrated a vastly different capacity to overcome top-down threats to their rule. It thus seems that the primary source of political stability emerged from the presence of well-institutionalized ruling organizations—such as the military in Egypt—not ruling parties, as was the case in Tunisia. To put it differently, institutions of authoritarian rule mattered during the Arab Spring, but it was both the character and composition of those institutions that determined state capacity to overcome elite factionalism. And while factionalism played a role in deposing a number of incumbent autocrats from power,\(^{34}\) it was not always a decisive factor in removing the regimes they commanded. Therefore, \textit{strong ruling parties}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[33] Holmes (2012): 391.
\item[34] To the extent that factionalism played a role during the Arab Spring, it was subsidiary to the causal role played by social mobilization; it only emerged after and because of the onset of protest.
\end{footnotes}
demonstrated a capacity to prop up weak incumbent rulers, but they could not compensate for fundamentally weak regimes during the Arab Spring.

In foreshadowing my argument about the lack of empirical, conceptual and theoretical scrutiny of some of the leading theories of elite collective action, this dissertation begins with the argument that these two overlapping questions—the factional question and the regime question—can be depicted as a more fundamental problem faced by authoritarian regimes: how is factionalism overcome, elite collective action achieved, and authoritarian stability consummated in the absence of a ruling party?

The standard account of authoritarianism suggests political parties are the *sin qua non* of elite collective action and thus authoritarian durability; they exert a statistically significant (and empirically convincing) influence on the stability of authoritarian states while concomitantly increasing their aggregate lifespans. Authoritarian rulers will therefore be unable to effectively exercise their control over society or extract compliance from the ruling elite unless they are able to simultaneously cultivate and sustain elite collective action. Much like the dramatic divergence in political outcomes during the Arab uprisings, this dissertation seeks to explain variation in state capacity to overcome threats to elite collective action, in particular factionalism. By presenting an account for this striking disparity, I aim to shed new empirical and theoretical light on the social, political and institutional foundations of elite collective action in authoritarian regimes.

My basic argument is this: disparities in the coalitional strength of authoritarian regimes are often the product of distinct socio-historical patterns that shape state capacity to overcome collective action problems over the long-term. Tracing state capacity and overall regime strength to the origins of authoritarian rule, I argue that the social, political and institutional norms...
generated during protracted, ideologically based violent conflict are more robust sources for sustaining elite collective action during periods of political crisis. Critically, I contend that the coeval strength of authoritarianism is determined not by the presence of a centralized ruling party, but by discrete patterns of contentious politics that erupted before the establishment of authoritarian rule. I assess the theoretical and empirical implications of this dynamic by examining a particularly puzzling case of authoritarian durability: the Islamic Republic of Iran, which lacks political parties institutions.

The Puzzle and the Argument

The Arab Spring provides an exemplary instance of the paradox of party-led rule: While ruling parties allowed incumbent leaders to stay in office during periods of political quiescence, they were of little help in solving problems of collective action during moments of political turmoil. Thus, I ask: Is there a discernable causal pattern at work that accounts for divergence in regime outcomes elsewhere? I contend there is, but only if we analytically separate incumbent rulers from the regimes they command. Whereas theories of factionalism suggest that incumbent autocrats and the regimes they helm are equally susceptible to factionalism, this dissertation draws a distinction between regimes and the rulers that run them. I begin with the assertion that the institutions that promote the survival of individual authoritarian leaders during periods of constant quiescence, such as parties, are often ineffective—if not downright deleterious—to the stabilization of incumbent rule during moments of political upheaval. In contrast to much of the literature that treats ruling parties as perennial bulwarks of authoritarian rule, I conceptualize party capacity more narrowly. Instead, I argue that ruling parties can better be conceptualized as an extension of what Michael Mann calls the “ despotic power” of the state, or “the range of
The Arab Spring vividly captured this dynamic, where the despotic power of individual rulers and the presence of centralized ruling parties failed to sustain elite collective action amid outbreaks of social mobilization and elite factionalism. Despotic power can effectively facilitate incumbent rule through the aegis of a ruling party, but it can also prove to be equally ineffective at stabilizing it during periods of crisis.

I thus contend: while factionalism may indeed weaken the capacity of individual authoritarian incumbents to stay in power, it does not necessarily follow that factionalism will simultaneously weaken a regime’s staying power. Put differently, incumbent capacity to resist factionalism can be weak while regime capacity remains formidable. Political parties during the Arab uprisings neither institutionally inured incumbent autocrats from being toppled, nor could they protect the regimes they commanded collapsing. In short, ruling parties were able to provide critical support to incumbent rulers because they had yet to face a sustained challenge that could credibly threaten their rule. Fostering elite collective action in the face of constant social and political quiescence was a comparatively easy task. But they could not similarly stoke elite solidarity during upticks in social mobilization.

Although the Arab Spring counterintuitively showed that the presence of a ruling party was not a good indicator of authoritarian stability, elsewhere we find an even more puzzling phenomenon: endemic, non-party factionalism strengthening authoritarian rule while paradoxically weakening elite collective action. This dissertation is based on the following empirical observation: One of the most stable authoritarian regimes in the world has endured not because it has cultivated elite cohesion, but because it has purposely eschewed it. Even more puzzling, authoritarian durability has been achieved not as a consequence of a cohesive ruling

party, but as a deliberate outcome of endemic factionalism. Popular consensus suggests that factionalism is incompatible with authoritarian rule, yet the Islamic Republic of Iran represents one of the most factionalized authoritarian countries in the world. Yet, it has remained remarkably resilient despite lacking what scholars have long believed is the single most important institution that helps sustain authoritarian regimes—a centralized ruling party. At the same time, the Islamic Republic’s clerical elite has willingly countenanced the presence of autonomous ruling factions, widely considered one of the greatest threats to authoritarian regimes. Moreover, political institutionalization is generally considered to reinforce authoritarian rule, yet factions represent just the opposite: non-institutionalization. It is therefore not just the mere existence of open-ended factionalism and durable authoritarianism that is baffling, but their mutual persistence.\textsuperscript{36} I examine and assess the implications of this paradox through a within-the-case historical analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Consistent with my empirical analysis of the Arab Spring, I advance an inductive argument that I tentatively suggest explains institutional divergence in elite collective action and coalitional strength in the Islamic Republic. Although my analysis is for the most part empirically restricted to the Islamic Republic\textsuperscript{37}, its theoretical implications are potentially not. Yet given the inherent limitations involved with single-case inductive analysis, I make no explicit claims as to the prospects of this dissertation’s potential theoretical contributions to the wider body of comparative literature on post-authoritarian institution building. As such, I offer a schematic framework that aims to account for discrete patterns of institutional strength and weakness in the Islamic Republic.

\textsuperscript{36} Iran odd institutional structure has been subjected to a wide array of detailed studies. The presence of endemic factionalism is a recurring theme in almost all analyses of Iranian politics. For instance, see Moslem (2004).

\textsuperscript{37} I have tentatively demonstrated the (non) impact of party-led factionalism as a causal factor in the Arab Spring. The empirical aim of the dissertation is to show the inverse of this dynamic: the impact of non-party factionalism on authoritarian durability in the Islamic Republic.
I begin with the theoretical premise that elite factionalism does not exert a comparatively uniform effect. Existing literature assumes that factionalism is causally invariant; it destabilizes equally both authoritarian regimes and ruling incumbent autocrats. In contrast to most scholarship on state building, I draw a sharp distinction between regimes and the rulers that run them. I contend that the impact of factionalism is most threatening to incumbent authoritarian leaders, but not necessarily the regimes they command. Thus, to restate the theoretical argument at hand: incumbent capacity to resist factionalism can be weak while regime capacity remains formidable. Whereas individual incumbent capacity can be severely constrained by ruptures to elite collective action stemming from factionalism, I suggest that authoritarian staying power evinces a more robust capacity. The now ubiquitous phrase “authoritarian durability” is often conceptualized as the dependent variable in most studies of enduring authoritarianism; durability necessarily equals stability. Thus, if factionalism (independent variable) weakens incumbent rule, by definition it weakens authoritarianism writ large. As the Arab Spring showed, however, this is often not the case; duration does not necessarily equal resilience. Thus, I suggest that durability alone is not an accurate measure of the overall staying power of authoritarianism. I instead propose that any measurement of durability should include the accompanying yet often elusive concept of stability, or the capacity of authoritarian regimes to not only endure, but to conquer both recurrent and episodic political crises. Put differently, I find that the impact of factionalism displays a discernable pattern of authoritarian breakdown, and I tentatively suggest that the Arab Spring tends to reinforce my theoretical and conceptual reinterpretation of factionalism. Staying in power is not the same as staying power: whereas the former is a measure of incumbent capacity, the latter deals with authoritarian capacity writ large. Drawing on what is arguably the most puzzling case of durability in the authoritarian world, this
dissertation seeks to leverage the counterintuitive experience of Iran to further buttress my argument about the social and coalitional foundations of authoritarian regimes, state power and ruling parties.

My argument in the broad strokes is this: Protracted and violent mass conflict during the prerevolutionary struggle and the early stages of regime formation made party institutionalization an untenable proposition for the now dominant factional coalition of the Islamic Republic—the clerical leadership. Tracing state strength to the origins of authoritarian rule and not ruling parties, I suggest that the Islamic Republic’s capacity to overcome factionalism is fundamentally shaped by the type of contentious politics that erupted before the establishment of the Islamic Republic: Violent prerevolutionary conflict made contentious politics both threatening and unpredictable to the dominant clerical leadership, which led to state incorporation strategies that precluded the creation of political parties. Perceptions of threat from their factional cohorts served to foster high levels of elite collective action and collusion among the clerical stakeholders of the revolution. Cultivating elite collective action came to eclipse the potential menace posed by decreased state centralization, or what scholars have called the despotic power of the state. Put simply, the regime relinquished its capacity to unilaterally make decisions (despotic power) by increasing its power to collectively enforce the decisions it does make (infrastructural power).38 The reduction in the state’s despotic power, manifest by the institutionalization of both clerical and democratic rule, gradually spawned what I dub “antithetical institutionalization,” or hybrid political institutions that are profoundly shaped by ideological currents underpinning state formation and revolutionary struggle. These hybrid political institutions anchored the state’s infrastructural capacity to withstand the absence of a

38 I make no normative claims as to whether or not the state willingly or involuntarily chose to constrain its own despotic power. It is certainly worth considering that scholars mostly agree that fundamental philosophical disagreements have forced Iranian elites to countenance competition as an elemental feature of the system.
centralized ruling party while simultaneously tempering endemic and revolutionary factionalism. Unable to fashion a state based on parties because of ideological “dissonance”\(^{39}\) and irresolvable political disagreements among the major stakeholders of the revolution, the clerical leadership used its revolutionary mandate to institutionally intertwine the competing ideological visions of the regime—Islam and democracy.

In attempting to fuse these divergent conceptions of political authority, I argue that factionalism became politically embedded within state’s institutional architecture. Long-considered paradoxical in nature and overlapping in structure, the institutions of the nascent revolutionary regime came to further embody the social, political and institutional norms developed prior to the onset of authoritarian rule, to wit, during the revolutionary struggle that successfully deposed the Pahlavi monarchy from power. The institutionalization of factionalism became permanently nested within the state’s peculiar yet robust electoral framework, allowing it to persist despite the apparent institutional paradox. Given that prerevolutionary contentious politics was deeply grounded in a protracted antiauthoritarian struggle pitting populist social forces against the state\(^{40}\), I thus argue that the coalitional strength of social forces would later engender the type of contentious politics that continues to punctuate the postrevolutionary political order: endemic factionalism. Simply put, strong prerevolutionary coalitions produced strong postrevolutionary factions.

Yet the regime’s incorporation strategies are not what we would expect. Rather than leading to the construction of centralized ruling party that would presumably foster high levels of elite cohesion, the regime chose to abandon such plans altogether. Instead, the regime followed an incorporation strategy that paradoxically gave greater autonomy to political factions. Indeed,

\(^{39}\) Brumberg (2001).

\(^{40}\) The Iranian revolution was a comparatively nonviolent event in world historical terms.
unlike almost all other revolutionary or postcolonial regimes borne of violent struggle, these factional coalitions never coalesced into institutionalized political parties. Instead, political factions became substitutes for them. As surely as elites in authoritarian regimes have institutionalized party competition after state formation, revolutionary social forces in Iran proved to be equally adept at forcing elites to abandon party competition before it. The coalitional strength of social forces in prerevolutionary Iran forced the clerical elite to forsake party construction in favor of freestanding factions. Thus, the question for some authoritarian regimes, particularly those forged from the rubble of revolution and steeled in its aftermath, is not just about how to effectively construct a regime that will allow individual leaders to stay in power, but how does the process of state formation influence authoritarian staying power writ large.

Undergirding this process of revolutionary state formation was a key antecedent dynamic that I suggest was a critical determinant in shaping both the robustness and fragility of authoritarian rule. I thus pose the following question: Did the ascendant clerical leadership perceive internal and external threats to its legitimacy to be an endemic feature of quotidian politics or as episodic and manageable under traditional forms of political governance? In short, did they believe that by institutionalizing political competition along party lines, they would hasten the very outcome they were attempting to prevent: authoritarian collapse. I therefore argue that the uncertainty inherent during the prerevolutionary struggle and the robustness of coalitional forces made contentious politics (and thus factionalism) endemic, unpredictable, and thus threatening, making party-based politics an entirely untenable proposition. Given the multiplicity of ideological forces and the cross-cutting social and class foundations of the revolution, I argue that emergent clerical elites openly perceived such threats to be ineliminable and most threatening under party-
based political competition. The mobilizational capacity of society further served to heighten perceptions of threat from below, which could potentially leverage parties as vehicles for capturing or fundamentally altering state power and its clerical foundations. Paradoxically, I contend that the very factor that is thought to erode elite collective action has helped the Islamic Republic achieve it. Yet, perceptions of threat were based almost exclusively on the fact that the coalitional counterparts of the clerical elite, although erstwhile allies during the revolutionary struggle, posed a serious ideological challenge once their common enemy—the shah—had been vanquished. This unpredictability yielded alternative and dissonant\textsuperscript{41} paths to state formation grounded in a deeply ideological state where state capacity itself was profoundly shaped by the dominant ideology of the clerical elite.

In sum, the Islamic Republic has experienced more staying power than some of its authoritarian cohorts during the Arab Spring and elsewhere because contentious prerevolutionary politics cultivated discrete patterns of social and political organization necessary for sustaining elite cohesion even amid recurrent outbreaks of popular mobilization and electoral uncertainty. Elite collective action is fostered and reproduced in terms of its political (but not party) institutionalization, and sustained through the clerical elite’s shared perception that factionalism was endemic and thus too unpredictable and unmanageable to countenance under traditional forms of political organization. This allowed rampant factionalism to exist in institutional tandem with a genuinely competitive political system because the state’s antithetical institutionalization hamstrung the capacity of elites to assume a genuinely oppositional posture in terms of a direct ideological challenge to the state. Conversely, I argue the very factors that led to the revolution—the coalitional strength of prerevolutionary factions—makes mass politics and

\textsuperscript{41} Daniel Brumberg coined the term “dissonant institutionalization” in his comparative analysis of Iran and Indonesia, which he suggests both departed from conventional understandings of institution building partially because contentious politics was “messy and indeterminate.” See Brumberg (2001):382.
the mobilizational capacity of society an inherently ineliminable threat. The absence of a ruling party is the end institutional result of this dynamic.

From Parties to Protection Pacts

This dissertation argues that sustained mass conflict prior to the inauguration of authoritarian rule can be a better source for cultivating elite collective action than ruling parties are though to be after a regime’s grip on power has already been consummated. To be theoretically persuasive, however, such analysis must be firmly grounded in the methodological logic that continues to define path-dependent analysis in comparative historical work. To be theoretically generalizable, however, such analyses must overcome the common criticism that it is empirically bounded. As I have already shown and intend to elaborate further, this dissertation tentatively suggests that a discernable pattern of authoritarian breakdown during the Arab Spring is at play, and it can be applied to the Islamic Republic of Iran. But whereas the Arab Spring demonstrated the weakness of parties in sustaining elite collective action, I suggest Iran inversely evinces the strength of non-party regimes, contrary to theoretical expectation and historical experience.

Following influential studies that trace authoritarian strength to the origins of authoritarian rule, I argue that the institutional arrangements of the Iranian state are less a sign of authoritarian calculations or elite politics but a reflection of mass politics. I thus see the postrevolutionary political institutions of the Iranian state as the historical residue of its prerevolutionary social coalitions, which are in turn legacies of historical conflicts.42 While not necessarily a bold or counterintuitive assertion, particularly in lieu of the increasing sociological bent of comparative

42 See, for instance, Waldner (2002) and Slater (2010). In terms of the theoretical generalizability of my argument, however, Slater’s framework is more persuasive in terms of its theoretical implications given its greater comparative rigor due in large part to its sample size. Waldner suggests his model is universally applicable, while Slater nevertheless carefully cautions against any perceived meta-theoretical claims of his study, despite its immense impact upon comparative historical work.
historical work in political science, tracing state strength to social coalitions is certainly far from being an intuited impulse. But unlike almost all other studies, I offer a theoretical corrective to what is generally believed to be the end institutional result of strong state authoritarianism—robust ruling parties. Whereas most studies on state building suggest parties represent the apex of institutional power for authoritarian regimes, I argue the reverse. Given that factions are similarly considered to be the organizational bane of autocracy, this dissertation is essentially inverting the logic of ruling party strength and authoritarian stability. I see ideologically driven collusion among the clerical elite as being tangibly represented by the state’s political institutions. In short, this dissertation sees the social and political cleavages that characterized pre-revolutionary Iran as constituting the institutional legacies of post-revolutionary society.

Studies have shown that such collusive approaches to state formation, in which one ideologically or politically driven group achieves virtual hegemony of the political order, are quite common in the authoritarian world. Yet conceptualizing elite collusion has proven far more difficult for practitioners of state formation who trace state capacity to authoritarian origins. This problem has been especially debilitating for scholars of Iran, but not necessarily for specialists of authoritarianism. This is because of the odd paradox that continues to bestride the Iranian body politic and the ability of observers to adequately conceptualize it: As cleavages among factions deepened, clerical collusion should have theoretically produced an effective channel for managing such tensions, or a ruling party. Although collusion among the clerical leadership produced a new revolutionary statecraft that used ideology as the state’s institutional glue, it did not impel the growth of political party. The end result, in the words of a handful of observers, is that factionalism became “suspended.” This, in turn, should have raised the acute specter of unbridled elite conflict, potentially unraveling clerical collusion and threatening regime stability.

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The failed emergence of a ruling party coalition coupled with the fact that factionalism did not pose a severe collective action problem necessarily points to an overarching mechanism that more profoundly shaped the coalitional strength of the ruling elite.

This dissertation started with the assumption that antecedent coalitional strength influences the robustness of subsequent political institutions. Yet, contrary to historical experience, I contend that a ruling party would have unnecessarily accelerated and exacerbated existing factional tensions, paradoxically producing the very outcome the clerical elite was attempting to prevent: authoritarian instability. Again, Iran challenges much of the received theoretical wisdom on state formation and authoritarian durability most severely. Since parties are institutionally absent, much of the existing literature on authoritarian state formation is of little analytic help, but not all of it.

This dissertation adheres to recent approaches to state building by claiming that parties are not always the best institutional defense against mobilizational threats to regime cohesion. I offer two critical caveats, however: Whereas almost all studies of authoritarian state building suggest that parties are the coalitional climax of an authoritarian regime’s institutional muscle, I argue that the reverse can be true, but only when early patterns of mass conflict make parties too threatening to tolerate. Parties are ideal institutions of authoritarian rule for distributing patronage and cultivating collective action during periods of normal politics, but they often fail to achieve those same institutional objectives during moments of threatening crises. Second, I tentatively find that causes of authoritarian breakdown during the Arab Spring and elsewhere can be traced to divergence in the coalitional strength of authoritarian regimes. More specifically, I find that this difference is best explained between regime and incumbent institutional capacity. To recapitulate the institutional argument on factionalism: incumbent capacity to resist
factionalism can be weak while regime capacity remains formidable. This is precisely the dynamic that I contend we find in the Islamic Republic, and one that was inversely obtained during the Arab Spring. While the onset of factionalism augured poorly for incumbent leaders during the Arab Spring, it did not necessarily exert the same influence on the regimes they ran. As the Islamic Republic’s experience shows, the absence of a party and the presence of endemic elite factionalism have not produced the expected political pressures that history suggests should be fatal for authoritarian regimes or incumbent leaders.

Dan Slater has offered what is perhaps the most ambitious theory of coalitional politics in the authoritarian world. Drawing on influential studies such David Waldner’s\(^\text{44}\) theory of social coalitions, Charles Tilly’s notion of “protection rackets,”\(^\text{45}\) and Braun’s discussion of “protection theory,”\(^\text{46}\) Slater sought to broadly capture the process by which authoritarian rulers were able to build sustainable political coalitions in late developing countries. Attempting to discern broad causal patterns that accounted for the divergent political trajectories of states in Southeast Asia, Slater found that the strongest authoritarian regimes were able to construct what he calls \textit{protection pacts}, or “a pro-authoritarian coalition linking upper groups on the basis of shared perceptions of threat.”\(^\text{47}\) These types of coalitions by definition can only be strong, and they can only emerge from early mass based conflict defined by urban mobilization. At their broadest, protection pacts \textit{institutionalize political support} from much of state and society: From economic elites and religious and communal leaders to middle-class citizens and state officials, a protection pact capably extracts, coerces, or otherwise compels political support from all these groups and organizes them into \textit{centralized ruling parties}. Thus, strong antiregime coalitions tended to

\(^{44}\) Waldner (1999).
\(^{46}\) Braun (1975): 280.
\(^{47}\) Slater (2010): 15.
produce even stronger institutional prospects for channeling political support into broad based ruling parties. Conversely, Slater terms failed protection pacts, or ruling coalitions that are substantively weaker but nonetheless formidable, as provision pacts.\footnote{Slater 2010.}

I find that protection pacts come close to explaining the type of institutional dynamic that we find in Iran, but not close enough. This is because of one large exception: like most theories of authoritarian institution building, the terminal ending of Slater’s protection pact is the creation of a ruling party. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that it is, in fact, the whole point of a protection pact. Because of this considerable institutional difference, a protection pact is unattainable in Iran, and not just because of the absence of a ruling party but because of the way the political diffusion has precluded the state’s despotic power from being concentrated in any one institution of the state.\footnote{Obviously some institutions are more despotic than others. The Office of the Supreme Leader best represents the institutionalization of despotic rule in the Islamic Republic.} But nor is Iran what Slater calls a provision pact. Provision pacts, as the name implies, are pro authoritarian groups that generate collective action and ensure the loyalty of elites through the provision of patronage. As I have discussed, patronage is ultimately a weak source for generating durable political institutions in authoritarian regimes. Instead, I argue that Iran is defined by coalitional collusion, or ideologically buttressed elite coalitions that use the formal and informal institutions of the state to protect their vision of society. But unlike a protection pact, this need not lead to the creation of ruling party, since I contend that early, mass based ideological conflict can make party creation too threatening.

In articulating his theory of protection pacts, Slater nevertheless situates them as something of a regional rarity throughout Southeast Asia, if not much of the authoritarian world. In his Southeast Asian tests cases, only Malaysia and Singapore were able to secure a virtual institutional monopoly of the political order through the collusion of the political elite. Despite
the dramatic divergence in the region’s erstwhile authoritarian regimes, and the relative recency with which many of them escaped their postcolonial authoritarian origins, Slater envisions protections pacts as being necessarily empirically elusive. Yet I go one step further. I contend that post-revolutionary authoritarian regimes founded on protection pacts are even rarer empirical oddities because the social revolutions needed to spur them are still rarer historical events. While at first glance the scarcity of social revolutions might seem to limit the theoretical portability of this argument, and the applicability of Slater’s thesis with my own, it need not. I contend that protection pacts can effectively apprehend the emergence of coalitional collusion irrespective of the specific form political contention takes. In line with Slater and Waldner, the question, I contend, is not whether we are able to neatly fit countries into what are increasingly regarded as arbitrary and unnecessary categories. The Arab Spring highlights this best, where “revolution” continues to be downgraded, and less evocative phrases such as “rebellion” and “uprising” are used in an effort to more accurately depict the actual empirical turn of events. Most scholars now agree that revolutions are inherently unpredictable and are the outcome of specific conjunctural and historical factors. Theories of state building that treat political institutions as the coalitional legacies of historical conflicts similarly conceptualize early mass based conflict not according to historically constructed categories, but according to the actual processes of authoritarian breakdown and regime formation.

I thus largely set aside well-established studies of the causes of the Iranian revolution. Nor is it the purpose of this dissertation to recast the postrevolutionary trajectory of Iranian politics in a new light by adding to the already crowded literature on Iran’s Islamic Revolution. These are both well-trodden paths that are, on balance, empirically and theoretically settled. The aims of

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50 Kurzman (2004), in what is perhaps the best revisionist tome on the Iranian Revolution, attempts to drive home this very point.
this dissertation, while more circumscribed empirically than the study of revolution, perhaps
carries with it the potential for a broader theoretical contribution to the study of elite collective
action and factionalism. But it does aim to reconceptualize the process of postrevolutionary state
formation and highlight how early contentious class conflict can produce unpredictable and
paradoxical patterns of state building. I submit that since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, few
authoritarian countries have had their political institutions subjected to as much empirical
scrutiny as Iran’s have, and yet paradoxically no country has generated so little theoretical
scholarship and been so difficult to capture conceptually, despite the potential wealth it offers for
theoretical refinement. Indeed, the majority of research on Iranian factionalism and authoritarian
durability has been almost exclusively descriptive.51 Empirically rich as it is theoretically
lacking, this long-standing research tendency has taken the form of describing the ideological
orientation of different factions. With few exceptions, most of the major theoretical studies of
authoritarian durability pay little attention to Iran. This dissertation thus hypothesizes that
collusive coalitions are a useful remedy.

Having said that, this dissertation does suggest coalitional strength and conflict intensity were
stronger in Iran than anywhere in Southeast Asia, presenting the regime with an exceptional
opportunity to craft a lasting protection pact. But I suggest that the revolution’s strengths—it
cross-class nature and ideological diversity—turned out to be its greatest weakness. Indeed,
whereas the defining institutional feature of a protection in Southeast Asia was the establishment
of a mass ruling party, in Iran the clerical elite had no such luck. To the considerable extent that
the existence of ruling parties serve as the institutional lynchpin of protection pacts and
authoritarian regimes writ large, in the Islamic Republic their absence has paradoxically served

51 Mehdi Moslem’s (2002) Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran is but one example of a penetrating empirical
study that nonetheless lacks much conceptual or theoretical exposition.
to strengthen authoritarian rule. Again, Iran most dramatically contravenes our current understanding of coalition building in authoritarian regimes. Since ruling parties are the institutional backbone for sustaining elite cohesion and institutionalizing protection pacts, Iran presents an ideal case to challenge not only the logic of party rule, but how protection pacts can be consummated and elite collective action can be achieved in the absence of a political party.

*Coalitional strength* and *conflict intensity* are better measures for determining the institutional chances that elites can and will collude to create institutions of authoritarian rule that prevent oppositional elites from acquiring veto-power and gaining political traction within the system. I see political institutions as legacies of historical conflicts among social coalitions. In the zero-sum game of ideological hegemony that is authoritarian rule, contentious, ideologically driven conflict allows the winners to shape the political order as they see fit. But unlike elsewhere, these visions were not channeled into a state led ruling party. As I will suggest, elite coalitions in Iran were shaped by the fundamental dilemma of the postrevolutionary order: The institutional struggle between republican and religious authority. This had enormous consequences for shaping the odd duality of the state’s overlapping institutional framework, and it would provide them with the necessary motivation to establish an institutional chokehold that would suffocate the potential for coalitional reform.

This is precisely why I see protection pacts as fitting well in the context of Iran, but ultimately not well enough. While parties are generally considered as the stop-gap preventing the encroachment of authoritarian reform or oppositional challenge, in Iran this never occurred. And while social revolutions pair strong antiauthoritarian social coalitions with powerful political, religious and economic elites to form a mobilizational whole, in Iran they produced different coalitional results and fundamentally different institutions of rule. I precisely argue that
the subsequent institutional prospects for building a strong authoritarian state augured so well because state capacity was heavily shaped by prior coalitional intensity. But the end institutional result of clerical collusion and the protection pact played out quite differently in the Islamic Republic: Whereas Slater argues that protection pacts must inevitably be institutionalized by a mass parry, in Iran the opposite occurred. Thus, protection pacts are ultimately an unsatisfactory answer to the question of how Iran’s institutional strength was achieved.

Thus far, I have attempted to elucidate why parties did not emerge in Iran—because they were more likely to exacerbate preexisting factional cleavages than resolve them. I contend that coalitional strength necessarily masked trenchant ideological differences, making the state extremely susceptible to the spread of dissonant ideological voices. Thus, when the nascent revolutionary state began to systematically purge the major factional stakeholders of the revolution through targeted campaigns of torture, killing, and political elimination, they tangibly perceived threats posed by competing factions to be unmanageable and endemic to the postrevolutionary power struggle. Yet, although the most vociferous opponents to clerical rule had essentially been expunged from any potential say in the new political order, and while the war period further shrouded oppositional elements from surfacing substantive discontent, the ruling elite still did not create a ruling party even though they were in an exceptionally strong position to do so. To be sure, elite disaffection among the clerical elite was not trivial, but it also was not dispositive of the inveterate political criticism mounted by the non-clerical establishment. Thus, I contend that the potential for party construction lapsed once the ruling elite prevaricated on creating a mass party during the war period. Contentious class politics and ideological dissonance was simply too unmanageable to institutionalize into a ruling party. Thus, a protection pact in Iran compensates for the fundamental weakness of the Iranian state and its
incapacity to forcibly extract political concessions from society. Elite unwillingness to stomach party institutionalization clearly reflects this dynamic, which is precisely the point of this dissertation.

But unlike Southeast Asia, where protection pacts uniformly consummated by a mass party, I argue that conflict intensity was too strong and ideological dissent too threatening in Iran for the clerical elite to follow the same path of party construction. Thus, they had to collude to create institutions that would choke off oppositional challenges. The Islamic Republic’s clerical elite institutionalized coalitional rule much differently. In Southeast Asia, protections pacts depended largely on the capacity of ruling coalitions to extract as much tax revenue from economic elites, which were funneled to a state treasury and used to subsidize state expenditure. Because Iran is a rent-seeking state as a result of its outsized oil economy, its fiscal health and its ability to fund the vast networks of power and patronage that constitute much of its infrastructural power is largely dependent not on the extraction of tax revenues but on the price of oil. As a semi-autarkic state guided by policies of self-sufficiency as a result of international sanctions, the Iranian state has governed through repeated domestic and international crises with relative impunity, despite the bite of sanctions and in spite of a robust tax regime. Thus, unlike strong protection pacts in Southeast Asia that require the extraction and accumulation of tax revenue to fund the state’s ability to preserve coalitional unity and cohere their protection pacts, the clerical elite in Iran is fundamentally driven by different factors, of which ideology is just one. While a strong tax regime allows patronage to flow smoothly and nicely underpins the strength of preexisting protection pacts, the price of oil similarly greases the institutional strength of clerical collusion. Thus, I contend that Iran’s ruling coalition is comparatively weaker if we consider global fluctuations in the price of oil and its inability to
directly extract tax revenue from elites, but comparatively stronger as a result of underlying ideological bonds and institutional choke points it created in the system’s antithetical architecture.

Underpinning the clerical elites’ collusive approach to politics was the establishment of what scholars have variously depicted as the establishment of “guardian”\textsuperscript{52} political systems—or a type of political order where major elite stakeholders of a regime defend the ideological foundations of the state. Yet I argue that ideological ties are more cross-cutting while at the same they are inherently ephemeral: Although they shape the dominant pattern of contentious politics and serve as the building block for fostering elite collective action among dominant elite groups, ideology is by definition relatively fluid. This is especially the case when compared to tangible political institutions shaped by an overarching ideology. This is why, I suggest, Iran never developed political parties or why stalwart defenders of the regime steadfastly refused to countenance their construction: The presence of competing ideological factions blighted the progress of party institutionalization. Paradoxically, this is the very reason why scholars suggest strong authoritarian states build parties—to avoid factional spillover. But I suggest parties are inherently risky propositions, particularly for revolutionary regimes steeped in an ideology of the state. Given that the lodestone of factional politics in Iran is electoral based political competition, parties represent a viable path to power for oppositional elites and regime reformists. But elections, I contend, are a far less risky proposition once the state has increased its infrastructural capacity. Infrastructural power is defined as the capacity of the state to implement its policies and exercise control over the population, usually through the institutions of the state. In Iran, this has taken the shape of what scholars have variously described as the dual institutionalization of

\textsuperscript{52} Mohseni (2012) is but one example.
the regime. In practice, this has involved the development of a series of parallel political institutions designed to blunt, as much as possible, the writ of electoral politics and the encroachment of oppositional elites into the heart of the system. This has meant that while Iran has genuinely competitive elections, it does not have competitive elites. As I will suggest in the following chapters, contentious politics before the establishment of authoritarian rule virtually guaranteed that parties would never be the *raison d’être* of competition in Iran, mostly because they were too threatening to the clerical elite, but also because they were entirely unnecessary. I contend that factionalism fundamentally reflects the paradoxical capacity of the regime: It allows the regime to harness prerevolutionary coalitional strength despite the state’s contradictory ideological foundations, yet it also demonstrates its *weakness* to abide the institutionalization of parties because of a common fear from their ideological and political rivals.

Although useful analytically in describing the ideological origins of some authoritarian regimes, “guardian” implies that the pursuit of elite collective action is an historical given; a state’s “guardian” ideology must simply be “defended.” It does not acknowledge that the pursuit of elite collective action is *both the ends and the means of authoritarian stability*, and to sustain it elites must be continually be vigilant of oppositional elite challenges from above and mobilizational threats from below. The supposed key-holders of the regime’s ideology—or its purported guardians—must contend with an array of coalitional forces who seek to not just the ideological agendas of their rivals, but to undermine their very position within the political order. In short, claim-making is not the same as state-making. Whereas the former requires only that one express ideological fidelity, the latter requires its tangible political construction, mostly through the institutions of the state and codified law. As Joel Migdal has argued, seeing the state as an autonomous actor that exists beyond the reach of society is tantamount to anthro-
I treat factional politics as a manifestation of mass politics writ large, whereas much of the literature on authoritarian state formation and party creation argues the reverse. Elites might therefore guard the ideological foundations of the regime, but they must also seek their *individual protection* in a Hobbesian sense as well as their *collective protection* in an institutional sense. This led Slater to term coalitional strength in Southeast as a protection pact, a wholly Hobbesian view of authoritarian institution building and elite collusion.

Rival Explanation or the Only Explanations? The Logic of Ruling Parties and Elite Patronage

This dissertation argues that the pursuit of elite collective action is fundamentally shaped by perceptions of fear in authoritarian regimes, which are most profoundly shaped by antecedent political dynamics prior to the onset of authoritarian rule. To some extent, however, I part company with most theorists of state formation who suggest that *patronage* is the ultimate form of protection for authoritarian elites. Yet the logic of party-based rule is not simply a rival or even the primary explanation for understanding how patronage is best distributed and elites collective action is maintained in authoritarian regimes. As Dan Slater argued in his agenda-setting dissertation, it is effectively *the only explanation*. As the Arab Spring strikingly captured and as I have argued, patronage was an ineffective way of ensuring elite loyalty during moments of social and political insecurity. Even when vast networks of patronage exist to efficiently distribute the perquisites of power and other material incentives, they vary rarely redound to the masses. This is why during the Arab Spring, patronage and apparatus networks were prone to crack amid pressures from ambivalent elites who existed on the margins of the...
regime’s patronage structure, not to mention the mobilized masses whose ire was partially precipitated by profligate elite excess.

Yet one looming factor alone prevents patronage from assuming any real explanatory power in this dissertation: institutionalized ruling parties are almost always the primary distributors of elite patronage in authoritarian regimes, whereas authoritarian elites in Iran have time and again exhibited a strong preference against establishing ruling parties. From the standpoint of mass politics, moreover, parties are thought to bridle bottom up mobilizational threats because they provide elites with a mass following in society, creating stable and predictable patterns of political behavior. This often presages the epiphenomenal outcome of electoral politics and the increasing tendency among some authoritarian regimes to convoke elections—sometimes even genuinely competitive ones—based on elite perceptions of fear that have been sufficiently mitigated due to the absence of both top-down and bottom-up threats to the status-quo.

But regimes based strictly on patronage, and particularly those without any outlet to articulate pent up political demands, have tended to suffer from chronically debilitating political crises unless they are able to draw on other, more potent sources for cultivating collective action and thus protection. That is not to say that patronage does not matter. Like most countries, democratic or otherwise, the Iranian state is rife with cronyism but also ideological nepotism. Given that it has no party to distribute material incentives to reward ideological allies and regime stalwarts, the state funnels economic resources through well-established parastatal networks, which include well-endowed religious organizations, revolutionary foundations initially set up to aid in the war effort but repurposed to facilitate patronage distribution, and other semi-official state bodies used to reward ideological adherents and elite allies of the regime.
There are few contemporary scholars who have paid as much attention to patterns of political development in postrevolutionary societies than Samuel Huntington. As Huntington has argued, there is strong empirical evidence to suggest revolutionary movements whose primary motivation is to acquire state power will build radically different ruling coalitions once they have attained it.\(^{56}\) This is precisely the case in Iran. But Huntington suggests that postrevolutionary regimes build a specific type of ruling coalition, which tends to be the strongest in the authoritarian world—political parties. “One party systems which emerge out of revolution are more stable than those produced by nationalist movements,” Huntington contends.\(^{57}\) In a nutshell, Huntington is suggesting that the harder the opposition struggles to capture power, the better of it will be as a result of doing so.\(^{58}\) Stated in terms that reflect the struggle of revolutionary contentious politics in Iran, I argue that strong prerevolutionary coalitions tended to produce strong postrevolutionary factions, but strikingly and counterintuitively, not parties. Importantly, Huntington contends that regimes that fail to develop party institutions at all, like the Islamic Republic, will increasingly find themselves on shaky political ground: “The more hostile a government is towards political parties...the greater the probable future instability of that society. Where traditional political institutions are smashed by revolution, post-revolutionary order depends on the emergence of one strong party.”\(^{59}\) Thus, the logic of one-party rule, according to Huntington, has as much to do with thwarting the highly combustible mix of revolutionary mobilization and political factionalism as it does with actually provoking the creation of a ruling party. Huntington’s analysis here also emphasizes the idiosyncratic ways that parties cumulate popular support. Simply put, parties breed patronage, which is why he believed

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\(^{56}\) It is, of course, axiomatic that revolutionary movements almost always seek to capture and alter the fundamental structures of state and social power.

\(^{57}\) Huntington (1968): 425.

\(^{58}\) Dan Slater (2005) reiterates Huntington’s point as well.

\(^{59}\) Huntington (1968): 91.
they were so vital to the long-term political stability of the ruling elite. Huntington’s portrayal of
parties as the primary dispensers of patronage has gained considerable theoretical and empirical
support, and much of the contemporary literature continues to consistently stress the ways that
parties incentivize long-term loyalty through patronage structures.

Yet there is little theoretical purchase for justifying such an otherwise empirically
persuasive argument in the Islamic Republic because the Iranian state long ago abolished
political parties. This dynamic has successfully explained authoritarian stability in cases where
parties emerged, but it by definition cannot help explain cases where it did not. Rivalrous
explanations therefore not only center on the primacy of parties to invariably protect against the
sort of Hobbesian disorder Huntington and other theorists saw as stoking the most fear among
incumbent autocrats, they do so with an unrivaled level of conceptual invariance rarely found in
most theories of authoritarian state formation.60 The process of state formation in Iran, thus,
seems to not only defy the experience of many other authoritarian regimes, but of revolutionary
regimes born of ideologically based social conflict, of which there are comparatively fewer.61
While agreeing with Huntington that revolutionary regimes are well suited to build strong ruling
party coalitions, I depart on the type and scope of institutional power. I see the process of
postrevolutionary regime formation as being far more institutionally systematic, ideologically
buttressed, and non-remunerative, involving not just a closed-off cadre of elites, barons of
business or elite recipients of patronage, but procuring the broad support of economic elites and
leaders of state institutions writ large. This institutionally encompasses bringing a wide array of

60 Evans (1995) also discusses the Hobbesian cause-and-effect aspect of party-based institution building in
authoritarian regimes.
61 I should reemphasize that revolutions from above, or those initiated by elite actors in the absence of significant
mass mobilization, are still fewer. Generally speaking, social revolutions are considered to be more systematic in the
way that they not only reorder existing political and institutional power, but the social foundations and structures
that they are built upon. China, Russia, Cuba and Iran are the paradigmatic examples of social revolutions that were
based on ideological conflict.
elite and non-elite actors into the state’s organizational orbit, including ordinary citizens through various civic and religious associations.

As we will see, elites in Islamic Republic orchestrated the creation of a parallel system of governance whose sole purpose was to bring the broadest spectrum of elite and non-elite actors into the administrative ambit of the regime. As revolutionary regimes are wont to do, the perquisites of participation are often non-material and ideological in nature. This includes both remunerative and purely ideologically based associations that foster religious and communal ties, economic institutions that blur the boundaries between private and public enterprise, and informal apparatus and coercive networks that draw upon regular Iranian citizens to militantly enforce ideological compliance among the population. Tightly interwoven as they are informally institutionalized, these parastatal networks cut across the entirety of the formal institutional structure of the state, and in many cases they are far more robust sources for sustaining elite collective action than their formal counterparts would suggest. Indeed, as I will go into greater length in the coming chapters, these informal institutions ably penetrate civil society and supply the regime with considerable infrastructural power to sustain collective action even during moments of political upheaval and electoral uncertainty. While parties can achieve some of this, they cannot do much of it. In short, I see revolutionary regimes born of violent, protracted conflict far less dependent on cronyism and the cycle of state dependency that ruling parties are thought to cultivate, and more dependent on non-remunerative forms of protection for stoking elite solidarity and promoting elite cohesion over the long-term. Thus, this dissertation submits that state formation in Iran can be seen as a series of informal and formal social networks based on shared perceptions of threat grounded in a common ideological frame. Whereas the common tendency is to circumscribe the state—particularly in the case of Iran—in strictly political and
institutional terms, I see the state\textsuperscript{62} and its institutions as the functional political equivalent of the social forces that gave rise to it.

One of the reasons that Huntington saw revolutionary regimes as well suited to create strong ruling parties was the looming specter of mass opposition. Competitive elections have historically augured well for protest in Iran, and they have provided a staging ground for appropriating the Islamic Republic’s electoral cycle as mobilizing structure for mass protest. Recent cycles of mobilizational protest in the Islamic Republic were sparked by what was perceived to be widespread electoral fraud. But the largest demonstrations in the history of the Islamic Republic succumbed to the state’s willingness to deploy brute crackdown capacity. Yet, while the potential for protest can be tempered, it cannot be eliminated. Competitive elections in Iran have produced mass constituencies and endemic political pressures which present factional elites with ample incentive to pursue party-building. Yet they have consistently refused to do so. The only mechanism by which the state could permanently temper the mobilizational capacity of society would be to destroy the state’s democratic institutions, which would make protest far less likely but also far less predictable. The Supreme Leader openly floated such a scenario after the state’s democratic credibility was dealt a devastating blow in the aftermath of the 2009 elections. Yet the continued viability of the democratic process continues to hold considerable currency for many within the elite establishment, and not just the reformist factions.

Rival Explanations

A number of possible explanations could plausibly account for how authoritarian regimes preserve elite collection in the face of endemic factionalism, but precious few existing studies have offered persuasive explanations of how revolutionary regimes are able to sustain elite collective action in the presence of elite factionalism, particularly in the absence of any party

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\textsuperscript{62} This is obviously in reference to the pithy title of Scott’s (1998) \textit{Seeing Like a State}. 

institutions at all. Thus, while rival explanations can capably explain how party institutions tame factionalism, they by definition cannot offer persuasive accounts for how the presence of factionalism is bridled in their absence.

**Ideology**

As some have argued, ideological influences can sustain elite collective action during periods of political crisis, and this very argument has been forwarded in the case of the Iranian revolution to varying degrees.\(^{63}\) According to this line of thinking, although the material benefits associated with patronage are strong incentives for preventing outbreaks of factionalism during normal periods of political quiescence, ideological ties that bind elites to the regime are more robust sources for maintaining elite collective action during periods of crisis. This is mostly because ideological affinities are based on *non-material* incentives that transcend the often-ephemeral economic order in which rentier states are often founded upon and which patronage ultimately rests on.\(^{64}\) Whereas the internal coherence of patronage is vulnerable to crack amid stresses resulting from economic downturn, regimes founded on a mobilizational ideology that is crosscutting in terms of its class appeal can overcome the disincentive to oppose the regime during an economic nadir. This strand of thought also considers ideology as a kind of proto-institutional force that can be helpful in coalescing otherwise competitively disparate factions, much like scholars such as Goldstone, Foran and Goodwin tend to conceptualize it.\(^{65}\) Revolutionary regimes that were seemingly spawned by an overarching ideology—particularly one that served as a mobilizational impetus to unite contending political coalitions against an

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\(^{63}\) Parsa (1989) does this to varying degrees with deft nuance, as does Burns (1996) and Moaddel (1992).

\(^{64}\) Given that Iran is a rent-seeking state, it holds particularly true.

\(^{65}\) Goldstone (1991) and Foran and Goodwin (1993) discuss ideology as being important in solving factional differences during the revolutionary struggle.
overarching authoritarian foe—have historically served to inspire much thinking on the role of ideology, and the Iranian revolution is no different.

Yet scholarly skepticism remains pervasive over theories of ideological instrumentalism and its capacity to lay the groundwork for a process that yields a sustainable trajectory of path-dependence over the long-term. Much like Goldstone and Skocpol\textsuperscript{66}, I see ideology in less functionalist terms. Instead, I see ideology as occupying a space between the rigid instrumentalism of early theories of revolutionary ideology\textsuperscript{67} and later iterations which posit it in a less deterministic fashion in regards to its long-term prospects to sustain a regime but perhaps more robust in its short-term outlook to influence the institutional arrangements of the state. Joel Migdal has perhaps argued more eloquently about the surprising inability of authoritarian regimes to dominate society with a hegemonically inspired political ideology than most scholars in recent memory. In his magnus opus \textit{State in Society}, one of Migdal’s primary objectives is to deconstruct the utterly untenable yet surprisingly ubiquitous tendency among thinkers of contentious politics to anthropomorphize the institutions of authoritarian rule.\textsuperscript{68} According to Migdal, this tends to disguise the basic fact, obvious to most lay observers, that authoritarian institutions are not people. Elites occupy positions of authority in institutions, and are required to make decisions that are based as much on bottom-up pressures emerging from within society as they are from top-down pressures emanating from within elite institutions. Seen this way, Migdal logically suggests that institutions—indeed the state itself—exists plainly within the ambit of society, whereas anthropomorphizing the state by ascribing to it the qualities of independent

\textsuperscript{66} Goldstone (1991) and Skocpol (1979).

\textsuperscript{67} Of course, this was particularly the case with the French Revolution, which spawned much thinking on the topic of ideology in social revolutions.

\textsuperscript{68} Migdal (2001).
human intelligence tends to separate it from society and make it an autonomous actor it has never been.

In particular, a familiar proposition to scholars of comparative politics—and particularly observers of Iran—has been advanced that theorizes that the influence of religiously inspired ideology is a more socially and politically cross-cutting bulwark against threats from above and below. This argument has a number of problems, most of which have been thoroughly deconstructed but are nevertheless worthy of brief discussion.

First, what is often overlooked is the way that some tend to ascribe to Islam an anthropomorphic logic that does not attend to many of the dominant political ideologies of the twentieth century, such as capitalism and communism. While Shi’a Islam, for instance, has quite obviously informed the creation of political institutions in the Islamic Republic, Shi’a Islam is not actually a political institution in any real empirical sense in that it can act independently of the bureaucratic and political elites that occupy its institutions. As Migdal rightly suggests, state institutions are run by the regimes and elite actors that command them, and since ideology—even ones that are seemingly hegemonic in their capacity to pattern a common frame over the process of institution building—are still a set of socially constructed beliefs that are particularly malleable and open to change through their ongoing engagement with society. Imputing to Islam an immutable orthodoxy is therefore redolent of the type of anthropomorphic theorizing that Migdal regards as too characteristic of our depictions of authoritarian institutions in the so-called “third world.” As Migdal suggested, a transformative state with a hegemonic ideology must still contest with the basic fact that its institutions are “subject to the pushes and pulls in society’s arenas that can change the line between it and other social forces.”

Although state ideology is espoused, tangibly manifested and disseminated by regime institutions, the process of its

instrumentalism does not take place in a social, political or economic vacuum in which contentious factional and class politics does not both strengthen and weaken such affinities even in the short, much less long term.

From the standpoint of Iran’s experience as post-revolutionary state, the suggestion that Shi’a Islam (or Islam in general) is an atypically strong safeguard against the capacity of democracy to penetrate the state is itself reminiscent of the Orientalist discourses of the Middle East’s “enduring authoritarian exceptionalism” prior to the Arab Spring. Such essentialism and naturalism—indeed ideological anthropomorphism—fails to reflect the basic empirical fact that animates the theoretical reasoning of this dissertation: Authoritarian elites were ultimately unable to institutionally consummate their ideological vision of the state in a political party due to the state’s endemic factionalism. As I have suggested, postrevolutionary factionalism is a direct consequence of society’s prerevolutionary coalitional push to oust the Pahlavi monarchy from power. Portrayals of Islam’s unnerving capacity to more effectively influence the staying power and authoritarian nature of the Iranian state is therefore not only contradicted by both prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary contentious politics, but is further challenged by the stark reality that the ideological dichotomy at the heart of the Islamic Republic is represented by both religious as well as republican philosophy. Where scholars of Iran and theorists following in the footsteps of Migdal are most likely to converge is around the basic fact that Shi’a ideology was just one of many ideological influences during the prerevolutionary struggle. Like almost all revolutions in world history, that one dominant prerevolutionary social force was able to muster the necessary political support to become the de facto ideology of the state in no ways detracts from the fact that the architecture of the state is as evocative of its Islamic influences as it is redolent of its republican ones.
Sociological studies and political science analyses of the Iranian revolution have overwhelmingly concurred with such a conception of ideology. For instance, whereas Marxist and Gramscian theories of ideology situate it as just one frame in the broader terrain of contentious class politics, organizational models also conceptualize ideology as just one factor, albeit within the institutional context of political competition and the struggle for power. Echoing the organizational perspective, Charles Tilly suggested revolutionary ideology is an informative and potentially historically significant causal force only insofar as it demonstrates why certain groups draw on it when “they are refused access to power.” From the standpoint of Iranian history, Keddie has been one of the leading proponents of the organizational model. She argued that fundamental changes in Shi’a doctrine in the late eighteenth century—such as the view that the religious community should have a greater role in interpreting codified state law—gave the Shi’a Ulema a level of historical justification for intervening in matters that were typically the purview of the state. This also served as basis for the subsequent rise in Shi’a institutional power within in Iran, which increasingly became autonomous from the state. According to Keddie, this laid the groundwork for privileging the role of Shi’a epistemology during the penultimate interregnum between the mobilizational challenge against the monarchy and its ensuing collapse. In short, while Shi’a ideology served as a historically distinct influence, it was not necessarily the primary or even the most important one. In concert with a slew of other contemporaneous historical forces as well as more contemporary ones—such as the general development of a broad-based opposition culture against the shah’s personalistic and arbitrary rule—ideology was a conjunctural and historical force that relayed preexisting mass economic and political disaffection from the regime.

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70 Przeworski (1980) is a good example of a Gramscian perspective on ideology and its interface with contentious class politics.
71 Tilly (1978): 203.
Said Arjomand has further challenged the notion that we can substantively distinguish between religious and non-religious ideologies by arguing they are essentially unmistakable from each other. “Nontheistic political religions of the twentieth century” such as communism and fascism, according to Arjomand, are virtually indistinguishable from their more theistic counterparts in terms of their mass appeal to instrumentalize behavior.\(^{72}\) Even Marxism’s putatively nontheistic origins become dubious if one considers its resemblance to Judeo-Christian theism and Marx’s own religious upbringing. This becomes all the more interesting if one considers the case of Ali Shariati. Shariati combined nontheistic ideologies associated with anticolonial Third-Worldism, Iranian nationalism, and Gramscian Marxism and married them theistic ideas grounded in Shia-Islamic utopianism to craft a radically instrumentalist liberation theology that called on the masses to mobilize against western powers and their clientelist patrons. In the context of Iran, Shariati’s primary antagonist was quite obviously the Pahlavi monarchy and the shah. His seemingly atypical synthesis of theistic and nontheistic ideologies becomes far more typical if one considers how, according to Eric Hobsbawm, they both rely on utopian commitments among their believers to bring about total societal change.\(^{73}\)

Ideology can therefore be viewed as a discursive means to articulate pent-up demands for political change.\(^{74}\) Viewing ideology in more instrumental terms has the unintended consequence of privileging it as both the means \textit{and} the ends of the revolutionary struggle by robbing all other social forces of their agency and speciously transferring it to the Shi’a clerical elite. Perhaps more importantly, the fundamentally democratic impulses of Iranian society reflect the basic logic stated at the outset of this dissertation: prerevolutionary coalitions morphed into postrevolutionary factions. The inability of the dominant ideological elite to institutionalize the

\(^{72}\) Arjomand (1993):52.  
\(^{73}\) Hobsbawm (1959).  
\(^{74}\) Moaddel (1992).
very state body that most evocatively expresses clerical rule and its putative hegemony—a ruling party—most severely challenges any empirical basis for theorizing the supposed primacy of ideology over institutions. Indeed, far from countenancing the construction of a ruling party, the clerical elite was forced to stomach its destruction due to endemic ideological conflict. Like Arjomand, I therefore see no fundamental ideological divergence between theistic and nontheistic political perspectives. Moreover, like Tilly, Skocpol and Migdal, I see the impact of ideology as being most potent in informing the basic political principles that lead to the formation of state institutions. And finally, like Mansoor Moaddel, I see ideology as an “episodic discourse” that is most instrumental during a “particular historical period,” which in the case of Iran was the era of postrevolutionary state formation and the subsequent institutionalization of clerical rule.

To summarize the primary position of this present study, ideology “most critically… affects factionalization”75 in the Islamic Republic and served as a non-material incentive during episodes of “high-risk activism and violent challenges to secular authority”76 that occasioned the mobilizational run-up to the toppling of the Pahlavi state. For specialists of comparative historical analysis steeped in the study of revolution and post authoritarian institution building, one of the central problems with conferring causal status to ideology is its inherent resistance to “falsification”77 and its stubborn proclivity to be ubiquitously applied as a of black box of causality. Similar to any other ideological strain of both theistic and nontheistic varieties, Islam carries with it a multiplicity of meanings that remains irreducible to an ossified and unchanging ideological doctrine. The post-revolutionary factionalization of the Iranian state continues to

77 Ibid.
reflect the underlying premise that girds together the basic political premise of this dissertation: *postrevolutionary elite politics is an unencumbered reflection of prerevolutionary mass politics.*

While we might plausibly conceptualize ideology as a sort of proto-institutional glue that can act as a substitute for preserving elite collective action during the short-term in the absence of an overarching nationalist ideology, even patronage ultimately assumes greater explanatory power over the long-term due to the atrophying of ideological commitments and the inevitable death of the revolution’s leaders.\(^7^8\) Thus, while ideology played an indispensable role during the early stages of regime formation—particularly its capacity to provide organizational coherence to elite collective action and to raise the institutional profile of Islam as one of the two ideological loci of the state’s infrastructural and thus institutional power, hyper-factionalism and the specter of mass political unrest has gradually replaced identity politics as the basic building block of normal institutional politics in the Islamic Republic.

**Party Contingency**

Theories of state formation that posit ruling parties as the ultimate institution of authoritarian rule are not simply the answer to the principle question of what state organs best preserve elite collective action in authoritarian regimes, they mostly *are the explanation.* In a useful update to Huntington, however, Benjamin Smith suggests authoritarian regimes will only create ruling parties under two conditions: when faced with a highly mobilized mass movement, or when confronted by well-organized oppositional elites.\(^7^9\) In short, an organized opposition from above or below constitutes an unmanageable threat to authoritarian rule. Again, much like Huntington, Smith sees post-authoritarian institution building as being fundamentally compelled by elite and popular threat perceptions. Although these factors are difficult to measure, both in terms of the

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\(^7^8\) Levitsky and Way (2013):13 make a particularly compelling empirical argument in this respect.  
\(^7^9\) Smith (2002).
organizational strength of elites or the oppositional intensity of mass movements, social revolutions by definition coalesce both of these forces into a broad-based mobilizational coalition. An argument could undoubtedly be advanced that although elite opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy was widespread, once the shah was overthrown and other factions were purged, the potential menace of a viable opposition had been eliminated. This dynamic might have prevailed throughout the war interregnum with Iraq, when some knowledgeable observers of Iran portrayed it as more totalitarian than authoritarian\(^80\), and such an argument might even hold water up until 1997, but not after. Given that 1997 was the bellwether year for reformist politics in Iran, ushering in earnest the current era of contentious factional politics, party construction should have be an almost axiomatic response to high-intensity elite factionalism. Yet it was not. Repeated episodes of mass protest, moreover, such as those triggered by the Green Movement in 2009, should have logically compelled the state to bridle mass mobilization and challenges posed by political elites such as Mir Hossein Mousavi. As the standard-bearer of Iran’s Green Movement during the 2009 presidential elections, Mousavi’s electoral position and his capacity to leverage mass politics into broader elite support for fundamental institutional change should have clearly signaled the endemic risk posed by endemic. Yet it did not. Again, Iran challenges historical experience and theoretical odds.

In contrast to Smith, I argue elite opposition in Iran \textit{is} tantamount to mass opposition: Opposition along one line necessarily abets opposition along the other. I suggest political institutions and factions are reflections of historically based social coalitions. In revolutionary regimes founded on ideologically driven violent struggle, mass participation and opposition is by definition an endemic condition of contentious politics. While the logic of Smith’s argument is helpful in explaining why the Pahlavi monarchy, or the shah, created a ruling party, it is of less

\(^{80}\) Chehabi (2001).
in help in explaining why the Islamic Republic ultimately did not. But perhaps most importantly, Smith’s premise rests on a specific temporal context: He argues that only new authoritarian regimes will create parties under specific oppositional dynamics, he says nothing of already established ones. Thus, his premise assumes only recently minted autocrats respond to organized threats, not long established incumbents that might be responding to competition from other political coalitions during the period of mobilization before the onset of authoritarian rule. But as I have argued, factions provided a more stable basis for countenancing political competition because they reflect the very social coalitions that brought the regime into existence. By comparison, parties would wanton serve to interrupt the discrete process of coalition building that had already succeeded in ousting the shah. New party institutions would subsequently serve to increase unpredictability by suspending long established methods for cultivating elite collective action. Thus, it was paradoxically the very strength of preexisting oppositional forces that nipped the institutional bud of party construction, not their weakness. If Iran had not been forged from the rubble of social revolution, making oppositional strength from below and above considerably weaker, then the risks associated with institutionalizing parties would be a far less tricky proposition. In line with my broader argument, I thus suggest it was the relative robustness of oppositional forces, not their comparative weakness, which fostered perceptions of unmanageable threat under traditional forms of political institutionalization, to wit, party construction.

While both Smith and Huntington offer persuasive arguments for ruling party strength in regimes where such institutions tend to increase long-term prospects for authoritarian durability, the most basic challenge Iran presents to such long-standing consensus is that it not only has no ruling party, but the state was forced to abolish the only party institution in the history of the
Islamic Republic in 1987. Due to incessant factional conflict and the party’s ultimate incapacity to bridle such an acute threat to elite collective action, Iranian electoral politics demonstrates the plausibility of convoking competitive elections amid the absence parties at all and the viability of doing so amidst endemic elite factionalism.

Brownlee similarly offers a seemingly convincing explanation of how authoritarian regimes are able to bridle pervasive elite conflict and sustain elite collective action despite the specter of genuinely competitive mass elections. In a comparative study of four authoritarian countries, one of which is the Islamic Republic, Brownlee suggests ala Huntington that party institutions are the fundamental building blocks of authoritarian political coalitions. As such, he argues that differences in democratic outcomes and authoritarian durability can be attributed to the causal role of parties. In cases where robust ruling parties exist to order mass politics and organize elite collective action, the outcome is authoritarian durability. Where ruling parties are absent, as in Iran, theoretical expectation suggests authoritarian debility. Yet again, however, Iran most dramatically defies theoretical expectation. Brownlee’s otherwise nuanced study is falsified and surpassingly disproven by his own theory. On the one hand, he suggests that “regimes without party institutions for managing their coalitions are vulnerable to being destabilized,” while on the other, “those that rule though parties can reap prolonged dominance.” Yet given that Iran has neither a party system to convoke elections nor has it been fundamentally destabilized by their absence, Brownlee’s notion of ruling party strength fails to engender the empirical validity necessary to substantiate his basic institutional premise. Perhaps more damning is not simply that Iran exists as his case of “weak” case of authoritarianism, but that Egypt exists as his “strong” one. Yet divergence in political outcomes indicates precisely the opposite of what Brownlee projects: Iran as the strong state despite party institutions and Egypt as the weak state in spite of

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party institutions. Much like the Failed States Index and the Global Forecast, Brownlee used ruling parties to make political projections regarding the robustness of authoritarian rule, even as empirical events in the Arab world gradually contradicted the theoretical plausibility of such an argument. Again, while parties have doubtlessly contributed to authoritarian durability and factionalism has often augured poorly for it, such consensus fails to offer an account for how the inverse of this typical trend has occasioned the opposite dynamic in Iran: non-party authoritarian persistence.

The byzantine and institutionally balkanized structure of the Islamic Republic has heretofore precluded proper conceptualization. The glaring absence of the primary administrative force that girds most institutional analysis of authoritarian regimes—political parties—has only lapsed scholarly interest in Iran as a site for theory construction. This is perhaps why, on the one hand, Iranian area studies specialists have spilt much ink dedicated to the study of enduring authoritarianism while, on the other hand, leading scholars of authoritarianism have conveyed little interest in Iran as a vehicle for theory refinement. I suggest that political institutions in the Islamic Republic can be capably portrayed as historical manifestations of the type of revolutionary conflict that preceded the establishment of authoritarian rule. It bears repeating: strong prerevolutionary coalitions evolved into strong postrevolutionary factions. Noncontrovertially, I see the atomization of the Iranian state and its division of labor between republican and religious institutions as reflecting the ideological dichotomy at the heart of contentious politics in the Islamic Republic. Perhaps more controversially, however, I submit that the state’s revolutionary institutions are unfettered reflections of the social coalitions that brought them into existence, which in turn represent the type of contentious politics that heralded the establishment of authoritarian rule—social revolution. Thus, endemic coalitional politics
prior to the revolution produced endemic competitive factionalism after it. The point to be made, contra Huntington, is not whether the process of state formation leads to parties. In terms of elite collective action, the defining trait of a party—beyond institutionalized political competition—is that it centralizes political, but not necessarily social support, for the regime. Yet factions are widely seen as being anathema to this because they lack institutionalization, potentially giving free rein to elites to challenge the state directly through the ballot box, or by dually drawing the masses into the streets. But I define this institutional dynamic more broadly, and see factionalism both as a reflection of state weakness and strength in the Islamic Republic: elites inexorably neither countenanced the construction of a political party, but capably prepared for such an outcome. The point, I argue, is not necessarily incorporation strategies that may or may not lead to the construction of a party, but how do elites achieve and consummate elite collective action in their absence? This question has of yet not been sufficiently theorized in the context of Iran. Given that parties in authoritarian regimes rarely compel or extract extensive social support unless patronage is deployed or coercion is applied, they are limited in terms of their ability to penetrate civil society, or what scholars such as Michael Mann have termed infrastructural power. In competitive authoritarian regimes borne of revolutionary social conflict, moreover, political parties in and of themselves would therefore lack the infrastructural capacity to compel, much less freely garner, genuine popular support. Thus, even the presence of a political party would not account for how the regime is able to generate elite collective action among its social base and thus attract the social support it does enjoy. As surely as the Arab Spring demonstrated the ineffectiveness of parties during moments of crisis, the Islamic Republic serves to reflect how their absence has meant little to authoritarian stability during periods of crises or relative calm. Without significant support from the masses abetting state capacity to compel political
support through patronage and other non-remunerative mechanisms, authoritarian regimes will ultimately find themselves susceptible to recurrent political crises.

Revolutionary regimes are better equipped to build state structures anew from the raw material that accompanies total state collapse. Social revolutions best typify this phenomenon, since they not only breakdown the institutional legacies of the previous regime, but they eradicate the social structures they were built upon. This permits the crafting of a new social compact replete with new elite attitudes regarding shared perceptions of contentious politics. But it also evokes a palpable shift in attitudes about shared perceptions of threat: what were erstwhile factional allies during the revolution are now recalcitrant reformers. Dan Slater refers to this phenomenon as an “attitudinal” shift.82 This shift accompanies authoritarian collapse wherever it is occasioned, but I argue it most severely felt during revolutionary upheavals: Perceptions of threat are at their highest when social and political conflict is pervasive. Because social revolutions cumulate otherwise disparate factional cleavages into a coalitional whole, they represent what I see as a more robust mechanism for stabilizing elite collective action: The shared pursuit of protection during periods of insecurity, and the presence of strong social and political networks that facilitate it are more cross-cutting than ruling parties. If any of the standard accounts of authoritarian stability were correct, then the Islamic Republic should have long ago experienced authoritarian breakdown. Rival explanations have helped scholars apprehend stability in party based countries, but they cannot capture how patterns of postrevolutionary political development failed to produce parties at all. Authoritarian parties and theories of state formation are thus not simply the answer to the principle question of what institutions best preserve elite collective action in authoritarian regimes, they mostly are the explanation.

Factions and Ruling Parties

The search for the cohesion of the ruling elite, as Dan Slater has noted, “is as elusive as it is elemental.” Slater’s statement evocatively captures the fundamental dilemma facing all authoritarian regimes: how is factionalism overcome and elite collective action achieved? Yet, Slater also identifies what is perhaps one of the most overlooked empirical phenomena in the authoritarian world: “In most places and under most circumstances, elite politics is rife with factionalism and parochialism.” How then do authoritarian regimes solve the perennial problem of factionalism? Given the perplexingly ubiquitous presence of factionalism throughout the authoritarian world, we should reasonably expect to see increased levels of regime instability. Yet we do not. While factionalism may indeed be rife, why are most authoritarian regimes not riven by it?

Another way of posing this problem is to analytically precise the specific institutional mechanisms that have historically mitigated the effects of factionalism. Existing theoretical and empirical literature offers one primary argument: ruling parties. While at first glance it might seem implausible that a single causal variable could account for the dramatic disparity in elite collective action throughout the authoritarian world, the theoretical currency of party construction is perhaps one of the more robust generalizations to emerge in the study of enduring authoritarianism. Indeed, the standard account of elite collective action suggests political parties are the sin qua non of elite collective action (and thus authoritarian durability); they exert a statistically significant (and empirically indisputable) influence on the stability of authoritarian states while concomitantly increasing their aggregate lifespans. Both in terms of cross-national

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84 Ibid.
85 Slater (2010), reiterated in Slater (2011).
86 Of course, this is in terms of how authoritarian regimes solve problems of elite collective action, and more specifically, factionalism.
quantitative studies and comparative historical analysis, ruling parties are widely heralded as
inexorably facilitating the cohesion of the ruling elite and therefore enjoy almost universal
acceptance as quintessential institutions of authoritarian rule.87

In so far as specialists have reached anything nearing scholarly consensus as to the capacity of
ruling parties to generate elite cohesion, they have demonstrated an equal—if not more robust—
commitment to the inverse of this proposition: whereas ruling parties strengthen authoritarian
regimes, factionalism weakens them by eroding elite cohesion. In the absence of parties,
authoritarian regimes are considered to be especially ill suited to tackle the many maladies that
threaten elite collective action, especially factionalism. In particular, party-based rule performs a
number of critical functions for authoritarian incumbents. Among sundry others, ruling parties
temper factional conflict, act as a channel for the effective distribution of patronage, they
incentivize long-term loyalty to the regime (thus bridling elite ambition), they provide a stable
basis for career advancement for political elites, allow the regime to monitor opposition
challenges from above and below, and parties establish an institutional basis for convoking
electoral competition and safely countenancing relatively regular patterns of popular
representation. In short, parties ensure that periodic upswings in political instability are
manageable and predictable, making contentious politics less menacing for authoritarian
incumbents. Parties thus play a vital role for authoritarian rulers by facilitating the
institutionalization of elite collective action.

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, however, scholars often emphasize different
institutional mechanisms of parties. Whereas some scholars highlight their electoral function—
such as parties’ capacity to produce a loyal mass following by permitting the state to safely

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87 One of the more hotly contested debates of authoritarian breakdown pits the relative significance of elite and
institutional forces against the capacity of society to foment regime collapse. This is a broader subset of the larger
debate between so-called rational-choice and institutional theorists versus bottom-up theories of political change.
convoke and countenance the presence of “competitive” elections—others see parties as necessary for establishing political legitimacy and bridling elite ambition. By preventing tempering elite factionalism, which has long been viewed as the greatest threat to elite collective action. Still, others regard institutions as being insufficient to garner the loyalty of the broad range of political elites. “Inert invisible structures do not make democracies or dictatorships. People do,” asserts Michael McFaul. If, as McFaul suggests, institutions don’t matter, why would an authoritarian ruler willingly abet the construction of a ruling party and convoke elections without a reasonable assurance that it would benefit him in some way? And why would an incumbent leader create a ruling party and convoke elections only to fall prey to the very predatory state he was attempting to create? On the one hand, given that party-based elections present an alternative path to power for opposition candidates, they pose a serious and utterly avoidable vulnerability to incumbent autocrats. Indeed, as erstwhile autocrats in Taiwan, Indonesia and elsewhere have discovered, convoking party-based elections brings with it the all too real prospect of electoral defeat. On the other hand, authoritarian rulers do not willingly abet the prospect of their own demise. This implies a paradox. If elections are equal risk and reward, why would any authoritarian ruler voluntarily abide the presence of parties and the real possibility of their own defeat?

Yet empirical evidence strongly suggests they are not equal. Why? The common thread that entwines much of the accumulated empirical wisdom about ruling parties is the idea of patronage and material incentives. If regimes do not have an institutionalized basis for distributing patronage and allocating material benefits, then authoritarian rulers run the risk of turning potential allies into ambivalent oppositionists. Thus, authoritarian rulers can be reasonably certain that if they institutionalize parties, they will have established the basis for
unfettered rule by constructing an effective network for distributing patronage and other perquisites of power. Aspiring autocrats will thus remain loyal allies because their material preferences rest with the regime, not the opposition.

Yet, while this perspective tells us why authoritarian rulers will create parties (to avoid factionalism), it suffers from a key liability, for it assumes that persistent factional conflict is always irreconcilable with authoritarianism. The logic of factionalism has provided valuable theoretical insights into how many authoritarian regimes are strengthened by party rule, but it tells us little about how authoritarian durability is achieved in the absence of parties, or how authoritarian rule can continue relatively unabated despite the presence of factionalism.

But perhaps more importantly, it only tells us what incumbent authoritarian leaders *often do during the course of authoritarian rule* (create parties), *not what aspiring autocrats might do during the establishment of authoritarian rule*. Indeed, existing theories presume that incumbent leaders create institutions of authoritarian rule, such as ruling parties, on an ad hoc basis well after they have already captured the reins of power. But this is not always the case. Whereas much of the existing literature traces mechanisms of durability to the presence of parties, the Islamic Republic of Iran presents a rare opportunity to gain valuable analytic insight into how factionalism can sustain authoritarian rule as much as it is thought to weaken it. By offering an argument for how authoritarian rule can be beset by factionalism while at the same time demonstrating how it can remain remarkably stable, this dissertation aims to gain analytic insight and leverage over the failure of theoretical expectation to fully illuminate recent empirical observation of ruling party weakness in the Middle East.

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88 Slater (2003) asks a somewhat similar question in his illuminating study of Malaysia. But whereas he is concerned with how an authoritarian ruler might “personalize power in the face of powerful preexisting institutions,” I am more concerned with how preexisting factions might construct an institutional architecture from scratch that needn’t rely on political parties for solving problems of elite collective action.
Methodological and Theoretical Issues

The periodization of Iranian politics into post and prerevolutionary eras is natural from the standpoint of comparative historical studies that methodologically deal with Iran as a single, within-the-case study. The primary purpose of this present study is not to offer a novel, revisionist account of prerevolutionary or even postrevolutionary politics. Instead, it is to offer a theoretical corrective to the dominant political paradigm that treats party institutions as the basic building block of authoritarian institutions writ large, and thus authoritarian durability. I have designed this dissertation around the basic empirical observation that regimes founded upon dominant ruling parties have increasingly found themselves mired in chronic political crises, whereas a country like Iran that has no party system at all has paradoxically persisted in spite of the presence of endemic elite factionalism—which is considered to be as antithetical to authoritarian durability as party’s are thought to be the primary causal force precipitating it. Historical examples such as the collapse of dominant single-party regimes in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab uprisings further serve to leverage the counterintuitive expectations that I increasingly contend are not so counterintuitive. The counterfactual predictions rendered by forecast practitioners wielding independent variables such as elite factionalism further challenge the basic theoretical premise under scrutiny in this dissertation. Thus, contra theories of path dependence in comparative historical analysis or the predictive ends inherent in political forecasting, I see causal analysis in terms of path contingence and not path dependence. Although to some the difference might seem negligible or even semantic, processes that seemingly yield stable patterns of path dependence still carry with them an unmistakable patina of predictive logic that occasions the very epistemological thinking this dissertation aims to deconstruct. As Nevzat Soguk has reminded me, the type of regimented thinking that produced
such theoretical invariance is unfortunately still at the forefront of comparative historical analysis, which might sometimes better be termed as comparative causal analysis.

To the extent that forecasting attempts to prognosticate future political outcomes based on the probabilistic odds generated by quantitative analysis, this dissertation aims to scrutinize the lackluster empirical support attendant in many extant forecasts that wield independent variables, such as factionalism, to predict momentous political change. The teleological ends implicit in such grand level theorizing has ostensibly not only been contradicted by recent political events forecast practitioners have failed to anticipate, but is increasingly at odds with qualitative research that comparative historical analysis aims to explain retrospectively.

For example, while the logic of party-led rule has made a great deal of sense in explaining authoritarian durability, it has been less helpful in explaining cases where authoritarian persistence is achieved in the absence of parties at all. As a result, and as my analysis has shown, cross-national quantitative studies and practitioners of political forecasting have increasingly produced counterfactual predictions about the continued durability of Middle East authoritarianism. Seeing the region through the lens of elites and institutions, most scholars focused on how the absence of Middle East social movements strengthened authoritarianism, barely considering the fact that their emergence might ultimately weaken it. Guided by the dominant paradigm in the democratization literature that treated authoritarian party institutions as the leading factor underpinning authoritarian strength, this dissertation acts as much as a sort of stress test on their predictive ambitions and causal claims as it does as an effort in theoretical generation. The literature on global authoritarianism has profited disproportionately from the experience of Middle Eastern countries, but it is has yet to find meaningful expression in that literature. And given that this literature increasingly justified its explanatory logic as being
capably buttressed by combining “in-depth knowledge of the region, on the one hand, with systematic use of universal theoretical tools from the political science literature, on the other hand,” such theoretical refinement has of yet not been sufficiently articulated from the point of view of countries in the region. Very briefly, two dominant ‘truisms’ in particular have merited special consideration as causes for the Middle East’s exceptionalism. First was the glaring absence of regional social movements across the region. The relative scarcity of mass protest seemed to signal a widespread popular diffidence about democracy, allowing incumbent autocrats to rule with virtual impunity in the absence of any organized public challenge. The second reason tapped into pervasive beliefs about the role of the state in the Middle East, particularly the role of authoritarian institutions in prolonging undemocratic rule and causal role of unbridled factionalism in hastening its demise. Yet as Iran and countries during the Arab Spring have demonstrated, parties are neither congenitally predetermined to prolong enhance authoritarian durability, nor is their absence a looming signpost of their inexorable decay.

That theoretical preferences tend to drive methodological choices would come as no surprise to scholars of democratization, where rivalrous academic debates among rational-choice, institutional and post-structural theories of political change continue to determine methodological selection. While scholars who favor rational-choice or voluntarist accounts of political change, for instance, are more likely to adopt cross-national statistical research as their benchmark methodology, specialists trained in institutional analysis and those from traditions that emphasize area specific knowledge are far more inclined to utilize comparative historical methodologies based on qualitative research programs. Differences in methodological selection also tend to reflect broader epistemological beliefs about the role of theorizing in disciplinary

90 The inverse is also true. Metholdogical
91 Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003).
social science. For example, while early theories of democratization are more likely to utilize quantitative methods that prioritize the role of political elites as the agents of historical change, it has behooved comparative historical scholars—particularly those studying processes of democratization prompted by revolutionary upheaval—to examine the way in which social forces have occasioned momentous political change.

The greatest area of divergence between area specialists and general theorists are their inclinations to explain or predict, respectively. Middle East specialists draw causal inferences based on deep empirical study of specific countries in order to explain, for instance, why the region appeared to be inordinately authoritarian. By comparison, the ambition of any forecast or quantitative study is to leverage social science explanations to render parsimonious predictions. But the fundamental area of convergence among forecast practitioners and qualitative and quantitative social scientists has been in their collective utilization of the same theoretical variables to explain or predict why some countries have proven to be so politically durable whereas others have not. Elite factionalism serves to highlight one of the more conspicuous examples of this scholarly predilection.

My analysis, however, if firmly grounded in the tradition of interpretive historical analysis and basic empirical observation that is less reliant on generating a new theoretical paradigm than it is with deconstructing the very idea of paradigms. The study of democratization, perhaps more than any subfield specialization in comparative politics, has reflected this inclination towards “paradigmatic” thinking. One need only look at the rise of the so-called “transition paradigm,” which was based on elite-centered theories of democracy, and its equally precipitous fall, largely based on bottom-up theories of social mobilization. The burgeoning field of contentious politics,

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92 By early I mean the third-wave of democratization, which began in 1974, and which found its initial theoretical steel with O’Donnell and Schmitter in the mid-1980s.
initially a product of political sociology and the study of social movements—has also quickly
gained an interdisciplinary following due to empirical overlap with political science.

A common criticism among general comparative political theorists is that single-case studies
lack a sufficiently large sample size to generate generalizable theoretical claims. But it has been
well established that within-the-case studies that exhibit a sufficiently elongated time horizon on
the dependent variable—in the case of this dissertation, authoritarian durability—are able to
overcome methodological problems associated with a single case. Yet the prerogatives of
inductive analysis still require the particularistic demands of a single case study to demonstrate
generalizability, but this is only the case where a study’s theoretical objectives seek external
validity. In the case of this dissertation, the aims are much more modest and seek to account for
the internal theoretical invalidity of ruling party strength while similarly accounting for the
potential theoretical validity of factionalism as a prospective independent variable that does not
invariantly herald authoritarian breakdown. Thus, my basic methodological aim is to amend
existing theory and not necessarily offer an exportable and generalizable account that is
applicable across time and space. Whereas the former is the explicit purpose of this study, I will
leave the implications of the latter to comparative historical scholars for later assessment.

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93 Keshavarzian (2007).
Chapter 2

Elite Factionalism

I. Introduction

Iranian area studies specialists have spilled much ink dedicated to the study of factionalism, but leading scholars of authoritarianism have demonstrated little interest in Iran as a vehicle for theory refinement. This is surprising, given the multitude of empirical and theoretical problems Iran poses for current theories of authoritarian durability—which would presumably present scholars with an attractive case study that would allow them to parlay the regime’s defiance of empirical expectation to improve our theories of state building. On the other hand, area studies specialists—particularly those studying the Middle East and especially Iran—have spent precious little time attempting to bring Iran into the comparative study of authoritarian durability. Instead, the tendency has been to express support for the view that Iran remains unique among authoritarian countries because of the peculiar way that parties seemed to imperil authoritarian rule and the contradictory way that factionalism seemed to paradoxically strengthen it. Placed in a theoretical and conceptual context, however, it becomes increasingly clear that many of the factors that area studies scholars claim are unique to Iran are in fact quite common among authoritarian regimes. As I posit, postrevolutionary states are especially well equipped to deal with problems of political under-institutionalization because the prerevolutionary social coalitions that brought such regimes into existence continued to exert considerable influence over postrevolutionary patterns of regime formation. In short, contentious revolutionary politics

94 This is especially true with respect to Iran.
had a lasting impact on postrevolutionary coalition building.\textsuperscript{95} I thus argue—in line with most theoretically informed scholarship on Iran\textsuperscript{96}—that the institutional pattern of authoritarian rule that promotes longevity in Iran, while certainly idiosyncratic, is in no way exceptional.

What is perhaps most surprising about the study of authoritarian factionalism—and where Iran gains the most analytic leverage as a counterintuitive case—is the tendency among scholars of comparative politics and practitioners of political forecasting to use factionalism as an invariant cause of authoritarian collapse. Because of this explanatory and predictive inclination, a puzzling paradox has continued to bedevil social science expectations of authoritarian endurance. If deep-rooted factionalism erodes what Michael Mann calls the “despotic power” of the state\textsuperscript{97}—defined as the capacity of incumbents to unilaterally render decisions in the absence of deliberation with other institutions—how do we square the intuitive logic of factionalism with the empirically counterintuitive persistence of authoritarianism in Iran and elsewhere.

A fundamental rethinking about our normative assumptions and theoretical expectations regarding the way factionalism effects authoritarianism is thus called for. Scholars have been effective at empirically describing the nuances of factionalism in Iran, but they have been far less likely to theorize how Iranian factionalism challenges reigning theoretical orthodoxy within the comparative study of authoritarian institutions and specifically ruling political parties. As an exercise primarily in theory refinement, this chapter attempts to review and situate how theories of factionalism came to enjoy such prominence and prestige throughout disciplinary social science as one of the greatest political forces precipitating democratic transition.

\textsuperscript{95} Keshavarzian (2005) has perhaps the most nuanced theoretical treatment of the effects of Iran’s fractured institutional makeup.

\textsuperscript{96} Mohseni’s (2012) comparative and theoretically informative study of “guardian regimes” is particularly illuminating.

\textsuperscript{97} Slater (2003).
Forecasting Strength, Predicting Weakness

The initial epistemological ambition of the social sciences was predictive. It is therefore unsurprising that identifying portents of momentous political change should be attractive to both practitioners of forecasting and scholars of politics. Writing in the nineteenth century, Comte described sociology as a kind of ‘social physics’ whose principle focus should be “the explanation of the past, so as to deduce from it the future.”98 Charles Tilly described Comte’s positivism as a kind of “metahistory” that sought to “discern a temporal pattern in all human experience.”99 Yet, his vision failed to galvanize many of his contemporaries, particularly leading luminaries such as Durkheim. Coupled with the failure of social science to predict any of the watershed historical events of the early twentieth century, which proved to be a “serious embarrassment”, prediction retreated from the scholarly ethos as a serious mode of academic enquiry.100 If sociology was increasingly concerned with the ‘systematic study of the present,’ then the intellectual task of creating a predictive discipline would be picked up by political science.101 But it would not be until the mid-twentieth century when the emergence of the ‘behavioral revolution’ repurposed some of the logic behind Comtean positivism to establish anew a research program dedicated to forecasting and predicting the emergence of political phenomena. As a result, political science picked up where sociology had left off, shouldering the intellectual task of creating a predictive social science. In comparative politics, modernization theory—an early Orientalist forerunner to more modern notions of Middle East exceptionalism— was routinely posited as an independent variable to explain with predictive accuracy the failure of the global South to develop along the same democratic trajectory of its

98 Comte [1851] 1875: 118.
101 Tilly (1988): 704. Quite obviously, disciplinary economics is a more predictive ‘science’— both methodologically and epistemologically speaking— than its political science or sociological counterparts.
Northern counterparts. Such skepticism of democracy in developing countries was pregnant with latent assumptions that saw an underlying normative orientation that redounded to authoritarian rule.

This bout of seeming pessimism was for some observers an opportunity to divine in a very real sense the dearth of Middle East democracy. Theoretically, most of these studies increasingly abided by a similar yet reduced form of Comtean positivism that social science epistemological convictions should be more explanatory, not necessarily predictive. Others did not remain as steadfast in these new normative commitments. Instead, certain methodological preferences, such as cross-national quantitative analysis, have regimented forecasting and social science prediction as useful conflict heuristic for anticipating events of large-scale political instability across the globe.

The original empirical question that political science was most interested in answering vis-à-vis forecasting was democratization. Unsurprisingly, the study of democratization in political science became imbued with normative assumptions regarding the necessity of imparting the democratic the ideals of the west—as Gabriel Almond suggested—“uncouth and exotic systems of the areas outside western Europe.”

Uncoincidentally, these preferences served as the underlying logic of modernization theory, which, as previously mentioned, was broadly defined by beliefs about democratization that were grounded in cultural ideas that would today be anathema to most scholars. Established in an age of authoritarianism, modernization theory was thus not only the dominant paradigm of democratization, it was also a useful heuristic device to forecast its future and its potential suitability in “uncouth” areas of the world. Nevertheless and as a result of such openly Orientalist assumptions regarding the “uncouthness” and unsuitability of democracy in much of the global South, social science’s enduring faith in prediction began to

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wane, where it increasingly became associated with crass positivism and reductive rationalism.\textsuperscript{103}

Yet forecasting continues to enjoy pride of place within certain corners of disciplinary social science, where phenomena such as ‘state failure’ and economic downturn in the global South are seen as the greatest menace threatening international security in the global North.\textsuperscript{104} Despite the globalization of forecasting methods and the creation of institutional hubs dedicated to it, many of the most dynamic processes of globalization continue to be especially impervious to prediction and even explanation.

To cite but one illustrative example that encapsulates the theoretical and empirical puzzle that concerns this dissertation, consider the forecast rendered by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) just before the Islamic Revolution in Iran. As late as January 1977, President Jimmy Carter was openly referring to Iran as an ‘island of stability’ in a region that was otherwise characterized by endemic political volatility. Perhaps more remarkable was the CIA’s internal forecast. Mere months before the shah’s regime collapsed, “ostensibly” ending 2,500 years of uninterrupted monarchial rule, the CIA continued to claim that Iran was ‘not in a revolutionary or even a pre-revolutionary situation’ despite the fact that popular protest was becoming increasingly widespread. Perceiving popular protest to be merely symptomatic of the quotidian politics of antiauthoritarian resistance in the global South, the CIA believed that the Iranian army, in institutional tandem with Iran’s feared repressive apparatus, SAVAK, would quell the burgeoning turmoil.

Yet contrary to conventional wisdom, I would submit that the CIA’s forecast was not necessarily doomed to failure. While my point is not to agree or disagree whether or not such

\textsuperscript{103} Kurzman and Hasnain (2014).
\textsuperscript{104} Bošaš and Jennings (2007), Patrick (2007), Sanín (2007).
revolutionary episodes are amenable to prediction, or even that the CIAs forecast was an example of bad social science. Rather, the point to be made is that there was nothing that fundamentally prevented CIA forecasters from predicting how a particular sequence of events might destabilize or even potentially cripple the Pahlavi monarchy. The extraordinary failure of the CIA’s forecast was more likely a function of fundamental methodological flaws that doomed its predictive power from the outset. Popular protest had already gained a degree of mobilizational momentum by the time its forecast was rendered. But believing that popular protest could be contained and that his elite allies could be assuaged, the CIA’s internal predictions were entirely a product of its enduring belief that the shah’s ability to retain the loyalty of his political appointees, and not the capacity of his regime to guard against a popular uprising, would be the ultimate arbiter of the regime’s survival. In short, it was thought that elite factionalism would be the shah’s downfall, not bubbling social discontent.

But this was not a problem unique to the intelligence apparatus of the United States. Social scientists were equally astonished by the appearance of the revolution, especially those who specialized in Iran. As noted sociologist Charles Kurzman wrote, the Iranian revolution was as “unthinkable” to street demonstrators as it was to intelligence organizations or even the Iranian state’s dreaded internal security—SAVAK. There was a certain taken-for-granted nature to the way protesters, forecasters, and political elites all assumed the inevitable demise of oppositional forces. Institutions of authoritarian rule, most notably the military—in tandem with SAVAK—would forcibly compel demonstrators through the systematic use of violence, inevitably leading to protest demobilization and the eventual defeat of the opposition. They thus did not think disparate and inchoate social movements and uncoordinated street demonstrations would be a causal factor. As Kurzman explained, Iranians themselves—many social scientists among

them—are still unable to even retrospectively explain how the protest wave cascaded into the downfall of monarchial Iran.

What the CIA therefore did perceive to be causal was the regime’s institutional muscle and its ability to endure. This was most obviously gleaned from its forecast that saw the military’s ability to stifle society’s mobilizational putsch as well as its well documented to coopt political elite, which would keep elite collective action intact and ensure that the shah’s elite allies remained loyal. Given that there was no ostensible sign of factional defection in the shah’s regime at the time of the forecast, long the leading harbinger of autocratic stability—such dynamics only seemed to redound to the shah’s favor. Yet as the Arab Spring demonstrated, elite factionalism was as likely to emerge because of democratic mass mobilization as it was considered to be the primary cause of it.

The influence of the Failed States Index or the Global Forecast, both mentioned in chapter one as perhaps the most prominent examples of security devices that failed to forecast the very type of phenomena they were designed to predict, is therefore more than just an example of predictive failure during a particularly watershed moment in recent world history. It demonstrated a much deeper problem with the way that social science continues to view politics in the global South, where problems of factionalism are considered to be anathema to normal politics whereas in the global North they are otherwise deemed to be characteristic of them. The readership of such security devices is enormous and extremely diverse, encompassing a wide array of public policy groups, public and private institutions ranging from NGOs to official state institutions, policymakers and pundits with tangible influence upon the crafting of national policy, including corporations that influence the ability of countries to attract foreign direct investment. More significant for the purpose of this dissertation is the way that such forecasts negatively bear upon
normative perceptions of individual nations, as well as how scholarship problematizes and regiments epistemology about the dynamics of contentious politics in the global South, producing persistent and perennial notions of ‘exceptionalism’ and ‘authoritarian endurance.’\textsuperscript{106} Both the former and latter have been hallmarks of scholarly research since Comte first introduced his vision of positivism to social science.

Pre-Uprising Prediction

A surprising paradox of global political forecasting is that the durability and demise of authoritarian regimes appear to be equally unpredictable. When the much-heralded ‘third-wave’ of democracy spread to almost all regions of the world, scholars and forecast practitioners alike marveled at the dramatic speed with which the global tide of democracy swept away long-standing despotic regimes throughout much of the global South. In the era of ubiquitous authoritarianism, who could have foreseen the golden age of democracy? At the same time, the third-wave presaged for some the ‘end of history’ where authoritarianism writ large would inexorably succumb to the spread of liberal democracy. Predictions about the death of dictatorship proved to be equally premature, however. Despite the ‘globalization of democracy’ and an abiding epistemological conviction to predict its future, our theoretical expectations of authoritarianism’s decline continued to lag behind our empirical observations of its unfortunate endurance.\textsuperscript{107}

Although the collapse of authoritarianism has been shown to be especially impervious to prediction, scholars have increasingly noted that it is also exceptionally resistant to

\textsuperscript{106} I thank Nevzat Soguk and his incandescent work on refugee displacement for reminding me of this. See Soguk (1999).

\textsuperscript{107} Diamond (2010): 93.
Retrospective accounts of authoritarian breakdown have been increasingly thrust upon the academic agenda in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and scholars throughout disciplinary social science have responded by expending significant intellectual effort in exploring its political, social, and economic dimensions. For many scholars of the Middle East, the empirical allure of the uprisings is at first glance intuitively obvious. The region’s exceptional capacity to resist democracy prior to the onset of protest produced an astonishing array of studies devoted to examining why it was so intractably authoritarian. As many scholars had observed, the greater Middle East was the only region in the world where the third-wave of democracy turned into a ‘faint ripple,’ leading to its ubiquitous depiction as poster child for authoritarianism run amuck.

Yet as scholars have noted few, if any, waves of democracy have demonstrated the type of spontaneous mobilizational momentum that began spilling across the Arab World in late 2010, forcing specialists of the region to revisit prior assumptions regarding the robustness of authoritarian rule and exceptionalism of the region’s regimes. For many specialists of global and comparative politics, however, the enduring appeal of the Arab uprisings has to a large extent resulted from theoretical concerns. Prior to the Arab Spring, the Middle East was deemed to be the most poorly suited region of the world for theory construction because it lacked what scholars of comparative politics view as being the most important methodological factor in theory generation: variation in outcomes.

The Middle East’s dramatic divergence in democratic outcomes has proven to be an especially attractive vehicle for theoretical refinement because such a range of variation allows scholars to explore why so many of their long-held expectations were shattered by episodes of

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109 Bellin (2004) memorably dubbed it “Middle East Exceptionalism.”
mobilization spillover. Further, the region’s variation in outcomes presents an unusually fruitful opportunity for specialists of global politics to revisit theoretical expectation because the very region that was thought to be the most recalcitrant to democracy and inhospitable to popular protest has paradoxically proven to be one of the few instances of the spread of democratic mobilization throughout a major world region.

There are thus few regions in the world where the gulf between theoretical expectation and empirical observation is more paradoxical than the modern Middle East. Rarely has a single region generated such counterintuitive beliefs about why it remained authoritarian, or produced such counterfactual predictions about why it failed to democratize. Beginning in 2009, however, a total of twenty countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) began experiencing varying degrees of political instability. From small protests and isolated clashes to full-blown revolution and civil war, the sweeping pattern of popular protest and mobilizational momentum that emerged across the region prompted scholars to reconsider many of their long-held expectations about the region’s democratic prospects.

No single event in recent memory has more strenuously flouted theoretical odds and empirical expectations, and yet few scholars have challenged previous notions of “exceptionalism” in the aftermath of the uprisings. As is increasingly argued by many scholars, the central irony of political forecasting is that many of the processes of globalization, such as the spread of mass movements across borders and spillover effect of democracy, have proven to be especially impervious to prediction and even explanation. While the Arab Spring brought to the fore the sheer difficulty of predicting momentous political change, theoretical insights continue to yield counterfactual predictions by forecasters throughout disciplinary social science regarding a
whole host of sociopolitical dynamics.\textsuperscript{110} To the extent that forecasters and cross-national quantitative experts failed to predict the uprisings, Middle East specialists have been equally uneasy about their inability to even explain them.\textsuperscript{111} Despite lacking the predictive ambitions of forecasters, country specialists have increasingly questioned the teleological assumptions that undergird much of the literature on Middle East authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{112}

For some, the relative scarcity of mass protest seemed to signal popular passivity about democracy, allowing incumbent autocrats to rule with virtual impunity in the absence of any organized public challenge. For others, the state was often the culprit, which preserved a mix of repressive capacity and the will to sue it.\textsuperscript{113} Taken together, the literature on Middle East authoritarianism conceptualized the region as a collection of quintessential predatory states that had succeeded in bullying social forces into submission. Social science expectations about the region’s democratic prospects were therefore predictably dim. Forecasters closely followed suit, anticipating little movement towards democracy. As Eva Bellin surmised unremarkably before the Arab Spring, “Nowhere in the region do mammoth, cross-class coalitions mobilize on the streets for reform.”\textsuperscript{114}

The region’s enduring ‘exceptionalism’, however, is not just a function of popular passivity. Explanations for the region’s exceptionalism have been legion. To name just a handful of causes considered to be responsible for the Middle East’s democracy deficit, consider the following: the strength of the coercive apparatus,\textsuperscript{115} the economics of the rentier state,\textsuperscript{116} the presence of

\textsuperscript{110} Kurzman and Hasnain (2014).
\textsuperscript{111} Howard and Walters (2014).
\textsuperscript{112} Kurzman and Hasnain (2014) use quantitative methods to scrutinize quantitative forecasts.
\textsuperscript{113} Bellin (2004) is an especially prominent proponent of this.
\textsuperscript{114} Bellin (2004): 150.
\textsuperscript{116} Herb (2005), Ross (2001), Shambayati (1994).
dominant single-party regimes cultural and religious exceptionalism, Arab exceptionalism, or the weakness of civil society. Upon closer inspection, it becomes increasingly apparent that the shared distinctiveness of many of these approaches and arguments generally focus on the role of the state, and more specifically, the strength of authoritarian institutions in prolonging undemocratic rule. In particular, scholars since Dankwart Rustow and Samuel Huntington have long viewed political parties as the primary institution that girds elite collective action throughout the entirety of the state’s institutional architecture.

Institutions have long been recognized as producing predictable patterns of elite behavior in nondemocratic polities because they constrain the capacity of authoritarian elites to unilaterally exercise power independent of other actors. Whereas forecasting the politics of mass mobilization has always been a thorn in the side of methodological individualists because of their serial inability to accurately predict such watershed historical events, institutional analysis nevertheless carries with it an inclination that lends itself to forecasting that has historically redounded to rational-choice and voluntarist theories of political change. The literature on Middle East authoritarianism has thus primarily focused on vertical threats to authoritarian survival: those that emerge from within the regime. By comparison, the Arab Spring perhaps demonstrated that such regimes and the scholars who study them should have been more focused on horizontal threats: those resulting from nonviolent collective action from below. Yet, given that the allure of agency-centered theories continued to exert substantial scholarly sway, rational-

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120 Langohr (2004). It should be noted that Langohr’s argument is more nuanced than most, since it argues that civil society, despite its outsized presence, is unable to extract concessions from single-party regimes due to long-standing authoritarianism.
Rational Choice and Factionalism

Beginning in the 1990s and into the early 2000s, disciplinary social science began to increasingly question many of the theoretical claims expressed in the fields of democratization and social movements. These concerns were driven by a wider perception that conceptual debates in sociology and political science were excessively focused on actor-centric and structural theories of contentious politics. The perceived scholarly divide was largely attributable to two counter theoretical and methodological tendencies: the belief among rational-choice and structurally oriented scholars that cultural accounts of democratization and social movements yielded a set of variables that was too subjective. By comparison, those working in the culturalist tradition argued that rational choice and institutional frames of contentious politics paid little attention to the role of culture and the universe of non-institutional activity that often inscribed contentious politics in authoritarian regimes.

Theoretical preferences also tended to drive methodological choices. While rational-choice theorists favored cross-national statistical research, culturally oriented scholars were more inclined to utilize comparative historical methodologies. The gulf in methodology tended to reflect broader epistemological beliefs about the role of theorizing in disciplinary social science. Early theoretical treatments of democratization were more likely to adopt quantitative methods

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125 The inverse is also true.
126 Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003).
that prioritized the role of elite factionalism. Although the dominance of structural analysis was a recurrent theme in the study of social movements, sociology was in the early stages of a broad-based shift towards a multi-institutional approach towards the study social movements.

Part of the analytic problem was the absence of a framework that coalesced the overlapping but splintered literatures of sociology and political science. In particular, the lack of intellectual synthesis among scholars of social movements and democratization meant that theoretical insights remained isolated and circumscribed by subfield specialization. The development of insular academic communities proved to be especially debilitating for the study contentious politics, since an explosion of social movement activity during the much-heralded third-wave of democratic transition generated a profusion of disciplinary research on contentious politics.

Perhaps more importantly, the third-wave offered the real opportunity for scholars of political sociology and comparative politics to bridge the long-standing gap between specialists who studied social movements and those who examined the politics of authoritarian rule.

Nevertheless, the potential for theoretical synthesis lapsed due to the scattered nature of research and the lack of an overarching political program. The end result of this process was that conceptual innovation developed largely independent of research conducted in other subfields.

The establishment of the contentious politics literature, which was forged in sociology and steeled in the literature on social movements, attempted to fill a long-standing research lacuna that promoted theoretical collaboration between sociology and political science. It also represented a normative shift in the way scholars thought about contentious politics.

Democratization specialists were beginning to bring the study of social movements into the analytic fray and political sociology increasingly framed social movement activity in the context of democracy and dictatorship. More immediately, it brought about a fundamental change in the

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127 McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (1996).
way scholars defined and spoke about the dynamics of political contention by providing a coherent theoretical map of the broad terrain that contentious politics inhabited. As an effort in theoretical refinement, its most significant consequence was to contest many of the putative assumptions that had highlighted the study of social movements and democratization.

**Democratic vs. Authoritarian Factions**

From the standpoint of the entirety of disciplinary political science, the study of factionalism continues to be dominated by those studying its effects on American and European politics.\(^{128}\)

Much of the causal logic of factionalism was originally developed within the confines of studies conducted on American and European party politics. While in democracies excessive levels of factionalism have long considered to “destabilize parties and create decisional stalemate,”\(^{129}\) the same logic was increasingly applied to authoritarian regimes, where “the main political consequence of elite disunity is regime instability.”\(^{130}\) While the overwhelming majority of contemporary works on political factionalism are therefore devoted to case studies of democratic factions in mostly an American or European context, the concept, oddly enough, is rarely applied or used to describe democracies. Factionalism in the context of comparative politics is generally portrayed as a sundry malady afflicting countries in the global South, and like many generic and ill-defined terms, it is often used as a euphemistic black box which allows scholars to theorize a whole host of different political phenomena. But in its institutional setting, which is the primary concern of this dissertation and in fact most scholarly analyses of political factionalism, it mostly

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\(^{128}\) This is obviously to the extent that American or European politics have either been objectively defined subfields of political science. Were that to be objectively true, then we would be required to determine a precise accounting of how many countries the United Nations currently identifies as being in existence, which can fluctuate from time-to-time.


conveys the deterioration of institutional norms and accepted codes of political behavior.

Nevertheless, there is an undeniable, perhaps implicit, cultural bias in the way that factionalism has historically been surfaced to describe political decay in authoritarian institutions, but not as something that presents a political problem for established democracies despite the increasing electoral fragmentation and polarization witnessed in the global North.

Political groupings in Iran are almost exclusively referred to as factions, yet few studies in contentious politics have examined the fundamental difference between democratic and authoritarian factions. Because endemic factionalism is generally a feature of party-based democracies, the dynamics of factional competition are fundamentally different in authoritarian and democratic settings. In democracies, factions can be defined as distinct political blocs that collectively organize within a formalized party structure. Since they receive their institutional coherence from parties, factions bear little practical or analytic difference from them. As “differing modes of the same universe,” the defining trait of a democratic faction is virtually synonymous with a political party: institutionalized elite competition. Through regular patterns of popular representation and party-led electoral competition, democratic factions provide a strong bulwark against executive encroachment upon the institutional authority of other branches of government. Michael Mann has dubbed this dynamic as the capacity of democratic elites and factions to restrain the “despotic power” of the state, or “the range of actions that” an authoritarian incumbent “is empowered to make without consultation.” Institutionalized elite competition is therefore endemic to democracies. Party institutions constrain factional conflict,

131 Boucek (2009).
133 Sartori (1976), Slater (2003).
and democratic institutions constrain the executive.\textsuperscript{135} Political competition can take the form of sub-party factions, but democratic factions cannot exist independent of institutionalized parties.

By comparison, in some authoritarian regimes factions exist not as smaller units of political parties but as substitutes for them. While authoritarian parties are formally nested institutions, authoritarian factions are not “defined and definite entities, that is, “they are not institutionalized.”\textsuperscript{136} Although they can lack party patronage and \textit{de jure} institutionalization, factions in authoritarian settings are often charged with assuming many of the supervisory responsibilities of their democratic counterparts. But as one of the leading studies of authoritarian institutions argued, unlike in democracies executive oversight is not an organizational ethos or an institutional prerogative of an authoritarian faction.\textsuperscript{137} Unlike democratic factions that exist as part of political parties, authoritarian factions are not constitutionally imbued with bureaucratic functions that promote democratic processes of institutional oversight. Thus, protecting against executive encroachment is not the primary or even a basic prerogative of authoritarian factions. Unlike authoritarian parties that subsume factions, the primary purpose of authoritarian factions is not to secure political legitimacy through regular patterns of popular representation, but to ensure authoritarian survival under threatening conditions that are perceived to be manageable and predictable. Systems of checks and balances are not the purview of factions but of other authoritarian institutions that preserve much of the \textit{infrastructural power} of the state.\textsuperscript{138} Thus while the purpose of an democratic

\textsuperscript{135} The power that state parties exert on regime elites is well established. Much of the prior work on authoritarian strength attributes the presence of a state party as the most important factor restraining intra-regime conflict and shaping authoritarian consensus. See for instance, Jason Brownlee (2007b).

\textsuperscript{136} Whitmore (2003): 41.

\textsuperscript{137} Slater’s (2003) study of authoritarian institutions in Malaysia is particularly illuminating.

\textsuperscript{138} This obviously includes coercive institutions but also those that promote elite collective action. In Iran, elite collective action is partially promoted and sustained through informal political networks, or so-called parastatal organizations, which further fosters ideological patronage and generates elite cohesion. While ideological bonds
faction is to avoid the wanton factionalization of competitive politics through the sponsorship of a ruling party, the purpose of authoritarian faction is to make sure that they “distort and control the electoral process.”  Since authoritarian parties purposely serve to generate elite collective action in an effort to increase an incumbent despotic power, authoritarian factions deliberately serve to cultivate authoritarian consensus by increasing a regime’s infrastructural power, producing a stable equilibrium for factionalized non-party competition. Guardian regimes Authoritarian regimes that emerge as result of ideologically based social conflict are far more concerned with a regime’s overall staying power.

Authoritarian leaders do not willingly abet the prospect of their own demise, and they have historically constructed broad-based ruling parties only when they perceive the benefits associated with institutionalizing competition to outweigh episodic threats to elite collective action. As party politics in Iran was unable to bridle such factionalism under the tutelage of a party between 1979-1987, such factionalism, through direct promulgation by political elites and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, was thus perceived to be unmanageable under traditional forms of political completion—or party institutionalization. The dissolution of the Islamic Republican Party further reflected the inability of elites to agree on basic issues related to economic and political policy, leading the Supreme Leader to disband the party. Upon its official abrogation, the Supreme Leader further stated that the party had anyway achieved its original aims, which was to sideline oppositional forces and to provide a basis for elite solidarity during the war period. With the war winding down and oppositional forces expunged, the party had

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specifically are certainly malleable and amenable to change, such logic goes both ways; it fluidity can remain static for long periods, but my point is that predictive efforts at detecting such elite ruptures is inherently unpredictable.  

139 Schedler (2002)  
140 Huntington (1968) was one of the earliest and most vocal proponents of this.  
141 Kamrava and Hassan-Yari (2004) label the presence of non-party factional competition in Iran as “suspened equilibrium.”  
outlived its utility, leading to the current era of factional politics where political contests are
called by individual candidates that are only loosely aligned with political factions, which
stand as ideological markers of a candidate’s’ general political platform. Quite paradoxically
then, party institutionalization had run its course because it was increasingly weakening elite
collective action rather than strengthening it. Keeping the party would have only served to
atomize elite collective action by institutionalizing it within existing state structures. Such
institutionalization would thus pose a wanton and utterly avoidable risk to regime hardliners
cared with shielding the reigns of formal state power from incipient reformists and other
ideological forces.

While sustaining elite collective action is important in many uncompetitive authoritarian
regimes, it fundamentally different in competitive authoritarian regimes, where notions of
absolute elite solidarity are contradicted by genuine electoral competition. The analytic leverage
Iran gains over other potential cases of theoretical nonconformity is its simultaneous
juxtaposition of these dynamics combined with the fact that it is a revolutionary state that
neglected to consummate its rule by way of institutionalization it Yet such perspectives plainly
assume that parties are the only or even the best way that authoritarian regimes institutionalize
their rule. As other have argued, and as Iran makes most clear, states are better vehicles than
parties for increasing a regime’s infrastructural power,143 and basic differences in the
institutional functions of democratic and authoritarian parties often fail to be sufficiently defined
or explained. Here, Iran again shows how processes of postrevolutionary institutionalization
placed the state’s infrastructural power fully within the power of other state bodies that were
more than capable at fostering elite collective action when factionalism might otherwise collude
with social forces during periods of electoral uncertainty to pose a serious threat to state power.

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143 Slater (2011)
This was precisely the case in 2009 when a cycle of protest-violence erupted in the aftermath of a hotly contested presidential election that saw incumbent conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad defeat reformist challenger Mir-Hussein Mousavi. The election was widely suspected to have been decided by state sanctioned electoral fraud, prompting what had been a relatively demobilized democratic movement to rise up against the regime in numbers measuring in the millions. Regimes born of revolutionary conflict are often more concerned with bottom-up threats to their rule emerging from the same social forces that brought the regime into existence than the comparatively few elites that might weaken collective action as a result of elite factionalism.

The precise dynamic characterizes the absence of proper political institutionalization in Iran, where factions exist as not as party subgroupings, but as actual replacements for party structures writ large, is perhaps not as rare as some specialists of Iranian politics would seem to believe.\(^{144}\) The primary difference between factionalism in Iran and elsewhere, often ill defined or otherwise neglected in the literature, revolves around three individual empirical phenomena that taken alone are not especially counterintuitive. But as a fully constituted contemporaneous dynamic, these three factors seem to challenge theoretical expectation for scholars steeped in the comparative politics of authoritarian rule.\(^ {145}\)

The combined and simultaneous presence of the following factors is what seems to make Iran somewhat unique, but as I argue in no way exceptional, among contemporary authoritarian

\(^{144}\) Slater (2011) argues that only some authoritarian regimes have parties, but he uses monarchial regimes to make his claim, but as he also suggests, such regimes are not hybrid in nature or competitive, but are examples of full-fledged, unmitigated authoritarian rule.

\(^{145}\) Payam Mohseni’s (2012) excellent dissertation on the comparative dynamics that promote authoritarian survival in “guardian regimes” is but one example.
regimes\textsuperscript{146}: (1) endemic institutional factionalism (2) the presence of such factionalism in a postrevolutionary regime (3) and the absence of a political party structure that would temper it through processes of proper institutionalization. Thus, that Iran has a postrevolutionary regime where genuinely competitive political competition is convoked through the aegis of non-party factions serves to make Iran somewhat of a empirical anomaly, although to what degree is debatable and amenable to further comparative institutional analysis among other authoritarian states that hold competitive elections.

Endemic factionalism can therefore be as conducive to democratic oversight as it is to authoritarian durability. Competition in authoritarian regimes can become highly factionalized in spite of deeply competitive contentious politics. This is because loosely affiliated factions in the legislature or parliament confront an authoritarian executive not as a collection of cohesive ruling parties but as inchoate patchwork of individual factions. The fundamental institutional differences between authoritarian and democratic factions, I submit, have to some extent been responsible for the widespread impression among comparativists—but not scholars of Iran—that such factionalism automatically imperils authoritarianism. It is at such a disciplinary juncture that this dissertation most pointedly endeavors to bridge the divide between empirical observation among specialists of Iran and theoretical expectation among comparativists of authoritarianism. Authoritarian factions are distinct organizational forms that should be analytically distinguished from the well-developed concept of both democratic factions and authoritarian parties.

\textsuperscript{146} Given the inherent limits of this dissertation’s empirical and theoretical scope, as well as the ability of its author to avail himself of all the rich institutional diversity throughout the authoritarian world, it is beyond my purview and ability to identify any particular regime with similar and simultaneously juxtaposed institutional phenomena.
Unfortunately, the absence of a theoretical inventory of literature dealing with factionalism in authoritarian regimes makes this almost impossible. I am hopeful that such a prefatory discussion initiated in this dissertation will help cultivate such a scholarly discourse.

This present reconceptualization of authoritarian factionalism helps address an unresolved theoretical problem that has plagued the study of contentious politics in nondemocratic regimes. Why would an otherwise authoritarian state countenance the presence of genuine elite competition and rampant factionalism despite the constant specter of regime breakdown? Stated differently, how is authoritarian stability achieved when conventional wisdom suggests that factionalism and authoritarian durability are a mutually exclusive proposition? The standard account of authoritarian durability suggests that when authoritarian incumbents perceive the benefits associated with creating political parties to outweigh episodic threats to elite collective action, they might construct ruling parties in an effort to tame factional tensions and to insure that periodic upswings in instability are predictable and manageable.147 But this perspective suffers from key liabilities since it only tells us what incumbent authoritarian leaders often do during the course of authoritarian rule they create parties not what aspiring autocrats might do during the establishment of authoritarian rule.148 And it tells us precious little about how factions might strengthen authoritarian rule as much as they are assumed to weaken it. From the context of comparative analysis, such conceptual invariance regarding factionalism’s causal role fails to distinguish between enormous empirical differences between an authoritarian incumbent’s

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147 See Geddes (1999), Brownlee (2007b), and Huntington (1968). Studies of authoritarian durability are increasingly conceptualizing state power, as opposed to just party power, as more profoundly explaining how authoritarian states can achieve political stability. Parties are just one aspect of state power, whereas state power writ large broadly encompasses the entirety of a regime’s “infrastructural power,” or its ability to enforce its decision-making throughout its territory. See, for example, Michal Mann (2008).

148 Dan Slater asks a somewhat similar question in his illuminating study of Malaysia. But whereas he is concerned with how an authoritarian ruler might “personalize power in the face of powerful preexisting institutions,” I am more concerned with how preexisting factions might construct an institutional architecture from scratch that needn’t rely on political parties for solving problems of elite collective action. See Slater (2003).
capacity to stay in power as opposed to an authoritarian regime’s overall staying power. As I have argued, incumbent capacity to resist factionalism can be weak while regime capacity remains formidable.

Iran thus makes explicit what others have left implicit: authoritarian regimes can be remarkably stable despite endemic elite factionalism, and they can sacrifice ruptures to elite collective action without simultaneously threatening regime stability. Thus, they can defend authoritarianism without defending elite cohesion. What Giovanni Sartori called the “naked power” of democratic “factions” may mean sacrificing elite cohesion in democracies, but not as the expense of regime durability in dictatorships. Authoritarian regimes can thus remain remarkably stable despite chronic factional instability, and they can suffer ruptures to elite cohesion without sacrificing authoritarian stability. Thus, they can defend authoritarianism without always defending the elite cohesion. This counters the intuitive empirical logic that factionalism is by definition irreconcilable with authoritarian durability, and it concurs with recent empirical evidence gleaned from the Arab Spring as well as Iran that while parties might be effective at shielding incumbents from threats emanating among regime elites, they are far less effective at shielding them from social forces during periods of political upheaval.

Social science has long demonstrated an enduring conviction that factionalism presages authoritarianism’s imminent decline. Such prescience is based upon the mostly empirically factual belief that factionalism can best be understood as a malady best constrained within the ambit of a larger, more institutionalized entity: In short, political parties. Partly because of an

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149 Sartori (1976).
150 Jason Brownlee’s (2007b) nuanced but unelaborated study of authoritarianism in Iran is a good example of this. Although he points out that Iran failed to develop a party structure, he leaves unanswered the question of why and how the Islamic Republic has persevered despite endemic factionalism. This is all the more surprising given Brownlee’s elaborate treatment of factionalism in Iran and elsewhere. Keshavarzian (2005) addresses this point in his treatment of authoritarian durability in Iran.
abiding conviction that factions represent a “pathology” of governance and are institutions of patronage, graft and illegitimacy,\textsuperscript{151} scholars have assumed that factions are antithetical to political institutionalization and thus anathema to processes that promote routinized, predictable patterns of political behavior. Unlike parties, factions are not institutionalized entities, making them more difficult to study as objects of academic enquiry. Scholars have thus naturally assumed and theorized factionalism as something that inevitably decays democratic rule in the absence of overarching political institutions that might better circumscribe its spread.

Seeing them this way, most scholars have focused on how factions hinder authoritarian durability, scarcely recognizing that they might facilitate it. Because of fundamental divergences in the purpose of democratic and authoritarian factions, scholars have therefore conflated how causal processes that lead to and promote factionalism in authoritarian countries are different. This takes on even greater divergence in revolutionary regimes, where contentious class conflict that spurs authoritarian breakdown inescapably produces postrevolutionary factional tensions that are fundamentally different that those obtained in democratic regimes. While such counterintuitive political patterns that promote endemic factionalism are certainly not always the case in revolutionary regimes, theoretical expectation has not accounted for the exceptions where it is.

The Iranian state, I have argued, best typifies the process under which prerevolutionary social coalitions morphed into postrevolutionary factions. This dynamic has most severely challenged theoretical probability because the cross-cutting social coalitions needed to spur truly revolutionary mobilization is a comparatively rare historical phenomenon. Where Iran departs from some, but certainly not all, revolutionary regimes was that its institutional rule was never consummated by a ruling political party, a dynamic that is well-studied among specialists of Iran,

but less known and understudied among general comparative theorists. Revolutionary regimes in China, Russia, Cuba and Vietnam all consolidated their rule by establishing fully institutionalized ruling parties that centralized mass political support and sustained elite collective action at the same time. Yet this process never occurred in Iran, save for a brief interregnum between 1979-1987 where internecine conflict and international warfare made party creation a necessity, but it’s later dissolution proved to be somewhat of a rarity in world historical terms, especially among revolutionary states.

In the postrevolutionary study of Iranian politics, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the study of factionalism has been the *sin qua non* of political and sociological analysis of the country. As many have argued, it has, in fact, been the whole point. To identify just a pittance of such themes and topics that elite factionalism in Iran has been implicated in, one would require an annotated bibliography of virtually every peer-reviewed sociological or political study since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. From the study of factional conflict in electoral politics, the factionalization and fragmentation of the armed forces, including the balkanization of the military into regular and irregular forces, the impact of factionalism on rent-seeking in Iran’s oil sector, the impact of factionalism on the state’s institutional architecture, the role of factionalism in national security policy, the role of factionalism in prerevolutionary Iran, to the role of factionalism in postrevolutionary

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152 Moslem (2002). This is particularly the case with deep empirical but not theoretical studies of factionalism in the Islamic Republic.
155 Chubin (2002)
156 Bjorvatn and Selvik (2008).
politics,\textsuperscript{160} one can hardly explain any aspect of Iran’s postrevolutionary era without some reference to how factionalism has profoundly shaped and been shaped it. Factionalism has thus been the lodestone of contentious politics in Iran in spite of its proper institutionalization within a formal party structure. Yet contrary to accumulated theoretical expectation, the absence of a ruling party has not lead to diminish state capacity to generate elite collective action and thsu regime cohesion.

\textsuperscript{160} Harris 2012, Behrooz (1991).
Chapter 3

Contentious Party Politics: Incumbent Weakness and Regime Strength

Introduction

Since 1979, few countries in the global South have had their political institutions subjected to as much scholarly scrutiny as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Owing as much to its unorthodox political institutions as to the seemingly incongruous blend of religious and republican ideology, Iran’s post-revolutionary polity has been an especially intriguing object of inquiry for both specialists of the country and practitioners of comparative politics alike. For observers of Iran, the country’s primary theoretical value has often been its place as a comparative foil in disrupting how conventional processes of post-revolutionary or post-colonial state formation are generally thought to proceed. In particular, what has tended to distinguish Iran from other cases of so-called durable authoritarianism has been the state’s capacity to negotiate multiple and successive political and economic crises despite the fact that it lacks the single institution long considered to be the lynchpin of elite collective action: a centralized ruling party.

For comparativists, Iran has been an equally anomalous both for what it is—a durable authoritarian regime that lacks a centralized political party—but especially for what it is not—a regime that is amenable to political classification within existing comparative frameworks. Although it has been cast as an example of a hybrid political system combining elements of democracy with dictatorship, which to be sure accurately depicts the ideological underpinnings of the regime, it has rarely been conceptualized as a causal force in the regime’s

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161 Obviously Iran is not a classic postcolonial state in that it was never occupied by an imperial power, but that has not exempted it from adding to the analytic value derived from comparative analyses of postcolonial states
162 Mohseni (2016) is but one example.
persistence or as a pivotal force in the creation of the state’s hierarchically structured authoritarian institutions. In attempting to categorize the Iranian regime, it therefore comes as little surprise that Samuel Huntington placed Iran as being “elsewhere,” whereas other scholars have taken to creating novel categories of political regime of which Iran is the only member. Nevertheless, the competitive nature of the Islamic Republic’s political system, in spite of its underlying authoritarian impulses, has promoted a wealth of scholarship that attempts to explain the many institutional contradictions that challenge conventional understandings of state formation in the authoritarian world.

It would certainly be a convenient scapegoat to attribute the Islamic Republic’s paradoxical persistence without the presence of a ruling party as resulting from some religious, cultural or political manifestation owing to Iranian exceptionalism. Such lazy rationalizations recall Orientalist tropes that still reduce the Middle East’s democracy deficit as a lingering vestige of Islam’s inherent incompatibility with democracy or its exceptionalism as a region of entrenched authoritarianism. Furthermore, such faulty, post hoc reasoning is not only tautological, but from the standpoint of disciplinary social science, it precludes comparative inquiry since it simply conflates institutionally anomalous phenomena as a sui generis novelty not found elsewhere in the authoritarian world. To be sure, regimes that lack ruling parties are certainly not an uncommon phenomenon, but such countries are generally not postrevolutionary political systems emerging from protracted ideologically based contentious politics.

Yet it would be equally misleading to not recognize that the absence of parties writ large from Iran’s body politic as not being something of an empirical oddity or worthy of comparative inquiry. Furthermore, the continued centrality that theories of elite collective action continue to

enjoy as causal if not predictive of authoritarian collapse teeters on the very type of teleological thinking that comparative analysis endeavors to replace. In line with attempting to bring Iran into the comparative fold, the remainder of this chapter situates and explains the theoretical and methodological implications of my analysis. Although this dissertation is primarily a theoretical study of authoritarian parties and regime persistence in Iran, the theoretical propositions that animate it are not region or case specific. As a study of authoritarian institutions, it addresses issues of state and regime formation that occupy the attention of scholarship produced on much of the global South. As an examination of elite factionalism in postrevolutionary regime, it also speaks to questions that interest specialists of democratization and social movements.

We have accumulated a voluminous literature on factionalism, but the overwhelming bulk of it is almost exclusively based on the experiences of America and Western Europe. In both cases, factionalism is virtually synonymous with a political party: The former is a sub-group of the latter and therefore cannot exist without it. But outside of the western world, and as Iran makes most clear, factions can act as effective substitutes for political parties despite being less effective at fostering elite collective action. Perhaps most importantly for the purpose of this dissertation, Iran’s defiance of theoretical expectation is therefore most emphatically felt not simply because it lacks a ruling party, but that it persists—indeed thrives—in lieu of endemic factionalism. Both of these empirical realities challenge existing wisdom on authoritarian institutions.

**Elite Factionalism**

In this chapter, I highlight some of the causal dynamics that might better elucidate the unelaborated paradox of non-party regime persistence. As the global model and index both revealed, the term “factionalism” has become so broad and amorphous that it often lacks sufficient analytic clarity. Does factionalism always mean that it must emerge within the context
of overarching political institutions, such as an institutionalized political party? In the United
States and much of Europe, indeed, if not in the overwhelming majority of countries—political
factionalism almost always refers to the dynamics of political competition and elite conflict
within political parties. Yet the question to be posed is this: Can factionalism exist within formal
political institutions, even in the absence of a party? Does factionalism convey a more
fundamental breakdown of rule of law and political accountability?

In the context of most studies of political factionalism, the answer is surely in the affirmative;
factionalism is commonly equated with the institutional erosion of political norms and generally
accepted codes of behavior that govern electoral politics. The attraction of institutionalized
political parties for incumbent autocrats as well as aspiring democrats—indeed the whole point
of parties—is that they temper the ability of elites to act unilaterally outside established
institutional norms that might otherwise lead to unbridled political infighting, turning loyal allies
into oppositional elites. This bandwagon effect is perhaps most menacing to authoritarian
regimes when oppositional elites are able to channel elite discontent into mass discontent,
brining about the possibility that democratic mobilization might further threaten autocracy. This
was precisely the dynamic that confronted Iran during it’s 2009 Green Movement, when Mir
Hossein Mousavi, apparently the target of state sanctioned electoral fraud, was placed under
house arrest and prevented from assuming any political activity that might further leverage the
mobilizational momentum of Iranian society and abet amore determined protest wave that could
potentially cause elite consensus to splinter.

For the most durable authoritarian regimes and the scholars who study them, empirical
evidence strongly suggests that infrastructural power abets authoritarian endurance more than
despotic power does. Why did mass mobilization supplant a long-standing authoritarian regime
in Tunisia while it simply replaced a long-standing authoritarian ruler in Egypt? Given that both countries were exposed to the same episode of mobilizational spillover—popularly known as the Arab Spring—we might expect variation in democratic outcomes to hinge on what scholars and students of comparative politics consider the end institutional result of strong state authoritarianism: a centralized ruling party. Yet both regimes were the envy of authoritarian rulers across the region and the world because they had seemingly consolidated autocratic rule by building strong ruling party coalitions that capably preserved elite collective action.

But that is precisely the point to be made: such coalitions were inherently vulnerable to crack amid vertical pressures from below, since the primary purpose of party rule is to prevent divisions among the ruling elite—or what scholars have taken to calling horizontal pressures—not as a stop-gap to thwart democratic mobilization. Thus, to the great extent that parties are thought to solve the many maladies that afflict due to elite conflict, factionalism has been equally well-documented as By turning to mass parties that routinize and regulate the ever-present threat arising from convoking competitive party politics, incumbents often feel assured that they can credibly count on party creation.

Middle East Authoritarianism and Factionalism

Although the much-heralded third-wave of democracy spread to almost all regions of the globe, it proved to be just a “faint ripple” in others (Slater 2010:4).¹⁶⁵ As a result, a significant body of literature began to take shape around the factors that sustain authoritarian rule. Within this emerging research program, a growing chorus of scholars identified a “single dichotomous” variable—the presence or absence of elite cohesion—as being the leading factor underpinning

¹⁶⁵ This is especially the case in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as Central Asia.
both authoritarian strength and weakness. Starting with O'Donnell and Schmitter’s\textsuperscript{166} finding that transitions from authoritarian rule during the third-wave almost exclusively resulted from divisions among the ruling elite, virtually all studies of authoritarian durability attempt have focused on the ensemble of survival strategies incumbent authoritarian rulers employ to maintain elite cohesion and prevent outbreaks of elite factionalism.\textsuperscript{167}

In particular, two prominent findings quickly gained widespread acceptance as pivotal to the underlying logic of elite factionalism. First, it has been extensively argued and empirically well-documented that political parties help stabilize and prolong authoritarian rule. In a pioneering study of global authoritarianism, Barbara Geddes found that single-party regimes on average had the longest lifespans among all forms of authoritarian rule. Elites in party-led regimes “have stronger incentives to cooperate with each other,” according to Geddes.\textsuperscript{168} “The creation of a party to support a particular leader creates vested interests in his survival.”\textsuperscript{169} Geddes’ findings comport with the broader incentive–based literature that emphasizes the material preferences of elites and the regulatory capacity of parties to foster cohesion and solidarity among the ruling elite.\textsuperscript{170}

The second well-established finding, parallel to this first, is that factionalism is antithetical to authoritarian persistence because it severely weakens elite cohesion.\textsuperscript{171} To the considerable extent that scholars view parties as stabilizing authoritarian rule, they have demonstrated an equally abiding conviction that factionalism is a destabilizing force. “Where parties have not been maintained, competition for political power arises,” Jason Brownlee argues. “Factions

\textsuperscript{166} O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986).
\textsuperscript{167} Geddes notes that these are dominant single-party regimes, although this does not preclude the existence of other parties.
\textsuperscript{168} Geddes (1999):122.
collide rather than collude, and losers ally with the opposition in new counter-coalitions” (Brownlee 2007:33). Whereas parties incentivize loyalty through the provisioning of patronage, factions lack any institutional capacity to distribute it. Factionalism thus creates a powerful incentive for incumbent autocrats to institutionalize their rule through the sponsorship of a ruling party. For theorists of authoritarianism and practitioners of forecasting, patronage has long implied predictable patterns of political behavior, whereas episodes of mass popular revolt have proven to be exceptionally resistant to prognostication. This is one of the reasons that both forecasters as well as proponents of cross-national quantitative research have long preferred top-down institutional theories to bottom-up ones that favor social forces.

Yet this long-standing debate has not recognized or explored the implications of a paradoxical phenomenon: factionalism strengthening authoritarian rule while preserving elite cohesion. To restate an empirical observation mentioned in the first chapter: while factionalism may indeed weaken the capacity of authoritarian incumbents to stay in power, it does not necessarily follow that factionalism will simultaneously weaken a regime’s staying power. As Geddes has noted, parties are often institutional vehicles for ensuring the survival of individual autocrats, and the toppling of a single ruler does not make a democracy. Moreover, elections in most authoritarian regimes are not competitive, and despotic rulers mostly invest in the electoral process on an ad hoc basis as a passive form of domination. This fundamentally challenges theoretical wisdom that parties are instruments of infrastructural power, since if they merely

172 Slater (2011) argues that conventional theories of authoritarian institutions see patronage as breeding quiescence among the population because they cultivate lasting patterns of state dependence. This makes political stasis somewhat predictable because it precludes mass dissent from being channeled into a broad based democratic movement that mobilizes en masse against the regime. For similar views of party capacity, see Huntington (1968). Brownlee (2005) discusses a similar dynamic, but also relates party capacity to its ability to foster loyalty among the ruling elite.
175 Schedler (2006).
serve to sustain incumbent as opposed to regime rule, they are by definition tools of despotic power.

The institutions that promote incumbent survival are often quite different than those that help stabilize the regimes they run. This conforms to the theoretical argument presented here with one exception: parties are not the only institutions, nor are they even the most optimal, for stabilizing authoritarianism writ large. While agreeing with Geddes’s argument that parties often serve the parochial interests of incumbent leaders, they also represent a serious and utterly wanton risk to authoritarian regimes that convoke genuinely competitive elections in the face of an electorally organized opposition, which presents a direct route to political power. Party creation can thus be inherently risky gamble. On this point, I would therefore suggest parties are as much a reflection of an incumbent autocrat’s personal desire to enhance their own despotic fiat as they are putatively theoretical indications of infrastructural power. Again, the party-regime distinction is best summarized, both empirically as seen during the Arab Spring and theoretically as expressed by Mann, in the difference between regime and incumbent capacity.

Differences in the staying power of authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring tend to reflect fundamental differences in their institutional capacities to overcome bottom-up threats posed by democratic mobilization. The concepts of infrastructural and despotic power coined by Michael Mann best explain how theoretical expectation was challenged by variation in democratic outcomes among two separate countries: Tunisia, the bellwether state of the Arab uprisings, and Egypt, long considered the bellwether state of the Arab world.
The Arab Spring

Despotic Power and Infrastructural Power

Mass ruling parties are thought to increase a state’s infrastructural power—defined as the capacity of the state to actually penetrate society and implement its policies across its territory—because they provide authoritarian elites and party officials with a devoted mass following while simultaneously forestalling the type of Hobbesian free-for-all that elite factionalism so often hastens. This is precisely why parties are thought to be the most effective institutional vehicles for tempering elite factionalism and obtaining dependable and predictable patterns of mass quiescence. In cases where authoritarian regimes convoke competitive elections, or what some scholars have called competitive authoritarianism, such patterns of popular participation ensure that the ambit of democratic and electoral politics becomes firmly “nested” and circumscribed within the broader ambit of authoritarianism.

Yet in a riposte to both his critics and cohorts, Mann suggests that ruling parties might ultimately denude the state’s infrastructural power over time. According to Mann, because ruling parties are a single cog in an ever expanding and changing institutional hierarchy that over time promotes rivalrous tensions with other coercive state organizations, the primary objective of authoritarian elites is not simply to protect the state from society, but also to protect themselves from the state. This harkens back to Slater and Tilly’s discussion of individual protection and perceptions of fear among elites that are often at odds with the best interests of the regime. And since it follows that mass elite purges and bureaucratic turnover are staple realities of

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177 Schedler (2002).
178 Mann (2016).
authoritarian institutions, elites are further incentivized to be vigilant and watchful of the very institutions with which they use to induce compliance from society at large.

The interrelated concepts of infrastructural and despotic power have enjoyed increasing prominence throughout studies of regime formation since Michael Mann first theorized the origins of state and social power in 1984. One of the reasons for their popularity, I would suggest, is because they lucidly present a theoretical concept that is immediately imaginable in tangible form, bringing to mind the dichotomous sources of state power that authoritarian rulers actually use to enforce their rule, both among elite actors and the population at large. While they are certainly not the same, infrastructural power—defined as the state’s capacity to enforce its decision throughout its territory—can be thought of as a very real proxy for a state’s institutional power. Infrastructural power, however, should not be mistaken for simple coercive control. As others have noted, the most effective authoritarian regimes rarely deploy brute violence to enforce decisions—that tends to signal underlying authoritarian weakness. Regimes that chronically utilize violence as the primary mechanism to extract concessions from elite and non-elite actors have generally proven to be less stable than those that are able to consistently evade employing the state’s raw coercive capacity. Conflict avoidance, as opposed to conflict resolution, better explains the fundamental difference between authoritarian stability and authoritarian durability.

Political parties are thought to prolong the lifespans of authoritarian regimes because they increase what Michael Mann calls the “infrastructural power” of the state, or the state’s institutional capacity to enforce its decisions and exercise control of the population. But authoritarian leaders create parties at a cost. By bestowing greater power to the state to enforce the decisions of incumbent rulers, the process of party construction simultaneously weakens the

179 Slater and Fenner (2011).
“despotic power” of the state, or the capacity of authoritarian leaders to make decisions unilaterally.\textsuperscript{180} Although they sacrifice despotic power to unilaterally make decisions, leaders simultaneously increase infrastructural capacity to enforce the decisions they do make. Some authoritarian regimes freely countenance this tradeoff because maintaining coercive and enforcement power is more important than maintaining a virtual monopoly over decision-making. If a regime’s enforcement and coercive capabilities are weak, then it makes little difference how decisions are exercised if they cannot be reliably executed by the institutions of the state. Thus, strong states wield infrastructural power as a passive form of domination, while states that rely exclusively on despotic power to from society are often unable to avoid recurrent crises or decisively resolve them extract compliance decisively in their favor.

I submit that a regime’s staying power (long-term stability) is broadly a manifestation of its infrastructural power (institutional power to enforce). I further suggest, contrary to almost all scholarship on infrastructural power, that ruling parties are a manifestation of despotic power, not infrastructural capacity. Geddes implicitly hints at such a regime-ruler distinction when she summarizes the basic logic of parties from the point of view of incumbent rulers: “From the dictator’s point of view, support parties and elections are central elements in his personal survival strategy.”\textsuperscript{181} While they allow individual authoritarian incumbents to stay in power during lulls in oppositional activity, I contend that parties lack basic top-down infrastructural controls to shepherd incumbent leaders through perilous periods of conflict. Like Geddes, but somewhat more explicitly, I suggest parties sometimes serve as personal mechanisms of institutional control for incumbent leaders but not necessarily the regimes they command. In such instances, because parties primarily exist to stoke elite collective action that allows them to

\textsuperscript{180} Infrastructural power is the corollary to Michael Mann’s concept of “despotic power.” See Mann (1988), reiterated in Mann (2008).
personally stay in power, while offering little in the way of a regime’s overall staying power, parties can be more usefully thought of as despotic institutions in such cases. The political outcomes in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring emphasize differences in infrastructural and despotic capacity.

The Egyptian state’s institutional capacity to rapidly respond to both threats from above and below was only surpassed by the infrastructural capacity of its institutions to actually enforce its decisions. Even though president Mubarak’s National Democratic Party quickly collapsed after his ouster, the commanding heights of the regime’s infrastructural capacity were on full display as it capably responded to the orders of the state’s most respected institution—the military. Preserving well-entrenched institutional capacity and unrivaled coercive power, the military in its self-perceived role as guardian of the state’s secular ideology, oversaw the forced ouster of Egypt’s first ever democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi. While Morsi had an equally entrenched ruling party at his disposal and had temporarily garnered the loyalty of the ruling elite, his individual power was easily dwarfed by the military’s infrastructural capabilities. Thus, while Morsi confronted the military with a party-led organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, the military employed its infrastructural capacity, most notably its vast array of tightly interwoven coercive organizations, to undermine whatever despotic power he wielded. The judiciary, the media, and the police similarly responded to the military’s infrastructural controls by seeking to undermine his authority, stripping him of his despotic powers, and punishing his supporters. Long before Morsi had been elected, the military in Egypt had functioned as a capable state organ for authoritarian control over state and society, using its almost hegemonic infrastructural authority to trump the comparatively weak despotic power of the chief executive. Thus, Morsi’s despotic power meant little because the party organization he
commanded lacked any infrastructural capacity. The advantages of distinguishing between despotic power and infrastructural power become increasingly resonant by considering how elite factionalism and revolutionary mobilization proved fatal to Morsi, but not the military: Incumbent capacity to resist factionalism and social mobilization was weak, while regime capacity was strong.

By contrast, Tunisia had long been held up as a consummate example of the strength of party-led rule. Yet I submit that while its despotic capacity might have been relatively robust, allowing it to achieve a stable basis for unfettered rule during periods of chronic quietism, its infrastructural power was not similarly strong. In fact, we see the very opposite institutional dynamic in Tunisia: A highly despotic state with weak infrastructural controls. Thus, when the onset of protest presented the first serious challenge to Ben Ali’s mostly uncontested rule, the state lacked a capable infrastructural option to suppress the spread of protest or prevent rampant elite defection. While Ben Ali had ruthlessly enforced elite loyalty by virtue of his highly despotic ruling style, despotic capacity meant little in the face of thousands of protesters without the means to enforce it. Ben Ali could not credibly count on the coercive apparatus of the state because the elites that staffed those institutions had either defected, refused to obey his orders, or they fundamentally lacked the type of top-down controls that abet strong state authoritarianism. Thus, while he had successfully created a state that allowed him to rule by incumbent fiat, Ben Ali had unwittingly destroyed state capacity to enforce the very despotic commands he sought to accumulate. In short, in his haste to concentrate his own despotic power, Ben Ali had destroyed the state’s infrastructural power. The Weberian notion of administrative capacity was alive and well in Ben Ali’s Tunisia, but Mann’s infrastructural capacity was sorely lacking.
To some degree, a state’s infrastructural power is a proxy for its actual institutional power. But Weber’s notion of the bureaucratic function of government is quite different than Mann’s concept of infrastructural power. Given that ruling parties in authoritarian regimes are by definition state sanctioned institutions, one might logically conclude that they are natural extensions of the state’s infrastructural power. But the answer is not as clear-cut as it appears. First, ruling parties are often created by despotic (and hence unilateral) fiat, and they therefore frequently serve the parochial interests of individual authoritarian leaders.182 As I will argue, elections in most authoritarian regimes are not competitive, and most rulers invest in the electoral process as a passive form of domination to ensure their continued rule under the ruse of genuine competition.183 And while ruling parties help convoke elections and register citizens to vote, which would appear to serve the state’s infrastructural power, they might actually place limits on it. In competitive electoral regimes where elections are more than mere window-dressing, party construction presents a clear path to power for the political opposition, and it might therefore be used as a vehicle to constrain the state’s willingness to deploy wanton violence. While rarer, parties have also served to unseat incumbent leaders altogether, ushering in democratic transition and therefore drastically reducing the despotic power of the state.

Indeed, all states—authoritarian or democratic—have laws and institutions that confer despotic power and construct infrastructural power. But unlike democracies, authoritarian regimes can be despotically strong while infrastructurally weak. As I will argue, however, states that willingly trade infrastructural capacity for increased despotic power will increasingly find themselves mired in chronically debilitating bouts of oppositional challenge and elite defection. Even in the

182 Slater (2003) provides an illustrative example of how Mahathir Mohamad turned the state ruling party, previously an instrument of the state’s infrastructural power, into an instrument of his own despotic power.
183 This point is made clear by Schedler (2006) and many other studies of “electoral authoritarianism” and “hybrid” regimes.
most highly despotic states where decision-making authority is tightly controlled, authoritarian leaders cannot remain confident that their orders will be followed unless they preserve enough infrastructural capacity to enforce decisions. Again, strong authoritarian states freely countenance this tradeoff because maintaining the cohesiveness of the ruling elite is more important to regime survival than maintaining a virtual monopoly over decision-making.

Yet the concept of infrastructural power poses a number of serious problems. Given that Mann’s notion of infrastructural power conceptualizes the state as being *autonomous*, there are no bounds to what the state can and cannot do independent of society. Muck like Skocpol’s call to bring the “state back in” during the 1980s, the concept of infrastructural power thus risks kicking society back out. Prone to over-extension and thoroughly grounded in elite and institutional theories of political transformation, I suggest that we need to move beyond the elite level in order to better capture the way that infrastructural power both shapes and is shaped by preauthoritarian social coalitions. We know, for instance, that prior to the Arab Spring, scholars and pundits regularly conceptualized the ubiquitously acute reality of Middle East authoritarianism as a consequence of the state’s autonomy from society. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the state’s autonomy throughout the Middle East was routinely held up as being emblematic and causal of the region’s democracy deficit: It was, in many cases, *the whole point*. Yet we also know that in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, the empirical distinction between state and society was not as clear cut as some of the conceptual distinctions might indicate. After protests emerged, many state actors controlling vast swaths of the state’s infrastructural power simply melted away into the social “periphery,” refusing to either deploy or countenance wanton violence or otherwise actively switching sides from state towards society.
In this sense, the failure of the *Failed States Index* and the *Global Forecast Model* to underwrite an accurate teleology of the Arab Spring was in part problematized by the fact that they only focused on how elite factionalism could constrain the state’s despotic power, most notably the state’s party institutions. In contrast, I see political parties as reflections of incumbent capacity, which is in turn a reflection of despotic power. Parties preserve a great deal of institutional capacity to generate acceptable norms of political competition, and they are effective vehicles for distributing patronage through established institutional channels that bind authoritarian elites to the regime. But they are not institutions of top-down social enforcement. In many undemocratic regimes, they might more aptly be described as institutions whose primary prerogative is enforcing compliance among regime elites. Moving beyond the elite level, I aim to show how parties primarily extract political concessions from elites, particularly those in the opposition, not society. Thus, as institutions of horizontal (elite) but not vertical (social) enforcement, it comes as no surprise why parties are often so ineffective at extracting the quiescence of society or even the compliance of political elites during moments of momentous political upheaval. While the Arab Spring demonstrated the singular institutional weakness of party led regimes during outbreaks of mass mobilization and elite defection, Iran demonstrates the precise inverse of this dynamic: the institutional resilience of non-party regimes during moments of mass political upheaval.

Thus, in keeping with my overall argument challenging the invariance of theories of single-party strength, an empirical test of this very dynamic began playing out in the streets of Tunis and Cairo in late 2010. Although such a theoretical discourse can seem crude given the scores of lives already lost and the countless others that risked everything in the face of overwhelming odds, the analysis presented here attempts to contest the heretofore taken-for-granted and
neglected way in which social forces have facilitated the breakdown of authoritarian rule and contested the institutional hegemony of dominant single-party regimes. In cases where authoritarian collapse never occurred, such as Iran, my primary theoretical argument regarding ruling party weakness is thus most emphatically challenged by the empirical observation that the very social coalitions that precipitated authoritarian collapse during the prerevolutionary period are the very same postrevolutionary factions that remain most threatening to the regime. The regime’s failure to accede to party-based competitive politics reflects the underlying strength of those very social coalitions. From a theoretical standpoint, this basic empirical reality also demonstrates that parties are not always the institutional apex of an authoritarian regime’s staying power, and factionalism can persist in tandem with authoritarianism so long as more robust sources of the state’s infrastructural control constrain the ambit of competitive electoral politics and its potential to be channeled into a bottom-up challenge.

While both regimes had displayed an impressive ability to endure—with a combined lifespan of over eighty-years of uninterrupted authoritarian persistence. Scholarship produced on Tunisia, for instance, tended to refer both to the systematic demobilization of society as well as the strength of the state and its infrastructural networks in deadening any sign or even potential of political opposition.\footnote{Bellin (2005) and Brownlee (2004), for instance, discuss the exceptional role played by coercive institutions and the iron will of incumbent autocrats to repress society throughout the Middle East.} Mass quiescence was further occasioned not just by state capacity to use violence, but also by Middle East autocrats’ willingness to deploy it.

Yet contrary to theoretical expectation, Tunisia proved to be among the weakest authoritarian regimes in recent memory. While an apparent bout of astonishment might accompany this ostensibly grandiose claim, consider the following. The regime and its attendant Neo-Destour (ND) ruling-party had an aggregate lifespan of over fifty years, and it was a consummate
example of a preponderant single-party regime that had demonstrated an uncommon institutional resilience to survive for decades without any meaningful social opposition.\textsuperscript{185} It was therefore not only \textit{durable} in terms of its total lifespan of forty years, but it seemed to be inordinately \textit{stable} as well. Whereas even similarly dominant single-party dictatorships such as Hafez al-Assad in Syria or even personalist rulers like Saddam Hussein faced serious internal social opposition in the form of mass mobilization, Tunisia had seemingly cowered the opposition into mass quiescence. Given that cross-national comparative studies have steadily demonstrated that personalist regimes like Sadaam Hussein’s Iraq have the longest lifespans of any type of authoritarian rule, and that single-party dictatorships come in at a close second,\textsuperscript{186} Tunisia’s resilience was thought to be all the more remarkable.\textsuperscript{187}

This lead scholars to dourly deduce that the state’s ability—or perhaps more accurately elite actors’—to manipulate the state’s infrastructural power vis-à-vis its hegemonic party structure was largely responsible for enabling regime continuity. That Tunisia was well-known for having a comparatively weak military, largely due to incumbent autocrats’ desire to purposely weaken its ability to pose a challenge to ND leadership, only seemed to reinforce the idea of a hegemonic party state that was adept at both avoiding and resolving crises that were only episodic to begin with.\textsuperscript{188} Scholarship quite plainly held Tunisia up as the pinnacle of single-party persistence because the lack of any elite opposition tended to radiate in a top-down fashion and further dampen any potential for bottom-up challenges through the aegis of a reform or democratic movement.\textsuperscript{189} And any social conflict that Tunisia did exhibit was restricted to palace intrigue

\textsuperscript{185} This point is certainly debatable, but a Tunsissan expert I am most certainly not.
\textsuperscript{186} Single-party regimes are the most durable hybrid regime type in terms of electorally competitive authoritarian countries. Thus, if we introduce the added variable of competition, personalist regimes would not be included.\textsuperscript{187} Geddes’ (1999) study is perhaps the most prominent and oft cited among comparativists in this respect.
\textsuperscript{188} David G. Ortiz for instance, dubs Tunisia as one of a number of “highly autocratic but militarily weak regimes.” See Ortiz (2013): 97.
\textsuperscript{189} Brownlee (2005)
among elite actors, specifically between the erstwhile ruling autocrat Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who initiated the coup that ousted Bourguiba from office in 1987. As another scholar put it in lamenting scholarly the failure to apprehend pent-up social discontent in Tunisia, “of all Arab countries, Tunisia was believed to be one of the least likely to experience such a massive uprising.”190

While it has many merits, the authoritarian persistence literature has tended to treat the limited success of democratic movements during the Arab Spring as proof positive that prior theoretical assumptions regarding the robustness of authoritarian rule were essentially correct. Yet such striking divergence between theoretical expectation and empirical observation challenges such assumptions not only of the Middle East’s assumed exceptionalism or the alleged apathy of its publics, but for the purposes of this dissertation, the supposed singular institutional resilience of authoritarian ruling parties and the regimes they purportedly gird together.

Rival Explanations

Dan Slater and Joseph Wong have argued that the primary preference of authoritarian incumbents is to stay in power, not necessarily to remain authoritarian.191 According to Slater and Wong, authoritarian rulers can willingly countenance the prospect of democratizing, even from a position of exceptional strength, if they are confident that they can win elections and preserve stability in an ensuing democratic state. In their analysis, authoritarian strength simply refers to elites’ perceptions of their party’s ability to win elections, or what they refer to as “victory” and “stability confidence” (2013: 717). But they note that authoritarian rulers will only follow

190 Cavatorta and Haugbolle (2012).
191 Slater and Wong (2013). Lai and Slater (2006) also discuss first order preferences of authoritarian regimes.
this path if they believe they have already passed the “apex” of their power. As they readily realize, this implies a problem, if not an outright paradox. On the one hand, authoritarian rulers will only concede democracy if they are reasonably certain in their own capacity, and that of their party’s, to garner substantial and majoritarian electoral support under fully democratic conditions, to wit, a democratic regime. On the other hand, they must openly perceive that the pinnacle of their power has lapsed. Thus, they will concede democracy to stay in power, but only if they remain convinced that their political prospects would be comparatively equal to or better than it is under an authoritarian government.

The dynamic that Slater and Wong present runs contrary to much of the accumulated wisdom on the causal impact of ruling party strength on authoritarian survival, but it seems to muster necessary empirical support through a number of cases they examine in the authoritarian world. They also offer a predictive model for their theory, arguing that countries like Singapore, Malaysia and China are particularly ripe for conceding democracy. Yet what is perhaps lost in this counterintuitive chronicle of autocratic elites’ willingness to countenance democratic transition is that it risks ignoring enormous ideological and economic investments that often bind many of the top cadre of elites to the authoritarian regimes they command. By assuming that authoritarian regimes are inherently inclined to acquiescing unilateral control of the regimes they run seemingly violates one of the more fundamental theoretical propositions scholars of comparative politics have argued for in recent years: revolutionary regimes born of violent and protracted ideologically based conflict rarely relinquish the reigns of state control to democratic challengers.\(^{192}\)

\(^{192}\) Levitsky and Way (2013) make such an argument here, and reemphasize and reiterate the point regarding revolutionary regimes’ capacity to resist such challenges.
Farideh Farhi and Daniel Brumberg have described just a dynamic, whereby underlying normative ideological commitments and investments in the economy would be threatened if not entirely erased by conceding democracy without a fight.\textsuperscript{193} Given that Iran has no political parties or other institutional capacity that would provide it with the necessary confidence that it could credibly contest and win elections in an ensuing democracy, it is unlikely that such a scenario of “conceding democracy to thrive” could ever be obtained.\textsuperscript{194} Perhaps more importantly, given the clerical elites’ penchant for engaging in acts of electoral irregularity that are widely believed to have played a decisive role in the 2009 presidential election, there is little evidence that the ruling elite has any “victory confidence” in their electoral viability in any presumptive transition to democracy. Perhaps most important is the fact that the Islamic Republic already enjoys a dynamic whereby contentious politics means that although Iran has truly competitive elections, it does not have truly democratic ones. Because presumptive candidates for political office must pass a litmus test demonstrating their commitment to the perpetuation of the current clerically dominated system, the Iranian regime already enjoys substantial regime confidence in its ability to limit incumbent confidence to democratize the system. As I have argued, such perspectives fail to apprehend institutional and comparative differences among countries. The ability of reform and democratic movements to leverage their electoral viability and achieve “victory confidence” within the framework of authoritarian institutions depends on the presence of party structures, of which Iran has none. Again, revolutionary regimes such as the Islamic Republic prove especially adept at nipping the institutional bud of party politics before such problems emerge.

\textsuperscript{193} Brumberg and Farhi (2016).
\textsuperscript{194} Slater and Wong (2013)
Although resting on ideological arguments against democratic transition have historically been especially risky empirical propositions, the experience of revolutionary regimes again challenges conventional wisdom most proudly and dramatically. Beyond the demonstrated weakness of single-party authoritarian incumbents during the Arab Spring, it is considerably less frequently mentioned that the only two regimes in the region that were not seriously challenged were both post-revolutionary states—Algeria and Iran.\textsuperscript{195} In the Islamic Republic, conceding democracy would also entail the abrogation of official state doctrine—Guardianship of the Jurisprudent (\textit{velayat-e faqih}), which constitutionally codifies the primacy of the Supreme Leader in Iran’s institutional pecking order. For Iran’s elites, countenancing such a radical change is tantamount to apostasy and heresy, and has cultivated an inclination on the part of conservative elites to constrain—via the institutional purview of the Guardian Council—the political and electoral viability of such oppositional challenges. Given that electorally viable candidates in Iran must pass a litmus test by the Guardian Council if they are to stand for elected office, their first order requirement is to demonstrate their ideological suitability with regard to the state’s overarching revolutionary ideology—Islam. Payam Mohseni, in reiterating this ideological dynamic, states that “the minimum requirement to partake in the political game or the “‘authoritarian bargain’” of the Islamic Republic is to accept the legitimacy of this supreme veto player—the fundamental position of the \textit{velayat-e faqih}.”\textsuperscript{196}

As others have argued, and as I have non-controversially concurred, postrevolutionary factionalism made party construction and an entirely untenable proposition for authoritarian elites in Iran. This empirical fact can is most emphatically seen in the dissolution in 1987 of the only centralized political party in the Islamic Republic’s history- the IRP (Islamic Republican

\textsuperscript{195} Levitsky and Way (2013).
\textsuperscript{196} Mohseni (2016): 41.
Party). Yet I argue that such inter-elite discord is a broader by-product of pre-revolutionary legacies of factionalism: prerevolutionary social coalitions morphed into post-revolutionary faction.

The attitudinal mechanism mentioned in chapter one that links subjective perceptions of elite fear to objective actions on the part of the clerical elite can be most clearly and dramatically be seen in their inability to willingly countenance continued factional bickering during the period between 1979-1987—the era under which Iran had a centralized ruling party. Yet as the only official ruling party in the postrevolutionary regime’s history, Ayatollah Khomeini ultimately disbanded the IRP due to the party’s inability to address underlying political quarrels in social, political and economic policy. As scholars of comparative politics and authoritarian institutions are always quick to point out—and as the Iranian regime’s actions emphatically demonstrated—since the purpose of party creation is to resolve inherent problems associated with sustaining elite collective action, the Islamic Republic’s response therefore demonstrated the precise opposite of theoretical expectation and long-standing empirical experience: party destruction. Additionally, because the postrevolutionary state had already dispensed with its most strident political critics shortly after the revolution—particularly leftist and Marxist oppositional forces—there was little need for allowing the party to continue if it was only exacerbating, not solving, factional politics. This dynamic is perhaps the most damning case against ruling party strength in the authoritarian world, since it not only challenges how party creation can intensify preexisting political cleavages, but it also shows how factionalism solved them.

In his comparative-historical study of authoritarianism, Jason Brownlee examines divergence in the institutional capacity of authoritarian regimes—specifically ruling party strength—to

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overcome problems associated with elite collective action.\textsuperscript{198} Among his cases, he examines Egypt—which stands as his durable case of authoritarianism—and Iran, which is his fragile and negative case. Yet it was ultimately Egypt—a durable preponderant single-party regime that had demonstrated a seemingly robust capacity to endure for decades of uninterrupted authoritarian rule—that collapsed despite the presence of any prior factional conflict. This is significant, for Brownlee—in line with traditional perspectives of authoritarianism—suggests that factionalism is the single greatest threat facing single-party rule.\textsuperscript{199} Yet it was Iran, his negative case of authoritarian durability and the only regime in his study that lacked political parties altogether, that has proved to be the most resilient. Given that party strength was his independent variable, it is particularly perplexing as to how Brownlee could justify placing Iran as his fragile case when it not only lacks any political party structure, but it’s politics are defined by the very causal factor he suggests makes authoritarian regimes most susceptible to democratic transition: non-party factionalism.

I suggest that the failure of Brownlee’s study to withstand empirical scrutiny reflects a more basic failure to distinguish between the fundamental institutional sources of authoritarian strength. Rather than tempering factionalism and witnessing its defeat through the support of a ruling party, authoritarianism in Iran persisted \textit{in spite of the absence parties} and \textit{despite the presence of endemic factionalism}. In line with my broader argument, I suggest the bridling of factionalism is more effectively established as a result of antecedent conditions that preceded the inauguration authoritarian rule. I therefore see the threatening legacy of competitive prerevolutionary contentious politics in Iran as directly and more forcefully influencing the postrevolutionary formation of factional politics. This includes the attitudinal inclination of

\textsuperscript{198} Brownlee (2005).
\textsuperscript{199} Again, Huntington (1968) was one of the earliest to point this out, although it has quite obviously been ubiquitously reiterated as the central defining feature of authoritarian parties.
clerical elites to sacrifice the despotic power of the state represented by a ruling party—in favor of a infrastructurally stronger one—reflected by more powerful but unelected institutions. These organs of authoritarian power preserve the capacity to actually coerce elite actors as well as broader societal ones. While ruling parties are effective at compelling the former, they have demonstrated a far weaker capacity performing the same with the latter.

While many studies have highlighted the “byzantine” and “dissonant” structure of the Iranian state, surprisingly few studies have noted the problem Iran presents for current theories of authoritarian durability and contentious politics in authoritarian states, and still fewer have explored the crucial distinctions between authoritarian factions and parties and how such differences shape the long-term viability of incumbent rule. Thus, the majority of research on Iranian factionalism and authoritarian durability has been almost exclusively descriptive. Empirically rich as it is theoretically lacking, his long-standing research tendency has taken the form of describing the ideological orientation of different groups or examining how contentious factional politics impacts the struggle for institutional power in Iran. While students and scholars of comparative politics have learned much from the political science literature on Iran, they have gleaned considerably less from its potential theoretical contributions.

For example, Mehdi Moslem’s impressive and nuanced treatment of contentious electoral politics in Iran is perhaps one of the more profoundly illuminating empirical studies of factionalism since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Yet, despite its tremendous empirical contribution, it otherwise fails to contextualize Iran within any comparative theoretical

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200 Chehabi (2001) and Harris (2010) are two examples, although Harris’s study offers a more nuanced treatment of Iran’s “byzantine” structure. But because Harris is a sociologist conducting fieldwork in Iran, his concerns were more empirical than theoretical and dealt with social and economic policy in the Islamic Republic, not necessarily overarching theoretical issues related to authoritarian persistence.

201 Brumberg (2001).

202 Moslem (2002).
framework. One of the primary points of the book is to explain why Iranian factionalism persists side-by-side with durable authoritarianism, yet Moslem fails to offer any comparative or theoretical account of why this is so. Other than discussing its institutional idiosyncrasies, Moslem leaves unelaborated any theoretical or comparative examination as to how the absence of political parties informs this dynamic, or how factionalism has histrionically been antithetical to authoritarian rule. This has the unfortunate and surely unintended consequence of situating Iran as an exceptional and *sui generis* case, which precludes the possibility of comparison. Because it stands as a strictly empirical work of Iranian factionalism, moreover, any theoretical insights a reader might have gleaned from Moselm’s ideas would fail to be absorbed into larger bodies of comparative historical work. This perhaps represents a fundamental blind spot in area studies and country analysis and explains why publishers so often seek comparative studies steeped in theory. Simply put, Moslem’s empirical analysis fails to properly elaborate how the regime’s authoritarian institutions fit within the broader field of comparative-historical studies or the more narrow theoretical scope of authoritarian durability.

**Forecasting**

Although ambiguity is inherent to prediction, one of the methods forecasters utilize to reduce randomness is by drawing on well-documented empirical findings from disciplinary social science. Referred to methodologically as independent variables or theoretically as causal mechanisms, these factors are thought to be among the most important empirical phenomena preceding and presaging momentous transformational change. In the social sciences, they are among the robust explanatory sources for retrospectively explaining the processes that have provoked dramatic political change. But since forecasters are concerned with projecting into the
future rather than explaining the past, retrospective explanation holds little appeal other than as a potential causal determinant within the larger framework of a predictive model. This is part of the allure of path dependent analysis in comparative politics, which traces how seemingly minor events can yield specific historical trajectories that produce “predictable patterns of reaction and counterreaction.” More broadly, comparative historical analysis exhibits much of the same research focus, attempting to draw causal inferences through the ‘explanatory’ logic of history. The principle methodological burden for both research traditions is ultimately empirical. How well does theoretical expectation ultimately reflect empirical observation? Yet, since dramatic political change often emerges suddenly and with little advance warning, how do forecasters cope with such uncertainty?

Indeed, one of the most serious impediments faced by forecast practitioners is the creation of statistical models that can identify what students and scholars of comparative politics alike call “critical junctures” and “critical thresholds” — or watershed historical moments with potentially transformative effects that can decisively shape future political outcomes. Critical junctures are a robust source of prediction for forecasters because they are thought to be precursor events to even larger episodes of dramatic political change, such as civil and inter-state war, major economic downturns, or the serial collapse of authoritarian regimes. Globally disruptive events that exhibit a strong ripple effect — such as the spread of mass-movements across borders or the spread of democratization in a temporally and spatially contemporaneous fashion — are particularly appealing to social scientists because they reveal how the mechanisms of globalization and processes of democratization can either impel or encumber both states and the social movements within them.

204 Slater and Simmons (2010).
205 Przeworski (1986).
Yet it seldom recognized that while political forecasts make predictions, the scholars who design them make the methodological decisions that determine their accuracy. Political forecasting is therefore not just an objective outcome of what many practitioners of cross-national quantitative studies believe to be the methodological hallmark of prediction: quantitative analysis. It also results from what many scholars of global and comparative politics see as the defining methodological trait of in-depth empirical study: qualitative analysis. Thus, the popular perception that qualitative research is merely a ‘competitor’ to quantitative studies is mistaken since it is by definition one of its key features. It is precisely with the benefit of social science hindsight that such events can offer forecasters theoretical foresight to render sufficiently informed predictions of potential political outcomes. Thus, the political processes that critical thresholds allows forecasters to operationalize how these large-scale bandwagon dynamics can shape future

Yet qualitative research rarely endeavors to predict political phenomena. As the preferred methodology of area and regional experts, qualitative analysis generally aims for internal validity, whereas the scholarly ambition of quantitative experts is achieving external validity. The primary difference between the two concerns the degree to which a theory is generalizable. Internal validity refers to hypotheses testing within the sample under investigation: if a theory remains valid across all cases under review by a researcher, it is said to be internally valid. By comparison, a hypothesis is deemed to be externally valid when it has been proven to be correct even in out-of-sample cases not under consideration by the researcher. Simply stated, an externally valid hypothesis achieves a higher level of generalizability than internally valid arguments. Yet why did so many forecast fail to anticipate the very type of phenomena they were designed to predict? And why have almost all of the theoretical and methodological tools
available to regional experts and forecast practitioners similarly fail to explain why the Arab
Spring emerged at all? Unfortunately, we know precious little about why forecasts failed or why
theories of authoritarianism erred. This requires an abiding attention to many of the
methodological and theoretical decisions that collectively inform the generation of forecasts
models and the construction of theories that inform Middle East scholarship. The accuracy of
pre-protest forecasts attempting to predict the prospects for movement mobilization has largely
escaped empirical and theoretical scrutiny.

Scholars of global politics have historically exhibited apprehension about the potential
benefits of theoretical insights generated from the study of the Middle East. Because the region
was deemed to be uniquely resistant to democracy, theories developed by scholars of the region
were considered to be ‘contextual’ and thus not theoretically generalizable.206 By contrast,
specialists of global politics have been equally uneasy about importing theories from a region
that was thought to be too exceptional in its normative orientation towards democracy, leaving
little room for the region to inform broader theories of authoritarianism.207 Given that theoretical
expectation has been most severely challenged and upended by the Arab Spring, it provides a
welcomed opportunity to give voice to the unfortunate silence that has characterized the
“exceptionalist” discourse on contentious Middle East politics. This is for three primary reasons.

First, of all previous waves of global democracy, only the postcommunist states in Eastern
Europe exhibited any uniform pattern where popular mobilization played a part in democratic
transition.208 Thus, public quiescence, not popular protest, has tended to characterize the global
spread of democracy throughout history. Democracy during the third-wave of democratic

206 Haklai (2009).
207 This is a claim leveled primarily by scholars of cross-national statistical research.
208 McFaul (2002) termed the postcommunist revolutions as the “Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship,”
whereas others see the postcommunist revolutions as a continuation of the third-wave. Bunce (2003) notes that the
most successful transitions to democracy in the postcommunist context began as a result of mass protests.
transition was mostly driven by elite settlement, or what scholars have called elite pactings. That the bubbling of protest, initially perceived to be local in impact and minor in scope, would spread beyond national borders and threaten rulers throughout the region, challenges theoretical expectation of the region’s enduring authoritarianism.

Second, the literature on authoritarianism has overestimated the power of the state while strongly underestimating the role of social forces in facilitating authoritarian breakdown. Most studies of Middle East authoritarianism primarily focus on vertical threats to authoritarian survival: those that emerge from elites within the regime itself. Much of the accumulated theoretical wisdom suggests that the single most important factor underpinning authoritarian strength is the cohesion of the ruling elite. Recent events in the region point to an opposite dynamic where horizontal threats, or those radiating upwards from society, as being the primary force challenging authoritarian rule.

The third limitation is parallel to the second: theories of democratization remain excessively elite centered in their focus. The Failed States Index reinforces this point. While scholars of global politics and specialists of the Middle East have increasingly recognized that much of the literature on the region was characterized by an explicit elite-centered and institutional bias, much of this scholarship has not contested many of the theoretical claims generated in that literature. Much of the work on global authoritarianism has profited disproportionately from the experience of the Middle East and North Africa before the Arab Spring, yet much of that literature has been contradicted in its aftermath. The Middle East, long lamented as being singularly defiant in its normative orientation to democracy, surprisingly defies many of the theoretical and empirical assumptions about how and why authoritarian regimes collapse.
Chapter 4

Divided Yet Durable: Authoritarian Persistence in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Introduction

The curious thing about revolution, as many scholars have noted, is that although the conditions for mass political disaffection are relatively widespread, successful revolution is remarkably rare. Theoretical expectation has tended to reinforce this basic empirical reality. The forecasts identified at the outset of the dissertation reflect how prevailing wisdom on revolutionary upheaval is rarely predicted with any level of political accuracy by forecast practitioners. Because instances of revolutionary social mobilization are so uncommon—and rarer still in cases such as the Arab uprisings where mobilizational spillover propelled political instability across a major world region—such thought has naturally come to inform scholarship on revolutions.

At the same time, given the centrality that elites play in holding authoritarian regimes together through processes that sustain elite collective action over the long-term, forecasters have tended venture their short-term theoretical bets on the more probabilistic outcome of authoritarian durability, as opposed to the less probable outcome of authoritarian breakdown. Perhaps more perplexingly, the literature on Middle East exceptionalism has still been unable to explain even retrospectively how such a counterintuitive event emerged in the absence of any prior tangible manifestation of mass discontent. It is therefore not surprise that sociologist Charles Kurzman once remarked that we should not necessarily be surprised in the inability of forecasters to

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successfully anticipate the very phenomena they are most “eager” to predict, because protesters themselves rarely believe in the chances for movement success.\footnote{210 Kurzman and Hasnain (2014): 239. Kurzman’s primary thesis regarding revolutionary unpredictability is most aptly summarized in his study of the Iranian revolution. See Kurzman (2004).}

This chapter is no different. In the following pages, I examine why contentious prerevolutionary politics—led by the coalitional strength of an antiauthoritarian democratic movement—inevitably cultivated postrevolutionary political factionalism. As discussed in earlier chapters, the political conditions that currently bestride the Iranian system are paradoxical both from a standpoint of theoretical expectation and accumulated empirical evidence: the regime has remained remarkably resilient despite the fact that postrevolutionary politics in Iran is characterized not only by mass disaffection, but also by mass elite factionalism. Given that Iran is a postrevolutionary regime steeped in the contentious politics of revolutionary mobilization, such experience should presumably augur well for social forces and make the regime particularly susceptible to a potential counterrevolutionary movement. Moreover, the regime’s seeming inability to consummate and centralize its rule through a ruling political party runs contrary to expectation on not only the durability of revolutionary regimes,\footnote{211 Levitsky and Way (2012) are particularly adamant about this.} but of the durability of authoritarian regimes more generally.\footnote{212 This point is beyond contention.}

The basic problem I have identified in this dissertation is not one of scholarly quiescence but of empirical absence. Few postrevolutionary regimes born of sustained, ideologically based mass mobilization have experienced processes of statemaking where revolutionary leaders who invariably institutionalize their rule fail to institutionalize party rule. The primary reasons single-party regimes have demonstrated that they are the most durable form of competitive authoritarianism is because they have shown to be the most effective authoritarian institution for
obtaining mass loyalty among state and society. Through processes that incentivize loyalty such as the distribution of patronage and the mass following that comes with party institutionalization and the convoking of elections, state dependence has generally been seen as best fostered by a centralized ruling party.

I offer no prescriptions for why the Iranian revolution occurred, nor is it my purpose to add to the already crowded and well-documented literature that has addressed the structural, social and political forces that generated mass discontent and allowed for the success of the revolution. The masterworks on the Iranian revolution require little in the way of additional theoretical insight or empirical observation. The primary purpose of this chapter is, however, to offer an account of how factional, non-party competition became nested within an institutional architecture that challenges many of the aforementioned expectations regarding the regime’s antithetical institutionalization. Such a counterintuitive experience further reflects how and why the social forces that gave rise to postrevolutionary authoritarianism are the same ones that constrain the state’s capacity to establish the praetorian political order so often seen in such regimes.

**Prerevolutionary Mobilization and Postrevolutionary Clerical Consolidation**

The mass revolutionary mobilization that toppled the shah was not only startling simply because it occurred at all, but especially striking for how it occurred. As Charles Kurzman has noted, the bandwagon effect that successful revolutions impel mobilized numbers during the Iranian revolution rarely seen in world historical terms. Whereas the Russian and French revolutions involved roughly one percent of the population actively mobilizing against the state, there were episodes of popular protest during the Iranian revolution where ten percent of the entire of

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213 Charles Kurzman (2004) is just one instance of a “revisionist” work that has garnered widespread praise.
population was mobilizing against the state.\textsuperscript{214} The mobilizational momentum created by opposition to the shah is thus comparatively unheard of in modern revolutionary history. Despite the shah’s use of intermittent violence and his later prevarication over how to precisely deploy it, the revolution in Iran showed how repression can be as likely to abet increased mobilization as it is generally considered to thwart it.\textsuperscript{215} In tandem with protesters, mass political-economic strikes began emerging across the country, which as Nikki Keddie argued, demonstrated the “total opposition to the regime” by showing how it spread to “new classes of people.”\textsuperscript{216} The practical outcome of the willingness of state employees to strike en masse was that it crippled the economy and robbed the regime of its primary source of revenue—oil. Critically, the strikes would not end until the end of the revolution, interrupting patronage distribution structures and rupturing elite collective action and any remaining loyalties political elites might have maintained towards the regime.

With massive countrywide strikes, unprecedented popular revolt in the streets, and elite defection throughout the ranks of his most trusted authoritarian institutions, the revolutionary situation had reached a critical and “conjunctural”\textsuperscript{217} moment. When the revolution’s spillover quickly achieved the critical revolutionary threshold that “precludes reviving elements of the previous” regime, the shah saw the writing on the wall and was forced to flee the country.\textsuperscript{218} But the decisive death knell for the shah had already been laid when the military began experiencing massive elite defection upon the return of the charismatic spiritual leader of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. The crowd that received Khomeini upon his return at the airport

\textsuperscript{214} Kurzman (2004). It has not gone without notice in the Iranian revolution or the Arab uprisings that protesters lacked access to many of the social media and electronic technologies that some have argued makes protest more likely.\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{215} Francisco (2005): 60. The “strength through brute repression” thesis has been one of the enduring mainstays of Middle East exceptionalism and regime durability. See (Bellin) 2004, for instance.

\textsuperscript{216} Keddie (2006): 233.

\textsuperscript{217} Mahoney and Goertz (2006).

\textsuperscript{218} Brumberg and Farhi (2016): 5.
was estimated to be more than three million. From the airport Khomeini was taken to a cemetery where he paid his respects to protesters that had been killed as result of oppositional activity. While the postrevolutionary regime later gave a figure of 60,000 dead as a result of anti-shah protests, it is generally believed to be closer to 3,000. In comparative-historical terms, the revolution was therefore surprisingly non-violent.

Meanwhile, with the shah’s ouster, Khomeini began in earnest convening and constructing revolutionary organizations tasked with addressing both incipient and lingering problems associated with cultivating political consensus among the various coalitions. These early revolutionary organizations and the politicking that occurred between the coalitional representatives offers a direct window into how the regime’s overlapping and hierarchically defined institutional architecture came to fundamentally reflect the ideological factions that ultimately were responsible for their creation. Importantly, the revolutionary councils were comprised of both secular and religious coalitional elements, reflecting the regime’s comparatively quick pivot to a postrevolutionary trajectory of factional and not necessarily coalitional politics. In the heady period following the shah’s fall, Mehdi Bāzargān was made prime minister and head of the interim revolutionary government, and his liberal but lay coalitional backers were intent on constructing a regime based on Charles de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic. Bāzargān was a classic manifestation of the array of ideological forces that grew out of the revolutionary movement. Contra Bāzargān, Khomeini and his devotees were keen to immediately institutionalize their vision of velayat-e-faqih, or rule of the jurisprudent, more popularly known as the Office and position of the Supreme Leader. The push for this vision more than anything else would be more responsible for establishing the fundamental

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authoritarian character of the regime because it would institutionalize the position and unchecked veto authority of the Supreme Leader within the Iran’s revolutionary system.

Still, Bāzargān was seen as the lesser of two evils and he was viewed as an acceptable compromise and coali tional bulwark against leftists like Ayatollah Taleqani who espoused more radical redistributive policies and who were more strident still in their opposition to clerical rule.\footnote{Keddie (2006): 240-241. Dabashi (2007): 164.}

Yet Bāzargān’s and his cohort of support remained intransigent in their opposition to the institutionalization of clerical rule. Realizing that such an institution would be unelected, unaccountable and thus fully authoritarian, his lay conception of how the postrevolutionary regime should be constituted was therefore anathema to Khomeini’s vision of clerical rule. Bāzargān felt that the executive should be elected and accountable to the public, lest the will of the revolution be washed out and wasted on just another embodiment of the shah’s dictatorial rule. Bāzargān was fully invested in western ideas concerning the technocratic bureaucratization of the state based on experts and professionals, not an unelected cadre of clerical elites.\footnote{Moslem (2002): 25.}

The political impasse between Bāzargān and Khomeini reflected more fundamental problems associated with how differing visions of state formation would influence why the new revolutionary regime would pursue a process of political institutionalization that would be utterly antithetical to rule by authoritarian fiat, on the one hand, and elected and accountable democratic rule, on the other. The hybridization of the regime was underway through coalitional pacting and elite settlement. Realizing the threat to the potential Islamicity of the regime that might be posed later—he need only look to the recalcitrant leaders of the secular factions and their opposition to his vision of religious rule—Khomeini’s reached a basic compromise with Bāzargān on a
popular referendum that would decide the very fate of the country. Khomeini’s plan for the plebiscite was originally to ask the public yes or no on the question of whether or not they preferred an Islamic Republic. Bāzargān rejected this phrasing and petitioned for a tertiary addition to the plebiscite, one that asked voters if they wanted a Democratic Islamic Republic. Khomeini’s proposal to Bāzargān was met with disdain and public recriminations. Khomeini contended that it simply attempted to mimic western modes of governance, and he adroitly calculated that voters were loathe to accept anything that could be seen as a continuation of the shah’s reign. By giving Bāzargān a seat at the table, Khomeini had calculated that his lay intellectual support would be no match for his, and more importantly, he had been able to sideline and splinter the remaining leftists and Marxists that might otherwise succeed in challenging his vision of clerical rule. On April 1, 1979 the referendum was held. Out of an electorate of twenty-one million people, twenty million voters—or 99 percent—cast their ballots in favor of the Islamic Republic.

This process deadened any remaining leverage the left might have had regarding their ability to use the rhetoric of democracy to contest the clerical establishment’s growing grip on constitutional authority. Although it can be looked at as an embryonic exercise in budding democratic politics, the crafting of the plebiscite did not take place in a social or historical vacuum. While Khomeini pursued an objective that would net him the biggest constitutional gains by sidelining his greatest threats and handpicking weaker ones to placate his democratic foes, the question posed to voters gave them little choice for any alternative. As the vote tally demonstrates, the electorate was never going to cast a ballot against one of the central revolutionary coalitions that had put them in the position to choose some form of government

other than shah. At this point, and as Ayatollah Khomeini and his coalition correctly concluded, it wasn’t so much who the public was voting for so much as who it was voting against.\textsuperscript{225}

As Ervand Abrahamian has pointed out, the post-referendum process quickly morphed into an institutional assault on the left.\textsuperscript{226} Khomeini and the new revolutionary regime wasted little time in exerting their new fangled authority as both democrats and clerics by institutionalizing religious guardianship of the state. Many of the most famous political institutions in the Islamic Republic—particularly those vested with unelected constitutional authority—can trace their origins back to the aftermath of the public referendum. Mehdi Moslem has termed the religiously inspired institutions of the state that are vested with virtually unlimited oversight powers as “religious supervisory bodies.”\textsuperscript{227} The victory in the referendum foreshadowed the creation of such “super-bodies”\textsuperscript{228} such as the Assembly of Experts (\textit{Majles-e-Khobregan}), which was established in August 1979 but not fully institutionalized until 1982. The primary purpose of the Assembly is to select the Supreme Leader from within its own ranks, and in the case of incapacitation or an inability to successfully carry out the duties of the office, the Assembly is also invested with the prerogative to remove the Supreme Leader. As it currently stands, the Assembly has never questioned nor has it ever removed a Supreme Leader. The Assembly’s membership consists of theologians (\textit{Mujtahids}) that has variously fluctuated between 82 and 88 members since its creation. Although the Assembly is popularly elected, all members must be vetted for suitability by the equally if not more powerful Guardian Council.

The election for the Assembly’s initial delegate cohort was held in August 1979. Given the benefit of retrospective hindsight, it is unsurprising that the elections produced yet another

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\textsuperscript{225} Dabashi (2007): 164, is particularly strident in making this point
\textsuperscript{226} Abrahamian (2008): 163.
\textsuperscript{227} Moslem (2002): 33.
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid. Moslem also dubs them “super bodies” because they are hierarchically placed above democratic institutions.
electoral triumph for Khomeini and his backers. Out of 82 total candidates, 66 of them were estimated to be closely aligned with Khomeini.\(^ {229}\) The Assembly’s next charge was to help in the drafting of the revolutionary state’s constitution, which would fully enshrine clerical rule and permanently delimit the authority of democratic institutions.

In the quixotic euphoria of revolutionary triumph, the regime began establishing revolutionary courts with little to no due process to try, convict and summarily execute regime opponents. Marxists and leftists clerics were among the targets, but Pahlavi government officials and supporters found that the revolutionary state had little appetite to negotiate a pact with political adversaries that might constrain or even jeopardize the still shaky ideological ground the clerical establishment doubtlessly perceived they were barely clinging to. Although they had won a series of electoral victories, other revolutionary coalitions still presented an electoral if not an outright mobilizational challenge. Whereas electoral politics had served to establish the republican credentials of Khomeini’s burgeoning coalition, what were erstwhile allies were quickly transitioning into antiregime opponents. As all revolutionary regimes have been wont to due throughout modern history, once power has been consolidated and vested within the institutions of the state, political opponents are systematically expunged from the process of constitutional deliberation, which in the history of postrevolutionary Iran, was tantamount to statemaking. While such processes seem almost intrinsic to postrevolutionary political consolidation, it was never fully achieved partially because, as and Way have noted, attempts at ideological consolidation often abet armed counterrevolutionary movements\(^ {230}\) or as Stephen Walt has shown, revolutionary success severely increases the likelihood of interstate war.\(^ {231}\)

Wars permit revolutionary regimes to do things that regular authoritarian regimes are hard-
pressed to get away with. In the case of Iran, it led to the tangible institutionalization of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or *Pasdaran*), which continues to exist as a parallel institution of the armed forces that oversees and supersedes the authority of regular military (*artesh*). The IRGC predated any counter-revolutionary threats and was created in 1979 as a paramilitary adjunct to the imperial army. As an ideological force composed of regime loyalists, the IRGC acts as both a defender of the regime’s Islamic character as well as the regime’s most trusted coercive organ guarding it from domestic enemies and external threats. In line with Levitsky and Way’s contention that ideological armies are more institutionally insulated from threats that arise due to elite factionalism, some of the most committed and ideologically rooted adherent of the regime come from the IRGC’s command structure. Critically they remain outside the normal chain of military command and answer directly to the Supreme Leader, not the regular military. Along with other “parastatal” organs of the state, ideology has tended to act as sort of institutional glue that coheres elite collective action during periods of crisis that has otherwise proven to be fatal to many single-party regimes. Yet the IRGC is increasingly as well-know for its vast economic interests as it is for its traditional role as the ideological vanguard of the Iranian armed forces. As perhaps the most powerful infrastructural actor in the Iranian state, the IRGC has gradually garnered greater empirical scrutiny because of the ostensibly outsized role it plays in the Iranian economy. The parastatal institutions of the Iranian state have to a large degree been responsible for informing such perspectives.

**Parallelism: Iran’s Parastatal Institutionalism**

The term “parastatal” is an odd and somewhat ambiguously defined term in the context of formal authoritarian institutions. Given its especially ubiquitous usage among scholars of Iran, this

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remains curious. Scholars of Iranian politics have generally assumed that outside observers are able to automatically glean its meaning despite the fact that it is rarely defined. The Oxford dictionary simply defines parastatal as an institution that “has some political authority” that serves “the state indirectly.” On Wikipedia there is not a dedicated page to the term. Instead, a search query for “parastatal” redirects to a page for SOEs—or State Owned Enterprises—which is an entirely different definition than Oxford’s and still more different than within the context of Iran.

Although they are sometimes only loosely linked with the state, parastatal institutions in Iran often have far more authority that their more properly institutionalized counterparts, despite what theories of authoritarian institutions would seem to suggest. Developed in the aftermath of the revolution, parastatal organizations in Iran might be better defined as not just parallel and informally institutionalized political bodies, but as a whole parallel institutional architecture that has over time developed its own bureaucratic mechanisms and norms, or what one scholar more termed an entire “pseudo-state,” or a series of “banks, military firms, state-linked investment and holding companies, endowed foundations, [and] pension funds.”

These parastatal entities, according to Kevan Harris, resemble not so much a takeover of the state’s formal responsibilities, but reflect a systematic state practice by the Iranian regime to delegate its policy of increased economic decentralization to institutional actors in the private sector. For example, whereas some scholars see the IRGC’s extensive economic interests as a surefire sign of a creeping military takeover of the regime, Harris has argued that such views fail to take into account the parastatal institutionalism of the Iranian regime. As one of the central ideological and coercive support organs of the regime, the IRGC is well-suited to assume many

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233 Again, Iran poses the greatest challenge to conventional theories of authoritarian institutions not simply because it does not have political parties, but because it is a revolutionary regime where factions exist as substitutes for them.  
234 Harris (2013): 46.
of the responsibilities that would otherwise be delegated to fully private corporate interests. Because of its ideological and coercive prerogatives to defend the regime, the IRGC is ideally suited to benefit from the state’s extensive institutional tentacles that distribute patronage to key infrastructural actors and organizations within the state’s parastatal machinery. Scholars have tended to see the IRGC as a threat to the clerical elite because they conflate the IRGC’s economic power as an intuited manifestation of its political influence, and they thus fail to situate the state’s parallelism within the larger framework of authoritarian institutions in Iran. What economic power the IRGC preserves is a function of the state’s patronage network and its unique position as an ideological-military force. Harris therefore contextualizes parastatal networks not as growing economic threats to the regime’s despotic authority but as manifestations of its infrastructural control over state and society. The “commodification of bureaucratic privilege” is how Harris terms the state’s divestment of some aspects of social and economic policy to parastatal organizations, but it is an entirely Weberian euphemism for Huntingtonian notions of patronage. The difference in the Islamic Republic is that such patronage does not flow through a centralized political party with strong despotic controls but through a larger parastatal network with broader infrastructural powers.

Within the context of Iran’s formal structure, parallelism is best exhibited by the state’s institutional duplication. Redundancy in the Iranian system is largely predictable if one considers the political chokepoints necessary to constrain the authority of democratic institutions. In both theory and practice, popular sovereignty and democratic authority is delimited by the state’s more powerful authoritarian institutions. The purpose of the Guardian Council, perhaps the most

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235 Wehrey et al. (2009) is a good example of the perspective that sees the IRGC’s political influence as a function of its economic power.
236 Harris (2013): 63.
powerful political institution in the Islamic Republic, is to determine whether or not the laws passed by parliament are compatible with Shari‘a as well as to determine the suitability of candidates for political office. Such a litmus test severely constrains ideological opponents of the regime and forestalls electoral challenges to the conservative clerical elite.

This same process of inverse legitimacy can be seen in every major institution of power in Iran. The more infrastructurally powerful institutions are disproportionately vested with more political authority, and the ideologically buttressed nature of these institutions can be seen in their names and their higher standing in the regime’s hierarchical infrastructure: the Supreme Leader over the Presidency, the Guardian Council over the Parliament; the Expediency Council over both the President and the Parliament; and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a paramilitary adjunct to the regular military. While these institutions do not exhaust all the potential examples of parallelism in the Islamic Republic, they represent what Michael Mann and scholars following in his footsteps see as the most robust source of authoritarian power: infrastructural capacity. These parallel state institutions supervise and interpret laws passed by the parliament (Guardian Council), break legislative stalemates between the Guardian Council and the Parliament (Expediency Council), and establish the overall direction of the system and maintain ultimate authority over the armed forces (Supreme Leader). Therefore, power is distributed unevenly among state institutions and legitimacy is often derived in a circuitous and irregular fashion. This all combines to fashion an infrastructurally powerful state that is nonetheless constrained by the very social coalitions that gave rise to it. To the degree that infrastructural power in Iran abets the tenacity of its authoritarian institutions, bottom-up political pressures and systemic factionalism make the durability of its democratic organs equally robust.

237 This is of course outside the position of the Supreme Leader, which is a despotic institution.
As the IRGC’s creation demonstrated, Iran’s pseudo-state, or its network of parallel political institutions, emerged for a number of reasons having to do with the social coalitions that mobilized against the Pahlavi monarchy and the deep sense of distrust the emergent clerical elite possessed regarding the shah’s most powerful infrastructural bodies. Thus, rather than simply inherit the shah’s political institutions, the clerical elite presided over the construction of new institutions whose purpose was to circumscribe the authority of coalitional challengers. Rather than recruit new adherents to the regime’s cause or risk staffing old institution’s with potential loyalist sympathizers, the regime simply created revolutionary organs and put trusted elites with revolutionary credentials who would carry out the nascent state’s revolutionary vision.

The state’s broader parastatal network, or the pseudo-state, tangibly reflects Michael Mann’s definition of infrastructural power, or the state’s institutional capacity to enforce the decision of the central government. The Iranian regime’s infrastructural controls are entrusted almost entirely to parastatal institutions, which are the state’s authoritarian institutions. Mann’s notion of despotic power, which is executive capacity to render decisions absent consultation with other state institutions, is most aptly crystallized in the executive authority enjoyed by the Office of the Supreme Leader. Except for the despotic institution of the Supreme Leader, which is nevertheless constrained by factionalism rampant throughout the Iranian regime, almost all other institutions in the Islamic Republic that have strong infrastructural controls over state and society are those parastatal entities that operate with varying degrees of independence from the regime’s formal democratic institutions. This is in stark contrast to authoritarian parties, which are theorized to preserve strong infrastructural controls but have increasingly reflected a much weaker despotic capacity to coerce elites but not society at large.238

238 In addition to the absence of parties altogether in Iran, this is best reflected in single-party weakness during the Arab Spring.
Factionalized Party Politics

Unlike traditional authoritarian parties that are created as vehicles to sustain elite collective and obtain mass loyalty, the IRP (Islamic Republican Party) was never ideologically uniform. Along with the revolutionary courts and the Guardian Council, the creation of the IRP was ordered by Khomeini in February 1979, a period during which there was at least some lingering doubt over whether or not the revolution would succeed. Nevertheless, there are differing accounts of precisely when Khomeini authored its creation, with some arguing that he had mandated its establishment before he had even returned from exile in Paris\textsuperscript{239}, while others have pointed to its official promulgation as not occurring until shortly after his return to Iran.\textsuperscript{240} Still, in the heady days that bookended the end of the revolutionary mobilization and the nascent period of postrevolutionary political institutionalization, lingering uncertainty over the future precluded ideological domination because the clerical elite had yet to ensure their rule much less guarantee the victory of any of the coalitional forces that mobilized against the Pahlavi state, although it was a relatively safe bet to make at this point. Although it was primarily staffed with Khomeini supporters and was established as a venue to begin the incipient institutionalization of clerical rule, this did not prevent other revolutionary coalitions from influencing its deliberations. The problem for other ideological groups was that unlike the IRP and its Khomeinist backers, they lacked any large base of economic support. The bazaaris had already thrown their support behind Khomeini, and so while it was not ideologically homogenous, in its early days it was certainly a

\textsuperscript{239} Moslem (2002): 22.
\textsuperscript{240} Keddie (2006): 243-244.
hotbed of clerical support for the revolution. But given that Ayatollah Khomeini had personally ordered construction to ensure that *velaya-e-faqih*—or clerical rule—was codified into the constitution, this was unsurprising.

Once the clerical establishment had shown its ability to outmaneuver competing coalitional forces, they began using the IRP as an instrument to further their hegemony. But there were still instances that demonstrated the inherent uncertainty and endemic factionalism of early postrevolutionary Iran. For example, in an effort to gain curry with leftist groups that were wary of clerical power, Khomeini announced a ban on clerics from running for the presidency in 1980.241 Such coalitional bargains were part and parcel of the early period of the revolution when clerical power was still in doubt and coalitional groups had not yet made the full transition to becoming part of an entrenched factional opposition. That the IRP was itself a parallel political body that was not part of the provisional ruling government foreshadowed how clerical power would later be codified along a similar institutional trajectory.

There were four primary ideological coalitions that made up the IRP, although the terminology used to describe them varies widely. Empirical examination of factionalism in Iran is notorious for its analytically inchoate tendencies and its use of a whole series of modified descriptors to elaborate the ideological nuance of Iranian factionalism. Nevertheless, the four groups that constituted the factional makeup of the IRP are the theocratic left, the theocratic right and the republican left and the republican right. The two former camps simply refer to ideologically conservative and leftist groups among the clerical establishment, whereas the latter tandem refers to ideologically lay conservatives and leftists. Table 2 shows the IRP’s ideological makeup.

One of the biggest impediments to party consensus was the role of the state in the economy. Yet because of mobilization on another front—Iran’s eight-year war with Iraq from 1980-1988—party factionalism was tempered out of political necessity to galvanize political support for the war effort. Coupled with the charismatic leadership of Khomeini and his unrivaled ability to prevent upticks in factional conflict from getting out of hand, party politics during this period was comparatively tame until 1987. This is one the reasons why the literature on factional politics within the IRP has been a far less attractive object of analysis for scholars of Iran than non-party factional politics in post-Khomeini Iran: party politics had been bridled by Khomeini’s charismatic presence, and the modern era of current factional politics would not begin until Khomeini’s death in 1989.243

In the interim, in addition to differences in the economy, factional rivalries in the IRP began to intensify as the war effort stagnated in the late 1980s due to Iran’s virtual isolation in its bloody war with Iraq and the latter’s international support from countries such as the United States. Given the devastating toll the war had taken on the economy, intra-party politics raised

the acute specter of spilling over and negatively impacting the war effort and other vital regime interests, such as maintaining elite consensus during wartime. Political bickering became so severe that Khomeini publicly conveyed his position that he considered it to be a wanton and increasingly useless exhibition of dissent to the press and outside world. Given that authoritarian party politics meant that the IRP was virtually bereft of any political competition, there was paradoxically perhaps a better case to be made that if factionalism was something that would be willingly tolerated, the regime might as well consider multi-party politics. Khomeini finally concluded otherwise, deciding that the party had outlived its usefulness. If it was unable to solve basic factional disputes, it was devoid of any utility. Its original aim of institutionalizing clerical rule had been accomplished years ago, and the state had at its disposal an array of institutions that had demonstrated a much more robust capability to achieve the political objectives of the state while capably clamping down on public displays of factional dissent. In May 1987, the party was officially dissolved, ending the only era of centralized party rule and ushering in the current period of factional (non-party) politics.

As a revolutionary state that came into existence as a result of protracted, ideologically based social conflict, the Iranian regime’s distinctiveness begins with a bizarre constitution that is simultaneously among the most despotic and democratic social contracts between a state and its citizens in the world. Variously described as overlapping institutionally and fragmented politically, Iran’s constitutional arrangements have to a large degree been responsible for its seemingly endless labyrinth of political institutions, or what one scholar dubbed the “dispersed

domination” of some authoritarian regimes.  

While it has often been argued that the Iranian regime stands alone in the Middle East, if not the entire authoritarian world, for both the tenacity of its democratic institutions and the durability of its authoritarianism, I would suggest that any empirical novelty to be gleaned from the Iranian case has less to do with the persistence of democratic impulses among the public, but more to do with the absence of its proper institutionalization expressed and consummated by any political party structure. While democratic institutions and popular representation serve to reflect democratic practices among the citizenry, authoritarian impulses among the ruling elite continue to reflect the despotic character of the regime. Thus, although Iran has genuinely competitive elections, it does not necessarily follow that it has competitive political elites. Thanks to authoritarian institutions such as the Guardian Council, the Office of the Supreme Leader and the Expediency Council, Iran’s institutional structure is defined by a hierarchically defined pecking order where the political authority of democratically elected institutions such as the parliament and presidency is officially arrogated by its authoritarian ones.

As one scholar observed, unlike many authoritarian regimes, leaders in Iran do not have to resort to undermining or suspending the constitution in order to maintain authoritarian rule; instead, they draw inspiration from it. Whereas some authoritarian rulers arrogate unto themselves sweeping, extra-legal executive powers to increase the despotic power of the regime, Iran’s constitution makes licit the ability of unelected bodies to constrain the institutional prerogative of the state’s democratically elected political bodies. Thus, while the Office of the Supreme Leader and other authoritarian institutions are sometimes conceptualized as

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247 I am indebted, as are many scholars, to Joel Migdal’s notion of “dispersed domination” and “state-in-society” for making me rethink and resituate the comparative context of Iran’s institutional structure. 
248 Mohseni (2016) also mentions party absence, but Brownlee (2005) curiously does not or otherwise fails to situate how factionalism should predictably weaken the regime. This is particularly given Brownlee’s theoretical premise that relies on ruling party presence to promote authoritarian persistence.
consummate examples of the state’s predatory power—or what Michael Mann called the despotic power of states—in both theory and practice the ability of Iran’s authoritarian political bodies to supersede and supplant the authority of its democratic ones better reflects the state infrastructural capacity, or its ability to carry out its decision making authority via established institutional channels. Whereas a state’s despotic power is exercised unilaterally vis-à-vis autocratic fiat, infrastructural power in Iran is effectively invested and codified in the constitution. This has meant that Iran suffers from what many scholars have termed institutional duplication. Practically speaking, this has meant that for every popularly elected political body within the state, an overarching authoritarian architecture exists whose primary political purpose is served by constraining the representative branches of the government—or those institutions such as the parliament (Majlis) and presidency that are directly elected by the public. Authoritarian encroachment upon the institutional authority of democratic political bodies reflects how infrastructural authority in the Islamic Republic is divested in an inverse fashion compared to most democratic countries. Still, although the writ of democratic politics is subsumed by a fundamentally authoritarian political structure, the astonishing array of electoral surprises in the past twenty years poses a serious problem for theorists who see such episodes of contentious politics as exceptions to the Middle East’s fundamentally authoritarian rule. Like all electoral cycles in the current regime’s history, presidential elections are especially convenient vehicles for surfacing the existence and intensity of factional divisions.

Since the watershed year of 1997, elections in Iran have been characterized by a predictable pattern in which periods of democratic opening are seemingly nested within a larger process of

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249 For instance, see Kamrava and Hassan-Yari (2004).
authoritarian persistence. Despite having genuinely competitive elections, the Iranian public has not been able to translate public preferences for large-scale democratic reform into tangible political change the public has long pursued. To state the matter more succinctly, although Iran has genuinely competitive elections, it does not have genuinely competitive elites. The Guardian Council, one of the most powerful political bodies in the Islamic Republic, vets candidates for political office. The institutional logic behind this dynamic is to prevent the potential candidacy of any politician whose Islamic or revolutionary legitimacy is under question. In practice, however, the majority of candidates that are barred from running overwhelmingly come from the reform camp of electoral politics. This single institutional dynamic—the Guardian Council’s ability to block reform candidates from pursuing political office—more than anything else reflects the fundamental dichotomy and paradox the confronts aspiring democrats in Iran. Authoritarian elites thus have at their disposal a virtual armada of institutions that they wield to ferret out non-conformist candidates whom might reverse the revolutionary origins of the state.

Yet, while the strategic manipulation of the electoral process by authoritarian rulers in Iran has bended the democratic institutions of the state, it has nonetheless been unable to break them because of popular political pressure exercised at the ballot box. The following vignettes of factionalism serve to underpin how theoretical expectation is challenged by factionalism in Iran.

250 Schedler (2005) uses Tsebelis’s (1990): 5, concept of a “nested game,” which describes electoral politics in authoritarian regimes as a game that “is nested inside a bigger game where the rules of the game themselves are variable.” Schedler perhaps offers a more precise definition: “the game of electoral competition is embedded within the meta-game of electoral reform.” In a calculated move to avoid direct confrontation with the regime, the Iranian reform movement long ago adopted a democratization-by-reform strategy, or what one scholar refers to as a policy of “gradualism.” Gradualism sees the electoral process as a vehicle for slowly democratizing the regime. The electoral process is therefore “nested” within the broader game of political reform and democratization. For a brief discussion of reform gradualism, see Farhi (2005).
Vignettes of Electoral Factionalism: The 2013 Elections

The stunning presidential victory of Hassan Rouhani on June 14, 2013 was in many ways a surprise to even seasoned observers of Iranian factional politics. Just a week before election day, Rouhani found himself in a crowded electoral field of six candidates. The Guardian Council, the powerful political body mandated by the Iranian constitution to approve candidates for political office, had recently announced the official list of presidential hopefuls. Only two presidential contenders with reformist or moderate political leanings were approved: reformist Mohammadreza Aref and centrist Hassan Rouhani. Voter turnout was expected to be relatively lackluster, partially due to public perceptions of extensive electoral fraud during Iran’s 2009 presidential election. Viewed in the lingering context of 2009, public sentiment among the reformist cohort coalesced around the belief that candidates aligned with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei would invariably garner preferential treatment. Abetting these suspicions was a more widespread concern among the center-left that the Leader would simply not tolerate the election of a candidate from a moderate or reformist faction. According to this view, the democratic pretensions of the regime were dealt a devastating blow after the cycle of protest-violence following the “electoral coup” of 2009 (Farhi 2013), and the Supreme Leader was seriously pondering whether or not to fully consolidate authoritarian rule by swallowing the electoral process, and the remaining vestiges of democracy, whole. Compounding deep-rooted reservations over the sanctity of the electoral process was a more immediate political problem. The presence of two center-left candidates would split the reformist-moderate vote, setting the stage for a conservative victory and the further marginalization of the center-left. Because Iran’s tiered voting system requires a majority in the first round to avoid a runoff election, it was all the more unlikely that a splintered center-left would have the electoral support needed for an outright
victory. Even if Rouhani or Aref made it out of the first round, a runoff election posed the tantalizing prospect for conservatives to rally around one of their own against their reformist archrivals.

Yet as election day approached, it became increasingly clear that any comparison to 2009 was illusory. Instead, the watershed elections of 1997 served as a more fitting analog, when the watershed candidacy of popular reformist Mohammad Khatami surprisingly defeated the preferred candidate of conservatives and the Supreme Leader to assume the presidency of the Islamic Republic. Khatami’s election served as the ideological anchor of the subsequent movement for democratic reform, which heralded what most astute observers of Iranian politics see as the defining dichotomy of postrevolutionary factional politics in Iran.251

In an abrupt twist the week of the election, Mohammadreza Aref, one of two center-left candidates on the ticket, officially bowed out of the race. Two former presidents of the Islamic Republic—Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani—had orchestrated Aref’s withdrawal in an effort to consolidate popular support for the center-left behind one candidate. Aref’s exit prompted a palpable shift in Iran’s pre-electoral mood. Previously anemic estimates of voter turnout quickly gave way to a reenergized electorate encouraged by the prospects of a center-left coalition. With a late surge in popular support, Rouhani was able to leverage his newfound position as the sole standard-bearer of the moderates to win a stunning first round victory. Rouhani’s triumph also signaled a winning electoral gambit for the centrist-reformist alliance shepherded by Khatami and Rafsanjani. The consequences of the moderate-reformist coalition not only proved to be a remarkable political success, but it renewed interest in a stagnating presidential race by convincing an otherwise diffident voting public to once again

251 While such crude Manichaeanism belies the byzantine nuance of Iranian factional politics, it does serve as the ideological frame of how post-1997 politics became defined by Khatami’s electoral victory, as well as the subsequent failure of his reformist agenda to institutionalize fundamental political change.
engage the democratic political process. Despite widespread skepticism of pervasive electoral fraud in the last presidential election, factions were able to muster the necessary popular support by negotiating an eleventh-hour factional bargain.

Interestingly if not entirely ironically, in 1997 a strikingly similar accord was struck between moderate and reformist factions, allowing Khatami’s much heralded election to Iran’s presidency in spite of a similarly unpropitious political climate. Now, Khatami had returned the favor to Rouhani by robbing the field of a candidate that would presumably siphon away votes from his campaign. Before the 2013 elections, it was not an uncommon refrain among western and Iranian observers alike to conclude that genuine electoral competition in Iran had been “silenced” rather than merely “suppressed.” But by voting in relatively large numbers, Iranian citizens registered their commitment to ensuring the continued viability of the electoral process as the most important democratic institution in the Islamic Republic. As the center-left alliance showed, factional pacts can be a powerful catalyst for overcoming steep electoral odds in authoritarian regimes as much as democracies.

This brief vignette offers a prefatory glimpse into the central political dynamic that has most dramatically shaped the course of elite politics in postrevolutionary Iran: factionalism. Since the bellwether elections of 1997, politics in Iran has resembled what one scholar dubbed “factionalized authoritarianism”, a term that evocatively captures the Islamic Republic’s bizarre blend of authoritarian theocracy and republican democracy. Iran remains one of the few regimes in the world to be politically categorized not according to its structure of government but by the penchant of its elite class to engage in unbridled conflict. While this political proclivity is a de jure reflection of institutionalized party politics in democracies, it rarely is discussed or mentioned as feature of authoritarian factional politics. The image of factionalism as the sine qua non of Iranian politics would be incomplete without recognizing the profound influence of factionalism as a defining characteristic of the Islamic Republic's political landscape.

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non of contentious politics in Iran is not restricted to observers or specialists of Iranian politics. To fully appreciate this dynamic, and the way in which western media and governments frame contentious politics in Iran, another short vignette might prove useful.

When now president Rouhani traveled to America for the annual gathering of the United Nations in 2013, the New York Times prominently featured a series of articles exploring the first direct conversations between the presidents of Iran and the United States since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Characterizing politics in Iran as “factional warfare”, an unmistakable theme emerged from the Times’ account of Rouhani’s visit: how could the newly elected president credibly conduct bilateral negotiations with the U.S in the face of strident political opposition from Iran’s formidable bloc of conservative factions? Without the acquiescence of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, moreover, the newly minted president was largely perceived to be handicapped in his ability to pursue such a fundamental shift in Iran’s mostly cantankerous relationship with the U.S. Because the Supreme Leader is aligned with the more conservative factions in Iran’s body politic, and since he was widely known to have supported one of Rouhani’s presidential opponents, the Times’ questioning of Rouhani’s political authority fundamentally reflected the challenges presented by Iran’s bitterly divided factional environment. President Obama later echoed the Times’ skepticism in a television interview with the AP: “the way that the Iranian system works, he’s [Rouhani] not the only decision maker, he’s not even the ultimate decision-maker.” The Obama administration’s doubts were evidently based less on Rouhani’s ability to deliver on his campaign promise of “moderation and prudence,” but more on his perceived inability to overcome factional divisions at home and his subordinate position to the Supreme Leader. Despite the fact that Khamenei had already publicly

253 Quoted in the New York Times, 26 September 2013.
254 Quoted in the Associated Press, 5 October 2013.
backed Rouhani’s diplomatic outreach, the ever-present challenge of securing domestic political consensus among Iran’s warring factions loomed large for the American government and media.

Shortly after his victory, Rouhani adopted one of the post-election made by president Obama after his own unanticipated electoral coup in 2008: keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer. Having defeated senator Hilary Clinton in a bruising political primary, Obama offered her the plum position of secretary of state, often the most sought after appointment in an American president’s cabinet. Obama would later add a number of Republicans to his administration, deciding it better to have the opposition fomenting trouble furtively within his administration than publicly outside of it. Heeding this political dictate, Rouhani crafted a political coalition that brought previously obstinate critics of the center-left under his coalitional umbrella. While political recriminations from his conservative critics would be forthcoming, by establishing his own “team of rivals” Rouhani used the symbolism it evoked to temper conservative ire. In both 1997 and 2009, the center-left’s collective ability to forge a political consensus would have likely been foreclosed if individual candidates represented institutionalized political parties as opposed to uninstitutionalized political factions. The construction of a broad factional coalition that overcame steep electoral odds would have petered out had it not been for the ability of factions to improvise an electoral strategy that was able to circumvent the normative constraints posed by codified party bylines or constitutional provisions outlawing such boldly extemporaneous acts of political cunning. To be sure, while factionalism bestows the Iranian right with fundamental institutional advantages, such as the capacity to purge political opponents from running for office with relative impunity, institutionalized political parties would pose equally harsh constraints on conservatives themselves. Had Rouhani, Khatami or even Mousavi in 2009 been a member of the state ruling party, it would have been an
The act of political apostasy to rig an election through the aegis of the state ruling party, and it would be equally unthinkable that members of the state ruling party could force fellow party members to capitulate their positions on the electoral ballot in favor of their own. While such institutionalized politicking doubtlessly occurs within the ambit of democratic party politics, it is far more difficult in the presence of a single, authoritarian ruling party led by an incumbent autocrat with no other centers of institutional power. Uninstitutionalized factional competition in Iran most dramatically challenges both these dominant perspectives on theoretical but especially empirical grounds. Perhaps more importantly, these are the party dynamics that led Khomeini to ultimately disband the state’s ruling party—the Islamic Republican Party (IRP)—in 1987. This electoral legacy, itself a direct product of ideological dissonance among prerevolutionary political coalitions with differing visions of how state formation should proceed, illuminates why the specter of party politics proved to be such an untenable proposition.

The Factional Fix

“As Iran’s voters just showed they still believe the elected office of the president matters,” argued political scientist Farideh Farhi, “it was nothing less than a political earthquake.” Farhi’s comments were dispositive of—if not an outright confirmation for—the extraordinary resilience of democracy in Iran. For many western observers, particularly the fevered echo chamber of Washington media and punditocracy, the death knell of democracy in Iran occurred in June 2009, following the post-election crackdown on the Green Movement. Remaining wary of gleaning too much from Rouhani’s election, such skepticism was based on the now largely discredited claim that Rouhani had been wistfully ushered into office by the Supreme Leader. That the Supreme Leader would fully author the ascendance of an ideological adversary to the

255 Quoted in Inter Press Service (IPI), 15 June 2013.
highest elected office in the Islamic Republic—albeit with dour reluctance—was beyond the pale for even the most conspiratorially inclined elements in Iran—but not Washington. Rouhani’s election would serve as an unmitigated disaster for the Iranian right, and would serve to further splinter the already fragmented conservative wing of Iranian politics. Of course, Rouhani’s election did just that, allowing him to not only capture the debate about the creeping surveillance state and the unctuously imposed social restrictions Iranians have grown tired of, but to force the hand of the Supreme Leader into accepting popular demands to redress them. Yet the ether of Washington politics continued to engage such unfounded contortions, venturing their collective bets that a Kafkaesque cabal of elites aligned with the Supreme Leader had installed Rouhani. As electoral underdogs, it was ostensibly inconceivable that a factional coalition comprised of ideological adversaries of the regime could capture the office of the presidency in a “closed” authoritarian country.

To be sure, such feats of electoral engineering remained squarely within the toolkit of the regime, given the purported machinations that surrounded the reelection of president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009. Yet there was little evidence or logic to support claims of a Faustian bargain in 2013. It was one thing for an authoritarian regime to prevent a political adversary from assuming power; it was something else altogether to rig an election in favor of your opponent. Whereas in 2009 a there was an abundance of empirical evidence to prop up such claims, there was precious little in the way of credible proof, beyond wild conjecture, to invite such a comparison in 2013. To be sure, such speculation tended to almost exclusively emanate from well-known opponents of diplomacy in the West that treated Rouhani’s victory as a pyrrhic one. But when it became increasingly clear that the Supreme Leader had not manufactured the election, an equally apocryphal claim began to emerge. Although Rouhani had indeed been
elected and not selected, then the crippling sanctions regime—particularly those of the nuclear variety—were largely responsible for his victory. The Iranian economy was in dire straits, the argument went, which played right into one of the key campaign promises of Rouhani. Iranians might have voted Rouhani into office, but sanctions drove them to the polls.

Rouhani wasted little time after the electoral dust had settled before making good on his promise of moderating Iran’s domestic and foreign politics. Iran’s freefalling currency and the increasing difficulty of its banking sector to circumvent the intricate web of global sanctions seemed to redound to Rouhani’s favor. Yet a poll taken directly after the election contradicts this popular claim. According to the poll, just two percent of Rouhani’s supporters identified his ability to mitigate sanctions as the reason they voted for him.256 Another telling statistic concerns Iranian attitudes towards the nation’s nuclear program and the influence sanctions had on voting behavior. While roughly half of the Iranian electorate believes sanctions have had a negative impact on the economy, just seven percent voted for Rouhani based on economic issues. This tends to reinforce two important points. First, polling has consistently shown overwhelming public support for the country’s nuclear program—despite the bite of sanctions. Second, although sanctions have undeniably impacted the Iranian economy, the same poll shows that over half of Iranian voters believe that Iran can avoid sanctions without relinquishing key aspects of the nuclear program. Although sanctions have damaged the Iranian economy, they have also inured the electorate to their costs. Thus, the popular perception that sanctions can act as an effective inducement by influencing voter preference is contradicted by Rouhani’s election. Instead, sanctions seemed to have had a countervailing effect; voters had become both used to

the pang of sanctions while at the same resentful of them. In short, as an election year issue sanctions registered a negligible effect on the voting behavior of Iranians.

While Iranians did not express overwhelming concern with sanctions or the economy, the same could not be said for the conservative elite. Iranians have bore the brunt of sanctions for decades, but only until very recently did the economy begin to experience a precipitous decline. Because fixing the Iranian economy is as much a matter of internal mismanagement during the Ahmadinejad years as it is external sanctions resulting from the nuclear program, conservative bickering increased sharply under his presidency. Disastrous economic policies coupled with a feckless inability to seriously address them precipitated conservative disillusionment with his administration. Moreover, Ahmadinejad’s repeated attempts to arrogate unto himself constitutional authority reserved for other branches of government led to a split within the conservative establishment. Among those who publicly broke from Ahmadinejad was conservative stalwart Rafsanjani, one of the most powerful politicians in the Islamic Republic. That segments of the ruling class began to abandon Ahmadinejad in 2009 speaks to the divide within the Iranian right over the economy that continues to define the current state of contentious factional politics. While sanctions played a role in exacerbating cleavages among the ruling elite, Ahmadinejad’s calamitous policies had already fractured conservative unity before the most crippling nuclear sanctions took effect. Thus, by leveraging conservative infighting to his advantage, Rouhani’s unanticipated victory drew on the fickle nature of factional politics in the Islamic Republic.

Indeed, what was most remarkable about Rouhani’s victory was the sheer unpredictability of it. Unlike Khatami’s landslide election in 1997, Rouhani narrowly avoided a second round runoff. Had he not, Rouhani could have easily succumbed to a concerted effort on the part of
conservatives to ensure his defeat in the second round. Had reformist Mohammadreza Aref not been asked to withdraw his candidacy by Khatami and Rafsanjani, it would have drained the Rouhani campaign of critical reformist support and would have failed to swell the ranks of Rouhani supporters. And had Rouhani not campaigned on a platform of relaxing tensions with the west, his pathway to the presidency would have been implausible given the catalyzing effect diplomacy had in compelling broad segments of state and society to intervene on his behalf.

Factionalized Diplomacy

As the world awaited the coda of negotiations between Iran and the west, the irony of Rouhani’s election was that the Iranian president’s institutional authority to unilaterally craft foreign policy was severely constrained by other actors within Iran’s national security apparatus. Yet it was an unheralded moderate president, not the comparatively unencumbered Supreme Leader, who presided over the most tectonic shift in Iranian foreign policy since the founding of the Islamic Republic. To be sure, the factional pact that elevated Rouhani to the presidency would have been impossible without the fulcrum that Iranian society provided. But the election of Rouhani represented not so much the revival of Iran’s much heralded reform movement, or the revitalization of its political progeny the Green movement, but the continued perseverance of democracy writ large. While talk of reform has historically served to harness the mobilizational potential of the electorate, it has also been a flashpoint for conservative recalcitrance and manipulation.

Since 1997, conservatives have won two presidential elections. In 2005, the absence of a center-left candidate on the runoff ballot hampered voter turnout and led to reformist fence-sitting. Allegations of electoral irregularities, from voter suppression to regime support for
conservative candidates—plagued the 2005 presidential elections. In institutional tandem with the Guardian Council, conservatives successfully eliminated the viability of reformist candidates by either disqualifying them before the election or wielding the power of the state to provide preferential access to their conservative opponents. In 2009, electoral improprieties are widely believed to have played a decisive role in the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The state’s predatory behavior was on full display as it violently quelled what turned out to be the largest protests in the history of the Islamic Republic. In both cases, the regime strategically manipulated the institutional power of the state to tilt elections in favor of conservatives. As the key institutional safeguard of the regime, the Guardian Council acts as the regime’s front line defense against political candidates they deem unfit for office. Yet the sanctions regime has achieved something that conservatives have largely failed at: they have helped cultivate broad consensus throughout Iranian state and society in opposition to what is perceived as a wanton and indiscriminate financial blockade of the country. Yet it is often lost among observers unfamiliar with the fluidity and sheer unpredictability of Iranian politics that had Rouhani not been able to arrive at a factional bargain with other members of Iran’s political elite, the electorate would have never had the opportunity to elevate Rouhani to the presidency in the first place. While parties can perform some of these electoral functions in democracies, party-based politics requires a greater degree

Yet the popular appeal of using sanctions as a mechanism of both economic enforcement and political inducement continues to hold significant sway. The common yet purely hypothetical argument that the ruling elite in Iran is inordinately concerned with the long-term economic stability of the Islamic Republic—largely because of sanctions—has been a convenient justification for rationalizing their punitive nature and countenancing their indefinite application.
Although there is ample evidence that suggests economic decline can be especially debilitating to authoritarian regimes, this is not always the case. Given that Iran is a rent-seeking state by virtue of its outsized oil economy, it preserves the economic capacity to govern with relative impunity through repeated domestic and international crises. And it has done so. The rapid spillover effect of the Arab Spring toppled a series of predatory states throughout the Middle East. Yet none of these regimes had access to substantial oil rents that could be used to subsidize vast patronage and apparatus networks that penetrated both state and society. And while international sanctions have denied Iran access to the international banking system and global financial markets, the Islamic Republic is one of the few states in the world to be guided by autarkic economic principles. Yet the Iranian state’s policy of self-sufficiency is as much a reaction to international sanctions as it is a guiding tenet of the state’s revolutionary ideology. In order to move Iran away from autarky and towards economic and political integration with the international community, it is critical that the sanctions regime is balanced by an equally formidable incentives regime. That the United States has backed off its demand that Iran permanently halt all nuclear enrichment has only helped Rouhani sell the interim deal at home. But for a permanent deal to take shape, real sanctions relief must be abetted by the promise of entry into the world financial system. Any deal that abrogates Iran’s access to world financial markets will likely be considered a redline for the Islamic Republic. Without such guarantees, an otherwise fractured ruling elite would become galvanized by the lack of a genuine incentive structure, collapsing elite consensus and potentially forcing both Rouhani and the Supreme Leader to reconsider their support for diplomacy. The despotic power of the state, represented by unelected clerical rule, has for the moment been upended by the tenacity of social forces. But if president Obama fails to secure a lasting a deal with Iran and continues with the status-quo of
sanctions, the Iranian right will begin anew a campaign to undermine Rouhani’s already fragile position.

Perhaps most importantly, Rouhani’s election has demonstrated yet again that the state’s endemic factionalism makes it virtually impossible for one group to achieve hegemony of the political order. By dint of sheer historical persistence and the coalitional foundations that spurred prerevolutionary protest in 1979, post-revolutionary regimes founded on protracted, ideologically based social conflict carry with them the social bases of support to extract concessions from the state, even in the context of authoritarian politics. Yet unlike revolutions in China, Cuba or Russia, where one party achieved virtual hegemony of the political order and effectively institutionalized mass support in the form of a centralized ruling party, in Iran neither of these dynamics is obtained. While clerical rule was institutionalized in Iran, the theocratic elements of Iran’s leadership were unable to expel other ideological opponents from influencing the ensuing democratic character of the nascent regime’s institutions.²⁵⁷ Top-down revolutions like those in post-Ottoman Turkey and Egypt are far more likely to lack such mobilizational sources of social power because the revolutions that spurred them were elite initiated and political power was fully centralized within the office of an incumbent autocrat.

Institutional divergence in Iran relative to much of the postcolonial, postrevolutionary, and authoritarian world lies not in the mere fact that authoritarian politics is electorally competitive, but rather that the political power exercised by society and oppositional elites occurs through the aegis of factionalism. That the mobilizational potential of Iranian society continues to cleave at the authoritarian impulses of the regime—despite society lacking a proper institutional venue for officially challenging regime rule—contests the standard script of ruling party strength. Whereas

²⁵⁷ Obviously, this is most conspicuously illuminated by the name of the country—the Islamic Republic of Iran.
Ruling party strength is a theory incumbent elites, Rouhani’s election and the story of Iranian factionalism continues to be a story of oppositional challengers.

**Ruling Party Strength**

Ruling parties have told us much about the institutional sources of authoritarian strength and weakness, but they by definition cannot tell us about the dynamics of factional politics where ruling parties fail to exist at all. And while the literature on parties can tell us why an authoritarian regime would willingly countenance their creation, they cannot tell us why they sometimes don’t. Moreover, given that ruling parties have been well documented as the apex of an authoritarian regime’s institutional muscle, theories of ruling parties lack the analytic and explanatory power necessary to illuminate how authoritarian durability is obtained in the absence of parties at all. Finally, traditional theories of authoritarian institutions are almost exclusively voluntarist and thus guided by top-down theories of contentious politics. Yet Iran challenges intuited thinking on all grounds and in all its forms: it has neither a ruling party to sustain authoritarian rule, nor does it have a political system on the verge of collapse, since factionalism is considered to be antithetical to authoritarian persistence. It is thus not the counterintuitive absence of parties that makes Iran such an empirical outlier, but also the counterintuitive presence of factionalism. Thus, while parties bring about mass participation in politics, they are by definition helpless to prevent mass mobilization against the regimes they represent. State differently, while parties are ideal institutions for sustaining elite collective action, they are equally ill-suited to prevent outbreaks of contentious collective action vis-à-vis episodes of democratic mobilization.
As mentioned in chapter one, while ruling parties provide authoritarian incumbents with an effective channel for distributing patronage and other nonmaterial perquisites of power to elite allies during periods of normal politics—they are often ineffective at cultivating elite loyalty during periods of political crisis. As the Arab Spring showed, divergence in institutional strength could not be predicted or even retrospectively explained by ruling parties. Single-party regimes during the Arab Spring proved to be the most vulnerable type of authoritarianism whereas monarchy proved to be the most durable. A brief comparative vignette of Egypt, Tunisia and Iran is called for.

As detailed in the preceding chapters, Iran’s departs from established theoretical expectation in that two paradoxical features of its political system suggest it should be particularly prone to collapse: the absence of political parties to safely convene political competition and thus convoke elections, and the presence of factionalism as a de facto substitute to accomplish these aforementioned objectives. Yet as I argue, ruling party strength is a function of a state’s despotic power as much as scholars are wont to suggest it is a function of its infrastructural power. To the extent that the primary function of a ruling party is to bring together the greatest number of elites within the organizational orbit of the regime, a ruling party by definition lacks basic infrastructural or coercive controls to compel social forces from engaging in cycles of urban-based democratic mobilization. *Ruling parties, then, prop up incumbent rulers and the regimes they run by obtaining elite loyalty, not mass consent.*

While it is doubtless that authoritarian parties produce loyal mass constituencies that are made possible through patronage and other material rewards associated with party membership, and while this surely creates lasting patterns of dependence on state services throughout society—these are ultimately weak sources of state power because they lack the basic infrastructural goods
to compel elite as well as social actors, and this does not simply refer to an authoritarian regime’s relative will to crackdown of protesters or their inordinate tendency to profligately subsidize military expenditure.

Political scientists have long characterized regimes such as the Islamic Republic as straddling the political boundary between dictatorship and democracy. As neither classic ideal type accurately depicts political systems that incorporate major features of authoritarianism and democracy, scholars have dubbed such countries as “hybrid” regimes. Perhaps the single most important feature separating hybrid regimes from fully closed authoritarianism is the specter of competitive party politics and the potential for regular electoral turnover, a virtual impossibility in dictatorships. The Iranian regime, therefore, and perhaps more conspicuously than any of its hybrid counterparts, clearly reflects the fundamental conceptual distinctions between hybrid and non-hybrid regimes. Consider the name of the country—the Islamic Republic of Iran—and how it plainly incorporates the basic authoritarian-democratic dichotomy between unelected clerical rule and popularly elected rule.

Yet the question to be posed was this: why are some countries able to construct broad based ruling coalitions that temper outbreaks of elite factionalism, further preventing the type of Hobbesian anarchy that elite factionalism was so renowned for hastening during the third-wave of democracy. The democratization of the global South is as well-known for being prompted by processes of elite fragmentation as it was by the inability of military rulers in Latin America and Southern Europe to establish a coalitional basis for cultivating elite cohesion, to wit, a ruling

258 Bellin (2004)
259 Ibid.
party. Yet we find the precise inverse of this dynamic in Iran: authoritarian persistence \textit{in spite} of a ruling party and \textit{despite} and endemic elite fragmentation and political factionalism.

Whereas there is little doubt that ruling parties perform critical functions for authoritarian rulers, and while overwhelming empirical evidence cannot be overturned by a single disconfirming case, I see theoretical expectation as incomplete. As many scholars have argued, state institutions are far better cultivators of the tangible mechanisms of authoritarian durability—such as strong coercive institutions and enforceable tax regimes—than party institutions that often serve the narrow interests of incumbents by enhancing their despotic fiat.

Although the institutions of authoritarian rule are generally inherited rather than constructed, this is not always the case.\textsuperscript{261} Post-revolutionary states have long been recognized as generating the most stable and enduring systems of authoritarian rule in the world (Huntington 1968 Slater). Post-revolutionary states are ideally suited for creating regimes based exclusively on non-party factions, and social revolutions in particular best exemplify this dynamic since they displace existing class and political structures through the popular mobilization of factional coalitions, making institutional inheritance a virtual impossibility.\textsuperscript{262} Although elite defections force incumbent rulers to think intuitively about how to best preserve power during periods of instability, post-revolutionary regimes are well-situated to think counterintuitively about these questions during regime formation.

Because the clerical leadership in Iran was deeply mistrustful of the shah’s political institutions, they divested the state of his institutions and created a revolutionary statecraft that systematically divided the “infrastructural power” of the state among the key factional stakeholders of the revolution—the clerical elite. The infrastructural power of the more secular

\textsuperscript{261} Geddes (2006), Levitsky and Way (2012).
\textsuperscript{262} Parsa (2000).
and formal institutions, such as the presidency and the parliament, were invested with disproportionately less power and capacity to pursue fundamental shift in the state’s political orientation, whereas both informal, formal and more religiously inspired institutions of the state, such as the Office of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, monopolized much of the regime’s infrastructural power and thus its capacity to alter via unilateral fiat or institutional consultation with other authoritarian institutions the direct of the regime. Whereas revolutionary regimes in China, Vietnam, Russia and Cuba centralized their ideological basis for ruling by creating robust ruling parties, Iranian elites harnessed the power of their revolutionary coalitions to sustaining elite collective action even amid outbreaks of contentious politics. As surely as some authoritarian states have institutionalized party competition after regime formation, revolutionary states like Iran have proven to be equally adept at nipping the institutional bud of competitive party politics in favor of candidate based political competition, or factionalism. Succinctly stated, strong prerevolutionary factions tended to produce strong postrevolutionary coalitions. Yet these coalitions never crystallized into the consummate institution that most theories of strong state authoritarianism suggest: a ruling party. Instead, the prerevolutionary coalitions that mobilized against the shah morphed into postrevolutionary institutions of authoritarian rule, reflecting the mass politics and coalitional legacy that first upended the shah’s regime.

Yet, because those coalitions were strengthened by collective mobilization against the shah’s personalism, such coalitions cracked amid the competition to establish the fundamental ideological basis and coherence of the nascent revolutionary state once his regime had been vanquished. The mass based coalitional legacy of prerevolutionary Iran has paradoxically proven to constrain the clerical elite’s capacity to dominate its postrevolutionary factions.
The presence of revolutionary violence\(^{263}\) and the systematic political purges of factions belonging to different oppositional groups not only permitted the consolidation of clerical power, but it hardened the appeal of and mitigates the impunity with which revolutionary leaders have been willing to countenance the deployment of wanton violence. While Iran’s ensuing eight-year war with Iraq produced a generation of war-weary veterans, it also produced a pool of next-generation leaders steeled by the experience of both revolutionary struggle and international war.\(^{264}\)

Conclusion

That so many people participated in the revolution, coupled with the fact that early episodes of state violence seemed to indicate a combustible mix of coercive capacity and the shah’s willingness to deploy it, in retrospect is somewhat surprising given that such a circumstance never defined the broader contours of prerevolutionary contentious politics. Despite his willingness to initially use brute repressive force, the persistence of protest coupled with the shah’s seeming political procrastination proved to only encourage mobilization. During the period from October 1977, the date when protesters were first killed in revolutionary activity—until February 1, 1979, the date of Khomeini’s return from exile—the Pahlavi state could have conceivably deployed the full arsenal of its coercive force before it became rife with defection. Despite the internal power struggle among the various coalitional forces and the role of ideology as a galvanizing impetus, collective mobilization against the shah momentarily masked these abiding and entrenched differences.

\(^{263}\) Iran’s revolution was comparatively non-violent compared to most social revolutions from below. For instance, see Parsa (1989).

\(^{264}\) Levitsky and Way (2013).
As Parsa, Mohseni and others have shown\textsuperscript{265}, the subsequent institutional strength of postrevolutionary authoritarianism is more durable when the elite coalitions that constitute them are girded by underlying ideological convictions. But this is far from being a deterministic, path-dependent process. The process by which prerevolutionary coalitional politics produced postrevolutionary factionalism, leading to the paradoxical absence of political parties altogether from Iran’s political system and the counterintuitive presence of political factions, was certainly not predetermined, but perhaps predisposed the state to such endemic elite conflict. Once the specter of the shah’s “sultanistic”\textsuperscript{266} rule had been removed, the common figure that had heretofore galvanized the collective strength of coalitional forces began to presage the utter precarity of achieving elite collective action in the postrevolutionary political order. After his departure, it was becoming clear that the various ideological forces that helped spark the mass uprising against the shah were increasingly beginning to see fissures develop in their otherwise unified coalitional front. Nevertheless, the ultimate ideological underpinning of the victorious revolutionary faction—the clerical ruling elite—proved to be a stable basis for cultivating elite collective action despite the absence of the perennial institution of authoritarian rule—a centralized ruling party.

From the perspective of comparative politics, Misagh Parsa has demonstrated that the Iranian military was not fated to fissure simply by dint of mobilizational pressures or the shah’s incapacity to decide on how he would counteract them. Instead, Parsa shows that authoritarian regimes that staff the ranks of the military with regular citizen conscripts are fundamentally more vulnerable to defection because soldiers continue to maintain close ties with the civilian

\textsuperscript{265} Levitsky and Way (2013).
\textsuperscript{266} Linz and Chehabi (1998).
population. By comparison, when the military is insulated from the population at large, they are more likely to remain neutral or defend the state during periods of political crisis. In the context of Iran, Mohseni has argued that such insulation is most effectively achieved by what he calls “ideologically buttressed veto players,” or authoritarian institutions where an overarching ideology of the state informs both its creation and its perpetuation, particularly amid the most threatening episodes of contentious politics. Whereas the Pahlavi state’s prerevolutionary regime lacked such a dynamic, the clerical elites’ postrevolutionary state was well-equipped to channel such a social force into a broad based factional coalition. But for the moment, the soon-to-be revolutionary regime needed to establish an institutional basis for cultivating elite collective action when the ideological foundations of the regime were still in question.

Perhaps most perplexing from the standpoint of comparative politics is how the shah’s personalist monarchial regime collapsed as a result of mass revolt. Personalist regimes are exceptionally durable, and last on average longer than any type of modern authoritarian regime. The only type of authoritarianism with comparable lifespans are single-party regimes, which are entirely different since they convene competitive elections and have the potential for electoral turnover, unlike fully closed, personalist authoritarian regimes. Moreover, because such regimes are typically forced from office as a result of exogenous shock generally due to war, the Pahlavi monarchy paradoxically displayed an inherent vulnerability reminiscent of single-party dictatorships during the Arab Spring. From an empirical perspective, this can be seen in the Pahlavi’s states ability to sustain elite collective action during periods of relative quiescence, but also in its failure to sustain it during periods of political crisis.

\[268\] Mohseni (2012).
\[269\] Personalist regimes are in fact closer to totalitarian type regimes than they are to competitive authoritarian regimes that condone electoral competition and often have competing centers of political power.
\[270\] Geddes (1999).
Revolutionary ideologies and communal ties differ widely in terms of their appeal to successive generations of political elites. The de facto abandonment of state sponsored communism was easier to stomach by the ruling elite in China partially because the attraction of any ideological commitment to a state-led economy was easily outstripped by the comparatively robust economic opportunities presented by a capitalist market economy. But for the clerical ruling elite in Iran, abandoning the ideology of the state, and the shared commitment of revolutionary struggle forged during the formative years of the revolution, would be tantamount to countenancing apostasy, something which the more conservative elements among Iran’s ruling elite have time and again stressed.\textsuperscript{271} Communal ties and the bonds of religion have proven to be exceptionally durable mechanisms for producing cohesion among the key clerical elites and solving collective action problems, and the presence of ideology has likely compensated to some degree for the absence of centralized ruling party. Again, Iran’s historical experience and its institutional abandonment of parties have posed a severe and clear challenge to theories of ruling party strength and regime cohesion.

Nevertheless, the ideological bonds that gird elites to the regime wax and wane as the passage of time eclipses such normative commitments that are often forsaken for economic ones. As prerevolutionary leaders are gradually replaced by a new generation of elites that had little to no experience in the revolutionary struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy, revolutionary states such as China have shown a willingness to surrender core ideological commitments in favor of ensuring the continued viability of the existing order.

States and the regimes that run them are reflections of the societies they attempt to rule. This dissertation has aimed to spotlight how the staying power of authoritarian regimes can paradoxically be strengthened by many of the factors that are presumed to weaken them. In this

\textsuperscript{271} Takeyh (2006).
present study, I examined how authoritarian institutions that have long been presumed to strengthen authoritarian regimes—specifically centralized ruling politics—can in fact pose serious short and long-term threats to regime resilience. At the same time, as a study whose primary focus was to challenge theoretical expectation—the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as single-party regimes during the Arab Spring—paradoxically proved to be the most willing and unexpected participants. Although factionalism has long been a theory of elite incumbents, contentious politics in Iran and the Arab world has increasingly been the story of challengers.
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