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Populism in Iran: A Case of Islamic Populism

By

Majid Bozorgmehri

Professor Faculty of Social Sciences, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin. Iran Visitor Scholar, York University, Toronto, Ontario. Canada Orcid: 0000-0002-2715-8997

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Corresponding author
Majid Bozorgmehri

Abstract

The article examines the particular configuration of populism in the Islamic Republic of Iran and argues that it should be conceptualized as a distinctive form of Islamic populism. By combining historical contextualization, theoretical discussion, and engagement with recent scholarship, the study demonstrates that Iranian revolutionary discourse, post-revolutionary political practice, and contemporary state rhetoric have produced a populist formation shaped by the country's religious and ideological foundations. In contrast to approaches that interpret Iranian populism merely through the framework of conventional anti-elitism, the Iranian case reflects significant adaptations rooted in Shiʿi symbolic narratives, theocratic state structures, and persistent opposition to foreign domination. The article argues that populism in Iran emerged through the fusion of Shiʿi theological motifs, anti-elite mobilization, and socio-economic appeals. While these features share some affinities with broader theories of populism, they also diverge from dominant Western models in important ways. Methodologically, the study relies on library-based research and autoethnography.

Keywords: Iran, Islamic Populism, Iranian Populism, Islamic Revolution, Populism.

1. Introduction

Populism is generally understood as a political logic, discourse, or style that invokes "the people" in opposition to a corrupt or self-serving elite. Over the past several decades, it has become one of the most debated concepts in political science. Although a large proportion of the literature has focused on Europe and the Americas, increasing attention has been paid to non-Western cases in order to understand how populism is reformulated in different historical, cultural, and institutional settings. Iran provides a particularly important case in this regard. Since the 1979 Revolution, populist discourse has occupied a central place in the construction of political legitimacy, the organization of state ideology, and the rhetoric of governance in the Islamic Republic.

In the Iranian context, the boundary between "the people" and "the elite" cannot be understood solely in socio-economic or institutional terms. Rather, it is embedded in a more complex ideological field structured by claims to revolutionary authenticity, religious legitimacy, anti-imperial resistance, and social justice. As a result, the Iranian experience of populism cannot be adequately explained through analytical models derived exclusively from Western democratic settings.

The central question guiding this article is as follows: What are the defining characteristics of populism in post-revolutionary Iran, and to what extent can this phenomenon be understood as a specific model of Islamic populism?

This article seeks to demonstrate that populism in the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a distinct subtype of Islamic populism. Drawing on existing scholarship, theoretical debates, and historical developments, it argues that Iran's revolutionary language, subsequent political practices, and contemporary official rhetoric have generated a form of populism that is deeply shaped by the country's socio-religious environment. Rather than merely reproducing a standard anti-elite discourse, Iranian populism incorporates Shiʿi religious narratives, state-centered theological claims, and geopolitical antagonism into its political language.

Iran's political economy has also played an important role in sustaining this populist configuration. As a major oil-producing state, Iran has historically derived substantial revenues from

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natural resources. These resources have strengthened the capacity of political authorities to finance distributive policies, ideological institutions, and symbolic forms of mass mobilization. At the same time, populist discourse has been disseminated through extensive control over religious institutions, educational structures, broadcast media, print culture, and other cultural mechanisms. The clergy's presence within many of these spheres has further reinforced the integration of religious symbolism and populist messaging.

The study adopts a library-based research design and employs content analysis as its principal methodological tool. This approach is particularly appropriate given the constraints on independent fieldwork and survey-based research in Iran, especially on politically sensitive subjects. Under such conditions, qualitative analysis of political texts, official discourse, and scholarly sources provides one of the most viable means of examining the structure and meaning of populist discourse in the Iranian case.

2. Research Methodology

This study is based on library research as well as autoethnography. Library research may be defined as the systematic use of printed and digital scholarly resources to identify, collect, evaluate, and synthesize information relevant to a specific research question (George, 2008; Sare, 2017). In the context of this article, library research makes it possible to assemble the relevant theoretical literature on populism and Islamic populism, while also drawing upon historical and political analyses of post-revolutionary Iran.

In addition to library research, the study employs an explicatory mode of inquiry. This involves a close and careful examination of key texts, discourses, and political contexts in order to clarify the meaning of complex ideological formations and the conditions under which they emerge (George, 2008). Such an approach is especially useful for interpreting the symbolic and doctrinal elements that shape populist discourse in Iran.

Autoethnography combines autobiography, ethnography, and analytical social research. Through it, the researcher analyzes broader political and social phenomena through personal observations, lived experiences, field memories, participation in political culture, and reflective interpretation (Rhodes, 2021; Eliss & Bochner, 2016; Tony E. A., Linn, Jones & Ellis, 2015). Indeed, the author's lived experience in Iran and direct exposure to its political and social transformations have provided firsthand insight into the dynamics and evolving manifestations of populism within the Iranian context. Therefore, author`s analysis is not treated merely as "personal opinion," but as situated knowledge, insider empirical observation, and reflexive field experience.

3. Theoretical Framework: Populism and Islamic Populism

3.1. Populism

In political science, populism is widely regarded as an "essentially contested concept," meaning that no single definition has achieved universal acceptance and that its meaning remains subject to ongoing scholarly debate (Mudde, 2017). This definitional difficulty arises in part from the considerable diversity of political movements that have been labeled populist, ranging from redistributive left-wing projects in Latin America to exclusionary nationalist movements in Europe (Löffler, Luyt & Starck, 2020).

Among the most influential contemporary formulations is the definition advanced by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, who describe populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that portrays society as ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," while insisting that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Within the broader literature, populism is therefore commonly understood as a thin ideological framework that opposes "the people" to "the elite" and seeks to restore political power, moral authority, or symbolic centrality to the former. Populist discourse typically relies on moral polarization, simplified political narratives, and emotionally charged appeals that promise renewal, justice, restoration, or collective redemption in the face of corruption and betrayal (Zúquete, 2017).

The thin-centered character of populism enables it to combine with a broad range of host ideologies, including leftist, rightist, corporatist, nationalist, and religious frameworks. This ideological adaptability helps explain the wide geographical and cultural reach of populism, from Latin America to Southeast Asia and across a variety of religious settings (Dorraj, 2017). Within this perspective, several core features are consistently identified. First, populism is people-centered in that it privileges the "general will" of the people as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. Second, it is anti-elitist, construing elites as morally suspect actors who have distanced themselves from the authentic community. Third, it frequently relies on a Manichean moral structure that portrays politics through a binary opposition between good and evil. Precisely because populism is "thin," it rarely exists independently; rather, it attaches itself to more comprehensive ideological systems such as nationalism, socialism, or religion.

Contemporary scholarship has nonetheless converged around three major analytical approaches to populism: populism as ideology, populism as discursive style, and populism as political strategy (Al-Rikabi, 2024, p.358; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). As Angela K. Bourne observes, populism maintains an ambivalent relationship with democracy. On the one hand, it may widen political participation and strengthen claims of representation; on the other hand, it may erode liberal institutions, weaken pluralism, and endanger minority rights (Bourne, 2025). This same flexibility also allows populism to merge with religious worldviews, thereby generating forms such as Islamic populism.

3.2. Islamic Populism

Islamic populism may be understood as a hybrid ideological formation in which the central logic of populism is expressed through Islamic symbols, values, and political narratives. Asef

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Bayat characterizes Islamic populism as a mode of politics that combines religious moral authority with appeals to the oppressed (*mustazafin*) against corrupt ruling groups and foreign domination (Bayat, 2007/2013[b]).

Vedi Hadiz, by contrast, defines Islamic populism as a cross-class political alliance mobilized through Islamic identity and linking marginalized populations with sections of the bourgeoisie in opposition to secularized or Western-oriented elites (Hadiz, 2016). In Hadiz's account, contemporary Islamic populism gains force through the convergence of grievances, frustrations, and aspirations across a broad social spectrum. In this framework, the "good" and "virtuous" masses are defined primarily through faith, that is, through a shared sense of belonging to a historically marginalized and long-suffering *ummah*. Hadiz further argues that the emergence of this "new Islamic" populism is closely associated with conditions of marginality, social dislocation, and uncertainty (Hadiz, 2016, p.188).

Islamic populism therefore preserves the principal elements of populism while recasting them in a religious idiom. In this formulation, "the people" are no longer understood merely as a political community but as a moral Islamic collectivity, often identified with the *ummah*. Legitimacy is grounded not only in popular support but also in religious authenticity. Elites are criticized not simply as politically or economically privileged groups, but as corrupt, Westernized, impious, or morally estranged from Islamic values. Likewise, the "general will" is interpreted as being consistent with divine or Islamic principles, thereby generating a dual basis of legitimacy that combines popular and sacred authority.

The symbolic repertoire of Islamic populism further distinguishes it from secular variants. Its discourse frequently draws on religious categories such as *mustazafin* (the oppressed), *taghut* (illegitimate or tyrannical authority), martyrdom, sacrifice, and justice. These concepts function not only as theological motifs but also as political frames that deepen the emotional and moral resonance of populist mobilization.

At the same time, Islamic populism is not uniform across Muslim societies. Its form varies according to national context, historical development, class configuration, and state structure. In some settings, it emphasizes conservative moral order and religious orthodoxy; in others, it incorporates demands for socio-economic justice justified through theological language and Islamic ethical traditions (Saramifar, 2024).

Table 1. Islamic Populism and Classical Populism Based on the Analyses of Hadiz and Bayat

Dimension	Islamic Populism	Classical Populism
Source of legitimacy	Popular and divine legitimacy	Popular sovereignty
Definition of "the people"	Religious community (*ummah*)	Political community
Ideological attachment	Islam	Nationalism, socialism, or other secular ideologies
Critique of elites	Secularized, Westernized, or impious elites	Political and economic elites

In this context, an important distinction must be made regarding the applicability of the analyses of Hadiz and Bayat to Iran. Much of their work is concerned with Islamic movements operating outside the structures of state power. Iran, however, presents a more complex trajectory, having experienced at least two distinct phases of Islamic populism. The first emerged during the 1979 Revolution, when militant and revolutionary Islamic populism developed in opposition to the secular Pahlavi monarchy. The second appeared after the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, when populism came to function in support of an institutionalized system of Shiʿi clerical authority.

During the establishment and consolidation of the Islamic Republic, state authorities benefited from several structural advantages: extensive oil revenues, broad governmental capacities, and a longstanding cultural and historical matrix of Islamic belief in Iran. These conditions enabled the state not only to deploy populist rhetoric but also to sustain it materially through redistribution, ideological institutions, and broad mechanisms of mobilization. In this regard, it is significant that ideology and utopian aspiration have long remained central features of Iranian political life (Ansari, 2008, p. 684).

4. Previous Literature

Scholarship on populism in Iran, and particularly on its Islamic form, has expanded across political science, sociology, and Middle Eastern studies. Existing research may be broadly divided into two major strands: first, historical and ideological analyses of the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's political thought; and second, studies of post-revolutionary Islamic populism and its later transformations.

The first strand emphasizes that populism in Iran should not be regarded as a recent or purely post-1979 phenomenon. Rather, many scholars argue that it possesses deeper historical roots in Iran's political and religious traditions. Majidifard et al. (2025), for example, suggest that populist tendencies can be traced to earlier religious movements and were gradually incorporated into Shiʿi political culture, eventually influencing modern political discourse. From this perspective, populism is not an episodic development but a recurrent and durable feature of Iranian political life.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911 is frequently identified as an early moment in which modern populist themes—particularly justice, anti-elitism, and national sovereignty—became visible in Iranian politics. Similarly, the nationalist movement associated with Mohammad Mossadegh is often interpreted as a

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pre-revolutionary populist episode, especially because of its emphasis on anti-imperialism and popular sovereignty (Majidifard et al., 2025:2). Such historical continuities have led some scholars to treat populism as a persistent component of Iranian political culture rather than as a temporary political style confined to particular moments of crisis.

Within the literature, however, the 1979 Revolution is overwhelmingly regarded as the decisive turning point in the emergence of Islamic populism in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini is often described as a militant populist leader who successfully combined religious authority with mass mobilization (Ahmad, 2018). Keddie (2006) argues that revolutionary discourse in Iran was structured around the morally charged opposition between the *mostazafin* (the oppressed) and the *mostakberin* (the arrogant or oppressors). This binary served not only as an instrument of mobilization but also as a legitimating device for the concentration of state power after the revolution. By presenting revolutionary leadership as the true representative of the oppressed, this discourse helped justify the consolidation of authority within the new political order (Keddie, 2003/2006).

Other scholars, most notably Ervand Abrahamian (1993), have argued that Khomeini's discourse brought together Islamic symbolism, populist rhetoric, and socio-economic grievances to create a powerful ideological framework capable of mobilizing multiple social classes. This synthesis helped produce a broad revolutionary coalition composed of clerics, bazaaris, the urban poor, and sections of the middle class. The ability to unite such heterogeneous constituencies is widely regarded as one of the central reasons for the success of the revolution (Majidifard, Fouladiyan & Yousofi, 2025).

Beyond clerical leadership, the literature also highlights the contribution of intellectual figures such as Ali Shariʿati. Shariʿati played a major role in connecting Islamic thought to modern revolutionary ideas. His writings drew selectively on Shiʿism, Marxism, existentialism, and anti-colonial theory, producing a radical reinterpretation of Islam as a framework for political action and social justice (Abrahamian, 1982). This intellectual reformulation broadened the appeal of Islamic populism beyond traditional religious circles, particularly among students and segments of the urban middle class.

A further body of scholarship focuses on Shiʿi political theology as a constitutive element of Iranian Islamic populism. In this literature, concepts such as *mustazafin*, *taghut*, and the Karbala paradigm of resistance are shown to have been transformed from religious categories into explicitly political instruments of mobilization. Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* further institutionalized this synthesis by asserting the legitimacy of clerical political authority and linking divine sovereignty to mass political mobilization (Alamdari, 2005).

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, populism did not disappear; rather, it became embedded within state institutions. The second strand of the literature argues that the post-revolutionary regime combined religious legitimacy, populist discourse, and state-centered economic intervention. The result, according to some scholars, was a form of "state populism" in which redistributive promises and anti-elite rhetoric were incorporated into a theocratic political order (Majidifard et al., 2025).

Val Moghadam (1989) argues that the populist discourse that emerged in Iran following the 1979 Revolution was grounded in an orthodox, radical, and fundamentalist ideological framework closely tied to pan-Islamist aspirations. In her analysis, the revolution displayed several key features commonly associated with populism, including broad mass mobilization, the construction of a sharp antagonism directed against elites connected to the ancien régime, secular intellectuals, and opponents of clerical rule, as well as a strong moral emphasis on social justice (Moghadam, 1989, p. 428).

Mohammad Reza Farzanegan (2009) approaches the emergence of the post-revolutionary order from a macroeconomic perspective, examining the structural dimensions of the regime's populist orientation (Farzanegan, 2009). Extending this line of inquiry, Saïd Amir Arjomand (2009) and Ali Ansari (2019) maintain that populism within Iran's politico-religious system has been deeply rooted in non-elective institutions and religiously derived forms of legitimacy. Within such a structure, claims to represent "the people" are articulated through clerical authority and revolutionary symbolism rather than through democratic accountability. As a result, Iranian populism has coexisted with institutional arrangements that constrain political pluralism while simultaneously reinforcing the moral and political authority of ruling elites (Arjomand, 2009; Ansari, 2019). Similarly, Kazem Alamdari (2005) argues that during the first decade after the revolution the Iranian regime adopted a form of religious populism, which later gave way to patterns of clientelism.

More recent scholarship suggests that Islamic populism operates through the construction of a moral dichotomy between "pure believers" and "corrupt elites," a pattern that closely corresponds to the ideational definition of populism proposed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (Bazoobandi, 2023).

A number of studies further indicate that populism has remained a central component of political discourse in the Islamic Republic, employed by both conservative and reformist factions. Political actors continue to construct "the people" in different ways, often emphasizing themes of purity, victimhood, or resistance to internal and external enemies. The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) is frequently identified as a high point of post-revolutionary populism, characterized by redistributive economic measures, anti-elite rhetoric, and direct appeals to marginalized constituencies (Milani, 2007).

At the same time, not all scholars accept populism as a sufficient explanatory framework for the Iranian case. Some argue that the concept alone cannot adequately capture the complexity of Iran's political order and instead emphasize authoritarian structures, rentier-state dynamics, or ideological domination as more decisive factors. Other scholars draw attention to the emergence of post-

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Islamism, particularly from the 1990s onward, as a response to the limitations of Islamic populism. This line of analysis highlights growing demands for democracy, civil society, and pluralism articulated within an Islamic framework (Bayat, 2013[a]).

Beyond the specific case of Iran, scholars such as Asef Bayat and Vedi Hadiz have theorized Islamic populism as a broader phenomenon within the Muslim world. Hadiz conceptualizes Islamic populism as a cross-class alliance mobilized through Islamic identity and directed against secular or Western-oriented elites. Bayat, in turn, emphasizes the moral and political centrality of "the oppressed" as a category that links religious legitimacy to populist mobilization.

Although the scholarship reviewed above offers important insights into the nature of populism in Iran, the broader political science literature—whether global, focused on Islamic societies, or specifically concerned with Iran—still lacks a sufficiently comprehensive descriptive and analytical treatment of the subject. The present study seeks to address this gap through an integrative perspective.

5. Islamic Populism in Iran

5.1. Dimensions of Populism Before the Establishment of Political Power in 1979

The success of the 1979 Iranian Revolution may be understood analytically as the product of an intersection between populist mobilization and Islamic ideological production. Ayatollah Khomeini and allied Islamic movements developed a distinctive form of religious populism that combined Shiʿi political theology with mass-based anti-elite discourse.

A central dimension of Khomeini's political strategy was the construction of a populist opposition between "the oppressed people" and a corrupt, Western-backed ruling elite. In this discourse, the Shah was portrayed as the embodiment of tyranny, corruption, and foreign dependency, thereby enabling diverse social groups to be incorporated into a shared antagonistic narrative (Iran: Religious Elements of the 1979 Islamic Revolution ,2013).

Importantly, Khomeini initially avoided placing doctrinal issues such as *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) at the center of his public messaging. Instead, he emphasized broadly resonant themes including economic injustice, political repression, and anti-imperialism, which appealed not only to religious constituencies but also to secular opposition forces (Abrahamian, 1982; 1993; Kashefi, 2008). This mode of political framing closely aligns with the ideational understanding of populism, insofar as it constructs a moral opposition between "the people" and "the elite" while claiming to embody the general will.

Scholars have described this framework as a "Khomeinist script," according to which the clerical establishment was expected to lead collective struggle against tyranny and imperial domination, thereby transforming religious authority into political leadership (Iran: Religious Elements of the 1979 Islamic Revolution ,2013).This doctrine furnished a normative justification for clerical rule, a religious reinterpretation of sovereignty, and a bridge between Islamic tradition and revolutionary politics.

Khomeini's intervention marked a significant departure from the tradition of Shiʿi political quietism. Whereas Shiʿi *ulama* had historically refrained from direct political rule, Khomeini redefined their role as active leaders in the struggle against unjust government (Momen, n.d.). Several key religious concepts were rearticulated as populist frames of mobilization. *Mustazafin* (the oppressed) came to signify the authentic people; *taghut* (tyrannical or illegitimate authority) was used to denote the corrupt ruling elite; and the narratives of martyrdom and Karbala supplied a powerful symbolic language of sacrifice and resistance. These concepts endowed the revolutionary movement with both moral legitimacy and emotional force.

One of the most decisive organizational resources of the revolution was the mosque-based network of the Shiʿi *ulama*. Mosques functioned not merely as sites of worship but also as centers of communication, coordination, and political mobilization (MA, 2011). This network offered several strategic advantages: it provided a pre-existing nationwide infrastructure largely independent of the state, enjoyed high levels of social trust and legitimacy, and possessed the capacity to mobilize large numbers of people through sermons, rituals, and demonstrations. In this sense, the *ulama* operated as intermediaries who translated religious authority into populist political action.

Another important innovation in Khomeini's revolutionary strategy was the use of informal communication technologies, particularly audio cassette tapes. During his exile, his speeches were recorded, reproduced, and distributed widely throughout Iran, enabling him to sustain direct communication with the population. These recordings circulated outside official media channels, conveyed messages in simple and accessible language, and reinforced Khomeini's image as a charismatic and omnipresent leader. In effect, this practice created a parallel communication network that facilitated the dissemination of populist messages across both urban and rural settings while circumventing state censorship.

Khomeini's movement also succeeded in constructing a broad and diverse social coalition that included bazaar merchants, the urban poor, recent migrants, religious scholars, seminarians, secular intellectuals, and leftist groups. His discourse centered on social justice, anti-imperialism, and moral renewal, themes that resonated across ideological and class divisions (Kashefi, 2008).

At the same time, socio-economic transformations under the Pahlavi monarchy—especially rapid modernization, uneven development, and social dislocation—created favorable conditions for such populist mobilization. These processes generated forms of alienation and instability that Khomeini's rhetoric was particularly effective in channeling and politicizing (Alamdari, 2005).

The fall of the Pahlavi regime, therefore, cannot be explained solely in terms of structural crisis or political opposition. It must also be understood as the outcome of a coherent strategy of religious populism. The Iranian case demonstrates how populism,

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when fused with religious doctrine, can produce a powerful and durable revolutionary force capable not only of mobilizing mass participation but also of legitimizing an entirely new political order.

5.2. Populism After the Seizure of Political Power

5.2.1. General Description

In contrast to many Western democracies, where populism typically emerges as an oppositional force, populism in Iran became embedded within the institutions of the state itself. From revolutionary councils (*shura*) to both elected and appointed bodies, claims to represent "the people" acquired constitutional and ideological significance, even when constrained by clerical oversight. This institutionalization has given Iranian populism a degree of durability and resilience that purely oppositional populist movements often lack.

The religious regime in Iran has historically grounded its legitimacy in the doctrinal foundations of Twelver Shiʿism rather than in democratic institutions as the primary source of political authority. Clerical leaders have often presented themselves as descendants of the *Sayyids*—that is, as genealogically linked to the family of the Prophet of Islam and the Shiʿi Imams—and therefore as bearers of a form of sacred lineage.

Drawing on Qurʾanic verses and prophetic and Shiʿi traditions (*hadith*), the clerical establishment developed and promoted discursive frameworks that affirmed and strengthened its own authority. Religious rituals and commemorative ceremonies were repeatedly interpreted and enacted in ways that reinforced both the ideological foundations of the religious state and the political centrality of the clergy. In effect, the clerical establishment sought to mobilize the sanctity inherent in religious language and belief in order to transfer a comparable aura of sacred legitimacy to clerical rule itself. Within this framework, a limited degree of criticism of non-clerical officials was at times tolerated, provided such criticism was framed as constructive and did not threaten the broader system. Criticism directed at the clerical establishment itself, however, remained effectively prohibited.

Mosques and major pilgrimage centers functioned as important venues for the reproduction and dissemination of clerical authority. At the conclusion of congregational prayers held in mosques in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, collective supplications were often recited that combined devotional prayer with explicitly political slogans. The number of mosques in Iran has increased dramatically since the 1979 Revolution, rising from approximately 25,000 to nearly 80,000. In parallel, mosques and affiliated religious centers were established across government offices, public institutions, and universities, often under the rubric of cultural, ideological, or political offices. The primary purpose of these institutions was the dissemination of state-approved religious discourse. A large proportion of officially organized cultural competitions and ceremonies—particularly those conducted by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting organization, and ideological units within public institutions—served to promote religious principles that reinforced the foundations of the political order. In this sense, the propagation of religious concepts supportive of the Islamic Republic became deeply embedded in everyday social life.

This process extended into the educational sphere. At all levels of schooling, including elementary, middle, and secondary education, morning assemblies often included Qurʾanic recitation followed by the broadcast of political slogans over loudspeakers. Students were expected to repeat slogans directed against the United States, Israel, and opponents of the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Such practices indicate the extent to which political ideology penetrated the cultural and social environment of the country. From this perspective, the Iranian state developed a pervasive ideological apparatus that sought to shape public consciousness through religiously framed political messaging.

The *Basij-e Mostazafin* ("Mobilization of the Oppressed") constitutes another central institution in this system. Established under the authority of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij functions simultaneously as a paramilitary force and a social organization. Its official mission has been to protect and consolidate the ideological and political foundations of the Islamic Republic. Even the terminology chosen for its name—*Basij* (mobilization) and *mostazafin* (the oppressed)—reflects a distinctly populist orientation.

The Basij has become one of the largest and most extensive institutions in Iran in terms of membership and organizational reach. Its core structure rests on a network of local resistance bases distributed throughout cities and villages across the country. It is widely regarded as one of the principal instruments of power within the Islamic Republic, responsible for recruiting, training, organizing, and deploying volunteer forces. At present, at least 33,000 Basij bases reportedly operate within or adjacent to mosques. The state has also incorporated Basij participation into broader systems of social and economic access, creating conditions in which even applicants for relatively ordinary jobs were often expected to possess a history of Basij involvement, including, according to some reports, occupations as modest as taxi driving (Ghanbari, 2017).

5.3. Populist Leaders in Power

5.3.1. Ayatollah Khomeini as the First Supreme Leader (1979–1989)

The most important theoretical foundation of Khomeini's political project was elaborated in his work *Islamic Government* (*Hokumat-e Islami*), in which he advanced the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, or the rule of the Islamic jurist. Although the concept had precedents within Shiʿi jurisprudence, Khomeini significantly radicalized it after the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979 by arguing that Islamic jurists possess the right and duty to govern in the absence of the Hidden Imam. In doing so, he fused religious authority with political sovereignty (Ahmed, n.d.; Nader, Thaler & Bohandy, 2012)

Khomeini's leadership combined charismatic authority with religious legitimacy. In the relative absence of competitive political parties and fully functioning democratic institutions, he came to

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embody both divine authority and the will of the people. His ability to present himself simultaneously as a *marjaʿ* (source of emulation), a revolutionary leader, and a defender of the oppressed enabled him to consolidate an exceptionally powerful form of religious-populist authority (Alamdari, 2005; Amirpur, 2014).

Khomeini's populism cannot be reduced to mere mass mobilization. Rather, it involved mobilizing the population around a moral, religious, and anti-imperialist mission, framed through promises of social justice and national independence.

One of Khomeini's best-known slogans was "Neither East nor West, [but the] Islamic Republic." This formulation underscored his rejection of both Western imperial influences, especially that of the United States, and Soviet domination. It reflected a populist discourse centered on independence, authenticity, and resistance to foreign interference (Zabetpour Kari, 2021).

Another important theme in Khomeini's rhetoric was the centrality of the masses to the revolutionary process. In this discourse, the people were represented as the agents of transformative historical change, and the revolution itself was framed as a struggle between the oppressed and a corrupt ruling elite, embodied above all by the Shah and his foreign allies. This mode of address cast the revolutionary movement not merely as a struggle for material improvement, but as a moral campaign to establish a just Islamic society.

Khomeini's speeches repeatedly invoked the category of the oppressed as the moral core of the nation. Across numerous statements collected in *Sahifeh-ye Noor*, he emphasized that the achievements of the revolution derived from the people, and especially from the oppressed strata of society. He consistently portrayed the *mustazafin* as aligned with prophetic history, divine justice, and the ultimate triumph of truth over falsehood (*Sahifeh-ye Noor*, 1991, various volumes). In this discourse, the defense of the oppressed became not only a social imperative but also a religious and revolutionary obligation.

A further dimension of Khomeini's populism was the attribution of a sacred and providential character to the political struggle. He routinely justified revolutionary mobilization through religious legitimacy, portraying the struggle of the Iranian people as a holy mission sanctioned by God and the family of the Prophet. The idea that faith guaranteed victory, and that truth would ultimately prevail over falsehood, was central to this discourse (Imam Khomeini's short speeches and sentences about the Islamic Revolution, 2016).

Khomeini also developed a pronounced anti-elitist rhetoric. His critique was directed above all at the Pahlavi monarchy, foreign-aligned elites, and Western capitalist influence. He presented himself as a leader who would restore the rightful place of the people within the political order. In his view, educational and cultural institutions had been shaped by forms of imperial domination that alienated the country from its authentic Islamic foundations. This concern extended especially to universities and educated elites, whom he regarded as particularly vulnerable to Westernization (MA, 2021).

His distrust of Western-oriented intellectual influence is evident in statements warning future generations to protect universities from deviation, Westernization, and Eastern ideological infiltration. In such remarks, the defense of higher education was framed not simply as an educational matter, but as a national and Islamic duty aimed at preserving both the country and the moral character of its political order (The Will of Imam Khomeini, n.d).

5.3.2. Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, Second Supreme Leadr (1989–2026)

Khamenei's populist style has been more institutionalized and strategic than the revolutionary populism associated with Khomeini. Since assuming the position of Supreme Leader in 1989, he has focused less on revolutionary upheaval and more on preserving the political and religious integrity of the Islamic Republic while responding to changing economic, social, and geopolitical pressures. His populism is therefore oriented not only toward mobilization, but toward regime maintenance through the reinforcement of anti-imperialism, economic justice, and Islamic morality.

Although Khamenei's discourse remains deeply rooted in Shiʿi political theology, it also incorporates a pragmatic rhetorical blend of nationalism and Islamic ideals designed to address contemporary political challenges. Central themes in his public speeches include resistance, self-reliance, and steadfastness, particularly in relation to the United States and the broader West.

Analyses of Khamenei's speeches suggest that, in terms consistent with the conceptual framework developed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, he—like Khomeini before him—has employed Shiʿi theological concepts to define both the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," thereby constructing a moral dichotomy that binds supporters together through a shared religious ideology. In this discourse, the "pure people" are represented as the pious Shiʿi community committed to the Islamic Revolutionary state and loyal to the *vali-ye faqih*, regardless of their geographical location (Bazoobandi, 2023, p.324–325).

His speeches further indicate an assumption that many Iranians adhere to an interpretation of Shiʿi Islam centered on *jihad*, self-sacrifice, and collective endurance, especially in the face of economic hardship. Within this framework, social resilience and resistance to crisis are cast as moral obligations that serve the broader good of society. The corresponding "elite," by contrast, is defined as the West and its allies, including those within Shiʿi and wider Muslim communities who are portrayed as sympathetic to foreign influence or hostile to the Islamic revolutionary order.

The discursive structure of Khamenei's populism therefore reproduces many of the core elements identified in theories of populism: the moral valorization of the people, the denunciation of a corrupt elite, and the claim to embody a higher collective will. Yet in the Iranian context, these elements are articulated through a specifically Shiʿi ideological vocabulary, one that links political

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loyalty, religious authenticity, and resistance to foreign domination within an enduring framework of Islamic state power.

One of the most persistent slogans in Ayatollah Khamenei's political discourse has been "Death to America." Although the slogan originated in the revolutionary period and became strongly associated with Ayatollah Khomeini, Khamenei has repeatedly retained and redeployed it as a mechanism for mobilizing public sentiment against perceived Western hostility. Within this discursive framework, the United States and its allies are presented as enemies of the Iranian nation, and the slogan functions as a populist device through which domestic unity is reinforced by portraying the population as the target of foreign aggression and intervention (Khamenei: Other nations do not dare, but the Iranian nation dares to say, "Death to Americ"a, 2025).

A related theme in Khamenei's rhetoric is the imperative to "resist arrogance." In this formulation, the term "arrogance" refers primarily to dominant global powers, especially the United States and its allies. Khamenei consistently reproduces the notion of "global arrogance" (*estekbar-e jahani*), above all in reference to the United States, as the principal adversary of the Iranian people. In his discourse, this external enemy is placed in direct opposition to the "Iranian nation." In a speech marking the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in 2021, for instance, he described the confrontation with the United States not as a dispute with an ordinary government, but as the struggle of the Iranian nation against a domineering global order (Hajij, 2025). Khamenei's populism is therefore anchored in a continuing narrative of resistance to Western power, presenting the West as an imperial danger to Iranian sovereignty. This framing resonates strongly in a context shaped by prolonged sanctions, geopolitical pressure, and the memory of foreign intervention.

The concept of the "enemy" occupies a central place in Khamenei's political thought. Seyyed Amir Pourfazeli has examined this issue in detail, particularly the ways in which Ayatollah Khamenei conceptualizes the enemy and the necessity of confronting it (Pourfazeli, 2018).

Quantitative and textual observations of Khamenei's speeches further illustrate the significance of this theme. Over the past two decades, he has delivered approximately 64 public speeches per year on average. During one year, the December 2023– December 2024, he reportedly delivered 55 public speeches. A textual reading of these speeches suggests that the word "enemy" appeared on average six or seven times in each speech, while "U.S.A." appeared roughly five times per speech. Across that yearly corpus, the word "enemy" was used 373 times, "U.S.A." 299 times, and "the Zionist regime" 145 times. At the same time, words such as "people," "country," and "Islam" remained among the most frequently recurring terms in his overall discourse (One Hundred Most Frequent Words; Khamenei's Most Popular Words in 1402, 2022). This lexical pattern illustrates the extent to which populist moral polarization and external threat construction remain central to his political language.

Another important dimension of Khamenei's discourse is the moral centrality of the *mostazafin*. He has repeatedly portrayed the deprived and oppressed as the true owners of the Islamic Revolution and has insisted that the political system bears an ethical obligation to defend their interests. In a meeting with workers in 2020, he stated that the revolution belongs not to those possessing wealth and power, but to the deprived and the oppressed. Such rhetoric situates social justice within a populist moral economy in which the legitimacy of the state is measured by its claimed commitment to marginalized groups.

One of the most enduring features of Khamenei's discourse is the repeated opposition between, on the one hand, the faithful, revolutionary, and patient people, and, on the other, elites described as lacking insight, belonging to a political aristocracy, acting as liberal technocrats, or displaying excessive orientation toward the West. He has repeatedly argued that the most serious danger to the political system does not come solely from external enemies, but also from internal elites who have become detached from the people.

In a 2019 speech to members of the Basij, Khamenei stated that the core problem emerges when segments of the elite place their hopes in the West and distance themselves from the people (Khameneibook, n.d.). Closely related to this theme is his repeated insistence that "the Iranian nation is a strong and independent nation," a formulation that contributes to a broader discourse of national resilience, self-sufficiency, and sovereignty. This rhetoric reinforces populist themes of collective pride while representing Iran as a nation subjected to unjust external pressure.

5.3.3. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013)

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may be regarded as one of the clearest examples of executive or presidential populism within the Islamic Republic. His populism operated not at the margins of political power, but at the center of the state, drawing on the resources of government office, economic policy, and presidential visibility. His political style relied heavily on strongman rhetoric designed to mobilize the masses against ruling elites within Iran, including, at times, elements of the clerical and bureaucratic establishment. He presented himself as a man of the people committed to social justice, economic fairness, and national dignity, and he repeatedly invoked the downtrodden in opposition to corrupt elites, wealthy classes, and foreign influence.

Ahmadinejad's political persona also reflected a paradoxical combination of religiosity, populism, authoritarianism, and intense nationalism. Although he cultivated an image of personal simplicity and proximity to ordinary citizens, his presidency also displayed some of the most repressive tendencies of the post-1979 era. As Ansari observes, Ahmadinejad's desire for popular acclaim and his effort to present himself as the representative of the "common man" coexisted with a striking distrust of electoral processes and institutional constraints (Ansari, 2008). In this sense, his populism was marked by both popular theatricality and authoritarian consolidation

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5.3.3.1. Core Components of Ahmadinejad's Discourse

- *The Opposition Between the "Dispossessed People" and the "Corrupt Aristocratic Elite"*

A core feature of Ahmadinejad's discourse was the explicit construction of a confrontation between the oppressed people (*mostazafin*) and corrupt, technocratic, and aristocratic elites. During both his presidential campaign and his time in office, he repeatedly accused previous administrations, bureaucratic actors, reformists, and even sections of the conservative establishment of having become detached from the population. This pattern closely corresponds to a moralized form of populism in which political legitimacy is derived not from expertise, procedural legality, or institutional authority, but from perceived identification with the people. Ahmadinejad consistently portrayed himself as the president of ordinary citizens and used his modest lifestyle as symbolic evidence of authentic popular representation (Ansari, 2008: 696).

- *Direct Redistributive Policies*

Ahmadinejad's economic agenda, especially in the form of cash transfers, low-interest loans, and extensive provincial tours, represented a clear expression of economic populism. These measures bypassed many expert-led planning mechanisms and technocratic institutions, instead establishing a more direct and personalized relationship between the state and the population.

Within the broader literature on populism, such policies are often interpreted as instruments of short-term mass mobilization and mechanisms for strengthening political loyalty, even when they generate inflationary pressures and deeper structural distortions over time (Weyland, 2017). A number of studies have argued that Ahmadinejad's economic policies weakened planning institutions, intensified inflation, and aggravated underlying inequalities, despite being framed discursively as initiatives designed to advance justice (Pesaran, 2013).

- *Construction of External Enemies and Anti-Hegemonic Discourse*

Ahmadinejad also deployed a classic populist strategy in foreign policy by identifying the United States, Israel, and what he described as the global hegemonic order as the principal enemies of the Iranian nation. In this discourse, international conflict was not presented simply as a matter of diplomacy or national interest, but as a moral confrontation between truth and falsehood. This approach activated one of populism's central functions: shifting responsibility for domestic failures toward external enemies while at the same time promoting internal cohesion through the invocation of external threat. Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and his provocative remarks in international forums can be understood within this broader strategy of populist polarization and mobilization.

- *Institutional Erosion and the Personalization of Power*

In contrast to the more institutionalized form of populism associated with the leadership structure of the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad's populism showed a pronounced tendency toward the personalization of political authority. He repeatedly entered into conflict with parliament, the judiciary, supervisory institutions, and even established conservative actors, portraying himself as a leader acting beyond the limitations imposed by formal structures. This characteristic aligns closely with models of authoritarian populism, in which an elected leader claims to embody the will of the people directly and therefore treats intermediary institutions as obstacles to the realization of that will.

- *Instrumental Use of Religious and Mahdist Concepts*

One distinctive element of Ahmadinejad's populism was his symbolic and unconventional deployment of religious concepts, especially Mahdism. By invoking ideas such as the global governance of the Hidden Imam and by attributing a divine mission to his administration, he articulated a form of charismatic religious populism that generated discomfort even among parts of the established clerical hierarchy.

This pattern may be interpreted as a variant of charismatic religious populism in which the political leader seeks to cultivate a direct, emotional, and supra-institutional relationship with the people (Keddie, 2003). Ahmadinejad repeatedly returned to public life with increasingly extraordinary claims and an intensified sense of conviction. Ansari notes that after declaring victory in the nuclear crisis, Ahmadinejad went so far as to describe Iran as having achieved superpower status and, in a speech in Mashhad, effectively suggested that his government was acting on behalf of the Hidden Imam and that its mission possessed a global dimension (Ansari, 2008: 698).

In his address to the United Nations General Assembly on 26 September 2012, Ahmadinejad drew explicitly on a cluster of religious, revolutionary, pro-oppressed, and anti-injustice themes (Ahmadinejad, UN General Assembly Speech, 2012). Reports surrounding his claim that a halo of light surrounded him during his speech at the United Nations further illustrate the quasi-sacral language and self-understanding that accompanied his political performance. Although this account was later denied by some of his associates, the circulation of the claim itself became part of the public narrative surrounding his sense of sanctified political mission (Sadeghi, 2018).

Table 2. Comparative Evaluation of Populist Approaches Among Three Political Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Analytical Dimension	Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini	Seyyed Ali Khamenei	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
Historical Position	Revolutionary leader and founder of the political system	Institutional leader and consolidator of the system	Populist president operating within the system
Type of Populism	Revolutionary–Islamic populism	Institutionalized Islamic populism	Personalistic–economic populism
Definition of "the People"	The oppressed (*mostazafin*), the Islamic ummah, revolutionary masses	Faithful, revolutionary, and resilient people	Lower social classes, "ordinary people"
Definition of the "Other / Enemy"	The Shah, dependent elites, imperialism	Global arrogance, Westernized elites, "uninsightful" insiders	Political aristocracy, bureaucracy, global powers
Relationship with Elites	Rejection of political and monarchical elites	Control and redefinition of elites within the system	Open confrontation with official elites
Role of Religion in Populism	Religion as a force of revolutionary mobilization	Religion as a source of institutional legitimacy	Religion as an instrument of moral legitimacy
Leadership Style	Charismatic and mobilizational	Moral–authoritarian and strategic	Personalistic, confrontational, and performative
Economy in Populist Discourse	Social justice and poverty alleviation	Resistance economy and support for the disadvantaged	Direct wealth distribution and cash subsidies
Relationship with the West	Complete rejection ("Neither East nor West")	Structural and discursive confrontation	Aggressive and symbolic confrontation
Position of Populism vis-à-vis the State	Anti-existing order (pre-revolutionary)	Intra-systemic and supportive of the Islamic state	Semi-anti-institutional within the system
Primary Function of Populism	Revolutionary mobilization and regime overthrow	Preservation of legitimacy and systemic cohesion	Acquisition and consolidation of electoral support
Durability of Populist Discourse	Foundational and historical	Long-term and structural	Episodic and leader-dependent

6. Conclusion

Populism in Iran cannot be adequately interpreted through conceptual frameworks developed primarily for Western

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democratic contexts. Rather, the Iranian case reflects a durable hybrid formation in which Islamic theological motifs, revolutionary memory, and broader Middle Eastern political traditions are closely intertwined. From the period of revolutionary mobilization to the era of contemporary political communication, populism has remained a central and adaptable element of Iranian political life. Its endurance lies in its capacity to cross factional divides, absorb changing socio-economic conditions, and redefine the boundaries of political legitimacy in accordance with shifting state and ideological priorities.

Islamic populism generally mobilizes a morally virtuous community against corrupt, alienated, or unjust elites, but it does so through religious narratives that frame politics in terms of justice, authenticity, piety, sacrifice, and resistance. The moral distinction between "the people" and "the elite" is therefore reinforced by theological and ethical meanings. In many Muslim contexts, Islamic populism also incorporates anti-colonial or anti-imperial dimensions, presenting the community as both morally authentic and historically oppressed.

The Iranian case illustrates this dynamic in a particularly distinctive way. In post-revolutionary Iran, populist discourse has been shaped by Shiʿi historical memory, especially narratives of martyrdom, oppression, and resistance. These symbolic resources allow the state and political actors to frame "the people" not simply as a democratic majority or socio-economic category, but as a religiously dignified and revolutionary collective. Likewise, enemies are not represented only as domestic elites; they may also include imperial powers, secular dissidents, morally corrupt actors, or those depicted as betraying the values of the revolution.

The Iranian case also contributes to the comparative study of populism by demonstrating that religious authority, sacred historical narratives, and geopolitical antagonism can play a constitutive role in the formation of populist discourse in non-Western settings. In this sense, the study of Iranian populism broadens prevailing theoretical approaches by showing that populism may be grounded not only in popular sovereignty and anti-elitism in the secular sense, but also in religious symbolism, clerical authority, and narratives of civilizational resistance.

More generally, populist discourses and practices in an Islamic state such as Iran are frequently organized around an intense opposition to the West, which is represented as a predatory imperial force, and around explicit hostility to liberal culture and liberal political values. This adversarial posture is commonly accompanied by appeals for a return to Islamic principles as the authentic basis of social and political order. Populist leaders and movements often claim to speak on behalf of underprivileged and low-income populations, rhetorically emphasizing equality and social justice while advancing socialist or quasi-socialist policy orientations. At the center of this discourse lies a sustained elevation of the masses as the principal source of political legitimacy, combined with assertions of justice across social classes and, at times, the articulation of nationalist or ethnocentric narratives.

At the same time, populism in such contexts often involves marked hostility toward independent intellectuals, as well as a rejection of pluralism and political tolerance. Political authority is frequently consolidated through control over party structures or factional competition, together with strict regulation of mass media, especially radio and television. In a rentier state such as Iran, oil revenues may serve to reinforce monopolies of power and to sustain loyalty networks within ruling circles. Educational curricula are likewise closely supervised in order to reproduce the dominant ideological order, while artistic and cultural production—including books, cinema, theater, radio, and television—is often instrumentalized for ideological dissemination.

These structural and discursive mechanisms are reinforced by a populist logic that divides society into insiders and outsiders and defines "the people" in exclusionary moral and political terms. Leadership in such systems frequently centers on charismatic figures who portray themselves as virtuous, heroic, or uniquely capable representatives of the popular will. Through emotionally charged, epic, and morally polarized rhetoric, these leaders attempt to cultivate a direct relationship with the masses, thereby weakening intermediary institutions and legitimizing the concentration of political authority in their own hands.

From this theoretical perspective, the populism of the Islamic Republic cannot be reduced to generic anti-elite rhetoric alone. It must instead be analyzed as a historically specific formation in which religious legitimacy, revolutionary discourse, socio-economic promises, and anti-imperialist narratives are woven together. This analysis therefore approaches Iran not as a peripheral example of a universal model, but as a case that expands and complicates the comparative study of populism itself.

Tables 3 and 4 below summarize the principal dimensions of Iranian populism and, more broadly, Islamic populism as derived from the Iranian case.

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Table 3. Dimensions of Iranian Populism (1979–2026)

Dimension	Iran (Ayatollah Khomeini`s Leadership, Khamenei's Leadership and Ahmadinejad's Presidency)
Religious-Ideological Foundations	A pronounced form of Islamic populism rooted in Twelver Shi'i doctrine; strong emphasis on messianic expectations; explicit hostility toward liberal culture and liberalism; sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders; exclusionary slogans demanding unconditional loyalty
Political Authority	Supra-democratic claims to legitimacy; primacy of appointed institutions; concentration of authority in the office of the Supreme Leader under *Velayat-e Faqih*; sacralization of clerical leadership and assumptions of exceptional moral authority; nationalism articulated through Islamic discourse
Foreign Policy Orientation	Opposition to regional regimes aligned with the West; persistent anti-Zionist discourse; confrontation with Western powers at both regional and global levels
Social Justice Claims	Rhetorical commitment to equality and justice; support for deprived and marginalized groups; advocacy framed in terms of defending oppressed populations across the broader Islamic world; revolutionary mission extending beyond national borders
Institutional Control	Weakening or rejection of party pluralism; establishment of parallel military and social organizations such as the Basij for ideological and social control; monopoly over major mass media, especially radio and television; close regulation of educational curricula; extensive use of cultural and artistic production for ideological propagation

Table 4. Islamic Populism Based on the Iranian Case (1979–2026)

Dimension	Foundations of Islamic Populism
Anti-Western Discourse	Representation of the West as a predatory imperial force; hostility toward liberal culture and liberal political norms
Religious and Ideological Foundations	Return to Islamic principles and Twelver Shi'i beliefs; emphasis on messianism; sanctification and moral authority of clerical rulers; presumption of exceptional or quasi-infallible religious leadership
Social Support and Justice	Rhetorical defense of underprivileged and low-income groups; repeated claims of justice and social equality across classes
Anti-Intellectualism	Suspicion toward intellectuals and defenders of pluralism; efforts to monopolize political organization and suppress alternative viewpoints
Mass Mobilization	Continuous emphasis on the masses as the foundation of political order; reliance on emotionally charged speeches and religious rituals for mobilization
Nationalism	Construction of national identity through Islamic discourse; anti-Western and anti-Zionist rhetoric integrated into national political identity
Institutional Control	Monopoly over media institutions, especially radio and television; ideological control over educational content; establishment of parallel institutions for social regulation
Charismatic Leadership	Leader represented as heroic, morally superior, or exceptionally authoritative; direct leader-mass relationship; reliance on epic, emotive, and morally charged rhetoric
Cultural and Artistic Mobilization	Instrumental use of literature, cinema, television, radio, and theater for ideological dissemination
Societal Division	Binary distinction between insiders and outsiders; exclusionary political rhetoric and moral polarization

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