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Comparative Government

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**Religious Cleavage in Iran**

Unlike other core countries, political participation in Iran is not through political parties but religious institutions. Therefore, political participation opportunities are extremely limited in Iran. In fact, such participation is specifically controlled by a small group of religious leaders who believe in Shi’ism. Their constitution stated that “official religion of Iran is Islam and the sect followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism", and that this principle is "eternally immutable".

In Iran, the population is composed of 98 to 99 percent of Muslims and 89 percent of them are Shia and the rest are Sunni. The other one to two percent of the population is composed of Baha'i, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jews. Religious minorities or, those who do don’t believe in Shi’ism, do not have the rights of political participation and freedom of religion. They face difficulties in pursuing education, housing, and career; most of them reported being imprisoned, harassed, and intimidated due to their beliefs.

Although Sunnism may be considered as a part of Islam, the split between Sunnism and Shi’ism can be traced back to the dispute of the succession of Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D.. However, what impacted the religion the most in Iran is the Iranian Revolution led by Khomeini. Khomeini changed the old monarchy to a strict Shi’ism theocracy. Khomeini believed that the clergy should provide religious guidance to create a society where religion and politics are intertwined by using their expertise in Islamic laws. Due to his reputation and forceful personality, many followed his actions and desecularized the political structure of Iran.

The strict religious rules in Iran, therefore, limited the political participation of people. In Iran, the Constitution gives almost all political powers to the religious leaders who "interpret" the law. These religious leaders, known as the Council of Guardians, are appointed by the Supreme Leader and other Islamic institutions in Iran. The Council of Guardians approves laws, however, only those which adhere and benefit the Islamic belief. Therefore, political freedom is extremely limited in Iran. For example, a newly formed party will have to issue a license from the Ministry of Internal Affairs for their activities. However, if any of its activities are deemed to be against the interest of the regime, the license will be revoked. As a result, there is no true "participation" in Iran and opportunities are limited because everything is strictly censored by the religious group.

Therefore, the mosque is the only direct political participation for the people. People participate in weekly congregational prayers which deliver political sermons. Such participation is considered as a religious and civic duty of the people. Numerous religious-political associations also gathers at the mosque organizing various activities, investigating religious credential aspirants, conducting classes for education, and setting up teams to monitor shop prices and personal behaviors. However, most voluntary works are for men instead of women. What is found most ironically about the political participation in Iran is that while more than 90 percent of the population regard themselves as being religious Muslims, only 30 percent of Iranians attend weekly prayers. Such irony resulted from the over-politicization of religion which leads to the disenchantment of the people.

Another setback caused by the religious cleavage is the unequal treatment of women. Iranian women are required to wear veils, perform their "duties" as wife and mother and are harshly discriminated. The veils are believed to cover up the "sexual" temptations women have on men. Furthermore, men can have four wives and legalized affairs through Sigheh (or temporary marriage). Women are not respected in every aspect, and due to the strict Islamic belief, any contraception and any form of family planning are illegal.

Iran’s religious cleavage, compare to that of Nigeria’s is more internal. Nigeria’s religious cleavage was influenced by colonial powers. For example, the British Empire first rooted in the southern part of Nigeria and worked itself north. As time progressed, Christian missionaries were most active in the southern region, and thus making the region more “Christian” than the rest of the country; therefore causing conflicts between the Christian and Muslim groups, similar to that of Sunni and Shiite. In Nigeria, the religion of the president alternates between Muslims and Christians. However, in Iran, most of the political activities are controlled by the Shiites, so the people do not really have “actual political participation”.