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Iran:
Organization and functioning of political
parties

Query Response [a-10095]

12 June 2017



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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD as well as information provided by experts within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI).

This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection.

Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference.

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1 General information and legal framework

In a May 2017 telephone interview, Houchang Hassan-Yari, Emeritus Professor at the Royal Military College of Canada (Kingston, Canada), stated that there are no political parties in Iran in the way they are known in the West. “Political parties” in Iran are in fact merely groups of people who come together prior to elections and decide to support one candidate or another. These are ideologically driven factions who have common interests, all believing in the absolute power of the Vali-e Faqih (Supreme Leader) and seek to invite people to vote for their candidates. Once the elections are over, these groups go into “hibernation”. In a way, they are like “mushrooms”, in the sense that they suddenly appear and then disappear after a short life. This applies to conservative groups like Heyat-e Motalefeh Eslami, who firmly believe in the system of Velayat-e Faqih (Governance of the Islamic Jurist), as well as to reformist movements such as Mosherkat (a group that was founded by the brother of former reformist President Mohammad Khatami, gained a majority in the 6th (“reformist”) parliament and was dismantled by the judiciary after the 2009 presidential elections). All these groups never evolved into real political parties with headquarters, offices in different cities and regions, clear party manifestos, projects, party membership or party activities. Unlike political parties in the West, Iranian “parties” do not pursue the goal of taking power. Indeed, it does not matter much who wins the presidency or the parliament, for even the country’s president does not hold real power but rather has a “secretarial” role, with the real power residing with the Supreme Leader. (Hassan-Yari, 3 May 2017)

As to political groups’ possible links to organisations that are active outside Iran, Houchang Hassan-Yari, Professor at the Royal Military College of Canada, noted that parties that were opposed to or critical of the regime, such as the National Front, Freedom Movement or the Toudeh Communist Party, were dismantled by the Islamic regime. There are small vestiges of these and other organised groups that pursue some activities in exile, but not within Iran. Indeed, since political groups in Iran are frequently accused of collaborating with foreign groups, they are very unlikely to have organized or organic relationships with groups that are active outside Iran. It does of course happen, however, that members of the Iranian diaspora would talk positively about one group or another in social media platforms without significant impact on the political game in Iran. (Hassan-Yari, 3 May 2017)

The Reuters news agency notes that according to Iran’s Interior Ministry, there are “over 250 registered political parties” in Iran, although it has “no tradition of disciplined party membership or detailed party platforms” (Reuters, 18 February 2016).

The German Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt, AA) Iran country page states that Iran does not have “political parties” of the kind one can find in the West, even though many groups are registered as “parties”. In parliamentary and presidential elections, people do not elect parties but personalities. (AA, June 2016). Similarly, a March 2011 report of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a US-based NGO that provides assistance for elections in emerging democracies, states that “[e]lections in Iran are candidate-centered, and individuals are self-nominated”. The same report notes that “[a]s the political environment in the Islamic Republic has not been conducive to the creation of parties, political factionalism has dominated Iran’s postrevolutionary era” (IFES, March 2011, pp. 73-74).

A 2010 article by Farideh Farhi, an independent scholar and affiliate graduate faculty at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, states that there is an “absence of well-developed parties” and that Iranian parties have been “more like elite blocs with limited membership formed as vehicles for particular elections” (Farhi, August 2010, p. 5).

A February 2016 article of Al-Monitor, an online news platform focusing on coverage of the Middle East, says that “major political power brokers align among fluid and sometimes blurred factions and groupings”, and these factions are often dictated by “[m]ajor political events [...] rather than the reverse” (Al Monitor, 20 February 2016).

The March 2011 IFES report notes on the role of factional politics in parliamentary (Majlis) elections:

“Factional politics [...] play an important role in the electoral contest as candidates are often closely affiliated with one of the ruling factions. For the Majlis elections, the factions usually form coalitions to improve their chances of election to the legislature.” (IFES, March 2011, p. 74)

Farhi describes party politics within Iran’s parliament (Majles) as follows:

“Once in the Majles, various political cliques or tendencies have operated as factions, which form into fluid majority and minority coalitions. But these coalitions have also been difficult to discipline. And individual members have proven susceptible to outside influence.” (Farhi, August 2010, p. 5)

In his 2015 book “Islamic Law and Governance in Contemporary Iran”, Mehran Tamadonfar, a professor of Political Science at the University of Nevada (USA), describes the legal framework for political parties as follows:

“The Islamic Republic’s constitution and related codes do not distinguish parties from groups. Dealing with both instruments of civil society, Article 26 of the constitution permits the creation of political parties and groups but, like other institutions in the system, they are prohibited from violating principles of independence, freedom, and national unity; criteria of Islam; and the basis of the Islamic Republic. Of course, these very broad and ambiguous restrictions impose a great deal of limitations on the establishment and role of political parties and groups in the country. In an attempt to curb factionalism and party politics, since the leadership considered such divisions destabilizing, the parliament enacted and the Guardian Council approved of the Parties Law in 1981. This law and its executive regulations subject parties and groups to similar political, organizational, and functional restrictions and rights. Party organizations, finances, leaderships, ideologies, and activities are checked by governmental oversight and supervision.” (Tamadonfar, 2015, p. 154)

Article 26 of the Iranian Constitution of 1979 (last amended in 1989) allows the formation of “parties, societies, political or professional associations” and other groups “provided that they do not violate the principles of freedom, independence, national unity, Islamic standards and

essentials of the Islamic Republic” (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, Article 26).

Iran’s Political Parties Law of 1981, last amended in 1989 defines “[a] political party, society, association, political organization” as “an organization that has a manifesto and charter and is established by a group of individuals committed to a specific ideology and political thought” (Political Parties Law, 1981, Article 1).

Article 8 of the Political Parties Law stipulates that “[t]he Interior Ministry is given the authority to issue permits and register groups in accordance with this law” (Political Parties Law, 1981, Article 8). The Interior Ministry then submits applications to the “Article 10 Commission”, and “[a]fter confirmation by the Commission, permits signed by the Interior Minister will be issued to the groups” (Political Parties Law, 1981, Article 9). Upon receiving a permit, the group is required to publish its charter and manifesto in an official newspaper (Political Parties Law 1981, Article 11).

Article 14 of the same law states that “[g]roups applying for permits must directly express their allegiance to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in their manifesto and charter” (Political Parties Law 1981, Article 14).

Article 7 of the Political Parties Law lists groups of people who are “prohibited from forming or joining the board of directors of any political groups and parties”:

“All members of the dissolved SAVAK (the Shah’s secret police), freemasons, those who between 22 Mordad 1332 (August 19, 1953) and 22 Bahman 1357 (February 11, 1979) were ministers or members of the Senate or Congress [Shoraye Melli], members of the previous regime, members of the Rastkhiz party, and all those whose social rights have been revoked by court rulings according to Islamic laws are prohibited from forming or joining the board of directors of any political groups and parties.” (Political Parties Law, Article 7)

Article 6 of the Political Parties Law requires all groups “to inform the Interior Ministry of their manifesto, charter, the identity of the board of directors, and any subsequent changes in them” (Political Parties Law, 1981, Article 6). Such changes “must be verified” by the Article 10 Commission, which may “suspend the permit of the group” if it finds that “the announced changes in the manifesto or charter contradict Article 14 or the new members of the board of directors do not meet the qualifications mentioned in Article 8 [sic!].” A group whose permit has been suspended “has the right to complain to the courts within one month from the suspension” (Political Parties Law, 1981, Article 15).

Article 6 of the Political Parties Law states that group activities are allowed as long as groups “do not commit any of the violations described in Article 16” of the same law (Political Parties Law, 1981, Article 6). Article 16 lists the following violations:

“Article 16

Groups subject to these laws must avoid the following things in their publications, gatherings, and activities:

- A. Actions that will jeopardize the independence of the country.
- B. Any contact, information exchange, collusion, and conspiracy with embassies, representatives, government agencies, and political parties of foreign countries at any level and in any way that is harmful to the freedom, independence, national unity, and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- C. Receiving any financial and material assistance from foreigners.
- D. Violation of the legitimate freedom of others.
- E. Spreading accusations, defamations, and rumors.
- F. Damaging national unity and actions that lead to the disintegration of the country.
- G. Promoting divisions within the different sectors of the nation by manipulating cultural, religious, and racial differences present in Iranian society.
- H. Damaging Islamic principles and the fundamentals of the Islamic Republic.
- I. Anti-Islamic propaganda and spreading deviant books and publications.
- J. Concealing, keeping, and carrying illegal weapons and ammunition.” (Political Parties Law, 1981, Article 16)

Tamadonfar states that the existing legal restrictions on political organisations “did not succeed in discouraging party creation and political activism”, noting that “[i]n the political atmosphere of post-revolutionary Iran, many of the old political parties re-emerged and a large number of new ones were created” (Tamadonfar, 2015, p. 154). The author notes that under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), “the interior ministry authorized political parties”, with “new moderate and centrist parties [being] established”. These parties “began contesting seats on local and municipal councils and the parliament”. (Tamadonfar, 2015, p. 157)

Tamadonfar (2015) states that many of the moderate and centrist parties were in fact religious reformist parties. Other (religious) parties, were “limited in organization and popular support, often lacked consistent and comprehensive programs” and, in many cases, “did not last long”. The same author notes that among the legally authorized parties, “[t]here were also non-Islamist parties with broader programmatic agenda”. (Tamadonfar, 2015, p. 157)

Tamadonfar (2015) goes on to say that in addition to these (once) legally sanctioned parties, “there are many Iranian parties (mostly active abroad) that can be categorized as leftist, monarchist, nationalist, liberal-democratic, ethnic, and environmentalist”. The author holds that “[t]hese parties lack any significant social base and any capacity to influence the Iranian politics of today” (Tamadonfar, 2015, p. 158).

The March 2017 US Department of State (USDOS) country report on human rights practices, which covers events of 2016, indicates that “[t]he government limited freedom of association through threats, intimidation, the imposition of arbitrary requirements on organizations, and the arrests of group leaders and members” (USDOS, 3 March 2017, section 2b).

The April 2017 Freedom House Freedom in the World 2017 report notes that “[o]nly political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate” and that “[r]eformist parties and politicians have come under increased state repression, especially since 2009” (Freedom House, 15 April 2017). The German Foreign Office (AA) similarly notes that after the 2009 presidential elections, many reformist groups have been banned or otherwise subjected to repressions (AA, June 2016). Reuters indicates that “[t]wo main pro-reform parties were banned after the 2009 election” (Reuters, 18 February 2016).

A January 2016 article by Katayoun Kishi, formerly a research assistant with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and currently a research associate at Pew Research Center, a US opinion research institute, notes that “[s]ince the last [presidential] election, both reformers and conservatives have founded new parties” (Kishi, 11 January 2016).

Reuters notes that “two main groups”, the United Front of Principlists and the Pro-Reform Front, have emerged, although some of their candidates are “backed by more than one group” and “allegiances often shift” (Reuters, 18 February 2016). These two main factions “contend in the conflict within the political establishment” (Ghoreishi, 24 February 2016).

2 Reformist parties

The Freedom House notes in its Freedom in the World 2017 report published in April 2017:

“In 2015, two new reformist parties – Nedaye Iranian (Voice of Iranians) and Ettehad Mellat Iran (Iranian National Unity) – were established ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections. However, most candidates from these and other reformist groups were disqualified by the Guardian Council ahead of the voting.” (Freedom House, 15 April 2017)

The “Political Handbook of the World 2016-2017”, edited by Tom Lansford (2017), elaborates that a “List of Hope” was “[f]ormed by moderate and reformist groupings for the 2016 parliamentary elections”. This list “included the National Trust Party (Etemaad-e Melli) and the Council for Coordinating the Reforms Front, a coalition of 18 parties led by former president Mohammad Khatami, and the Union of Islamic Iran People Party, formed in 2015 and led by Ali Shakouri-Rad (Lansford, 2017, p. 700).

The Reuters article of February 2016 refers to the Pro-Reform Front as an “alliance [that] is made up of members of dozens of parties, including the Union of Islamic Iran People Party, Nedaye Iranian, Iranian-Islamic Freedom Party, Association of Combatant Clerics, Islamic Labor Party and Moderation and Development Party” (Reuters, 18 February 2016).

As the Financial Times (FT) newspaper notes, both the Union of Islamic Iran People Party (Ettehad Mellat Iran, referred to here as “Iranian National Unity”) and Nedaye Iranian (“Voice

of Iranians”) “rely on former members of the Mosharekat (participation) party, which was the biggest reformist party but outlawed after the 2009 unrest” (FT, 25 May 2015).

According to Kishi, the reformist Union of Islamic Iran People Party, which obtained its permit in March 2015, has “30 executive members, many of whom were members of the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF) banned in 2010” (Kishi, 11 January 2016). As the FT states, the party is “widely assumed to be a continuation of Mosharekat and is led by Valiollah Shoja-Pourian, a former reformist member of parliament” (FT, 25 May 2015).

An October 2015 article of the Guardian newspaper mentions that the Union of Islamic Iran People Party (Islamic Iranian National Alliance) has a central committee and a secretary-general. The article provides the following details:

“National Alliance party’s reformist pedigree is clear. Its convention in August was attended by Mostafa Moin, former education minister and 2005 presidential candidate; Mohammad Reza Khatami, brother of former president Mohammad Khatami and former deputy parliament speaker; Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari, interior minister under Khatami; Mohammad Reza Aref, former vice president and 2013 presidential candidate. Shahindokht Molaverdi, Rouhani’s vice-president for women and family affairs, was also present. Among members of the Islamic Iran Participation Front sitting on the central committee of the National Alliance party are Ali Tajernia, Ali Shakouri Rad and Azar Mansouri. All three were arrested during the protests following the 2009 presidential election.” (Guardian, 7 October 2015)

The Persian language homepage of Ettehad Mellat can be accessed under the following link:

- Ettehad Mellat: Homepage, undated [in Persian]
<http://ettehademellat.com>

Nedaye Iranian, established in December 2014 (Kishi, 11 January 2016), is a “coalition comprised of some 20 other reformist parties” (Payvand, 27 February 2015) and “has 2,300 members who are mostly in their early 30s and is led by Sadegh Kharrazi”, a former ambassador to France who, “[a]lthough retired, [...] holds a prominent position in the clerical establishment.” (FT, 25 May 2015). However, in August 2015, it was reported that Sadegh Kharazi has “suddenly and dramatically resigned from the party” (Al Monitor, 24 August 2015).

The Persian language homepage of the Nedaye Iranian party can be accessed under the following link:

- Nedaye Iranian: Homepage, undated [in Persian]
<http://www.nedayeiranian.org/>

The National Trust Party (Etemaad-e Melli) was registered by Mehdi Karubi, a former Majles speaker, “shortly after the 2005 presidential election” (Lansford, 2017, p. 700). The Iran Social Science Data Portal, a US-based internet portal that hosts social science data on Iran including information on political parties, describes the organizational structure of the reformist National Trust (Etemad-e Melli) party as follows:

“The organizational components of National Trust are a Constituent Board, Congress, Central Committee, Secretary-General, and a vertical division into sector, branch, division, and member. The highest authority within the party is the Congress. It is held once a year, and elects fifty-five main members and six alternate members of the Central Committee. The Central Committee elects the Secretary-General.” (Iran Social Science Data Portal, 15 June 2011)

Media report in December 2016, that Karrubi, who has been in house arrest since 2011, has resigned as secretary-general of the National Trust party (NYT, 27 December 2016; RFE/RL, 27 December 2016).

As Stopiranwar.com, a US website that seeks to raise awareness on issues concerning Iran and to prevent a US war against Iran, mentions in an undated overview, “outside Iran there are several active opposition parties but four of them are more powerful and active: People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (left-wing, religious party), National Front of Iran (liberal nationalist), Organization of Iranian People’s Fedaiyan (socialist) and Constitutionalist Party of Iran (Liberal Democrat).” (Stopiranwar.com, undated)

3 Parties representing ethnic groups

Tamadonfar (2015) states that “[s]ome parties represent ethnic groups, including the Ahwazi Renaissance Party (Al-Mohamara), Komala (Kurdish Party), and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI)”. The oldest of these parties, the PDKI (or KDPI), is “[a]ctive outside Iran” and enjoys “important ethnic support” (Tamadonfar, 2015, p. 158). The PDKI headquarters are located in the (Iraqi) Kurdistan Region (Rudaw, 2 July 2016).

The undated website of the PDKI provides an overview of the party’s structure:

“The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) was founded in the city of Mahabad in Iranian Kurdistan on August 16, 1945.

The highest decision making body of PDKI is its congress, which is held every four years. Between two congresses the Central Committee, which is elected at the congress and is made up of 25 permanent members and 10 substitute members, is the highest decision making body. The Central Committee also elects 7 of its members to the Political Bureau, which also includes the Secretary General. The Chairperson of the PDKI’s affiliated organizations, the Democratic Women’s Union of Iranian Kurdistan, the Democratic Youth Union of Kurdistan and the Democratic Students Union of Kurdistan are automatically members of the Central Committee.” (PDKI, undated)

For further information about Kurdish political parties, please refer to the following report:

- DIS/DRC - Danish Immigration Service/Danish Refugee Council: Iranian Kurds; On Conditions for Iranian Kurdish Parties in Iran and KRI, Activities in the Kurdish Area of Iran, Conditions in Border Area and Situation of Returnees from KRI to Iran; 30 May to 9 June 2013, 30 September 2013 (available at [ecoi.net](http://www.ecoi.net))

http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1226_1380796700_fact-finding-iranian-kurds-2013.pdf

Further information on political parties in Iran can be found in our July 2015 COI compilation:

- ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of Law, July 2015 (available at [ecoi.net](http://www.ecoi.net))

http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/4543_1436510544_accord-iran-coi-compilation-july-2015.pdf

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