Government 94py:
Revolution and Politics in Iran

Fall 2021

Prof. Payam Mohseni
Email: pmohseni@fas.harvard.edu
Class Time: Tues 3-5pm EST
Office Hours: By Appointment

Course Description:

With former U.S. President Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the ensuing uncertainty and escalation which has followed, the significance of Iran in Middle Eastern and global affairs is now more important than ever. From its internal domestic politics to its role across the region in Syria and Iraq and rising tensions with Saudi Arabia, the political trajectory of Iran is critical for the future of peace and stability in the Middle East. To contextualize and understand these processes, this course examines the intricacies of Iranian politics since the 1979 revolution. It explores a broad range of topics including the causes of the Iranian revolution; the institutional architecture of the Iranian political system; competitive political ideologies in the contemporary Iranian scene; factional dynamics within the ruling elite; Iranian regional and foreign policy, Iran-US relations, and the multilateral complexities surrounding its nuclear program; and, contemporary Shi’a political ideology.

This course is divided into three sections. We first look modern history of Iran prior to the revolution, the 1953 coup, the development of the Islamic revolutionary movement and Shi’i Islamic political ideology, and the establishment of the theocratic regime during the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini. The main purpose of this section is to familiarize ourselves with the ideological and institutional roots of the state at its inception—the knowledge of which will be necessary to grasp the consequent developments that have taken shape in the country. Our attention then turns to competitive factional politics in the post-Khomeini era in the second section of the course, largely undertaking a chronological examination of Iranian politics under the Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad presidential administrations. Despite the different time periods and contexts examined, our purpose will be to assess the factors and variables that continue to shape the political dynamics of the state irrespective of who holds office. Finally, in the last section, we turn to issues of Iranian foreign policy and international affairs. Our goal is to contextualize Iranian foreign politics within the domestic political context and the contours and institutions of the theocratic state. We also assess what impact US and Western policies may indirectly have on Iran’s domestic political scene when engaging Iran over security issues, such as the Iranian nuclear file.

There are no prerequisites for this course. The seminar is designed to introduce and delve into Iranian politics for students with varying familiarity on the topic. Background reading assigned for Week 1 is critical for course success. There will be weekly pre-recorded online video
lectures on the course website that will give all necessary information and background discussions. The course will also include watching and discussing three Iranian movies related to different thematic aspects of the course content.

**Course Objectives:**

After the completion of this course, students will gain a theoretically nuanced understanding of the contemporary politics of Iran. Moreover, they should be able to:

- Identify the main arguments and supporting evidence of a text.
- Present original ideas both orally and in writing.
- Develop critical and analytical arguments about the state, factional politics, and religion in Iran.

**Course Requirements:**

The course grade will be based on the following components:

*Class Attendance and Participation – 20%*

Students are required to attend class regularly and to be actively engaged in classroom discussions and organized activities. All absences must be discussed with the instructor. If a seminar is missed without prior approval or due to a serious medical reason, the student must write an additional reaction paper for the missed session and email it as an attachment to the professor before class. There will also be three required movie screenings.

*Discussion Leading and Presentations – 15%*

Each student is required to be a discussion leader for the discussion portion of the class period at least once during the semester. Discussion leading requires students to prepare discussion questions for the class in consultation with the professor. Students should develop discussion questions based on their own reading of the materials. The specific requirements include:

- Meeting with the professor either during office hours or by appointment before class.
- E-mailing the professor and fellow class members prepared discussion questions by **8 p.m.** on the Sunday before you present.
- Actively taking part in class discussion. You are considered the day’s expert on the readings.
Reaction Papers – 20 % (10% per paper)

Each student will write two reaction papers over the course of the semester. The paper should be 2 pages in length (double-spaced) and should critically respond to the assigned readings of the week. Moreover, these papers cannot be written for the weeks in which you serve as a discussion leader for the readings.

Final Research Paper – 45%

Each student is required to write a 25 page research paper on a topic of choice related to the themes and content of the class. Students will be expected to discuss the topic with the instructor at office hours by Week 9 and submit a finalized research proposal by November 12th. More information on the precise requirements of the paper will be provided later in the semester. The deadline for the final paper is the course assigned final exam date.

Late Paper Policy: Students are expected to turn in their written assignments on time in order to receive full credit. Unexcused reaction papers will be marked down half a letter grade for each day they are late. In exceptional circumstances, student must inform of the professor beforehand and request for a deadline extension. No excuses will be accepted for the final research paper.

Collaboration Policy:

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. For the final paper, you must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. In the short paper, which is based on the assigned readings, full citation is not necessary; use shortform (i.e Author, page number) in the text of your paper, and there is no need for a bibliography. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, etc), from anyone other than the instructor, you must also acknowledge this assistance.

Readings:

The following books are required for class:


All other required readings will be available on the course isite as PDFs or as links. In some cases, the professor will provide you with literature in the class period prior to their assigned dates.

**Topics & Class Schedule:**

**Part I. Modern Iranian History and the Islamic Revolution**

**Week 1 (Sep. 7): Pre-Revolutionary Background**

BBC article, “The obscure religion that shaped the West,”

- Chapter 3, pages 37, bottom of page 51-56;
- Chapter 6, pages 110-117;
- Chapter 8, pages 130-131, bottom of page 140-145;
- Chapter 10, pages 172, 182-189;
- Chapter 14 pages 275-277, 288-300.

Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran.*
- Introduction, Chapters 1 and 3.


**Week 2 (Sep. 14): The 1953 Coup**


Peruse the confidential CIA documents that were recently released on the coup (August, 19, 2013): [http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/)

**Recommended reading:**


**Week 3 (Sep. 21): The Revolution & the Founding of an Islamic State**

**Week 4 (Sep. 28): Iranian Islamic Ideology, Part I**

Selected Readings from the works of Shariati and Mutahhari. TBA
Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*. Chapters 2 and 4.

**Week 5 (Oct. 5): Iranian Islamic Ideology, Part II**

Selected Readings from Ayatollah Khomeini. TBA

**Part II: Factional Dynamics in Post-Khomeini Iran**

**Week 6 (Oct. 12): Institutionalizing the Revolution (The Institutions of the Islamic Republic)**

Abridged version of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Read Sections**: Introduction; Legislative Framework; and Election Management Bodies
Farideh Farhi, “Constitutionalism and Parliamentary Struggle for Relevance and Independence


Week 7 (Oct. 19): Factionalism and Elections

Payam Mohseni, TBD.

Week 8 (Oct. 26): The Reformists and a New Intellectual Discourse

Selected readings from Abdolkarim Soroush TBA.

Recommended Reading:

Week 9 (Nov. 2): The Politics of Khatami’s Reform Period

Short interview with Masoomeh Ebtekar, the first female vice-president in Iran under Khatami:
Payam Mohseni, TBD.

Recommended Reading:

**Week 10 (Nov. 9): The Ahmadinejad Era and the Green Movement**

Hersh, “Preparing the Battlefield: The Bush Administration steps up its secret moves against Iran.” *The New Yorker*, July 2008.
Payam Mohseni, TBD.

**Week 11 (Nov. 16): The Political Economy of the Islamic Republic**

Iran UN Human Development Report 2015
Payam Mohseni, TBD.
Kevin Harris, “Social Welfare Policies and the Dynamics of Elite and Popular Contention.” Chapter 2 in Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi, eds., *Power and Change in Iran*.

**Part III: Iranian Foreign Policy and International Affairs**

**Week 12 (Nov. 23): The Foreign Politics of a Revolutionary State**


**Week 13 (Nov. 30): Iranian Regional Security**

Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, “Iran’s Axis of Resistance Rises,” *Foreign Affairs*.


Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, “Iran, the Vatican of Shi’ism?” *Middle East Report* 233 (Winter 2004).


**Recommended Reading:**