



# Kitap İncelemesi/ Book Review

*The Sacred Republic: Power and Institutions in Iran*

**Mehran Kamrava (Ed.), London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2023, s.400, ISBN: 9781787389519**

**Reviewer: Mehmet Akif KOÇ\***

In contemporary academic studies concerning post-revolutionary Iran, scholarly attention predominantly gravitates towards dissecting aspects such as foreign policy strategies, military endeavors, the intricacies of the nuclear program, and the socio-political dynamics. However, there exists a notable oversight regarding the comprehensive examination of the institutional framework that underpins the Islamic Republic. Hence there is a significant need to delve deeper into the state-bureaucratic attributes of the nation to gain a more holistic understanding of its governance mechanisms.

Addressing this scholarly lacuna, a recent publication emerges as a noteworthy contribution to the discourse. Authored by well-known Iranian scholars and edited by Professor Mehran Kamrava, a prominent figure renowned for his extensive works in Iranian studies, conflicts analysis, international politics, and the modern

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İran Çalışmaları Dergisi bilginin yayılması ve zenginleşmesi için Açık Erişim Politikasına uymaktadır.

history of the Middle East, this volume meticulously explores the power dynamics and institutional architecture within Iran. By synthesizing diverse perspectives and leveraging rigorous analytical frameworks, this publication endeavors to shed light on the often-overlooked dimensions of Iran's governance structure. Through precise examination and critical inquiry, it seeks to provide nuanced insights into the complex interplay between state institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and the broader socio-political landscape of the Islamic Republic.

Comprising ten chapters, the book undertakes a comprehensive examination of the institutional framework within the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the first chapter, Mehran Kamrava, as the editor of this seminal volume, spearheads the discourse by delving into the intricate dynamics of power and institutions within Iran. Kamrava navigates through theoretical debates that underscore the interconnections between the state apparatus, mechanisms of power, and the overarching institutional framework and elucidates the positioning of the book within the broader landscape of relevant literature.

Shireen Hunter in the second chapter of the book undertakes a nuanced analysis of the ruptures and continuities within Iran's socio-political landscape. By juxtaposing the pre-revolutionary state-society relations with the institutional structure of the Islamic Republic, Hunter offers a compelling examination of the transformative shifts that have occurred in Iran's governance framework. She describes the Shah era under the impact of those dynamics: state ideology (Iranian nationalism and modernism), the culturally growing duality, unmet economic expectations and finally the emerging leftist-Islamist coalition following the 1953 coup d'état. Hunter's analysis sheds light on a fascinating aspect of the Iranian Revolution's transition to an 'Islamic' paradigm —the involvement of the secular and liberal opposition: "*The more liberal and mostly secular groups that supported Mossadegh convinced Western powers that the Shah's removal would not much change Iran's politics, and that whatever changes took place would be for the better. However, since all these groups used Islamic vocabulary and accepted Khomeini's leadership, the revolution acquired an Islamic character.*" (p. 31)

In Arang Keshavarzian's third chapter, a compelling discourse unfolds surrounding the intricate nexus among elections, mass protests, and political representation within the context of what he terms an "electoral republic" (p. 64) given the current sociological realities of Iran. Keshavarzian also highlights the opinion of "The state has used mass participation to address the elite deadlock" which represents a remarkable form of state-society relations for modern republics.

In the fourth chapter authored by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Mahmoud Pargoo, the focus shifts to examining the complex interplay of risks and rewards associated with elections within the authoritarian framework of the Islamic Republic. The chapter elucidates the challenges faced by the regime in effectively managing electoral processes, highlighting the paramount importance of elections in maintaining both legitimacy and control. To navigate this delicate balance, the regime relies on its influential constitutional bodies to meticulously orchestrate and vet candidates, ensuring the perpetuation of benefits for the existing religious and political elites.

In his exclusive focus of the fifth chapter, Mojtaba Mahdavi delves deeply into the pivotal concept of *velayat-e faqih*, which has profoundly shaped the political landscape of the Islamic Republic for almost half a century. Mahdavi employs Khomeini's renowned aphorism, "There is no difference between the guardianship of a nation and the guardianship of the immature," (p. 89) to underscore the political elites' perspective on the relationship between the state and society. Through this lens, Mahdavi offers a nuanced analysis that illuminates the ideological underpinnings and practical implications of *velayat-e faqih*, providing valuable insights into its enduring influence on Iranian governance and state-society dynamics.

Subsequent chapters provide detailed examinations of the critical institutions that constitute the Iranian political system. In the sixth chapter authored by Goncheh Tazmini, focus is directed towards the Presidency, offering comprehensive insights into its functions and significance within the broader governance framework. Alireza Raisi, in the seventh chapter, delves into the role and dynamics of the Majlis (Parliament), shedding light on its legislative powers and its

impact on Iranian politics. Finally, in the eighth chapter authored by Hamideh Dorzadeh, attention is devoted to the Judiciary, elucidating its structure, functions, and its pivotal role in upholding legal order within the Islamic Republic.

In the ninth chapter, Alireza Eshraghi and Amir Hossein Mahdavi undertake a compelling exploration of a distinctive and noteworthy revolutionary institution: Sepah-e Pasdaran, also known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. Their analysis traces the evolutionary trajectory of this formidable elite army, elucidating how it gradually extended its political influence and economic footprint across various sectors of the country. Moreover, Eshraghi and Mahdavi illuminate the pivotal role played by Sepah-e Pasdaran as a potent instrument for advancing the Islamic Republic's interests on both domestic and international fronts.

Final chapter authored by Abdolrasool Divsallar delves into the intricate web of foreign policy institutions within Iran, offering a nuanced exploration of the complex policy-making machinery at play. Divsallar not only examines the coordination and arbitration processes among key institutions, including the Presidency, the Foreign Ministry, the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, and the Supreme National Security Council, but also sheds light on the contributions of lesser-known actors such as the think tank community and influential religious institutions.

Divsallar provides a comprehensive understanding of the diverse array of stakeholders involved in shaping Iran's foreign policy landscape. He also concludes a significant point for the Supreme Leader's unique role within the system: "*Weak foreign policy institutions help the supreme leader to always occupy the most powerful position with respect to the country's foreign policy. The current institutional model reinforces the significance of the supreme leader's role as an arbitrating power which guarantees the survival of the political system*" (p. 256).

In conclusion, this volume offers a deeply insightful examination of Islamic Republic of Iran's political system, encompassing its

implementation, evolution dynamics, and state-society interactions, alongside inter-institutional dynamics. It provides a rich perspective for analyzing the dynamics of continuity and change, spanning from the Pahlavi era to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, thereby enriching readers' understanding of Iran's socio-political trajectory across historical epochs.

