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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested polities,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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HOW ISLAM RULES IN IRAN: THEOLOGY AND THEOCRACY
IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

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Mehran Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, (ISBN 9781009460880).

Mehran Kamrava's *How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic* extends a long research agenda on the Islamic Republic's historical formation and legitimacy narratives. The author's extensive list of books on the topic underscores this trajectory, listing (among recent titles) *Righteous Politics: Power and Resilience in Iran* (2023), *A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis* (2022), and *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic* (2022), alongside other works.

For an area-studies journal such as *Asia Maior*, the book's value lies in its fusion of internal religious-legal debate with a clear account of how those debates become governance. It avoids treating Islam as cultural essence or mere ideological ornamentation; instead, it reconstructs the doctrinal moves and institutional pipelines through which Shi'i jurisprudence becomes political authority – and through which dissenting interpretations are disciplined.

Kamrava begins with an explicit gap statement. Although there is no shortage of books on Iran, the “intricacies” of state-religion relations, especially the jurisprudential underpinnings of theocracy, remain “highly understudied,” leaving a “gaping hole” in our understanding (Preface, p. vii). The book's stake is that regime resilience cannot be explained through coercion, patronage, or constitutional design alone; it also depends on sustained ideological production in which Shi'i jurisprudence is politicized, reinterpreted, and embedded in institutional practice.

The introduction frames contemporary state-religion relations through three features. First, the state's foundations rest on an innovative reworking of *velayat-e faqih* into supreme political leadership, largely associated with Ruhollah Khomeini's reinterpretation of guardianship (Introduction, p. 1). Second, the state's jurisprudential claims have been persistently contested by clerics and lay thinkers, despite extensive bureaucratization and control of the clerical establishment (Introduction, p. 1). Third, after 2009 the state “reasserted” an idealized state-religion relationship and insti-

tutionalized an “official orthodoxy” that the author labels “Khameneism,” characterized as conservative in jurisprudence, authoritarian in politics, and security-paranoid in its intolerance of dissent (Introduction, p. 2).

The book is organized as a periodized account of the “journey” of Iranian Shi‘ism from revolutionary mobilization through wartime consolidation, reformist rethinking in the 1990s, and later conservative retrenchment (Introduction, p. 2). The table of contents signals a deliberate staging: early chapters establish the institutional setting and the clerical establishment, then move to jurisprudence and the evolution of guardianship, followed by chapters on religious guardianship/guidance and Islam as a source of social protection, the relationship between Islam and democracy, and the competing sources of legitimacy, before culminating in “Khameneism” and religious authoritarianism and ending with a forward-looking chapter on the Islamic Republic’s trajectory (Contents, pp. v-vi).

A key conceptual move is to treat ideology as an ongoing process with identifiable arenas. Kamrava argues that the regime’s theoretical underpinnings are continuously “produced and reproduced” across three “sites of ideological reproduction”: official state institutions; semi-governmental bodies (research institutes, media outlets, and the theological establishment); and clerical/lay theorists whose ties to the state are “loose and indeterminate” (Introduction, p. 4). The boundaries between these sites, he adds, are “highly blurred,” often making it difficult to determine where one ends and another begins (Introduction, p. 4).

Methodologically, the author signals deep engagement with Persian-language debates and a commitment to accessibility, providing a glossary of religious terms to facilitate the understanding to non-specialized readers (p. 312). For an area-studies readership, this combination – internal discourse plus clear scaffolding – enhances the book’s reach beyond a narrow circle of jurisprudence specialists.

One of the book’s strongest contributions is its insistence that jurisprudence is constitutive of governance. Kamrava argues that Iran is not a “run-of-the-mill authoritarian system”; its institutional complexity is partly a product of designing a system that is simultaneously Islamic and republican, requiring detailed theoretical scaffolding articulated by senior clerics who move between religious and political establishments (Introduction, p. 4). This framing is a useful corrective to analyses that treat ideology as mere rhetoric appended to security-state rule.

The three-site model is analytically useful because it avoids two distortions: leader-centric accounts that treat ideology as emanating exclusively from the apex, and culturalist accounts that treat ideology as an ambient, undifferentiated religiosity. By naming semi-governmental research institutes, media, and the theological establishment as intermediate arenas, Kamrava clarifies the institutional pipelines through which doctrine becomes policy, enforcement routines, and public pedagogy (Introduction, p.

4). The framework is also readily deployable for interpreting later episodes of tightening, recalibration, or partial opening.

“Khameneism” captures post-2009 orthodoxy and enforcement, but the author explicitly notes that Ali Khamenei is “hardly [the] sole intellectual architect” of the doctrine that bears his name. Khamenei’s prolific articulation of Islamic rule operates alongside supportive institutions and a broader cohort of jurists who provide theoretical exposition and justificatory depth (Introduction, p. 5). This helps the reader see consolidation as an ecosystem rather than a single-actor project.

The book demonstrates that doctrinal disagreement produces enforceable boundaries. The introduction’s discussion of Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari – including trials before the Special Court for the Clergy, imprisonment/defrocking, and professional exclusion – shows how the state regulates the permissible range of theological argument (Introduction, p. 9). This linkage is crucial to the book’s overall claim: jurisprudence is not “background,” but a regulated arena of struggle.

For non-specialists, the commitment to limiting jargon and providing a glossary makes a difficult subject teachable. For specialists, the value lies in synthesis: Kamrava draws disparate internal debates into a coherent narrative about how theocracy is maintained through ideas as well as institutions, without reducing one to the other.

In the concluding chapter Kamrava suggests that the state increasingly relies on “forced compliance,” with only a “small percentage” adopting the official ideological agenda voluntarily while many comply publicly and reject privately; he adds that exact proportions are “indeterminable under authoritarianism” (Chapter 9, p. 298). The caution is responsible, but it marks a boundary of the approach: the book is strongest on ideological production and institutionalization, less on fine-grained measurement of belief, practice, and everyday negotiation across regions, classes, and generations.

How Islam Rules in Iran delivers a coherent and conceptually disciplined explanation of how Shi’i jurisprudence is operationalized as governance in the Islamic Republic, and how theocratic authority is reproduced through an interlocking ecosystem of institutions and authorized interpreters. For an area-studies readership, its main contribution is to reposition regime durability as simultaneously institutional and jurisprudential: ideas are not merely invoked, but built into administrative routines, legal boundaries, and the policing of dissent. If some of its most consequential claims – especially the extent of intellectual “standstill” and the reach of “Khameneism” as a unifying category – invite further specification and debate, that is also a measure of the book’s value: it sets an agenda that future scholarship can test, refine, and extend.