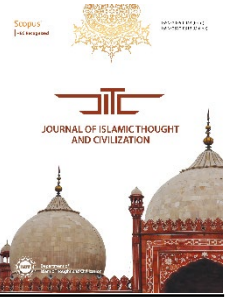
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Title: **Shiʿi Clerical Authority and Its Role in Iran's Political Landscape (1941–2024)**

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Shiʿi Clerical Authority and Its Role in Irans Political Landscape (1941 –2024)

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Abstract

This study explores the transformation of Shi'a clerical authority in Iran, examining how clerics have evolved from religious leaders to prominent political figures with enduring influence. By tracing the historical development of clerical authority from the occultation of the last Imam to the present, the research highlights the financial mechanisms that sustain the marjaʿ (leading cleric) in contrast to state-backed Sunni religious structures. Through qualitative analysis, such as historical context and case studies like the 2009 Iranian election and the Green Movement, the study reveals how clerics navigate political pressures, sometimes in tension with the regime. The findings indicate that while the Islamic Republic officially endorses clerical authority, the clerical elite—particularly in Qom—operates with considerable independence, bolstered by financial autonomy and skilled political communication. This research contributes to understanding the nuance between the Republic of Islam and the clerical establishment, suggesting that the economic and strategic positioning of Shi'a clerics ensures their lasting influence in Iranian religious and political spheres.

Keywords: Iranian Politics, Marjaʿ Authority, Qom Clerical Leadership, Shi'a Clerics, Velayat-e Faqih

Introduction

In the Middle Eastern political context, Shi'a clerics have emerged as key actors with substantial influence.[1] The growing academic interest in Shi'a religious authority and its historical evolution contributes to the community,[2] and the resurgence of Shiʿism in the region underscores the

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[1]Etan Kohlberg, "Imam and Community in the Pre-Ghayba Period," in *In Praise of the Few. Studies in Shiʿi Thought and History* (Brill, 2020), 187–212.

[2]Joseph Eliash, "The Ithnā'asharī-Shī'ī Juristic Theory of Political and Legal Authority," *Studia Islamica*, 29, (1969): 17–30, https://doi.org/10.2307/1595085.

significance of their role.[3] While some states have tried to eliminate religious symbols from their politics, others have experienced religious dominance, for example, in Iran since the 1979 Revolution. After nearly six decades of semi-secular governance, Iran has transformed into one of the modern world's nations where the *ulama* (religious leaders in the Islamic context) hold power. As explained, the founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, viewed the ulama as the principal driving force behind this transformative process.[4]

From the Islamic governance perspective, after Prophet Muhammads death, the Islamic community was governed by four of his companions – the Rashidun Caliphate: Abu Bakr Siddiq, Umar bin Khattab, Uthman bin Affan, and Ali bin Abi Talib, who were closely associated with the Prophet. Their religious authorities were crucial in unifying the Middle Eastern empire. However, this period also indicated political issues within the Muslim community related to the new leader election after Prophet Muhammad's period since no successor was appointed. The debate over succession led to a separation between those who accepted the decision made at the Saqifah meeting and those who opposed it, particularly the Prophet's family. The family believed that the Prophet had already chosen Ali as the next leader of the Muslim *ummah*.[5] In contrast to Sunnis, Shi'a believed that after the death of Prophet Muhammad, the leadership was taken by twelve Imams, who trusted to receive divine guidance. Various historical records indicate that these Imams hold religious authority and are regarded as rightful political leaders. However, the majority of Shia Muslims believe that a leadership vacuum emerged when the last Imam went into occultation in the 10th century. The scholarly class subsequently filled this gap in leadership.

From the early 11th century onwards, influential groups of clerics began to take on responsibilities that were the exclusive domain of the Imams, who acted as their representatives. In a situation where the Imam, a public leader, does not exist, the clerics' role is highly influential in preserving Shi'a religious thought and practices. Their roles are to disseminate Islamic values and to keep the Islamic doctrines and laws, making them the primary reference for Shi'a Muslims.

This evolution lead to a stronger connection between ijtihād and *taqlīd.* Ijtihād, an intellectual process of deducing religious laws based on Islamic principles, became the primary method for qualified Shia scholars to issue fatwas or religious rulings. A scholar recognized as a mujtahid holds the authority to establish relevant laws for the community, given their expertise and ability to interpret religious texts in a contextually adaptive manner according to contemporary needs.[6]

On the contrary, typical Shia adherents, referred to as *muqallid*, lack the requisite depth of religious scholarship necessary to issue fatwas or legal rulings independently. Consequently, they must adhere to the fatwas and edicts promulgated by a mujtahid. This process, termed *taqlīd,* entails the muqallid conforming to the directives provided by the mujtahid concerning various aspects, including religious rituals and social and political matters.

The relationship between the mujtahid and the *muqallid* within the Shia framework is characterized by a cyclical and mutually dependent interaction. The standing of the mujtahid comes from their scholarly understanding and the ethical and financial encouragement from those who

[3]Mehran Kamrava, "Leading the Faithful: Religious Authority in the Contemporary Middle East," *Sociology of Islam*, 6.2 (2018): 97–115, https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00602004.

[4]Agah Hazir, "Beyond Religion: Ulama and Politics in Pre-revolutionary Iran," *İran Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 1 no. 2, (2018): 39-57.

[5]M. F. Ilmi, "Interpretation of Leadership After the Death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)," (Doctoral Dissertation, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2020).

[6]K Jawdat Al-Qazwini, "The Religious Establishment in Ithnaashari Shiism : A Study In Scholarly And Political Development," (PhD Dissertation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom), 1997), https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/28898/1/10673072.pdf

follow them. Without such reinforcement, a mujtahid may grapple with notable obstacles to sustaining their authority and presence in the community. Meanwhile, as a follower, the muqallid relies highly on the mujtahids' fatwas and guidance for valid and dignified life navigation.[7]

Therefore, the Shi'a *ulama* (mujtahid) and the community (*muqallid*) relationship is not merely in intellectuality, but more on the social and economic factors that shape the religious framework. It impacts a meticulously organized hierarchy wherein the authority of the ulama is profoundly esteemed and adhered to. Nevertheless, it remains dependent on the community's support to maintain the existence of religious values.

An example of the political communication dynamics between the clerical authorities in Tehran and Qom is founded by the 2009 debated electoral and the ensuing uprising called the Green Movement, which manifested as the rivalry between *Marja'* and the influenced ayatollahs. In this context, Ayatollah Khamenei visited Qom twice, holding several private and publicly open meetings with diverse ayatollahs. Green Movement forced Khamenei to gather support directly from the influenced Ayatollahs to keep his political legitimacy.

Meanwhile, Green Movement leaders, such as Mir Hossein Mousavi, urged the clerics to oppose the repression of demonstrators and the electoral malfeasance. Families of the politically detained also visited Qom to gather support and mediation from the ayatollahs to release the prisoners. Throughout the protests, Green Movement supporters showed their respects to ayatollahs, such as Montazeri and Sane'i, who explicitly supported the movement. Environmental advocates further employed digital campaigns to influence public sentiments and compelled religious leaders to address the electoral controversies and subsequent oppressive occurrences. This phenomenon underlines the necessity for a comprehensive analysis of the political communication between these two clerical entities in Iran and their roles in shaping the political authority within this nation.[8]

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the developing roles and influences of Shi'a clerics to shape the contemporary dynamics of Middle Eastern politics, especially in Iran. This research addresses the significant gap in academic comprehension regarding the complex relationship between religious authority and political power within Islamic Shi'a, which has significant implications for governance, jurisprudence, and political mobilization in the Iranian context. Analyzing the historical transformation of the Shi'a clerical institution, from the occultation of the final Imam to his current manifestation in the Islamic Republic, this study provides a deep perspective on how the clerics transform from religious figures to significant political actors.

The pivotal contribution of this study is its focus on the friction between the Shi'a clerical in Qom and the political authority in Tehran, especially the *Velayat-e Faqih* institution (Leadership of the Jurisprudent). These dynamics have significantly influenced Irans political framework as they relate to collaborations and conflicts between established entities who claim religious legitimacy. Besides, this study underlines the significance of financial independence in preserving the authority

[7]Akif Tahiiev, "Female Leadership in Shia Islam: Women on the Way from Mujtahid to Marja," *Societies* 14, no. 1 (2024): 2.

[8]Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani, "Green Women of Iran: The Role of the Womens Movement During and After Irans Presidential Election of 2009 ," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 17, no. 1 (2010): 78-87, https://dev.sssup.it/UploadDocs/18086_7_S_Green_Women_of_Iran_The_Role_of_the_Women_s_Movement_During_and_After_Iran_s_Presidential_Election_of_2009_Victoria_Tahmasebi_Birgani_13.pdf

of the *maraji*ʿ (prominent clerics) and compares it with Sunni religious authorities, which depend on the country.

Furthermore, this study provides an innovative analysis of the Shi'a clerical institution network. This study also offers new perspectives on the socio-political behavior of clerical elites and their roles in political events, such as the 2009 Iranian presidential election and the Green Movement. Mapping the relationship between clerics and their followers, this study increases the understanding of the internal dynamics of Shi'a religious authority and how the relationship influences the Iranian political scheme.

This research significantly contributes to Middle Eastern studies, Islamic political theory, and religious authority by providing a comprehensive exploration of the mechanisms through which Shi'a clerics, using their economic autonomy and strategic political communication, consistently influence the socio-political landscape of the Iranian Islamic Republic. It also contributes to future studies integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, especially network analysis, to understand the development of Shi'a clerical elites influence on religious and political scope.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to provide a thorough analysis of the Shi'a clerics roles and influences in the dynamics of contemporary politics of the Middle East, with a specific focus on the Islamic Republic of Iran. This study investigates the complexities of clerical authority and its impact on political events by employing a qualitative approach that integrates historical analysis, case studies, and interviews with key figures within the Shi'a clerical network.

This study focuses on significant case studies, such as the 2009 Iranian presidential election and the Green Movement, to analyze the interaction between clerical authority and political outcomes. Through an in-depth analysis of primary sources, including religious documents, financial records, and political communications, as well as secondary sources like academic literature and media reports, the research aims to describe the transition of Shi'a clerics from religious authorities to influential political actors.

Further, this study investigates the tension between the clerical institutions in Qom and the political regime in Tehran, i.e., the *Velayat-e Faqih* (Leadership of the Jurisprudent). Applying the network analysis to the study of Shi'a clerical structures, the research provides new insights into the socio-political behavior of clerical elites and their influence on Iran's political landscape.

In conclusion, this study contributes to Middle Eastern studies, Islamic political theory, and the understanding of religious authority through the Shi'a clerics description of their financial independence and political communication tactics to influence the socio-political structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach by combining historical analysis, case studies, and interviews with key figures within the Shi'a clerical network. It examines diverse primary sources, including religious documents, financial records, and political communications, as well as secondary sources, such as academic literature and media reports. The main focus of this study is several cases, such as the 2009 Iranian elections and the Green Movement. It is to analyze the interaction between clerical authority and political events.

The methodology is designed to thoroughly understand the Shi'a clerical networks role and influence in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. Using the qualitative approach, this study integrates diverse methods to investigate the complexity of clerical authority and its political implications. It covers an in-depth analysis of historical documents, including religious and historical

records and scientific studies. Analyzing the historical transformation of the Shi'a clerical institution, from the occultation of the final Imam to his current manifestation in the Islamic Republic, this study provides a context for clerics authority transformation and its effects on political dynamics —deep perspective on how the clerics transform from religious figures to important political actors.[9]

This study focuses on specific cases, such as the 2009 Iranian presidential election and the Green Movement. Each is analyzed to understand the relationship between clerical authority and political events – how clerics face political pressures and influence outcomes. Case studies will be selected according to the research questions to provide insights into the broader dynamics of clerical influence.

3. Results and Discussion

The Islamic Republic is a state following the notion that the highest authority, de facto and de jure, must be held by a Shiʿi cleric. Similarly, the judiciary must be headed by a Shiʿi legal scholar, and Islamic law is the primary source for national legislation. However, the label of theocracy, which implies the Shiʿi clerical institutions dominancy over the state, is not entirely accurate. After the revolution, the clerical institution remained separate from the regime, although their relationship transformed significantly. The Shiʿi clerical in Qom, who claims the authority over the interpretation of the sacred texts, frequently argued with the Shiʿi government in Tehran, who also claims legitimacy and Islamic authority, leading to high tensions. This article aims to analyze the communication patterns and cooperation between the Islamic Republic, particularly the institution of Velayat-e Faqih (Leadership of the Jurisprudent), and the clerical institution in Qom, with a specific focus on the great Ayatollahs as the highest sources of emulation in the Shiʿi clerical hierarchy.[10]

Between 1941 and 1953, following the downfall of Reza Shah, a new political landscape arose in Iran. With the traditional power structures—including the monarchy, government, national assembly, foreign embassies, and military—religious leaders and Islamic factions became the primary actors in the state evolution. This article explores Islamic religious groups activities, perspectives, and internal dynamics during this period, especially those related to interacting with national movements to own the oil industries. This article measures how far these groups have shared their goals and strategies and presented their contributions to the movement. Despite the shortage of diverse resources becoming a challenge, this analysis prioritized its balance. Existing literature mostly presents a one-dimensional understanding of the religious groups and clerics involved, often ignoring their perspectives diversity, resulting in temporary alliances and sporadic unity.

Besides the religious forces led by clerics, newly established political groups also played a critical role during this period. This article, therefore, will analyze their actions, strategies, and internal developments within major religious movements and how those relate. It will further examine the collective impact of the oil nationalization movement. Key questions include whether or not these religious forces operated as a whole, what commonalities existed, and how their actions contributed to or lost the movement's goals. This study aims to answer these questions despite the constraints imposed by the available sources.[11]

The political engagements of clerics and religious organizations during this period were often characterized in academic literature as one-dimensional. In fact, the actual circumstances were

[9]Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam: From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja'* (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1996).

[10]Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (Hurst, 2008).

[11]Zohreh Salehi Siavoshani, 'The Role of the Clerics and the Religious Forces in the Iranian Movement of Nationalization of Oil Industry', *Historia Actual Online*, 26 (2011): 7–19.

considerably more complex owing to the presence of numerous centers of spiritual authority within Irans Shiʿi community, representing distinct spiritual heritages. This heterogeneity triggered political conflicts between 1941 and 1953 and halted the development of a cohesive religious-political movement. If a singular authority holds absolute control over these dynamics, such an individual could potentially marginalize other clerics, thereby consolidating influence to reshape the trajectory of events.

Their political endeavors exhibited considerable divergence in light of the varied religious affiliations among the clerics and religious organizations. Certain factions prioritized religious pedagogy and cultural involvement, promoting a reformed perspective on faith. These entities concentrated on eradicating superstition and doctrinal discrepancies, striving to align belief systems with rationality and democratic principles. The focus on cultural participation became progressively crucial in reaction to the ascendancy of the Marxist Tudeh Party, which opposed these religious entities.

It is crucial to highlight that Iran not only experienced one of the most successful Islamic movements in the Middle East but also one of the most impactful leftist movements. In the 1940s and 1950s, leading up to the 1953 coup, the Tudeh Party gained significant popularity among the working class in Iran. However, after the Shah solidified his power with U.S. backing, he enforced severe repressive measures against the Tudeh Party and the National Front, both seen as threats to his authority. Within this context, “while the clergy were granted the freedom to engage with the impoverished, opposition parties faced continuous restrictions in their attempts to establish labor unions, local clubs, or community organizations.” During this epoch, the Tudeh Party, alongside the National Front, effectively mobilized the masses to engage in resistance against the Shah and external powers. The Tudeh Party obtained substantial support from industrial laborers, who played a crucial role in the production continuum. Concurrently, the National Front garnered endorsement from the middle class, encompassing both traditional and contemporary factions. Nonetheless, the state’s repressive measures were so severe that neither faction could recover fully. This calculated state strategy, “left a void in ideological production and dissemination.” Eventually, this vacuum was filled by the emerging ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini, but only after the masses had already mainly mobilized independently.[12]

Building upon this achievement, Ayatollah Khomeini undertook initiatives to mitigate friction with his associates in Qom. Initially, he appointed clerics sympathetic to the senior ayatollahs to the Guardian Council, an institution charged with the oversight of elections and legislative processes, thereby empowering it to invalidate laws deemed un-Islamic. Subsequently, Khomeini entrusted the administration of the religious seminaries in Qom to Golpayegani, thereby acknowledging his jurisdiction over the ulama institutions in Qom, while Golpayegani reciprocally recognized Khomeini’s political dominance. Khomeini also conferred upon Golpayegani the duty of proclaiming religious holidays. Nevertheless, this alliance was fraught with challenges, as evidenced by Golpayegani's articulation of apprehensions regarding transgressions of Sharia law after the enactment of agrarian reform laws, along with his expressed discontent concerning the interment of Ayatollah Shariatmadari.[13]

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini marked a pivotal moment in the relationship between the Islamic Republic and the clerical institution. His successor, Ali Khamenei, who lacked Khomeinis

[12]Agah Hazir, “Beyond Religion: Ulama and Politics in Pre-revolutionary Iran,” *İran Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 1 no. 2, (2018): 39-57.

[13]Juan R. Cole, "Imami Jurisprudence and the Role of the Ulama: Mortaza Ansari on Emulating the Supreme Exemplar," in *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikkie R Keddie, Religion and Politics in Iran (New Haven, 1983), 33–46.

popularity, found his political authority constrained by the regime's ideological premise that religious authority should underpin political authority, especially in light of the existence of other individuals with superior religious credentials. Khamenei subsequently mobilized various resources—including state media and security apparatus—to position himself as a major ayatollah, marking the first instance of state institutions being utilized to promote a cleric as a source of emulation. Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's most capable and trusted student, was pivotal in supporting Velayat-e Faqih during the assembly. However, as his relationship with Khomeini worsened, Montazeri resigned from his position shortly before Khomeinis death. One reason for his resignation was the new judicial system of the Islamic Republic, which executed his laws without sufficient investigation and executed thousands of opposition activists without trial or evidence. This pushed Montazeri to reevaluate Velayat-e Faqih and its implications, leading him to propose a revised version that constrained the powers of the Vali-e Faqih by the assembly.[14]

Ayatollah Ali Khameneis campaign faced resistance in Qom, in which Ayatollah Montazeri, a senior ayatollah, criticized Khamenei's efforts and questioned his legitimacy as the highest Leader and Vali-e Faqih. The reaction to Montazeri's criticism was included in government agents attacks and militia disguised as civilians, as well as his placement under house arrest. Khamenei dominated the Qom hauzah by directly appointing a management board and directing government funding to his allied clerical institutions, such as the Imam Khomeini Institute of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. Although these efforts were not toward open confrontation, some senior Ayatollahs emphasized the importance of hamzah autonomy and its history as a state-independent institution.

In 2009, the fraudulent elections and the protest triggered tensions among major Ayatollahs due to the Green Movement. Therefore, Khamenei visited Qom and organized meetings with several Ayatollahs for some supports. However, the Green Movement leaders called out the clerics to oppose protesters and electoral fraud. The ayatollahs' responses to the election were divided; some explicitly supported the Green Movement, others personally expressed their dissatisfaction, and the rest remained silent.

Despite the increasing interaction and dependency between the regime and the clerical institution, they have different functions. The existence of these two institutions claiming authority over Islam has been a source of tension, creating different interests and cooperation. As the succession of Ali Khamenei grows due to his age and reported illnesses, other significant events might arise in the interaction between Senior Ayathollahs and the Islamic Republic. The election of a new Supreme Leader will re-highlight questions about religious authority and its relationship with Qom.

In the last decade, significant improvements in social analysis have been witnessed through network approaches, which were driven by the data revolution, network methodological progress, and software development. This approach offers new perspectives on community analysis qualitatively. For instance, religious authority analysis through the network perspective argues that an individuals position in the net work is more significant than their attributes. This approach enables a deeper understanding of scientific and social relationships between the clerics.[15]

Through network mapping and data analysis at both micro and macro levels, we could learn about the social and political behavior of the clerical elites. Although Shiʿi clerics have been studied for a long time, implementing the systematic network theory to understand the Shiʿi institutions is

[14]Syed Zeeshan Haider Zaidi, "Transformation in Political Thought of Ayatollah Montazeri," *Technium Social Sciences*, 29 (2022): 537–47.

[15]Ali Kadivar, "The Ayatollahs and the Republic: The Religious Establishment in Iran and Its Interaction with the Islamic Republic," *New Analysis of Shia Politics*, 6.28 (2017), https://ideas.repec.org/p/osf/socarx/3d6jq.html

still at an early stage. Exploring this goal, this article expects to trigger discussion and increase the understanding of *Shiʿi marajiʿ* structures and their impacts on the dynamic political situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The resistance faced by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Qom, primarily from senior clerics like Ayatollah Montazeri, the continuous tensions between religious authority and political power within the Islamic Republic. Montazeris critique of Khamenei's legitima cy as Supreme Leader (*Vali-e Faqih*) reflects a deeper separation within the clerical institutions, in which different perspectives of scopes and authority existed for a long time. The regimes response—including the harassment by government agents, Montazeri's house arrest, and control over the religious seminars in Qom (hauzah)—were examples of efforts to reconcile Irans theocratic framework with the autonomy owned traditionally by Shi'a clerical institutions.

Khamenei worked to secure political control over Qom by positioning his loyalists at the board management and putting state resources into allied institutions like the Imam Khomeini Institute, showing the increasing politicization of religious institutions. Although it did not trigger open confrontation, it raised deep concerns among the senior ayatollahs toward clerical independence, the basis of Shi'a tradition. This is historically based on the *marajiʿ* (leading clerics) financial independence, who depend on donations rather than what the state provided them, contrasting with the Sunni model of state-dependent religious authority.

The situation in 2009, following a contested election and the Green Movement, further illustrated the complexities of clerical involvement in Iran's politics. Khameneis involvement with the major Ayatollahs in Qom for support amid protests within the clerical institutions. Some clerics are on the same side as the regime, while others protest or remain neutral, thus revealing the limits of the Supreme Leaders influence over the broader religious community. Irans power was emphasized when religious legitimacy was shared and contested between the state and the clerical institutions in Qom.

As Khamenei's period ended, debates over his succession will likely worsen these tensions. The election of a new Supreme Leader will re-test the relationship between clerical authority and the political regime, raising fundamental questions about the legitimacy and the Velayat-e Faqih roles. Historically, Khamenei's appointment to this position was challenging because his prior position as Marja was low, and he relied on state security and media to strengthen his religious authority. This dynamic showed the shifting boundaries between religious and political power in the Islamic Republic.

In summary, the dynamics between the Shiʿi clerics in Qom and the Shiʿi government in Tehran are characterized by a complex relationship between authority, resistance, and negotiation. Instead of being static, this relationship develops to respond to politics, social pressure, and internal differences, making it important to understand the socio-political context in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The interactions between these entities will keep forming Iran's governance and the role of religion in public life.

The implementation of network analysis offers current perspectives to investigate the dynamics of the authority. Focusing more on the relationships within the Shi'a clerical hierarchy than individual attributes, network theory provides a deeper understanding of the socio-political behavior of clerical elites. Mapping the interactions between clerics, followers, and political actors, especially during high political moments such as the 2009 elections, allows a deeper exploration of how religious authority is negotiated and maintained within the Islamic Republic.

The interaction between Iran's clerical and political actors shaped the Iranian state institution. By integrating historical analysis and network theory, this study contributes to a broader

understanding of how Shi'a clerics, who used to be religious figures, have become pivotal political actors who are deeply embedded in the socio-political network of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[16]

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Shi'a clerics, mainly since the occultation of the last Imam, have played an evolving and critical role in both religious and political spheres within the Middle Eastern context. Historically, these clerics were positioned as the absent imams for both religious and political authority. This study also indicates the importance of the state financial independence of Shi'a clerics , in contrast to state-supported, Sunni clerics. Besides, the ability of the marajiʿ (high-ranking clerics) to raise funds from their followers is crucial to their influence, shaping their political stances and networks.

The relationship between the mujtahid (clerical scholars) and the muqallīd (followers) is central to understanding the dynamics of Shi'a religious authority, mainly through the mechanisms of ijtihād (independent legal reasoning) and taqlīd (emulation).[17] Despite the recognized significance of these clerical networks, there remains a gap in the scholarly understanding of their internal structures and dynamics. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how financial support and clerical networks influence Shi'a clerical authority and political outcomes, particularly in significant political events in Iran, e.g., the 2009 presidential election and the Green Movement.

Furthermore, the research highlights the Iranian clerics's unique political communication strategies, where the tension and cooperation between the Shi'a religious institutions in Qom and the political regime in Tehran are evident. While traditionally religious leaders, Shi'a clerics have emerged as key actors in political mobilization, significantly contributing to the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran for policymakers. This study also contributes to the broader understanding of how Shi'a clerical authority, financial mechanisms, and political interactions shape the socio-political dynamics in Iran. Additionally, it recommends that future studies integrate qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the evolving influence of the Shi'a clerical elite.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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