
Political Pluralism in the Qom Seminary during the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract. *The question of governance during the Occultation (ghayba) has been a central concern for Shi'i scholars. Some have emphasized "waiting" (entezār), while others have proposed the theory of Wilāyat al-Faqīh. Using a descriptive-explanatory method, this article examines the evolution of Shi'i political thought during the Islamic Republic across three phases. From 1979 to 1997: the central issue was the legitimacy of a jurist-led government during the Occultation. One group, centered on Ayatollah Khomeini, emphasized its legitimacy. Among his students, some believed in the election of the jurist, while others adhered to his appointment. Another group proposed a "government of a council of jurists." From 1997 to 2009: the main issue concerned the relationship between "Republicanism" (jumhūriyyat) and "Islamicity" (eslāmiyyat). Mesbah Yazdi, Javadi Amoli, and Mohammad Yazdi prioritized Islamicity over Republicanism, while Montazeri and Mehdi Haeri Yazdi prioritized the reverse. From 2009 onward: following the 2009 election and the events of 2017, 2019, and 2022, a new question emerged: Has the Islamic Republic succeeded? Four types of political thought emerged: (1) substantive transition to an Islamic government (Mirbaqeri, Araki); (2) reformist approaches strengthening Republicanism (Montazeri, Sanei, Haghghat, Ghazizadeh); (3) fundamental transformation (Kadivar, Heydari, Fanaei); (4) withdrawal from political guardianship (Alavi Boroujerdi, Yathrebi). Thus, Shi'i political thought has experienced one of its most pluralistic and dynamic phases.*

Keywords: Wilāyat al-Faqīh, political legitimacy, Republicanism and Islamicity, transformation of political thought, Islamic Republic of Iran

Политический плюрализм в Кумской семинарии в период Исламской Республики Иран

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Аннотация. *Вопрос управления в период оккультизма (гайба) был центральной проблемой для шиитских ученых. Некоторые делали акцент на «ожидании» (энтезар), в то время как другие предлагали теорию вেলাят-э факих. Используя описательно-объяснительный метод, эта статья исследует эволюцию шиитской политической мысли в период Исламской Республики на трех этапах. В период с 1979 по 1997 год: центральным вопросом была легитимность правительства, возглавляемого юристами, в период оккультизма. Одна группа, сосредоточенная вокруг аятоллы Хомейни, подчеркивала его легитимность. Среди его учеников одни верили в избрание юриста, другие же придерживались его назначения. Другая группа предложила «правительство совета юристов». С 1997 по 2009 год основной вопрос касался взаимоотношений между «республиканизмом» (джумхурийят) и «исламизмом» (эсламийят). Месбах Язди, Джавади Амоли и Мохаммад Язди отдавали приоритет исламизму над республиканизмом, в то время как Монтазери и Мехди Хаери Язди отдавали приоритет обратному. После выборов 2009 года и событий 2017, 2019 и 2022 годов возник новый вопрос: удалось ли Исламской Республике добиться успеха? Выделились четыре типа политической мысли: (1) существенный переход к исламскому правительству (Мирбагери, Араки); (2) реформистские подходы, укрепляющие республиканизм (Монтазери, Санеи, Хагигат, Газизаде); (3) фундаментальные преобразования (Кадивар, Хейдары, Фанаи); (4) отказ от политического надзора (Алави Боруджерди, Ясреби). Таким образом, шиитская политическая мысль пережила один из своих самых плюралистических и динамичных этапов.*

Ключевые слова: Вилаят аль-Факих, политическая легитимность, республиканизм и исламизм, трансформация политической мысли, Исламская Республика Иран

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Introduction

DURING the period of the Islamic Republic, the Qom Seminary (*Hawza-ye 'Elmiyya-ye Qom*) became one of the most important centers for the production and transformation of political thought in the Shi'i world. The profound changes that followed the 1979 Revolution in the structure of power, the role of religion in governance, and the position of the jurist (*Faqih*) in administering society created an unprecedented context for rethinking and reinterpreting key concepts of political jurisprudence. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the Qom Seminary confronted new questions: What is the nature of a religious government? What are the limits of the jurist's authority? How should the relationship between *Sharī'a* and the constitution, popular will, and modern institutions be defined? These questions led, over the decades following the Revolution, to the emergence of a wide range of theories and interpretations in Qom and fueled extensive theoretical debates. Examining political thought in the Qom Seminary during this period not only enables an understanding of the intellectual transformations of religious scholars but also sheds light on the possible future trajectories of Shi'i political jurisprudence.

The purpose of this article is to identify, describe, and categorize political ideas and thoughts in the Qom Seminary in the contemporary period. By political thought, this study refers to systematic efforts to respond to political questions and to resolve problems arising in the sphere of power. In these efforts, various approaches — such as jurisprudence, philosophy, theology, or history — may have been employed, and in terms of form, an author may have presented a brief idea in the format of an article or a book. All the political ideas discussed in this article are considered religious interpretations that are justified through theological reasoning. From a historical perspective, this study focuses on the period from 1979 to 2025. The main question is: How do jurists, activists, writers, and seminary scholars during the period of the Islamic Republic understand Islamic political thought?

Why is this research focused on the Qom Seminary? The short answer is that the main center of the seminary system in Iran today lies primarily in the Qom Seminary, and all religious schools and clerics in other Iranian cities are subordinate to Qom. In the years following the 1979 Revolution, religious schools in Iran expanded with the support of the Islamic Republic. Currently, approximately 490 religious

schools for men are active across the country, with over 130 000 seminary students (*tullāb* — *seminary students*) engaged in religious studies. Of this number, 86 000 have academic records at the Qom Seminary. Additionally, 500 religious schools for women are active nationwide, where about 80 000 female seminary students are studying.

Al-Mustafa International University (*Jāmi'at al-Muṣṭafā*), which is dedicated to non-Iranian students, has 170 affiliated branches and educational units in 60 countries. To date, over 30 000 non-Iranian seminary students have graduated from the Qom Seminary. According to the Qom Seminary's plan, by 2035 CE (1414 AH), 300 000 clerics should have been trained.

Furthermore, more than thirty specialized and university-affiliated centers affiliated with the Qom Seminary, and approximately 700 research and cultural centers connected to the seminary, are active in Qom. The main focus of advanced and research courses is in Qom, and the grand sources of emulation (*marāji' al-taqīd*) and theorists of Islamic sciences reside in this city. The religious schools in provincial cities, women's seminaries, and Al-Mustafa University play an educational and secondary role and are subordinate to the ideas prevailing in Qom. Even the Mashhad Seminary is currently subordinate to Qom and does not have an independent or different political orientation. For this reason, this article has focused its research on political thought within the Qom Seminary.

Methodology

To address the research question, an inductive approach has been employed. This approach involves posing questions and directly consulting evidence through the observation of data from books, scholarly articles, academic journals, published interviews, and works released in digital media. In addition, some of the findings are the result of hours of conversations with scholars and instructors of the Qom Seminary. The responses have been classified into a coherent framework based on similarities and differences.

Several considerations guided the process of identifying these responses, which may be regarded as the theoretical framework of this study. One concern is to highlight micro-level ideas that exist on the margins of the seminary milieu and that, in relation to socio-political contexts, may move from the periphery to the center and marginalize dominant theories. The second consideration is to demonstrate the

plurality and diversity of political ideas and thoughts within the Qom Seminary. The third consideration is that, although this study adopts an intellectual approach, it remains attentive to the relationship between political theory and political practice. One of the research concerns is whether political ideas and thoughts in the Qom Seminary are connected to social and political contexts or whether they emerge solely from textual analysis and theological reasoning. The fourth consideration is that the author does not seek to impose a theory upon the writers examined; therefore, the term “idea” is used throughout the text. The claim is not that all authors possess a coherent and systematic political theory, nor that all ideas are equally rigorous in their reasoning. Rather, the primary objective is to understand the political reflections of seminary scholars.

Three Periods of Political Thought in the Qom Seminary

In examining the intellectual transformations of the Qom Seminary during the period of the Islamic Republic, the trajectory of political thought can be divided into three distinct periods, each characterized by fundamental questions and specific theoretical challenges.

The first period (1979 to the late 1990s) centered on the question of the legitimacy of religious government based on the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*wilāyat al-faqīh*). During this period, the central question within the Qom Seminary was whether the rule of jurists, grounded in the theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, possessed divine and jurisprudential legitimacy during the Occultation of the Infallible Imam.

The second period (from the late 1990s to 2009) was defined by the question of the relationship between Republicanism and Islamism. In this phase, the principal issue in the Qom Seminary concerned the relationship between Islamism — understood as the authority of the jurist and the implementation of Islamic legal rulings — and Republicanism, understood as popular sovereignty, elections, and democratic institutions.

The third period (from 2009 to 2025) has been shaped by the question of the effectiveness of religious government. In this period, many seminary thinkers addressed the question of whether religious government has been able, in practice, to realize justice, welfare, development, and efficient governance. As a result, political discussions in the Qom Seminary increasingly took on an experiential, critical,

and reflective character, with attention to the issue of “effectiveness” replacing earlier central concerns.

1. The First Period

With the occurrence of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, alongside the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989) as the leader of the new government, one of the most fundamental and controversial issues became the legitimacy of the rule of jurists based on the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*wilāyat al-faqīh*). The intellectual and political atmosphere of this period was saturated with questions rooted in the very nature of the newly established political order: Can a jurist, during the Occultation, assume political authority in place of the infallible Imam? What are the scope and limits of such authority? From where does its legitimacy derive?

The first decade following the Revolution thus became a scene for the emergence and confrontation of diverse viewpoints, each attempting to offer a model for governing Islamic society that would be compatible with jurisprudence, political rationality, and public will. In response to these questions, several theories were articulated within the Qom Seminary. Hossein Ali Montazeri and Ne‘matollah Salehi Najafabadi advocated the theory of the elective guardianship of the jurist; Sayyed Abolfazl Mousavi Zanjani, Mohammad Sadeghi Tehrani, and Sayyed Mohammad Shirazi proposed the model of the guardianship of a council of jurists; Abdollah Javadi Amoli, Sayyed Kazem Haeri, Mohammad Taqī Mesbah Yazdi, and Mohammad Yazdi defended the theory of the appointment (*naṣb*) of the Supreme Jurist; and Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, in contrast to guardianship, put forward the theory of agency (*wakāla*).

1.1. The Elective Guardianship of the Jurist

A group of thinkers, while accepting the principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist, regard it as elective by the people. That is, although the qualifications of the jurist-ruler are determined by Shari‘a, the actual selection of the jurist must take place through popular choice. This theory is based on the assumption that the primary legitimacy of the jurist’s rule is composed of two elements: divine legitimacy (qualification) and popular acceptance (actualization and effectiveness).

Divine legitimacy refers to the requirement that the jurist possess the necessary scholarly and moral qualifications for leadership, such as absolute *ijtihād*, justice, and managerial competence. Popular acceptance, by contrast, concerns the transformation of the jurist's potential qualification into actual political authority and the legitimacy of enforcing his commands in society, which is contingent upon public acceptance, selection, and the vote of the people.

Hossein Ali Montazeri (1923–2009) was one of the most important students of Ayatollah Khomeini and served as the designated successor (*Qa'im-Maqam*) of the Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 1985 to 1989. He was also the head of the Assembly of Experts for the Constitution in 1979. During the drafting of the Constitution in 1979, Montazeri initially showed a stronger inclination toward the theory of appointment (*naṣb*). Later, he was removed from power and marginalized. However, through teaching the subject of *wilāyat al-faqīh* and publishing his four-volume work *Dirāsāt fī Wilāyat al-Faqīh wa Fiqh al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya*, he later articulated the theory of election (or selection by elites). According to this view, God has not designated a specific individual to lead society during the Major Occultation; rather, He has established certain valid attributes on the basis of which people may refer to a qualified individual, thereby granting him guardianship¹.

Ne'matollah Salehi Najafabadi (1923–2006) likewise subscribed to the theory of the elective guardianship of the jurist. By “election,” he meant that from among several qualified jurists, either a single individual or a council should be chosen to assume political leadership². In this framework, the primary role in conferring guardianship upon the jurist belongs to the people. The people must select the most qualified individual for leadership, a requirement that stems not from coercion but from the dictates of sound reason and moral conscience³.

1.2. *The Guardianship of a Council of Jurists*

The role of the *marja'* in Shi'i political thought is central. A *marja'* (pl. *marāji'*) is a source of emulation whom lay Shi'i Muslims follow for

¹ Haghghat, S. S. (2017) “Wilayah and Supervision in Contemporary Shiite Political Thought”, in *Rights of the People and Religious Governance in Imam Khomeini's Thought*. Vol. 2, p. 7. Tehran: Arooj.

² Salehi Najafabadi, N. (2014) *Wilayat-e Faqih (Hokumat-e Salehan)* [Guardianship of the Jurist (Governance of the Righteous)], p. 96. 3rd ed. Tehran: Omid-e Farda.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

religious and legal rulings. In this model, instead of one jurist, a council of jurists assumes authority and undertakes the administration of public affairs. In the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a Leadership Council composed of three or five qualified jurists was officially recognized under certain conditions.

Seyyed Abolfazl Mousavi Zanjani (1900–1992) was one of the close associates and supporters of the Freedom Movement of Iran (*Nehzat-e Azadi*) and a critic of Ayatollah Khomeini. He distinguished between individual and social rulings and believed that, in social matters concerning the destiny of the nation, disagreement among jurists leads to fragmentation and discord among the people and ultimately results in corruption and bloodshed. In such circumstances, he argued, the only viable solution is the establishment of a council of jurists. According to Zanjani, in vital social matters, qualified and well-known jurists of each era must set aside self-centeredness, avoid unilateralism and monopolization, and engage in consultation and deliberation with one another as well as with experts in political and social affairs. They should then collectively — or by majority — declare and implement what serves the best interests of the country and the nation⁴.

Sayyed Mohammad Shirazi⁵ (1928–2001), although a supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini during his years in Iraq, joined the ranks of his critics after the Revolution. In his view, the determination of the guardianship of the jurist should be based on the theory of a council of jurists (*marājiʿ* — high-ranking Shiʿi jurists whom lay followers emulate for religious rulings). In Shirazi’s theory of the council of *marājiʿ*, the opinions and votes of the people are never directly considered, and no general elections are held for this purpose. Rather, jurists who have gained public recognition and attained the status of *marjaʿ al-taq̄līd* (source of emulation) form a consultative council and select an individual as the leader of the Islamic community⁶.

Mohammad Sadeghi Tehrani (1926–2011) regarded the council of jurists as the most appropriate option for governance during the

⁴ Mousavi Zanjani, S. A. (2020) *Enheraf-e Enghelab* [Deviation of the Revolution], ed. M. Kadivar, pp. 101–109. 2nd ed.

⁵ The brother and successor of Seyyed Mohammad Shirazi, namely Seyyed Sadegh Shirazi, resides in Qom, and he follows his brother’s path in political thought. He believes in the Guardianship of the Jurists as a council (*Shura-yi Fiqh*). He is a critic of religious policies in Iran and has organized a network of religious associations (*heyats*) inside Iran and a network of religious satellite channels worldwide.

⁶ Shirazi, S. M. (1881) *Al-Fiqh (Fiqh al-Siyasa)* [Jurisprudence (Political Jurisprudence)], pp. 54–55. Qom: Dar al-Iman.

Occultation. In his view, the only mechanism that can relatively compensate the lack of infallibility in the leaders of Islamic states during the Occultation is a council of qualified individuals drawn from among just, pious jurists and politically competent figures, who would select a group of first-rank members from among themselves to form the Leadership Council. He maintained that the authority of Islamic jurists is limited and does not extend to the full religious guardianship exercised by the Prophet and the Imams⁷.

1.3. The Appointment-Based Guardianship of Jurists

A group of scholars and religious thinkers defend the idea of the general appointment of jurists as the successors of the infallible Imam. According to this view, a fully capable jurist is appointed to establish governance during the period of Occultation, and the people are obliged to assist him. This theory gained more attention particularly after the passing of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Abdollah Javadi Amoli (born 1933) was a disciple and supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini and he is one of the current sources of emulation (*marja' al-taqlid*). By introducing the concept of “Guardianship of Jurisprudence and Justice,” he argued that the affairs of the community can be divided into two categories. One category is determined through consultation among the people themselves, referring to matters under the community’s discretion, such as permissible acts and optional choices. The second category of communal affairs is dependent on the just jurist’s guardianship; the jurist is considered the “ruler” and is among the *Uli al-Amr* (those charged with authority — a Qur’anic term from Surah al-Nisa’ 4:59 meaning “those in command”). Javadi Amoli asserts that jurisprudence and justice are prerequisites for a religious ruler during the Occultation. The jurist must also possess comprehensive knowledge in Islamic law, complete justice, as well as managerial ability and leadership talent⁸.

Seyyed Kazem Haeri (born 1938) was a jurist (*mujtahid*) and political activist in Iraq and played a special role in leading the Islamic Dawa Party of Iraq. He later resided in Iran after the Revolution. He

⁷ Sadeghi Tehrani, M. (2010) *Hokumat-e Salehan ya Wilayat-e Faghihan* [Governance of the Righteous or Jurists], pp. 76–77. Bija.

⁸ Javadi Amoli, A. (2002) *Wilāyat-e Faqih, Wilāyat-e Fiqāhat va Adālat* [Guardianship of the Jurist, Guardianship of Jurisprudence and Justice], pp. 141–144. Qom: Markaz Nashr-e Esra.

believes that a jurist can govern during the Occultation if he fulfills four conditions: expertise in jurisprudence, competence and skill, superior knowledge in governance and guardianship, and the allegiance (*bay'ah*) of the people. Accordingly, Shiites are obliged to pledge allegiance to the jurist and assist him in governing⁹.

Mohammad Yazdi (1931–2020) argued that only God can limit a human being's natural freedom; the right of governance belongs solely to the Creator. God is the guardian of humanity, and since obedience to the Prophet is obedience to God, the Prophet possesses guardianship. Consequently, after the Prophet, the infallible Imams hold such authority, and during the period of Occultation, leadership of the community rests with a qualified jurist¹⁰.

Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi (1933–2020), who became the leading theorist of political Islam supporting Ayatollah Ali Khamenei from the mid-1990s, claimed that nearly all Shia jurists agree that, even during the Occultation, legitimacy of governance originates from God, as it did during the Prophet's time and the period of the infallible Imams. However, practical realization and establishment of governance require public acceptance and societal support. During Occultation, the legitimate ruler is a jurist meeting all conditions, appointed by general consent based on the noble directive (*tawqi' sharif*) from Imam Mahdi and other evidences in this regard. This appointment is not to a specific person, but rather to any jurist who meets the prescribed qualifications¹¹. The legitimacy of the jurist's guardianship and governance derives from divinely ordained legislative authority, and no form of authority is legitimate without attribution to divine appointment and permission¹². Mesbah Yazdi considered the Assembly of Experts responsible for identifying the qualified jurist (*faqih-e jame' al-shara'it*) for leadership in the Islamic Republic of Iran¹³.

⁹ Haeri, S. K. (1998) "Nezam-e Siyasi-e Eslam" [Islamic Political System], *Ketab-e Naqd* 8: 115–118, 128.

¹⁰ Yazdi, M. (1996) *Ghanoon-e Asasi baraye Hame* [Constitution for All], pp. 233–234. Tehran: Amir Kabir.

¹¹ Mesbah Yazdi, M. T. (2003) *Negahi Gozara be Nazariyeh Wilayat-e Faqih* [A Brief Look at the Theory of Guardianship of the Jurist], pp. 64–65. Qom: Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute.

¹² Mesbah Yazdi, M. T. (1996) "Ikhtiyarat-e Vali-ye Faqih dar Kharej az Marzha" [Powers of the Supreme Jurist Beyond National Borders], *Hokumat-e Islami* 1 (1): 88.

¹³ Mesbah Yazdi, M. T. (2012) *Porseš-ha va Pasokh-ha* [Questions and Answers]. Vols. 1–5, p. 125. Qom: Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute.

1.4. Delegation of Governance to the People

Some authors argue that governance during the period of Occultation has been delegated to the people. According to this view, the guardianship or deputization of the jurist was not intended during the Imam's Occultation; rather, God has entrusted the administration of society to the people, and such a government is religiously legitimate.

Mehdi Haeri (1923–1999), son of Sheikh Abdolkarim Haeri, was an important proponent of this theory during this period. According to him, politics and the techniques of statecraft are branches of practical wisdom. The power of government derives from prudence and wisdom and does not signify command, guardianship, or authority¹⁴. The Qur'an clearly states that the daily affairs of the people, which include political administration and statecraft, are fully entrusted to the people themselves¹⁵. Governance is considered a mandate or deputization from the citizens and based on legal and jurisprudential studies, the nature of deputization is that of a contract or agreement, which does not impose any obligation on the principal(s). This means that at any time and under any circumstances, the principal(s) may dismiss or remove their representative and appoint or elect any other person to this position¹⁶.

First articulated in Haeri's work in the early 1990s (early 1370s Persian calendar), his theory was later developed by other seminary scholars in the 2010s (1390s Persian calendar) who, building upon his framework, advocated for the separation of religious institutions from politics and a transition beyond the Islamic Republic. The section on political thought in the 2010s in this article will further elaborate on how these ideas evolved and influenced subsequent debates.

2. The Second Period: Islamism and Republicanism

From the mid-1990s and with the victory of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami in the election of June 2, 1997 (2 Khordad 1376 SH), the question of the relationship between the Islamic character of the system (*Eslamiyat*) and Republicanism (*Jomhuriyat*) within the structure of the Islamic Republic became one of the main issues. Seyyed

¹⁴ Haeri Yazdi, M. (2016) *Hekmat va Hokumat* [Wisdom and Governance], p. 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91–92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Mohammad Khatami was able to win this election. What took place was the confrontation of two different logics of governance: the logic that believed “the people should be the decision-makers” versus the logic that said “the people should only be the confirmers of pre-determined decisions.” In this framework, the idea of religious modernism (*nowgarayi-ye dini*) sought to create a conceptual reconciliation between these two aspects by reinterpreting concepts such as “religious democracy” (*mardomsalari-ye dini*), “civil society” (*jame’eh-ye madani*), and “rule of law” (*hokumat-e qanun*). But ultimately, this effort faced a practical dead end, because whenever the republican element moved to constrain the power of the Guardianship (*velayat*), the appointed structures, relying on their jurisprudential foundations, neutralized it. In such an atmosphere, the role of the people in governing the country and the relationship between Republicanism and Islamism became the main issue for Islamic thinkers. The relationship between Islamism and Republicanism within Islamic Republic became one of the main questions in political discourse. Scholars, jurists, and politicians reflected on how these two principles could be reconciled.

Based on the findings of this article, some authors limit the role of the people to their duty to obey the Islamic ruler, considering consultation with the people merely a ceremonial element aimed at educating and encouraging public participation in political affairs. Mohammad Yazdi, Mohsen Araki, and Seyyed Mohammad Mehdi Mirbagheri can be placed in this category.

Another group distinguishes between value-based democracy and procedural (formal) democracy, arguing that Islam opposes value-based democracy but can be compatible with procedural democracy. Javadi Amoli, Mesbah Yazdi, Mohammad Yazdi, and Abbas Ka’bi defend this perspective.

A third group divides socio-political matters into specified (*manşuş*) and unspecified (*ghayr-manşuş*) affairs, maintaining that the Islamic ruler should follow the outcome of public consultation in unspecified matters. Mohammad Hadi Ma’refat, Davood Feyrahi, and Seyyed Sadegh Haghghat adhere to this view.

The fourth group emphasizes the incompatibility of Republicanism and the Islamic character of the system (*eslāmiyyat*), advocating for the priority of Republicanism over Islamicity. Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, Mohsen Kadivar, and Abolqasem Fanaei are among the proponents of this perspective.

2.1. *Republican Form and Islamic Content*

A group of seminary scholars argue that voting, consultation, and allegiance are duties and obligations of the people. The people's vote is an expression of readiness to comply with the orders of the Supreme leader. They regard consultation as a means of encouragement, motivation, and education for public participation, and do not consider the ruler bound by the outcome of such consultation. Democracy and Republicanism do not possess intrinsic legitimacy; they are included in the title of the Islamic Republic for practical or other reasons. What is fundamental is the Islamic government and the implementation of Shari'a, and the authority is delegated to the supreme jurist.

Mohammad Yazdi does not consider the people's vote or choice relevant in matters of guardianship. According to him, popular selection is equivalent to non-selection. Public opinion is not a basis. If the public desires something that Islam does not accept, that opinion is never respected, even if there is complete consensus among the people for something rejected by Islam. At the same time, this does not mean that public opinion is entirely worthless or disregarded¹⁷.

Mohsen Araki (born 1955), former Secretary-General of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought and one of the students of Seyyed Mohammad Baqer al-Sadr, argues that Islam has not legislated a specific form for consultative councils after the establishment of government that the Islamic government is obliged to follow.

Historical practice shows that the Islamic ruler sought consultation from Muslim elders, particularly those of knowledge, wisdom, and religious experience, on important matters — whether the ruler could discern the best course or not — out of grace and mercy for the Muslims and to involve them in governance¹⁸.

Seyyed Mohammad Mehdi Mirbagheri (born 1961) distinguishes voting from allegiance. According to him, the essential difference is that voting is generally based on desire, preference, and inclination, which can exist in non-Islamic political systems, whereas allegiance is a declaration of loyalty rooted in duty and servitude to God. Adherents are required to commit their allegiance to the most capable individual

¹⁷ Yazdi, M. (1996) *Ghanoon-e Asasi baraye Hame* [Constitution for All], p. 275.

¹⁸ Araki, M. (2009) "Jaygah-e Shura dar Entekhab-e Hakem-e Islami" [The Role of the Council in Selecting the Islamic Ruler], *Hokumat-e Islami* 14 (2): 17.

in guiding the religious community, thereby facilitating the establishment of legitimate authority and the growth of divine governance¹⁹.

Some scholars and religious thinkers, by distinguishing form from content, maintain that the republican form and democratic method can be used, as procedural democracy does not conflict with Islam, but the content of governance must remain Islamic. They argue that value-based democracy conflicts with Islam, whereas procedural democracy is compatible.

According to Abdollah Javadi Amoli, the people do not have the right to legislate in divine matters; they only participate in planning and decision-making through their representatives. In the realm of human affairs, God's will constitutes law, but the people serve as the point of reference for its implementation²⁰. Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi argues that if democracy, in the legislative sense, implies primacy of human opinion, it is rejected by Islam. However, if democracy allows people to select representatives to participate in legal and social matters while preserving Islamic principles and values, it is acceptable²¹.

Abbas Ka'bi (born 1962) asserts that the supreme jurist is appointed through general divine authorization from the infallible Imam, or indirectly by God, and the people do not play a role in legitimizing the Islamic ruler. Nevertheless, in realizing, establishing, and actualizing governance, individuals remain the sole effective element, similar to their role in the implementation and formation of the government of the Prophet Muhammad (SAWA) and Imam Ali²². Ahmad Va'ez (born 1962) maintains that procedural democracy can be confined within the framework of Islamic principles, allowing public participation in selecting representatives for the legislative assembly, but these repre-

¹⁹ Mirbaqeri, S. M. M. (2022) "Barresi-ye Velayat-e Feqh va Faqih / Velayat-e Faqih Miras-e Geransang-e Emam Khomeini" [Review of Wilayat-e Fiqh and Faqih / The Guardianship of the Jurist: The Valuable Legacy of Imam Khomeini] [<https://mirbaqeri.ir>, accessed on 08.09.2022].

²⁰ MirAhmadi, M. (2011) "Mardomsalari-ye Dini dar Andisheh-ye Ayatollah Javadi Amoli" [Religious Democracy in the Thought of Ayatollah Javadi Amoli], *Esra Quarterly* 3 (3): 73.

²¹ Mesbah Yazdi, M. T. (2003) *Negahi Gozara be Nazariyeh Wilayat-e Faqih* [A Brief Look at the Theory of Guardianship of the Jurist], p. 185. Qom: Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute.

²² Ka'bi, A. (2013) "Ka'bi: The Legitimacy of the System is Based on the Jurist", *Nama News*, January 18 [<https://www.namanews.com/News/31291>, accessed on 11.05.2025].

sentatives do not have the authority to make decisions or enact laws contrary to Islamic values²³.

2.2. People's Vote as a Source of Legitimacy

A group of scholars and authors argue that allegiance and the people's vote possess intrinsic legitimacy. According to this view, governance is dual in nature — partly divine and partly popular — and a government becomes legitimate only when these two aspects are reconciled. This perspective implies that even if a ruler possesses the divine right to govern, the government will be illegitimate if the people do not consent.

Mohammad Hadi Ma'refat (1930–2006) argues that the Shari'a has only commanded consultation so that the Islamic community engages in deliberation and decision-making in all aspects of life, particularly in political affairs. However, the method of consultation is left to the people, to be carried out according to the practices of the wise and the customary methods of the world, referred to as the "custom of the rational" (*sirat al-'uqalā'*)²⁴.

Asadollah Bayat Zanjani (born 1941) views governance as a rational and human matter. According to him, no specific form or model of government has been recommended by God, and political guardianship is not sacred. In Muslim societies, governance is bound by norms that are valuable to the people, and legitimacy is based on the decisions of the Muslims themselves²⁵.

Davood Feyrahi (1964–2020) argues that Republicanism and Islamism are compatible. He distinguishes between Republicanism and democracy, considering Republicanism as a model of governance that reflects collective concerns, such as virtue and the common good. The concept of a republic applies to a society or ideology that grants governance to the people while maintaining societal values — referred to as the "public good" or "common good" — that must also be preserved. These values may derive from religion, tradition, or history²⁶.

²³ Vaezi, A. (2007) *Hokumat-e Islami: Darsname-ye Andisheh Siyasi-e Islam* [Islamic Governance: Textbook on Islamic Political Thought], p. 245. Qom: Center for Seminary Management.

²⁴ Marefat, M. H. (1998) *Wilayat-e Faqih* [Guardianship of the Jurist], p. 101. Qom: Tamheed Cultural Institute.

²⁵ Bayat Zanjani, A. (2016) *Hozur-e Hazer* [The Present Presence], pp. 53–54. Tehran: Sharif Publications.

²⁶ Firahi, D. (2023) *Masayel-e Mostahdeth-e Fiqh-e Siyasi* [New Issues in Political Jurisprudence], ed. M. Pourhossein, p. 207.

Seyyed Sadegh Haghghat (born 1962) argues that democracy can be reconciled with religion and religious governance. Democracy is a complex and multidimensional concept, and in practice, most governments combine elements of democracy with features of non-democratic regimes, such as oligarchic, aristocratic, or even religiously autocratic systems. Therefore, based on the non-contradiction between democracy and political jurisprudence, different interpretations of political jurisprudence can be compared using democratic criteria²⁷.

2.3. *Incompatibility of Republicanism and Islamicity*

A group of scholars argue that Republicanism and the Islamic character of the system (*eslāmiyyat*) are not compatible. In cases of conflict, they prioritize Republicanism over Islamicity, asserting that in a clash between human rights and the rights of obedience, human rights take precedence. Some among them advocate secularism. They maintain that with the consent of the people, certain religious rulings can be codified into statutory law.

Mehdi Haeri regards the Islamic Republic both in theory and at the legislative level as a contradictory, illogical, and unreasonable system, for which neither existence nor legitimacy can be conceived. According to him, the phrase “Islamic Republic under the guardianship of the jurist” is inherently contradictory and itself a clear and explicit reason for the denial of its rationality and legitimacy²⁸. Although Haeri taught at Azad University of Tehran (and not in Qom), his ideas were seriously discussed and debated within the Qom Seminary, as evidenced by his written debate with Ayatollah Javadi Amoli in the journal *Islamic Government*²⁹.

Mohsen Kadivar considers Republicanism and *willāyah* governance incompatible, or indeed mutually contradictory. In other words, one must either adhere to the absolute divine guardianship of a jurist appointed by God over the people, or accept the election of a ruler as a representative of the people. According to Kadivar, these two systems,

²⁷ Haghghat, S.S. (2015) “Feqh-e Siyasi va Demokrasi” [Political Jurisprudence and Democracy], *Andisheh Siyasi dar Islam* 4: 57.

²⁸ Yazdi, M. (1996) *Ghanoon-e Asasi baraye Hame* [Constitution for All], p. 246.

²⁹ Haeri Yazdi, M. (1996) “Naghd va Nazar: Naghdi bar Maqaleh ‘Seyri dar Mabani-ye Wilayat-e Faqih’” [A Critical Review of the Article “A Survey of the Foundations of Guardianship of the Jurist”], *Hokumat-e Islami* 2: 223.

if all intrinsic characteristics are preserved, cannot be reconciled³⁰. Kadivar was a graduate of the Qom Seminary and engaged in teaching and research at some of its academic centers. However, after raising his critical views, his connection with Qom diminished and he settled in Tehran. He later emigrated from Iran, but his views continue to be taken seriously in Qom.

3. The Third Period

The political ideas emerging in Iran between 2009 and 2025 have mainly been a direct and growing response to a crisis concerning the efficacy of the Islamic Republic government and the religious system. This crisis emerged as a consequence of the 2009 elections — an election accompanied by the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but in which the opposing candidates (Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi) alleged widespread fraud. The unprecedented wave of street protests that followed led to the largest political crisis since the 1979 Revolution and created a deep socio-political divide. Subsequently, in January 2018, nationwide protests centered on rising prices and unemployment began in Mashhad and spread to over 80 cities. Their economic slogans quickly transformed into a systematic critique of the rule of the clergy and the Supreme Leader, and even some religious seminaries were set on fire. Two years later, in November 2019, a 50 percent increase in gasoline prices coupled with the imposition of rationing sparked even broader protests. Political slogans against the entire system were chanted, and a significant portion of them shifted in favor of the Pahlavi dynasty deposed in 1979 during the Islamic Revolution. In September 2022, the death of Mahsa Amini — a young Kurdish woman who lost her life in the custody of the Guidance Patrol (*Gasht-e Ershad*) on charges of improper veiling — triggered unprecedented protests. Unlike previous protests, these directly criticized compulsory veiling and political repression, and quickly turned into slogans against the very integrity of the Islamic Republic system. Finally, in January 2026, new protests emerged in response to the rising value of the US dollar and the cost of basic goods. These were intensified by calls from Reza Pahlavi (born 1960, the exiled son of Iran's last monarch and a prominent opposition figure advocating a secular,

³⁰ Kadivar, M. (1998) *Hokumat-e Velaei* [Jurist Governance], p. 207. Tehran: Ney Publishing.

democratic Iran) and the US president Donald Trump. According to official statistics from the Islamic Republic of Iran, over three thousand people lost their lives in these clashes. This chain of protests, each time with greater intensity and scope, brought the question of the efficacy of the religious system from the margins to the center of Iranian politics.

On the one hand, these protests targeted the religious seminaries and the clergy, and were interpreted as a sign that a segment of the younger generation was moving away from religiosity. In such an atmosphere, scholars and clerics were confronted with the question: Has the Islamic Republic system in practice proven to be a successful system and fulfilled expectations? Those who respond are critics of the Islamic Republic's performance, each seeking the cause in a different place. According to the findings, four types of political thought have been articulated in this period.

3.1. Transition from the Islamic Republic to an Islamic Government

According to a segment of seminary scholars, the main obstacle to implementing the idea of an Islamic state is a group of pro-Western or Westernized individuals who have, through manipulating public opinion, succeeded in elections within the Islamic Republic, thereby wasting its time and resources. To achieve an Islamic civilization, it is necessary to move toward Islamic state-building, which is centered on *willāyah* (guardianship) rather than the people.

Seyyed Mohammad Mehdi Mirbagheri sees the primary goal of *willāyah* as the establishment of religion. The guardian (*wali*) must be the most knowledgeable and faithful in religion while also being the most capable in implementing it. Guardianship serves as a divine instrument for managing the confrontation between the divine and atheistic systems in the world. The most capable individual, able to plan for the power and authority of Islam, is qualified to hold such a position. “The development of perfection” or “excellence” can only be achieved through the system of *willāyah* and loyalty (*tawalli*). Without this system, the realization and development of perfection or excellence cannot be expected³¹.

³¹ Mirbaqeri, S. M. M. (2022) “Barresi-ye Velayat-e Feqh va Faqih / Velayat-e Faqih Miras-e Geransang-e Emam Khomeini” [Review of Wilayat-e Fiqh and Faqih / The Guardianship of the Jurist: The Valuable Legacy of Imam Khomeini] [<https://mirbaqeri.ir>, accessed on 08.09.2022].

According to Mohammad Momen (1937–2018), an influential member of the Guardian Council (*Shora-ye Negahban*), the proofs of guardianship require that God Himself appoint the jurist to the position of *willāyah*. Accordingly, the drafting laws in Islamic society — which may sometimes impose constraints on individual rights — falls under the authority of the supreme jurist. The jurist may determine the method of enacting these laws and, concerning division of labor, may assign responsibilities to the legislative assembly, ministries, offices, officials, and deputies as prescribed by law³².

3.2. Approaches to Reforming the Islamic Republic

Three political-social events in the years following the 1979 Revolution in Iran led to intellectual divides and the emergence of three groups of reformist thinkers within the Qom Seminary. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 caused some of his intellectual supporters to step aside. In the following decades, they argued that the Islamic Republic had diverged from its original goals and, based on a populist reading of Khomeini's thought, sought to revive Republicanism within the Islamic Republic. The dismissal of Hossein Ali Montazeri from the position of Deputy Supreme Leader and the events of 1997 (namely, the landslide victory of the reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami in the presidential election) shaped another group of reformist thinkers. They emphasize the democratic aspects of the Islamic Republic based on Montazeri's later theory, namely "supervision by the jurist" (*nazārat-e Faqīh*).

The study of some seminary students at universities and the establishment of seminary universities in Qom produced a third group of reformists. Familiar with new concepts and ideas, they sought ways to reconcile Islamic political thought with contemporary political ideas.

Hossein Ali Montazeri played a special role among the seminary reformists. Although his views on religious governance evolved over time, his theory of supervision by the jurist is considered his final theory. Montazeri conceptualized it as a bridge from centralized jurist guardianship to the theory of separation of faculties, granting greater authority to elective bodies. According to the separation of faculties, "the head of the executive branch need not be a jurist, although in

³² Firahi, D. (2015) *Fiqh va Siyasat dar Iran-e Mo'aser* [Jurisprudence and Politics in Contemporary Iran]. Vol. 2, p. 444. Tehran: Nashr-e Ney.

any case they should be chosen by the people. Similarly, those responsible for religious rulings and judiciary must, in addition to possessing scholarly and jurisprudential competence, also be selected by the people³³. These statements indicate that Montazeri, in his later reflections, regarded electoral mechanisms and separation of faculties as essential for restraining authority. He separates government powers and conditions them on majority choice, while in the areas of fatwa and judiciary, professional competence alongside popular selection must be considered³⁴.

Yousef Sanei (1937–2020), a reformist-oriented Shia source of emulation (*marja' al-taqīd*), among Shia argued in his later reflections that God has left the resolution of this need to the people at different times and places. God has not legislated a specific method or structure for political governance. In each society, whatever the people choose based on collective wisdom and rational principles, and upon which they establish their welfare, is pleasing to God³⁵. This means that the custom and reason of the people are the determining factors, and the political matter is earthly.

Kazem Ghazizadeh (born 1961) holds that during the Occultation, the Qur'an does not provide evidence for the specific appointment of a particular individual or group to govern society. However, numerous verses endorse delegating governance to the people. Considering God's absolute sovereignty and the people's authority in governance during the Occultation, the type of legitimacy can be described as divine-popular, in that the leader, while being chosen by the community, exercises authority in terms of divine guidelines³⁶.

Seyyed Sadegh Haghghat (born 1962) considers the establishment of an Islamic government as a rational necessity. Reason dictates that a government capable of implementing religious rulings is preferable, but implementation should not be coercive; it must align with the people's will and be democratic. According to Haghghat, existing proofs do not validate the jurist's guardianship in either the form of appointment or election. He supports partial supervision by jurists, as

³³ Montazeri, H. A. (2008) *Hokumat-e Dini va Hoquq-e Ensan* [Religious Government and Human Rights], pp. 24–25. Tehran: Hashemiyun.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

³⁵ Mortazavi, S. Z. (2015) *Negahi be Mabani-e Fiqhi-ye Ayatollah Sanei* [A Look at the Jurisprudential Foundations of Ayatollah Sanei], pp. 80–81. Qom: Fiqh al-Thaqalin.

³⁶ Qazizadeh, K. (2005) *Siyasat va Hokumat dar Qur'an* [Politics and Governance in the Qur'an], p. 214. Qom: Research Institute of Islamic Culture and Thought.

they acquire specialized knowledge in religion and jurisprudence. The people request that jurists oversee laws rather than exercise God-given authority with the intention of coercion³⁷.

3.3. *Transition from Religious Government to a Secular State*

Mohsen Kadivar (born 1959) stated in a lecture in 2017: “Since the second half of 2009, I have arrived at the necessity of a secular democratic government, meaning the independence of the state from religious institutions, and I have also moved beyond legal supervision of religion over politics and legislation.” In the second and third decades after the Revolution, he considered the possibility of an “Islamic Republic” or a democratic religious government, ultimately concluding that he must renounce absolute religious governance. According to Kadivar, the criteria for holding political office are competence (expertise) and trustworthiness (integrity). Beyond these two, no other conditions — especially religious ones — are required. The validity of legislation depends on the expert support of representatives of the people, and no other condition is relevant. While representatives are not irreligious or non-believers, and they observe religious and ethical standards in legislation, if they pass a law deemed incorrect by some religious scholars, the scholars have the right to criticize the law publicly. If they succeed in persuading the majority of citizens to annul the law, the previously incorrect law will be democratically corrected³⁸.

Seyyed Kamal al-Haydari (born 1946), a senior lecturer at the Qom Seminary — who in recent years has faced restrictions and had his classes suspended due to some of his controversial views — offers a distinct reinterpretation of Shia political jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in his analysis of the relationship between religion and politics. By distinguishing between religion and historical structures built upon religion, he argues that the Qur’an does not mandate the establishment of a “religious government.” What the Qur’an requires of the faithful community is the realization of moral values, justice, avoidance of oppression, social solidarity, and adherence to human virtues. He distinguishes two roles of the Prophet: the prophetic role, relating to revelation, and the social-customary role, influenced by the tribal,

³⁷ Haghighat, S. S. (2015) “Feqh-e Siyasi va Demokrasi” [Political Jurisprudence and Democracy], pp. 30–31.

³⁸ Kadivar, M. (2017) *Sekularism va No-andishi-ye Dini* [Secularism and Religious Reformism] [<https://kadivar.com/16262/>, accessed on 01.10.2022]

political, and security conditions of Medina. Many of the Prophet's governmental decisions were prudential and context-specific, and thus his governance is inherently "customary" (*urfi*) rather than a universal and binding model for all Muslim societies. Consequently, traditional political jurisprudence's reference to the Prophet's governance to justify the necessity of a religious government or the jurist's guardianship during the Occultation lacks sufficient Qur'anic and historical support. Based on these principles, Haeri does not ascribe political office to jurists during the Occultation, limiting their role to elucidating Shari'a and providing ethical guidance. He argues that politics and governance in this period are customary in nature and derive legitimacy from the people and collective reason³⁹.

Abulqasem Fanaei (born 1959) defends the normative connection between ethics and politics. He identifies seven politically relevant characteristics of ethics: "minimalist, context-sensitive, duty-based, supra-religious social normative ethics that also considers the predictable consequences of political action." Descriptive ethics, individual ethics, religious ethics, maximalist ethics, absolutist ethics, duty-based ethics ignoring predictable consequences, and consequentialist ethics denying independent moral duties are not relevant to politics. Individual ethics regulate the relationship between the individual and self, defining personal rights and duties, while social ethics regulate relations among individuals and social institutions. Social ethics must be supra-religious and non-sectarian, meaning they remain neutral toward both religious and non-religious worldviews and do not assume either. Thus, social ethics cannot be religious or non-religious in nature⁴⁰.

3.4. Return to Guardianship in Hisbah Affairs

Some scholars and seminary instructors advocate a return to the historical mission of the clergy, namely interpreting religion and defending Shi'ism. They argue that political Islam, by instrumentally using religion, has diverted youth and society from ethics and Shiite identity.

³⁹ Haghghat, S. S. (2025) "Velayat-e Siyasi-ye Masuman (AS) az Didgah-e Shi'ah ba Ta'kid bar Didgah-e Emam Khomeini" [The Political Guardianship (Wilayah) of the Infallibles (AS) from the Shia Perspective (with Emphasis on Imam Khomeini's View)], *Matin Research Journal* 27 (106): 12 [https://ensani.ir/fa/article/620161, accessed on 14.05.2026].

⁴⁰ Fanaei, A. (2011) "Kodam Akhlaq be Kodam Siyasat Mortebut Ast" [Which Ethics Relates to Which Politics?], *Andisheh Dini Mo'asir* [https://andishe.org, accessed on 24.12.2024].

Their emphasis is on returning to guardianship in *hesba* affairs (public religious duties such as issuing fatwas, religious propagation, charitable works, caring for the poor and needy, and managing endowments) and entrusting politics to specialists. It appears that the record of political Islam over past decades, as well as the role of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani in Iraq's developments, has reinforced this line of thought.

Seyyed Mohammad Javad Alavi Boroujerdi (born 1951), a lecturer at the Qom Seminary who in recent years has published his own practical treatise (*resale-ye 'amaliyye*), rejects an extensive and maximalist interpretation of religion and Shari'a, and opposes the term "Islamic economics."⁴¹ According to him, during the Occultation, the care of Shi'a is entrusted to the Shi'a *marja'* (source of emulation; pl. *maraji'*) and the jurist possessing comprehensive qualifications, which entails certain obligations. One of these is that the *marja'* should not remain indifferent to the conditions of the people. If the people face poverty, hunger, or suffering, the Shi'a *marja'* must provide guidance and admonition. The *marja'* and clergy should act as a parental figure for the people. The clergy are not only fathers of the faithful but fathers of all Shi'a, whether believers or not. Failure of the *marja'* and clergy to perform this paternal role would alienate the people from them⁴².

Seyyed Mohammad Yathrabi (born 1954), a professor at Qom Seminary, views the existence of *marja'iyya* (the Shi'i system of religious authority) and the practice of *taqlid* (following a jurist's legal rulings in matters of religious practice) as grounded in consulting specialists and learned individuals. According to him, the duties of a *marja'* during the Occultation include interpreting religion, defending it, promoting it, administering justice, and safeguarding the existence of Shi'ism. However, he ties the performance of these duties to the extent of the *marja's* influence (*bast-e yad*). If societal conditions limit the *marja's* influence, some of these duties may be curtailed. Acceptance of many social responsibilities by the modern state, such as education or care for orphans, can relieve the clergy of certain social duties; in such cases, *maraji'* (pl. of *marja'*) are responsible for overseeing the state to ensure it fulfills its obligations. Furthermore, the

⁴¹ Alavi Boroujerdi, S. M. J. (2020) "Eghtesad-e Eslami Nadarim" [We Do Not Have an Islamic Economy], *EcoIran* [<https://ecoiran.com/fa/tiny/news-2182>, accessed on 22.12.2022].

⁴² Alavi Boroujerdi, S. M. J. (2022) "Agar Pedari Konim, Mardom az Ma Joda Nemishavand" [If We Act as Fathers, People Will Not Separate from Us], *Shafaqna* [<https://fa.shafaqna.com/?p=1251675>, accessed on 22.12.2022].

injunction to enjoin good and forbid evil remains operative and must be emphasized according to the *marja*'s sphere of influence Yathrabi emphasizes that preserving the *marja'iyya* (the institution of source of emulation, which is distinct from the seminary / *hawza 'ilmiyya*), the seminary, and their historical position is one of the clergy's most important duties. He stresses the independence of the *marja'iyya*, the seminary, and the clergy, meaning the ability to make autonomous decisions, not necessarily opposition to the state. He believes that religious scholars throughout history have maintained this independence and passed it to contemporary scholars. *Maraji'* and clerics today must similarly uphold this independence to safeguard religion. Yathrabi defines the duties of the *marja'iyya* within the framework of *hisbah* (public religious affairs / commanding right and forbidding wrong), which refers to matters that lack a designated guardian⁴³.

Conclusion

Shi'i political thought in the Islamic Republic of Iran has evolved across three distinct periods: 1979–1997 (legitimacy of jurist-led governance), 1997–2009 (relationship between Republicanism and Islamcity), and 2009–2025 (crisis in the efficacy of religious governance). Table 1 summarizes these three periods, their central questions, and the range of responses from different groups of thinkers.

Table 1

Time Period	Key Question	Ideas
1979–1997	Legitimacy of the Jurist's Guardianship (<i>Wilāyat al-Faqīh</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected jurist guardianship (Montazeri, Salehi Najafabadi) • Guardianship by the Council of Jurists (Seyyed Abolfazl Mousavi Zanjani, Sadeghi Tehrani, Seyyed Mohammad Shirazi) • Appointed jurist guardianship (Javadi Amoli, Mesbah Yazdi)

⁴³ Taran, R. (2024) *Shari'at-Shahr: Revayati az Tahavvol-e Andisheh-ye Siyasi dar Howzeh-ye Elmīyeh-e Qom* [Shari'at-Shahr: A Narrative of the Evolution of Political Thought in Qom Seminary], p. 219. Tehran: Negah-e Mo'asir.

The end of table 1

Time Period	Key Question	Ideas
1997–2009	Relationship between Islamism and Republicanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Priority of Islamism over Republicanism (Mohammad-Mehdi Mirbagheri, Mohsen Araki, Mohammad Yazdi) ● Acceptance of procedural democracy and rejection of value-based democracy (Javadi Amoli, Mesbah Yazdi, Abbas Kaabi, Ahmad Va'ezzi) ● Priority of Republicanism over Islamism (Montazeri, Mohammad Hadi Ma'refat, Asadollah Bayat, Davood Fereyhi) ● Incompatibility of Republicanism and Islamism (Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, Mohsen Kadivar)
2009–2025	Crisis in the Efficiency of Religious Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group 1: Transition from the Islamic Republic to an Islamic Government (Mohammad Momen, Mirbagheri) ● Group 2: Return to Republicanism (Montazeri, Haghghat, Ghazizadeh, etc.) ● Group 3: Transition from the Islamic Republic (Kadivar, Seyyed Kamal Haeri, Abulqasem Fanaei) ● Return to the Historical Duties of the <i>Marja'iyya</i> (Alavi Boroujerdi, Seyyed Mohammad Yathrabi)

One of the findings of this research is that in the realm of political thought, a diverse range of ideas and theories have been derived from religious texts. This suggests that it may not be possible to regard any single idea as the definitive Islamic perspective. Consequently, with evolving contexts and the emergence of new issues, Islamic scholars can offer alternative interpretations of Islamic political thought to address these challenges. Another finding is that the political ideas of seminary scholars have developed in close relation to social and political contexts, rather than in isolation from them.

Another observation is that political thought in the Qom Seminary has not fully engaged with the modern world and continues to follow a classical trajectory. The main questions and discussions have primarily revolved around the issue of “who should govern?”, whereas modern political thought is primarily concerned with how governance

should be structured, not merely who occupies power. Accordingly, institutional analysis has received limited attention from seminary scholars, and even those who have engaged with institutions have examined them mainly in relation to the ruler. Many political ideas in the seminary focus on individual leadership, and the legitimacy of institutions is considered contingent on the legitimacy of the individual, namely the Supreme Jurist (*Wilāyat al-Faqīh*). In their view, the establishment of institutions and organizations depends on the Supreme Jurist's legitimacy and becomes legitimate only with his approval.

Another finding is that seminary research and political ideas have largely remained at a fundamental level; strategic and practical discussions have not received significant attention. As a result, their ideas have remained peripheral and have not been directly linked to real-world issues. Supporters of the political system have used their ideas at a macro level to bolster it, while opponents have attempted to critique, analyze, and weaken it. Overall, this has contributed little to the practical strengthening or weakening of the political system. Another observation is that the relationship between power and knowledge has not succeeded in transforming a single idea or political thought into a hegemonic discourse. While opposing viewpoints may not be expressed in formal circles, evidence suggests that rival perspectives continue to survive intellectually, and new ideas have emerged in opposition to the prevailing power-endorsed viewpoints.

A notable point is the relationship between political ideas and power. Power is a non-epistemic but influential factor in shaping, promoting, weakening, or marginalizing ideas. Typically, those who maintain better relations with the political system and benefit from its privileges also have greater access to resources. Some observations indicate that seminary scholars may revise their political ideas in accordance with changes in their institutional positions.

Finally, the findings indicate signs of decline or weakening of political Islam within the seminary. Specifically, two groups of scholars and instructors have critiqued political Islam: one group advocates secularism and the transition from a religious system, while the second consists of some traditionalists emphasizing social Islam or the jurisdiction of jurists in *hisbah* affairs (public religious duties such as issuing fatwas, religious propagation, charitable works, caring for the poor and needy, and managing endowments). Political Islam faced significant opposition within the seminary during the 1980s (1980–1988), but gradually became the dominant discourse.

The 1990s (1991–2000) and 2000s (2001–2009) marked the peak of political Islam’s influence in the seminary. However, after four decades of political Islam’s practical experience and following domestic protests in 2009, 2017, 2019, and 2022–2023, transformations are emerging that do not appear to favor political Islam. In the 1990s and 2000s, proponents of maximalist political Islam “othered” seminary reformists and devoted considerable energy to confronting and weakening them. This was despite the fact that intellectually, the reformists were closer to the maximalists than any other group; both accepted political Islam, but the reformists’ interpretation of it was democratic. Meanwhile, supporters of *wilāyat fi hisbah* (guardianship in public religious affairs) and advocates of secular approaches emerged on the periphery of the seminary and gradually grew. Currently, they have more representatives for *marja’iyya* (source of emulation), and in the last decade, a large number of seminary professors have been attracted to their ideas.

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