Ausg. 781 18.03.2026

KONTEXT: WOCHENZEITUNG

Depose the Father!

By Iraj Esmaeilpour Ghoochani

Date: March 18, 2026

In 1979, the turban replaced the crown—but the throne remained the same. In the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Shah was succeeded by the Ayatollah. Yet the so-called Velayat-e Motlaqeh, the absolute rule of a religious leader, was in essence nothing other than an absolute monarchy (Saltanat-e Motlaqeh), merely continued in a religious guise. In the current debates about Iran's future, a similar pattern is emerging, albeit with the roles reversed. As early as 1979, the phrase "The main thing is that these people disappear!" was often heard. Even today, the question is usually not "What will come?" but "Who will come?" The first question concerns the political order. The second merely seeks a new ruling figure, replacing one ruler with another.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Constitutional Revolution in Iran was actually fighting for a monarchy without political power—one that would nevertheless remain as a symbol of continuity and a source of legitimacy—and for a parliament that could act without fear and exercise real political authority under the protection of this symbolic legitimacy. In reality, over the past decades, the situation has been the exact opposite: there was a symbolic parliament in the hands of an absolute ruler.

The mantle of power has never rested on the same shoulders for very long. But as long as the political order remains unchanged, the history of Iran essentially proves to be a continuous repetition of the same catastrophe—only each time in a different guise.

A Path Yet to Be Taken

And yet there is a moment in the country's recent history that shows this cycle is not inevitable: In the fall of 2022, a slogan emerged in the Kurdish part of Iran that spread across the country with astonishing speed: "Woman, Life, Freedom!" Within a few days, this phrase became something rare in Iranian politics: a common language transcending ethnic, social, and religious boundaries. Kurds, Persians, Turks, Lurs, Baluchis, and Arabs. Religious, secular, and atheist Iranians. Students, workers, and office employees. Everyone repeated those same three words.

For a brief moment in history, it seemed as though Iranian society had overcome one of its oldest political obsessions: the search for the all-powerful father. A feminine energy with entirely unfamiliar coordinates suddenly swept through the entire country, opening up a different possibility for a society accustomed to the patriarchal "yes/no" commands of the father—a path not yet taken, a new vision of Iran and of Iranians themselves. But as long as the political order revolves around a cult of the king steeped in sexual resentment, the political arena remains the same: a stage where gallows are erected time and again—and a society waiting for the next blood ritual. A politics of executions.

The Iranian anthropologist Mehrdad Arabestani once described modern-day Iran as a "fatherless society." At first glance, the phrase seems paradoxical, since the Islamic Republic is based on a dense network of strict hierarchical authority. What is meant, however, is not the absence of power, but rather a crisis of its legitimacy.

Power Without Legitimacy

In many societies, power and legitimacy reinforce one another. In Iran, however, they often move in opposite directions. Authority is omnipresent—and precisely because it is everywhere, it is constantly being questioned. Political discourse is therefore marked by accusations, mutual suspicion, and competing claims to truth. Arabestani explains this dynamic using a concept from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: the "discourse of the hysteric." This refers to a social constellation in which subjects ceaselessly challenge authority while simultaneously craving it. Revolts against the figure of the ruler are rarely directed against the structure itself.

This structure also explains a distinctive feature of Iranian political culture: the fascination with hidden hands and conspiracy theories. Iranian literature has vividly portrayed this tendency in the famous satirical character "Uncle Napoleon"—created by Iraj Pezeshkzad. In the novel, *Uncle Napoleon* is convinced that every event in Iran is ultimately the work of the English; even the most trivial incidents serve as proof of this to him. And sometimes the English really are behind it—but that is not the point here.

The novel *Uncle Napoleon* is a comedy. Yet its extraordinary success points to something serious. In Iran, politics often resembles a theater stage: visible actors play their parts, while invisible forces are said to be writing the script behind the scenes. In such an atmosphere, mistrust itself becomes a method of political interpretation.

This mistrust is not entirely unfounded. Iranian history is replete with examples of foreign intervention: the division of the country into spheres of influence between Great Britain and Russia in 1907, the occupation of Iran by Allied troops during World War II, and the ouster of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953—an event widely regarded as the result of British and American influence on Iran's constitutional order.

These experiences—the consequences of which are still felt today—have given rise to a political memory in which the line between domestic politics and external manipulation is often blurred. The impression arises that there is always "a connection in the background" somewhere —and more often than not, there is some truth to that. Yet the underlying instability of Iranian politics cannot be explained by geopolitics alone. It also has to do with the complex structure of Iranian identity.

At least three historical layers overlap here: The first is Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, which remains a source of cultural pride and national identity to this day. The second is the long history of Islamic civilization, which has shaped social life for over fourteen centuries. The third is the project of modern political institutions, which has been introduced to Iran since the 19th century.

Authoritarian Temptations

These three elements do not belong to different groups or regions. They coexist within society—and often even within the individual, where the interplay of these forces creates a field of tension. Until now, every revolution in Iran has brought one of these three identity components to the fore, while the other two have been suppressed. The mantle of power shifted repeatedly from one father figure to the next; for so many years, political slogans in Iran were marked by heroic male rhetoric, a cult of martyrdom, and ideological hostility—until 2022, when Mahsa, a young Kurdish woman who had come to Tehran on a trip, died after being arrested by the morality police.

Her death sparked a wave of protests across the country. But the true significance of this movement lay not only in the protests themselves, but in the language they gave rise to. A poet

wrote on her grave in Kurdish: "You have not died. Your name will become a code." And that is exactly what happened. The Mahsa movement countered the political grammar of an authoritarian father with something much simpler and, at the same time, more radical: life.

The Mahsa movement sparked a wave of solidarity that swept across Iran—transcending all ethnic, linguistic, and social divides. In that moment, a form of femininity emerged that united women and men. The focus was no longer solely on women as a biological sex, but on the principle of the feminine as a shared experience that people can embody regardless of their gender.

Today in Iran, we are witnessing the emergence of new conflicts and divisive discourses under the banner of an increasingly hateful and highly sexualized language. In such a situation, the longing for the return of a strong father figure seems understandable to many people—a father who, through his authority, puts everyone "back in their place." It is precisely here that a dangerous temptation lies: This secret longing for a strong father is like a hidden itch beneath the skin. Society's collective unconscious has been shaped over centuries by the experience of monarchical order. Even if this tradition is denied on the surface—for instance, through the name "Republic" that the current regime bears—it remains effective in the deep political structure.

But if a father were to return to the living as a real ruler, history would repeat itself as a tragedy. To prevent this, a sacrifice must be made: the institution of the monarchy must be preserved—but solely as a symbol.

No Shirking of Responsibility

Iran's future therefore seems tied to an unfinished project: a political movement that separates status from power—the crown as a symbol of the nation and the people themselves as a living political entity that finds its voice in parliament.

In his study of Badaga society in southern India, anthropologist Frank Heidemann demonstrates how a similar structure functions. He speaks of dual sovereignty: a division between ritual power, expressed in public festivals, and symbolic status, which lies at the heart of these rituals. It is precisely because these two spheres remain independent of one another that the political system can function stably.

Recently, various videos have been circulating online that appear to be aimed at undermining Prince Reza Pahlavi's standing. However, this reputation has already been partially undermined by some of his own followers—those overzealous supporters who spread insults and vulgar abuse everywhere in his name. They are trying with all their might to see him as a second Reza Shah—something he simply is not.

Yet, precisely in the way he presents himself today, he could certainly fulfill his symbolic role. Even if—as in a video that was mockingly circulated—he fails to open a water bottle. Even if he

occasionally falls for a prank, such as the stunt by a Russian prankster duo posing as representatives of German political circles.

Such episodes may seem embarrassing, but they do not alter the fundamental point. Prince Reza Pahlavi possesses considerable symbolic capital, which has, in a sense, made him a national treasure. Yet one should not expect more from this symbolic capital than symbols are capable of delivering: to unite, to integrate, to serve as a rallying banner. Any expectation beyond that would ultimately be a shirking of the responsibility that rests with us.