



Study

Friday Prayers in Iran Religionizing Politics and Politicizing Religion



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Introduction

Friday prayer leaders hold a prominent position and enjoy social privileges among Iranian Shiites, given the fact that the Friday prayer sermon has become a significant ritual for the ruling elite since the 1979 revolution after it had been considerably marginalized during the Pahlavi dynasty.

After they took power following the 1979 revolution, the religious elite has been using the Friday sermon to transmit the supreme leader's messages to the people and officials at home and abroad.

While studying Friday sermons, there are several issues that need to be addressed related to their philosophical developments, particularly their purpose, topic, content and administrative development including the relationship between Friday prayer leaders and politics. A question arises here: What is the relationship between Friday prayer leaders and political power? Do they represent the Hawza and its teachings or the ruling elite and its perspectives?

The significance of this study stems from addressing the above-mentioned issues —through which we aim to highlight the role of the supreme leader in the Friday sermon and the appointment and dismissal of Friday prayer leaders. Also, we will identify the significance of Friday sermons to the ruling elite and their political role.

I- The Shiite Sharia Ruling Regarding the Friday Sermon

According to Shiite jurisprudence, the *Imamate* is a core doctrine and not a jurisprudential branch like what the Sunnis believe. The imam, divinely appointed as the successor to Prophet Muhammad, is tasked to maintain complete justice. He also must be one of the Twelve Infallible Imams.

This concept can be applied to politicized worship, which aims to send political messages to worshipers, like the Friday prayer. If the Infallible Imam is absent and Shiite jurists agreed to wait for him, the Friday prayer shall be suspended until he reappears. Any political message is senseless without the Infallible Imam. Political worship, like Friday prayers and the *Hudud* (fixed Islamic punishments), cannot be carried out without the permission of the Infallible Imam.

However, jurists have conflicting opinions with regard to the Islamic ruling on the permissibility of the Friday sermon in the absence of the Infallible Imam: Some jurists believe it is obligatory, other say it is prohibited while others believe it is preferable (some say it is preferable to perform the Friday prayer while others say it is optional to choose between the Dhuhr [afternoon] prayers and the Friday prayer).

1- Obligatory

First, Shiite jurists agreed that it is obligatory even during the imam's absence (*occultation*). Shiites continued to perform Friday prayers from the third century AH decade until the first half of the fifth century AH. Jurists in the third and fourth Hijri decade had not stated that it is prohibited during the Imam's absence. In different narrations, Alkulaini said it is obligatory and identified those it is obligatory upon. The fundamentalists claim that the Friday prayer leader must have certain qualifications. Thus, according to this Shiite opinion, waiting for the Absent Imam is temporary. ⁽¹⁾

Shiites had been performing Friday prayers in Baghdad until the middle of the fifth century (451 AH). They stopped when the Seljuks took over Baghdad and defeated the Pahlavi dynasty. ⁽²⁾

Other jurists say that it is obligatory in the Imam's absence if a rightful *imam* performs it. According to them, a rightful imam is not necessarily infallible. Mohammed Alsadr argues that the Friday prayer is obligatory and requires a rightful imam not the Infallible Imam. He considered himself a rightful Vali of Muslims, so he issued a fatwa calling on Friday prayers and sermons to be performed in October 1997. His fatwa was met with great enthusiasm and support from his followers, they continued performing Friday prayers until the assassination of Alsadr in February 1999. ⁽³⁾

There are two contemporary jurists who said that the Friday prayer is obligatory: Mohammed Reza Esfahani Alkarbalie, who used to perform prayers at Safi Mosque in Karbala, and Mahdi Alkhalesi. ⁽⁴⁾

2- Prohibited and Suspended

The political reason behind suspending the Friday prayer during the absence of the Infallible Imam is unclear. Maybe, the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty had a psychological impact on jurists who felt forced to suspend the Friday prayer. In the post-Pahlavi era, jurists believed that establishing the state and everything related to politics is the task of the Absent Imam [the twelve Shiite Imam]. Or, maybe, they suspended the Friday prayer because of the long absence of the imam and due to various political and economic developments that Shiites and jurists had gone through.

Generally, some jurists have supported the suspension of Friday prayers during the absence of the 12th imam: Imam Almahdi. Seyyed Nematollah Jazayer, a prominent Shiite scholar (died in 1700) called for the cursing of any cleric who performed the Friday prayer because he had usurped the role of the Absent Imam. ⁽⁵⁾ Thus, most jurists in the past called for the Friday prayer to be suspended. For example, the fatwa of Alkarari, allowing Friday prayers in the Safavid dynasty, was rejected by many jurists, most prominently,

Ibrahim Alqatifi— who claimed that Alkararki allowed the Friday prayer to meet the needs of the Safavid dynasty. He wrote a reply, clarifying the absolute prohibition of performing the Friday prayer during the absence of the 12th imam.⁽⁶⁾ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭa and Mohammad-Reza Golpaygani are among the jurists who supported the suspension of the Friday prayer during the absence of the 12th imam.⁽⁷⁾

Till today, Al-Najaf's marjaya believes the conditions needed to perform the Friday prayer are not met, so they support suspending it. "The Friday prayer is not obligatory but only when the Imam performs it or appoints a jurist to perform it. The jurist must have explicit power to perform it or he appoints another jurist from his circle of power. Else, you can perform Friday prayer at home to connect to Allah [God] and perform the Dhuhr prayer as an obligatory prayer," Bashir Najafi, one of the Four Grand Ayatollahs of Najaf, said.⁽⁸⁾

3- An Optional Obligation (al-wājib al-takhyīrī)

Some jurists say that it is permissible to choose between the Friday prayer or Dhuhr prayer. Their saying spread after the establishment of the Safavid dynasty. Most jurists today hold the same opinion that it is permissible to choose between the two prayers but it is preferable to perform Dhuhr.⁽⁹⁾

Probably, politics played a more pronounced role than it did in the Pahlavi era. Alkarari's fatwa to perform Friday prayer was supported by the Safavids, who needed it to entrench doctrinal legitimacy. A pivotal condition to perform Friday prayers, according to Shiites in general, is that it must be performed by a rightful imam. Therefore, Shiites dynasties starting from the Safavids until today were keen to show that they were *rightful* — even if in reality they were not.

According to Khomeini's *Tahrir al-Wasilah Khomeini*, it is an *optional obligation*, [al-wājib al-takhyīrī], i.e., it is optional to choose between the Friday prayer or Dhuhr prayer. Yet, Friday prayer is better than Dhuhr prayer. And the best option is to perform the Friday prayer and then the Dhuhr prayer.⁽¹⁰⁾

Khomeini holds the opinion: Friday prayer is an *optional obligation*, but he asserts that it is significant to perform it. When he was asked on the ruling if the Friday prayer leader is not rightful is it obligatory to perform it? "Today, the Friday prayer is an *optional obligation*. It is not obligatory to perform it. However, worshippers should not deprive themselves of the benefits and significance of the Friday prayer only because they doubt the rightfulness of the leader or for false pretenses," Khomeini said. He was asked, what is the Sharia ruling regarding those who do not attend the Friday prayer because they have different opinions on it or are indifferent to it? He replied,

“Not attending the Friday prayer, the political worship, believing that it is insignificant, is *reprehensible* in Sharia. And to always abandon performing it is not supported, in any way, in the Sharia.”⁽¹¹⁾

There is a contradiction in his argument; he said it is *optional* and at the same time it is *reprehensible* to abandon the Friday prayer. In Sharia law, not performing *optional acts* cannot be *reprehensible*. Not performing *obligatory acts* is *reprehensible*.

Ali Sistani, a contemporary grand marja of Najaf, said it is preferable to perform Friday prayers. “The Friday prayer is an *optional obligation*. The one who performs Friday prayer has the option to either perform the Friday prayer – if all its conditions are fulfilled – or to perform the Dhuhr prayer; and if he performs the Friday prayer, it will suffice in place of the Dhuhr prayer.”⁽¹²⁾

In a nutshell, the majority, today, say that it is optional to choose between the Friday prayer and the Dhuhr prayer. When reviewing the above arguments, it becomes clear that there is no difference between the jurists of Najaf and Qom. However, the jurists of Qom, who are pro-Velayat-e Faqih, urge people to attend the Friday prayers and say avoiding or lagging in its performance is *reprehensible* in Sharia. Though they have not stated it explicitly, the Velayat-e Faqih jurists argue that the Friday prayer is recommended [*Mustahabb*] or a collective obligation [*Al-Wajib al-Kifa'i*].

The Velayat-e Faqih jurists are keen to transmit their political messages to the people through Friday prayers unlike the Najaf jurists, who are not really interested in politics as they believe in the concept of awaiting for the Absent Imam. However, the current political situation made the Hawza in Najaf use the Friday prayer to transmit messages to the public about the challenges facing the Shiite community in Iraq in general and Iraqi political affairs in particular.⁽¹³⁾

II- The Roots of Politicization: Boosting Legitimacy

In the Shiite world in general and in Iran in particular, the Friday prayer has gone through several phases. Shiite political Islam, which gained ascendancy during several periods, worked to establish its own official mosques to proclaim political victory. These mosques were used to empower the Islamic Da'wa and act as symbols of spiritual superiority. We find that this has been prevalent since the era of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt, when the dynasty established the Cairo mosque, which would later be known as Al-Azhar mosque. The Fatimids supervised the Friday prayer sermon at Al-Azhar mosque as well as the appointment of jurists who educated people there. They also paid monthly salaries, provided accommodation and showered

them with various privileges.⁽¹⁴⁾

During the Safavid era, the Safavids desperately needed to legitimize their political, religious and sectarian presence as they established their state on the ruins of a Sunni state. Many of the residents of the country did not convert to this extremist version of Shiism embraced by the Safavids.⁽¹⁵⁾ The sectarian atmosphere was unfavorable to Shiite domination in the beginning. There was also domestic opposition. Overseas, there was an arch-rival represented in the Ottomans whose state was expanding both eastward and westward at the time. The Safavids wanted to curb Ottoman expansion into the Persian regions and the areas considered by the Persian empire as its strategic surroundings.

Therefore, the Safavid dynasty established a multi-task religious apparatus in the Persian region in order to undertake the mission of enhancing the presence of the Shiite sect across the empire. New religious positions were created and granted to clerics of the imamate. The positions of Shaykh al-Islām, and vizier were created and endowments administrators, judges and Friday prayer leaders were appointed.⁽¹⁶⁾

The prevalent jurisprudential opinion at the time held that Friday prayers were banned until the reappearance of the Infallible Imam. Cleric al-Karki, who was the jurist of the Safavid court, issued a fatwa in 940 AH permitting Friday prayers in the era of occultation. The fatwa sparked a great deal of controversy and drew opposition from most Shiite clerics at the time, but the general line embraced by al-Karki has had an impact on Shiites to this day, which cannot be ignored, especially in Iran.

We find that cleric Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi (1110 AH, 1700 AD), who was keen to legitimize the Safavid presence, claimed that the rule of the Safavids was a sign of the reappearance of the Infallible Imam and brought forth several Hadiths (i.e. narratives) which supported the legitimacy of Friday prayers. He was very keen to establish the Friday prayer and drew massive crowds while doing so.

There is no doubt that this was done in the context of conferring legitimacy on the Safavids as Colin Turner observes. He said, "As Arjmand refers, Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi conferred clear legitimacy on the monarchy which was at the time not included in the official Imamate political thought."⁽¹⁷⁾ Shah Suleiman rewarded him by appointing him as Shaykh al-Islām in 1687."⁽¹⁸⁾

The issue of appointing Friday prayer leaders under the Safavid dynasty was linked to the hierarchy they established which was led by the chief vizier Sheikh al-Karki at the time. Subsequently, an office for the Friday prayer leader was set up during the era of Shah Abbas I.⁽¹⁹⁾

The issue of establishing Friday prayers had become directly linked to the political authority from the era of the Safavids.

The ironic paradox is that when Khomeini came to power after the Iranian revolution of 1979, he did not make the slightest change when it came to the independence of Friday prayer leaders in particular and clerics in general.

The government apparatus did not abolish the religious apparatus of the state. On the contrary, the religious apparatus swelled. Many wings within the religious seminary have become subject to political authority for several reasons, which we have no room to explain here.

In the Qajari era, the situation was not drastically different. Clerics were tasked with leading the Friday prayer, controlling endowments, heading the Sharia-based judiciary, and signing contracts among the people. They were appointed by the political authority, which always turned a deaf ear to the expanding and deepening role of clerics, as it deemed such an alliance as a means to boost its religious legitimacy.

However, as the influence of the clerics expanded and they gained more control over the social and economic apparatuses of the state, differences between them and the government surfaced.⁽²⁰⁾

During the Tobacco Protest, clerics rejected concessions and the Friday prayer was used by clerics to incite public opinion against Naser al-Din Shah and the concessions he granted to the British Empire in 1890. The clerics took to rostrums and condemned the Shah. Sayyed Ali Akbar, an in-law of Mirza Shirazi, ascended the rostrum and gave a sermon where he strongly condemned the government. He called for ending the concessions and standing up to the representatives of the British oil firm.⁽²¹⁾

During the events of the Constitutional Movement, clerics took to rostrums and condemned the government for ignoring the interests of the people and resorting to excessive force and violence against the people.⁽²²⁾

Under the Pahlavi dynasty, the Friday prayer was marginalized compared to its role under the Qajars and the Safavids. This is because the Pahlavis were seeking to weaken the power of clerics as they feared a repetition of the turmoil that occurred in the aftermath of the Tobacco Protest and the Constitutional Movement.

This was in addition to the Pahlavi policy which intended to transform society in order for it to become more secular. Religious rituals in general were targeted, including the Friday prayer, hijab and other rituals which the political authority deemed to be tools for mobilization used by clerics to pressure the government.⁽²³⁾

The policies of the Shah prompted several clerics to establish the Friday

prayer in their homes. Some of them totally shunned it. In the meantime, the Friday prayer continued to be observed in Tehran and some cities under the sponsorship of the government. The official Friday prayer leader in Tehran was Sheikh Hassan Imami. He survived an assassination attempt under the Shah, and then fled the country after the revolution.⁽²⁴⁾

III- The Institutionalization of the Friday Prayer During the Era of Velayat-e Faqih

Successive political authorities ruling the central capitals of Shiism were keen to wrest control over the Friday prayer, starting from the Safavids until the Ottomans themselves who appointed a Sunni preacher in Karbala to give sermons and invoke blessings on the Ottoman Sultan, which prompted Shiite clerics to cancel Friday prayer congregations.⁽²⁵⁾

After the revolution in 1979, the Iranian government worked to enhance its legitimacy in the Persian regions by controlling the types of issues raised during the Friday sermons. As was the case under the rule of the Safavids, the state monopolized religious discourse via a network of local representatives across all institutions as well as the Friday prayer. This led to what we can call the 'appropriation of mosques' and the Friday prayer for the benefit of one religious model which the Iranian religious elites worked to impose. This can be explained in detail on multiple levels:

1- The Cultural Guardianship

After the Iranian revolution in 1979, we noticed that the government and political elites were keen to dominate all the cultural spheres of the country as well as the political and economic spheres. Hence, we could say that the Friday prayer was exploited and utilized as in the past. In addition, it was used to grant legitimacy to the state. Those supportive of Velayat-e Faqih staged a so-called cultural revolution in the country, through which they sought to control the entire cultural affairs of the country, appropriate universities, and make changes to curricula to ensure consistency with their ideological tenets. They also dismissed a large number of academics (most left the country), persecuted many university students who opposed Velayat-e Faqih and executed a considerable number of them. It is worth mentioning that the movement to purge universities was triggered from a Friday prayer rostrum in 1980.⁽²⁶⁾

It is also noted that the government used the Friday prayer on many occasions as a means to influence public opinion and to convince the people of the decisions it was going to take.

The government's domination over all religious and cultural institutions

is related to its general guardianship over all cultural affairs, including the Friday sermon. The elites supportive of Velayat-e Faqih consider that appointing and dismissing Friday prayer leaders falls within the scope of its work as the general absolute guardian covering all that is religious and worldly. Hence, this guardianship is applied to all cultural and religious affairs including the Friday prayer. In fact, the supreme leader himself prefers to appoint the leaders of the Friday prayer. This amounts to the monopolization of religious discourse and ensures government control over the information disseminated to the people.

This guardianship ensures that Iranian society remains under the control and domination of the supreme leader. Even if supporters of Velayat-e Faqih lose in elections, they can still be compensated for their losses by being appointed in official positions. Also, to avenge their losses they are likely to enact oppression or violence against their opponents. This does not contribute to virtue in society, according to the Iranian thinker Mostafa Malekian.⁽²⁷⁾

Many Iranian philosophers such as Sabashteri and Malekian reject the state's guardianship over cultural affairs and attempts to spread virtue via repression or through controlling cultural and religious institutions. These people believe that the government, in the field of public culture, must follow society and accomplish its work in a way which is consistent with the culture of the people. The government should not shape social culture.⁽²⁸⁾

The state's direct guardianship and politicization of the Friday prayer led many people to shun the Friday prayer.⁽²⁹⁾

It is worth mentioning here that the state's intervention and its guardianship over Friday sermons is considered a historical transformation in terms of Shiism's relationship with the state. Previously, Shiite clerics were solely responsible for Friday prayers and sermons, the government historically intervened on a limited scale. But under the absolute version of Velayat-e Faqih, the Friday prayer has become one of the missions of the government, not the Shiite community, which threatens the historical image of the perceived independence between the religious seminary and the ruling government.

2- Dismissing Opponents

Within the efforts of the ruling elite to seize control over state apparatuses in the country, it has always worked to appoint Friday prayer leaders who are supportive of it, and dismiss those whose loyalty is questionable.

For example, the former Iranian President and the Chief of the Expediency Discernment Council, the late Hashemi Rafsanjani, was prevented from

ascending the pulpit and leading the Friday prayer which he had never missed since the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979. This came after the announcement of the results of the presidential elections in 2009. The reformists took to the streets and protested in a number of Iranian cities, especially the capital Tehran. They accused the conservatives of rigging the elections in favor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The decision to prevent Rafsanjani from leading the Friday prayer came after a letter he sent to the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, implicitly criticizing Khamenei's silence on the accusations of corruption by Ahmadinejad against him and his son during the election debates. He described the accusations as irresponsible and having nothing to do with the truth.⁽³⁰⁾

Ayatollah Moussa Jazaeri, Friday prayer leader in Ahwaz, of the Khuzestan province, resigned or was dismissed. He attributed his resignation to incapacity and old age.⁽³¹⁾ But others said that there were political reasons behind the move.⁽³²⁾

Jazaeri's resignation was followed by other resignations including Ayatollah Abbasali Soleimani, Friday prayer leader in Sistan and Balochistan, who said he resigned in order to give greater room for the youth and new ideas.⁽³³⁾ The two parallel resignations support the viewpoint suggesting that there were political reasons behind these resignations.

The resignations of Jazaeri and Soleimani followed a host of Friday prayer leaders resigning during the past two years. A large number of preachers resigned, including Ayatollah Mujtahid Shabastari in the province of East Azerbaijan, Alireza Birjandi of South Khorasan province, Ayatollah Zein Al-Abedin Ghorban of the province of Gilan, Ayatollah Assadullah Imani of Fars province, Jafar Mohsenzadeh of Alborz province, and Ayatollah Mohammed Naqi Lotfi of Ilam province. Last year, Ayatollah Yehia Jafari resigned as Friday prayer leader in the province of Kerman after his remarks about supporting President Hassan Rouhani sparked controversy across the country.

Following these developments, Iranian First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri described the developments as worrying.⁽³⁴⁾

He described the resignations or dismissals at the time as a systematic purge against the supporters of Rouhani and Rafsanjani from giving Friday prayer sermons and that the conservatives would obtain via appointments what they could not get via the ballot box.⁽³⁵⁾ Meanwhile, the government disseminated rumors that some Friday prayer leaders were engaged in graft, which was a prelude to these dismissals or resignations.⁽³⁶⁾ Perhaps this corruption is true. But the corruption charges were politically motivated

and selective in order to cover up the government's problems and exclude the reformists.

Dismissals or resignations have been used by the government since the outbreak of the revolution in order to impose restrictions on the reformists and others whose absolute and total loyalty to the supreme leader is questioned. When Mohammed Khatami won the elections in 1997, the noose was tightened around the Friday prayer leaders who supported him. After every Friday prayer, supporters of Hezbollah chanted against Ayatollah Taheri, one of the backers of Khatami at the time. Hojatoleslam Mohsen Kadivar, one of the backers of Khatami, faced repression. He always gave speeches after every Friday prayer and was placed under arrest for months.

Taheri resigned in 2002, he spoke out against what he called the 'corruption of the religious elite.' In response, the authorities imposed a complete media blackout on any news about him. They restricted his movements and placed him under house arrest.⁽³⁷⁾

After the resignation of Taheri, the government sacked several Friday prayer leaders affiliated with the Islamic Left, including Mohammed Hossein Razandi, who was sacked in 2003, ending his 22-year career as a Friday prayer leader.⁽³⁸⁾

3- The Policies Committee on Friday Prayer Leaders

In addition to the foregoing, the government took administrative control over the Friday prayer arena in order to strengthen its authority. This was represented in establishing offices and bodies supervising the appointment and dismissal of Friday prayer leaders, as well as providing them with the subjects the state deemed appropriate in accordance with the issues facing the state at the time.

The first Friday prayer after the revolution was held on July 27, 1979 on the orders of Khomeini and was led by cleric Talaghani.

After the success of this experience in the capital Tehran, the rest of the cities called for, or were ordered to appoint, Friday prayer leaders to establish weekly Friday prayers.

Within a few years, mosques for holding these prayers increasingly sprang up, reaching 780 mosques.⁽³⁹⁾

At the suggestion of Khamenei, Khomeini ordered a committee to be established made up of several clerics to outline the policies related to Friday prayers. The secretariat general of this committee was established in the city of Qom.⁽⁴⁰⁾

This committee was known as the Central Committee of Friday Prayer Leaders. In August 1984, Khomeini appointed seven clerics, including

Mohammed Abtahi, Hashem Rasooli Mahalati, Mohammad Reza Tavassoli, Mohammed Aybayeri, Mohammed Javad Kashmiri and Ali Qazi Askari, as members of its secretariat general.⁽⁴¹⁾

In 1993, the Committee for Outlining the Policies of Friday Prayer Leaders took the place of the Central Committee on Friday Prayer Leaders. Hashem Rasooli Mahalati chaired this committee from its establishment until 2000. He was succeeded by Reza Taqawi. Extremism was the hallmark of Taqawi's tenure as he turned to the radicals close to Khamenei.⁽⁴²⁾

Three years after becoming the supreme leader, Khamenei appointed nine clerics to run this committee which he called the Committee on Outlining the Policies of Friday Prayer Leaders.⁽⁴³⁾

This committee is one of the influential entities in Iranian politics. It is tasked with setting the content of Friday sermons in cities. It contains a political section which sends publications and electronic magazines to Friday prayer leaders as well as recommendations related to sermons.

The government was alerted to the importance of the Friday prayer in sending its messages to the people across the country and its sprawling provinces, especially before the quantum leaps made in communication technology and modern means of communication. Following these technological advances, it was assumed that the position and significance of the Friday prayer in Iran as one of the government's political and mobilization tools would diminish. But the exact opposite happened as a result of the appropriate conditions which paved the way for the reverse. Western sanctions on Iran prompted the ruling religious elite to embrace the rhetoric of victimization and of being targeted. The government used this rhetoric to justify its curtailment of media freedom. This came in parallel with the government's blocking of several websites. This ensured the continued importance of the Friday prayer sermon in shaping public opinion and dealing with outside threats.

4- Earning an Income and Sources of Wages

The Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush cast light on the issue of how clerics earn their income, especially after the Iranian revolution, and how their source of financial income impacts their work and relationship with their sponsor, whether this sponsor is the state or the public.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Previously, Mortaza Muthari also touched on this problematic issue.⁽⁴⁵⁾

As for the Friday prayer leaders in Iran, the situation is not very different. The financial income of these leaders is set by the government, not the people or civil society. This makes these leaders, on most occasions, beholden to the state as they fear losing their wages. They have always been loyal to the state,

not the Ummah, as they have not reached the level of *ijtihad*. They are closer to the status of clerics who do not have the capabilities to lead the religious arena or issue *fatwas*. Therefore, they receive written Friday sermons. The public does not consider them *ijtihad*-worthy clerics and does not give them the *Khoms*.

Additionally, the institutionalization of the Friday prayer plays a role in loyalty to the state. Establishing the Friday prayer in Iran is a purely governmental task which the public has nothing to do with.

Despite the efforts of the religious elite to display asceticism and modesty, information indicates that the fortunes of clerics are inflating incredibly, in addition to other privileges that they get. Friday prayer leaders in Iran hold a special status as they represent the supreme leader. As for the budget allocated to them, it is said that the Friday prayer leader receives a nominal pay of \$54 per month. Friday prayer leaders in the poorer areas receive a slightly higher wage.⁽⁴⁶⁾

This tiny amount of money is not sufficient for Friday prayer leaders and their families. Therefore, the supreme leader has allocated additional income to Friday prayer leaders. This money is paid from 'the share of the imam' for these leaders to make ends meet.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Therefore, estimating the wages paid to the Friday prayer leaders is impossible. The issue of *Khoms* in general, including the share of the imam, remains unknown and has nothing to do with the official statistics and government budget. Despite a portion of the government budget being allocated to the religious establishments and the office of the supreme leader, these institutions have their own resources and sources of income which are not subject to the official apparatuses of the state.

According to *Velayat-e Faqih* theory, *Khoms*, in respect to both the notables and the imam, is paid as one obligation and government tax to the supreme leader and the ruler of Muslims (or his endorsed representatives). *Khoms* shall be spent according to the opinion and under the supervision of the supreme leader in the aspects that serve the interests of Islam and Muslims and secure the earnings of the poor Hashemites.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The Iranian government applies the *Velayat-e Faqih* theory to *Khoms*, which means that the supreme leader exercises guardianship over *Khoms* and all aspects of spending on state institutions.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Hence, it is very difficult to get clear figures on the budget allocated to Friday prayer leaders, the aspects of spending⁽⁵⁰⁾ in general and even the means of delivering this money to genuine beneficiaries given the absence of oversight and supervision.

This ambiguity and lack of official or unofficial specific and numerical information has prompted some researchers to believe that the position of leading the Friday prayer in Iran has become a means to get rich quickly. Every imam is given a bullet-proof car, a bodyguard, lodging, an unspecified tax-free salary, healthcare, funding for an annual pilgrimage to Shiite shrines and other privileges.⁽⁵¹⁾

Many senior clerics have denied such suggestions. They even claim that some clerics are living under the poverty line. According to Abul-Fazl Shokouri, 98 percent of clerics are living under the poverty line and only 3 percent of clerics benefited from the revolution. The rest of the imams live on 600,000 tomans per month (\$143)^{(52)*} as well as the money earned during Ramadan and Muharram by giving sermons from the pulpit. He also added that these imams are hired and move around the country with their wives and children in order to make ends meet here and there using outdated motorcycles. They can barely scrape by. He also noted that the people only focus on clerics who are judges and those working in the regulatory and military institutions, which leads to misjudgment about the lifestyle and income of clerics.⁽⁵³⁾

It seems that this message was targeting the people who view clerics with concern and suspicion due to the inflating fortunes of many of them. However, He said, "Despite this data, the Iranian people and media do not believe them."⁽⁵⁴⁾

IV- Politics First: Politicization of Religion and Religionization of Politics

The religious elite deals with the Friday prayer issue from a purely political perspective. The religious, spiritual and ethical aspects are subordinate to the political dimension. In the context of nationalization which we have discussed earlier, the political and sectarian opponents of the government are silenced, because they have no platforms to access the people. However, the religious elite regards the model of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist as being crucial to Shiism, and any other model is considered a violation of the officially mandated doctrine. Khomeini prioritized Velayat-e Faqih rules of governance over Islamic jurisprudential rules.

The controversy is not only limited to the politicization of Friday prayers, but also to the primacy of a particular political current at the expense of other currents. State loyalists have promoted the domination of one current which has stifled religious pluralism. If the religious elites truly believed in pluralism, they would not deny others using the minbar (pulpits in mosques)

and speaking to the people.

Fahmi Huwaidi studies the politicization and monopolization of the public prayer. He said: "The minbar became a platform for political guidance, where positions are declared and important news related to various local and international matters are announced, along with jurisprudence and religious guidance."⁽⁵⁵⁾

Khomeini usually did not issue political statements at a particular event, but rather he delivered a sermon and announced his position on the latest developments. Through these sermons, he reminded the people of his decisions. He usually met with officials and delegations and listened to them. After they finished their meetings, he delivered his sermon and the matter ended there.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Khamenei followed largely the same style, as did other officials as Huwaidi noted.⁽⁵⁷⁾ These speeches provoked discussion among political and religious currents. They can be understood differently. Is there a deliberate intention for not delivering clear and direct statements that cannot be interpreted? Or do they represent the doctrinal and religious preaching style of Khomeini?

In any case, the significance of the Friday prayer to the ruling religious elite is that it is a means for political and social mobilization. It is instrumental in protecting the Iranian state and the revolution from crises and sedition. Also it is significant in protecting the country's religious ideology. In fact, it is a weekly gathering held in more than 750 centers throughout the country. Friday prayers and sermons, which are infused with strong emotions, calls for mobilization, the remembrance of the oppression of Ahl al-Bayt, and the plots against the Absent Imam, and the Velayat-e Faqih state, resonate with the people at a spiritual level and also ensures that the official state doctrine is reinforced within the community. They also fuel religious fervor within people making them feel a closeness to heaven!⁽⁵⁸⁾ In this context, worshiping connotations have been changed. The opening takbeer is no longer a medium for reverence and closeness to God, but rather it targets the forces of arrogance. The aim behind prayers is not only to worship God, they are used to mobilize people and incite them against the so-called world oppressors and make them submissive to the Velayat-e Faqih leadership.^{(59)*}

The most prominent features of the politicization and political mobilization of the Friday prayers are as follows:

1- Disrespecting Internal Opponents

The religious elite took advantage of the Friday prayer platform to condemn opposition actors inside Iran. Political or intellectual opponents who adopted a different model to the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, or supporters of

the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist who attempted to modify the behavior of the government have all been condemned.

Rather than bringing Muslims together, promoting affection among them, and setting aside political differences — though differences between them are not over the major pillars of Islam — Friday's minbar turned into a platform for Velayat-e Faqih clerics. The loyalist elite expressed political outcomes in religious terms. Its rhetoric has been largely associated with religion and doctrine. Any deviation from the model of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist is considered a rebellion against religion itself.

Through the platform of the Friday prayer, the government of Mohammad Khatami, Rafsanjani, the reformists and moderates, as well as the Rouhani government were attacked.

During the Khatami era, after every Friday sermon, Hezbollah groups chanted against the Khatami government. Some of those groups even attacked Abdulloh Nuri and Attallah Muhajirani, who was the minister of interior and culture during the Khatami era.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Rouhani was criticized by Friday prayer imams. The imam of the Friday prayer Mohammad Ali Movahedi-Kermani addressed him during the demonstrations: "You have destroyed many parts of the country. Well sir, why did you neglect this problem? Why did you not work accurately? O' the so called government of measures, where are your measures so things like this never happen again?"⁽⁶¹⁾

The Friday sermon is considered part of the propaganda struggle in Iran's parliamentary and presidential elections. These sermons often support the conservatives against the reformists.⁽⁶²⁾

The Friday prayer imam in Mashhad Ahmed Alam al-Hoda said in the context of justifying the Guardian Council's rejection of the nomination papers of some Shura Council election candidates: "The Shura Council acted in a heroic way when it prevented infiltrators from entering the Parliament. We must not allow those who disagree with the supreme leader to enter the Parliament, even if this difference is very simple."⁽⁶³⁾

The temporary Friday prayer imam of Tehran city, Ayatollah Kazemi, said, "In reference to the upcoming parliamentary elections, the Parliament must maintain the same high level of nationalism and dignity of the martyr Qassem Soleimani's blood and members of Parliament must be loyal and worthy of the revolution."⁽⁶⁴⁾

If the Friday prayers imams are appointed by a body formed by the supreme leader himself, and if the delivered sermon has been already prepared for the imam by state agencies, it can be said that the network of Friday prayer

imams throughout the country is considered part of the supreme leader's institution, and that they are speaking on behalf of the state. This reflects the idea of nationalization, in order to avoid the emergence of prominent clerics in the community who influence the decision of the state, or dominate society through Da'wah, just like what happened during the Tobacco and Constitution protests.

The religious elite who revolted against the Pahlavis, along with other political currents such as leftists and liberals, are well aware that if the community of clerics was given a real opportunity to work independently away from the political system, historical events would recur like when the Hawza was considered a thorn in the side of the government. Therefore, the government has no choice but to continue to limit the independence and influence of clerics.

2- Facing External Enemies

Friday sermons also discuss Iran's external battles. The Friday prayer imam of Tehran, for example, described the killing of civilians in Aleppo by saying: "The Muslims of Aleppo conquered the infidels!"⁽⁶⁵⁾ This extended even to those within the Shiite community itself, like when Iranian religious and political officials accused Iraqi and Lebanese protesters in October 2019 of being "agents, conspirators, proxies of the forces of arrogance, and other charges."⁽⁶⁶⁾

The Friday sermon is always an occasion to hurl accusations against regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan. Through these accusations, religious elites aim to undermine rival countries in the Islamic world, and to mobilize internal public opinion against what they consider as conspiracies plotted by regional and international arrogant powers against the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist.

Friday sermons are always trying to influence public opinion on some foreign policy files, such as rejecting or approving the nuclear agreement, as determined by the political system.⁽⁶⁷⁾

On the last Friday of Ramadan each year, the International Day of Jerusalem is celebrated. This day has been celebrated at the request of the founder of the Iranian political system, Khomeini. The Friday prayer imams talk about Iran's role in protecting Jerusalem and the Palestinians. Through the Jerusalem Day sermons, Iran has consistently attacked Arab and Islamic countries, and also presents itself as the exclusive defender of the Palestinian cause, which is part of the government's ideological propaganda.

Many clerics warned against the systematic politicization of the Friday sermon as it has largely contributed to the reluctance among people to pray,

and is a deviation from the essential purpose of the sermon. This prompted Hojjat al-Islam to claim that less than 1 percent of the Iranian people are committed to Friday prayers.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Although this claim is an exaggeration, it reveals the concerns of some clerics about the widespread politicization of the Friday prayer.

Other than politicization, one of the main reasons for the reluctance among people to perform Friday prayers during the Velayat-e Faqih era is the general feeling that the mosque has become nationalized, and the imam is the official spokesperson for the institution of the supreme leader. Iranian public opinion has no room for creativity, modernity, and speaking in a manner aligned to the local environment or region in which the imam delivers his sermon. Moreover, the Friday prayer sermons do not address the concerns of the people who attend the Friday prayer, especially since people residing in villages, remote and border areas do not care about politics as much as they are concerned with the problems of daily life, and how they can overcome these obstacles. The mission of the imam is only limited to deliver the written text that is circulated to all imams, regardless of the topics of these written sermons.⁽⁶⁹⁾

All this has led to the spread of a conformist religiosity through fear of prosecution for opposing official public opinion. Therefore, rituals and optics increased at the expense of ethics, spirituality and religiosity. A woman's veil was more important to the authorities than eliminating corruption and nepotism within the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. Maintaining and funding the restoration of tombs, and sponsoring ritual marches were more important than providing the people with their basic needs, which was reflected in the entire religious environment. These factors contributed to the spread of what can be called fake religiosity within the community of clergymen.

V- The Repercussions of Politicization: The Increase in Secularization

The Friday sermon in Iran, as it stands today, may contribute to an increasing level of secularism in society because the topics of the Friday sermon are politicized and reflect the prevailing religious thought. The discourse that is delivered from the Friday minbar is closely related to the concerns of the ruling religious elite, not the concerns of the Iranian people.

In this context, the authorities aim to close platforms of religious and spiritual expression for non-loyalist religious currents, and limit them to the Husayniyah, religious schools. These platforms were restricted by place, time, and number of attendees, unlike the mosques scattered throughout

the country. The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist has emerged as the state endorsed doctrine in Shi'a jurisprudence which exclusively determines the principles of the sect with disregard to any other branches. This was promoted to an unprecedented level in Shiite Islam.⁽⁷⁰⁾

At the same time, it led to the rise of civil, liberal, and leftist currents. The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist has eased the path for the aforementioned currents to criticize and attack the Velayat-e Faqih system; the religious model the religious elite seeks to forcefully implement in the country. Thus, jurisprudential and philosophical studies related to tyranny, oppression, governance and sources of sharia have dramatically increased to address the Velayat-e Faqih doctrine. Some scholars have resorted to refute Velayat e-Faqih with the use of philosophy.

These voices greatly concern the government. It responds by disrespecting and religiously distorting these opposing currents, and sometimes resorts to prosecution. This reveals that the government is not thinking of changing its strategy towards these voices by providing spaces and platforms for alternative perspectives. These platforms would represent political and religious competition through offering a more progressive religious model, contrary to the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. Therefore, the strategy appears to be to maintain the hardcore loyalists and followers of Velayat-e Faqih.

Therefore, it is likely that the religious and sectarian polarization related to the nationalization of the Friday minbar will continue and may increase, dominate the religious sphere, and might also lead to greater efforts by opponents to gain a foothold even though they do not have religious or political authority. However, the failure of the government in some areas provides a good opportunity to support these opponents as a possible rational alternative.

Finally, the position of the imam and the minbar in contemporary Iran raises serious questions about the independence of the religious institution, the extent of its preservation of the Hawza heritage, the historical space between the jurist and the authority, and the erosion of its independence by the state! If Soroush stated that the Hawza had taken over the state, the observer is aware of the adverse impact of this. The state has taken over the Hawza or is still trying to take over the Hawza because the concept of waiting for the Absent Imam has not been adopted by the state yet though it was intensively used in the Hawza's teachings and thoughts. Thus, a gap has emerged between the Hawza which believes in waiting for the Absent Imam, and the Velayat-e Faqih doctrine which allows for the practice politics even

in the absence of the imam. This reminds us of the historical dispute between the teams of the Mashrootah and Almostabidah. Similarly, the supporters of the revolution are the natural extension of the Almostabidah movement, and the traditional waiting group is an extension of the Mashrootah current. Also, the principle of “the acceptability by the believers” is adopted by the Najaf Supreme Marjaya; depending on the constitutional philosophy of statehood.

Conclusion

This paper has concluded that with regard to the ruling elite’s desire to dominate all religious matters under the absolute Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, there will be no foreseeable changes in the patterns of Iranian religious discourse and its dependence on political authority. This has resulted in a number of conclusions, most importantly:

The Friday minbar has been used as a tool to strengthen the legitimacy of the political authority in the country by controlling the subject matter of Friday sermons across the country. In addition, Friday prayer leaders who were not seen as loyal were dismissed. The Friday minbar was directed to disrespect both internal and external opponents and undermine them religiously and doctrinally.

The study concludes that the continuity and permanence of the Velayat-e Faqih doctrine increases social and political secularization. It also smooths the path for other opponents and religious schools to criticize and attack the concept of Velayat-e Faqih.

Based on the foregoing, it was concluded that shifts in the philosophy and objectives of the Friday prayer which was previously used for Da’wah and preaching religion only, became a political and ideological platform in favor of the authoritarian religious doctrine imposed by the state. For example, Friday prayers represent the section of the Hawza that holds the reins of the state, and is no longer directed to the general community of believers. The government was keen on this approach in order to avoid what happened in the past in terms of the powerful role of clerics and the influence of the minbar on the people.

Finally, with regard to the issue of dependency, apparently Friday prayer imams are paid by the government and therefore considered as officials who directly follow the supreme leader. He has the authority to appoint and dismiss them, and to determine the words of the sermon. Therefore, it is not likely that the minbar in Iran will pose any threat to the current government, or produce charismatic preachers who will be followed by the people as what happened before.

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