# Disparity in Regional Development and its effect on Political Culture Trends: Evidence from Iran

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## Abstract:

Seeking to determine the factors driving political cultures onto distinct trajectories, researchers have considered development one of the main causes for emerging new values, which configure political culture trends along with cultural heritage as a conservative force. We argue that if the theories are correct, then they should function not only at the national level but also at other levels. We found that disparate human development levels in Iranian provinces, as a result of the concentration of resources and wealth in some regions, are contributing to the diverse levels of emerging democratic values and attitudes across the country and among provinces, which in turn has driven the country to a cultural heterogeneity in terms of these new values. Furthermore, the inconsistent case of Kurds indicates that there is still room for the cultural heritages of small worlds to impose their forces on national political culture structure.

**Keywords:** democratic values, Iranian development plans, heterogeneous political culture, small world, Kurds.

## Introduction

The Iranian modern era has experienced two political revolutions (Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911 and Islamic Revolution of 1979) and many pro-democratic movements (e.g., Nationalist movement 1951-1953, reformism movement of 1997, and Green movement of 2009-2010), heralding more freedom and liberation from authoritarianism. Despite these pro-democratic attempts with strong mass support, all of them eventually failed, and this country is still categorised as a non-democratic society.[1]

Despite numerous mass demands and popular uprisings in both revolutionary and reformist shapes, the failure in democratisation and the recurrence of authoritarianism raise questions about the underpinning mechanisms involved in the iteration and maintenance of this circle in countries like Iran. How and why cannot mass demands for democracy change the playground in favour of democracy and what dynamics underlie these developments?

There is a great body of literature explaining the democratisation process in Iran from different aspects, most of which discusses the incompatibility of Islam and democracy (for a general review of Iranian intellectuals' viewpoints on this subject, see Mirsepassi (2010); some others have adopted structural and institutional viewpoints (for recent works see Azimi, 2009 and Parsa, 2016), and few have highlighted the Iranian socio-cultural habits and behaviours (e.g., see Katouzian 2003; 2004; Pirzadeh, 2019). Employing political culture approaches, this study is another attempt to explore this issue to highlight fundamental, but often neglected, factors that underlie the paths to democratisation.

Political culture has been considered as a phenomenon establishing the political stability and legitimacy of regimes (Almond & Verba, 1963; Eckstein, 1966; Ruck et al., 2020), influencing citizens'

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1 According to the Freedom House's annual report (2020) on political rights and civil liberties, the aggregate freedom score for Iran is 17 out of 100, which puts this country in the "not free" category: https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2020

political behaviour and orientations (Flanagan & Lee, 2003), and also, driving changes in regimes' institutions (Welzel, 2020). In this way, the Democratic Political Culture (DPC) is considered as a prerequisite condition toward democratisation (Inglehar & Welzel, 2005) and, in turn, socio-economic development is responsible for its emergence and prevalence in every society (Welzel, 2014). On the other hand, other researchers highlight the effect of cultural heritage, which can strengthen or resist the newly emerged values and attitudes at the macro-scale of civilization (Huntington, 1996; Inglehart et al., 2003) and small worlds within nation-states (Henderson, 2004; Hepburn, 2010). Therefore, the democratic political culture that is responsible for the democratisation procedure originates from the driving forces of development and tradition or their combination.

In this study, this knowledge has been utilised to assess those factors that may exert influence on DPC, which, in turn, are involved in deviating the democratisation process of contemporary Iran. But we would argue that studies of political culture, relying on aggregate national mean scores to appraise the wholeness of the country and using nation-states as the unit of analysis, regularly ignore or underestimate the cultural dynamics and heterogeneities of societies. As the experience of Iran (and possibly many other developing countries) shows, strong economic gaps and unequal development across the country accumulated over the course of more than one hundred years cannot simply be covered by and reduced to national mean scores of GDP or HDI. Thus, since the cross-national variations of development that result in disparity in DPC and, similarly, biased development planning or inequality are likely to cause variation in DPC within a country. Furthermore, many nations including Iran comprise more than one ethnic group which each can function as small worlds in the national cultural context. These communities may contain strong cultural heritage that allows them to resist and curb or stimulate and strengthen every emerging value and attitude. That is, they may have the capability of causing bias in national trends of political cultures. As the principal aim of this article, we analyse these issues to explore the deeper layer of political culture developments and to create a more realistic image of the country in terms of political culture. In this way, a cross-sectional study has been conducted to examine the impact of provincial development and the potential of ethno-religious communities on variation in political culture across the country. More precisely, the following questions are addressed: Does the HDI and its components in Iranian provinces influence their DPC? Does ethnic cultural heritage really matter? Do different Iranian ethnic groups report a significantly different DPC?

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. In a first step, we review the modern history of Iran, emphasising the centralisation process and its consequences on Iranian economic development. Next, the relevant literature of political culture as the prerequisite condition toward democracy is reviewed and then, hypotheses are formulated. In the subsequent section, using data from the fifth World Values Survey (2005-2009), the measures and variables to test the hypotheses are described. Finally, we present our findings and conclusions, along with their implications.

## State building, rentier system and persistent regional inequality in multi-ethnic Iran

Iran is a predominantly Muslim country with a majority of Shiite (90%) and a minority of Sunni Muslims (10%) mainly residing in the border provinces of Sistan and Balouchistan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan, and Golestan. There are also some minority religious groups such as Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Bahais, which approximately comprise 2% of the total population according to some sources (Sanasarian, 2000, p. 9). Furthermore, Iran is a multi-ethnic country including Persians (61%), Azeris and Turkmens (18%), Kurds (10%), Lurs (6%) and other ethnicities (5%) with small population numbers.[2]

2 http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/iran/
Although there are no formal statistics on the number of different ethnic and religion groups, since the locations of ethnic groups across the Iran map are historically well known, researchers make their calculations based on the population of cities and provinces. Below are two other databases which have provided these types of data:
http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/index.shtml
https://chronicle.fanack.com/iran/population/#Minorities

Before and during the Turkish (Azeri) Qajar (1796-1925) Dynasty, Iran was a decentralised government under which the various territories called “Emarat” were enjoying almost independent political and economic authority in their regions. In return for annual tribute payments, these regional authorities were formally recognised by the King, and traditionally a balance of power had been established and institutionalised between the local rulers and the King (Amirahmadi, 1986).

In 1925, the Qajar dynasty was abolished, and the Pahlavi era began. The first Pahlavi king, Reza Shah, adopted completely different policies inconsistent with Iranian history to westernise and modernise the society. During his reign, the political and power structure effectively transformed into a centralised one (Amanat, 2017, pp. 424-431). Overthrowing the semi-independent Emarats, he broke down the borders of regions and designed smaller new sub-state administrative units called Ostan (province) in the new bureaucratic system (Amirahmadi, 1986). Furthermore, new provincial governors were appointed directly by the Shah, and decision-making systems and political power were completely transferred to Tehran (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 71). The system is still in place, although the governor is appointed by the executive power. Therefore, the economic surplus was transferred in favour of the centre without the bargaining power of former regional powers (Amirahmadi, 1986). Furthermore, he established a modern army, developed a national ideology based on Persian language and archaism, banned local clothes and traditions, and even replaced the names of local areas with fake Persian ones to reinforce the Persian identity and unify the country culturally and politically (Abrahamian, 2008, pp. 77-87; Amirahmadi, 1986; Keddie, 1988).

Under the reign of the second Pahlavi - Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) - although there was some alleviation of pressures on local customs, all centralising policies continued intensely and ethnic political demands were met with bloody repression (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 112).

Thanks to abundant and increasing oil revenues, during this period the state achieved indisputable dominance in the power structure and the king ruled over the nation independent of any local powers and social classes; furthermore, the rentier revenues motivated ambitious modernisation and development plans (Skocpol, 1982). In 1963, the king launched a major socio-economic project called the "White Revolution" with the main objective of transferring ownership of agricultural lands from major landowners to peasants. Under this program, landowners had to relinquish their land and in return receive state-owned industrial shares. In addition to leaving the left-hand opponents empty-handed and increasing his popularity, Shah succeeded in eliminating the last local power bases in favour of a centralised bureaucracy. With this, hundreds of thousands of peasants were directly connected to the state bureaucracy and government authority extended even to the most remote villages (Gelvin, 2011, pp. 252-253). Nevertheless, the oil revenues encumbered the regime with the common problem of bias in distributing its windfall revenues. The rentier governments tend to allocate their resources in line with familial, racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations to establish and maintain a patronage system (Schwarz, 2008). Since the ethnic regions in Iran are located in non-central areas, the bias in the distribution led to a territorial aspect; such that the predominantly Persian and Shiite centre of Iran benefited much more of the oil revenues and state investment compared to the ethnic areas. Aghajanian (1983) illustrated the institutionalisation of these inequalities by a complicated index of occupational structure, the rate of urbanisation, access to energy, health, and educational facilities, and also the level of poverty. For instance, in 1976, while the percentage of agricultural sector workers in the central regions (Persian provinces) was 13.8 and the rate of urbanisation was 79.6 percent, the corresponding figures for Balouchistan, a non-Persian Sunni province in the south-east of the country, were 57.1 percent and 24.5 percent and for Kurdistan, a Sunni-Kurdish province, were 51.6 percent and 24.2 percent. Moreover, 80.7 percent had access to electricity in central areas compared to 12.4 and 19.5 percent in Baluchistan and Kurdistan, respectively (Aghajanian, 1983).

In post-revolutionary Iran (1979), the integration of the Twelver Shiite ideology into the former political structure, religious minorities, and non-Shiite areas came under increasing pressure, and most hopes were quickly crushed by the onset of hostility and the commencement of the invasion of ethnic groups who had demanded autonomy for their regions by the newly established central government.

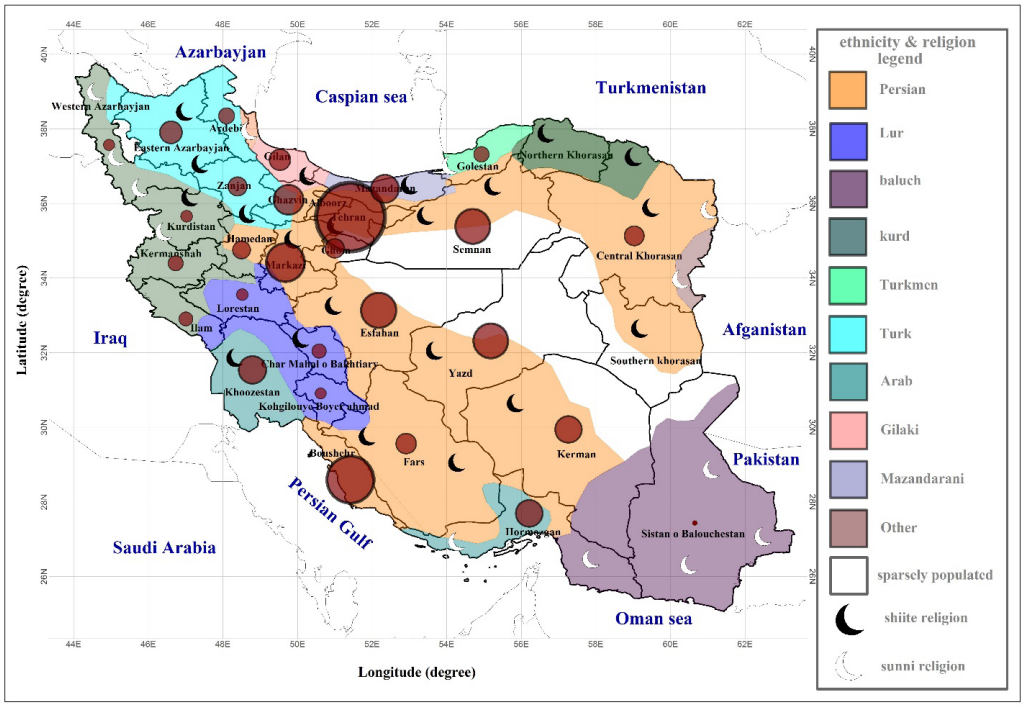



**Figure 1:** Ethnic and religious geography of Iran and provincial per capita GDP
*Source:* The cartographic is based on the simplification of the ethnic and religion infographs (Izady, 2016; 2018). The size of the circles represents the provincial GDP statistics, for which data has been retrieved from the Statistical Center of Iran: https://www.amar.org.ir/

Figure 2 demonstrates that the further the provinces get from the ideological bases of the government ethnically and religiously, the less possible it is for them to enjoy a fair portion of the GDP without oil. Except for East Azerbaijan, a Shiite-Turkish province, and Gilan, a Shiite-Gilak province, the rest of the 16 top provinces are mainly Shiite-Persian. The Turkish-Shiite provinces occupy the middle of the figure. As observed, Sistan and Balouchistan, a mainly Sunni-Balouch province, is placed at the end of the figure. Kurds (Kurdistan, Ilam, West Azerbaijan, and Kermanshah) and Lurs (Kohgiluyeh, Luristan, and Chaharmahal) constitute the other provinces that are placed at the right end of the figure.

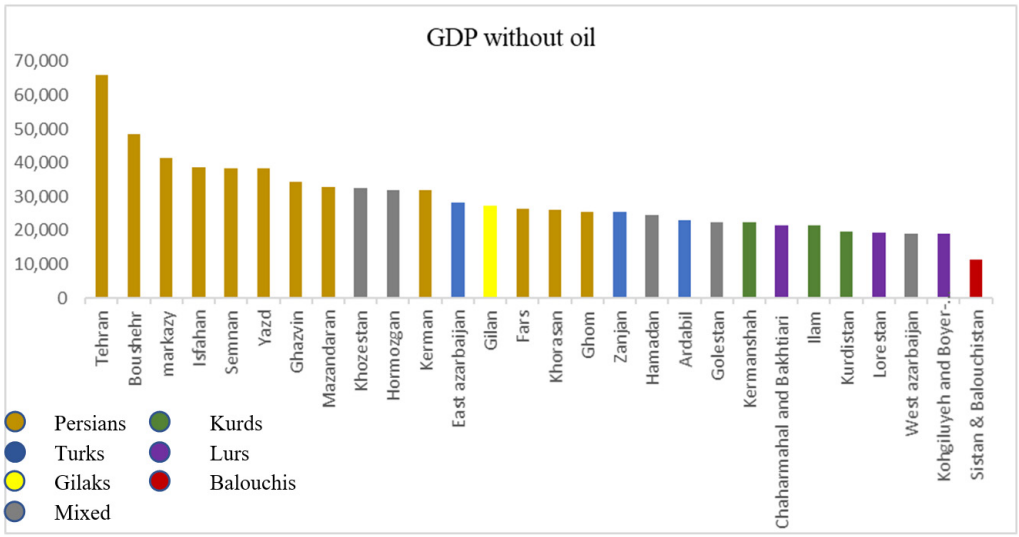



**Figure 2:** Iranian provinces, GDP per capita without oil, 2007 (thousands rials)
*Source:* Statistical Center of Iran (in Persian), https://www.amar.org.ir/

In general, the formation of a modern state with Persian domination and Shiite ideology post-revolution, as well as political centralism, weakness of democratic mechanisms, and finally, the concentration of industries and other revenue sources in the central Persian-Shiite regions have caused persistent inequality and an economic gap among various regions and provinces with different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

In the next section, theories concerning the effects of economic gaps and ethnic diversity in directing political culture are discussed.

## Literature review

### *What influences the trajectories of political culture in nonhomogeneous societies?*

There has been ongoing debate about political culture diversity, its origins, and its impact on political systems in academic and policy circles. The concept was first introduced following World War II and originated from curiosity about differences among political systems around the world, especially the gap between the free world and the rest (Gendzel, 1997). Trying to distinguish the term from temporary political views, public opinions, and even political ideologies, scholars emphasise deep beliefs and attitudes toward policy and government. Almond (1956) defined political culture as "a particular pattern of orientations to political action" and Pye (1968) referred to it as "the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process" (1968, p. 218). Political culture is a key aspect of a nation's collective mentality that structures people's political orientations and behaviour (Elazar, 1994). Therefore, political culture refers to ingrained ideas, beliefs, values, and orientations toward the policy, political phenomena, and decision-making processes. These orientations can determine the legitimate type of political system and leave profound effects on the nation's political trends.

Almond and Verba (1963) were the first to theorise the concept and discern a relationship between political cultures and political structures. As they posit, political cultures can be classified into three ideal types of parochial, subject, and participant, which respectively are congruent orientations in the traditional, centralised authoritarian, and democratic political systems. In general, every regime's stability depends on compliance between their authority patterns and orientations of

ordinary people toward political objects (1963, pp. 24-26); particularly, democracies need “civic culture" as an appropriate combination of participant and subject orientations to flourish. In this view, the supply and consolidation of democracy in authoritarian regimes have been attributed to the cultural change toward democracy, especially emerging values and attitudes associating with democracy. Conversely, the supply of democracy without cultural preparedness would lead to inefficiency and institutional failure. Subsequent scholars went further and tried to track the origins of these political values. Some researchers have highlighted the role of institutions in the process of socialisation. In this way, democratic institutions are considered to be responsible for the instruction and dissemination of democratic values and attitudes in society (Jackman & Miller, 1998; Muller & Seligson, 1994; Rustow, 1970). Many others emphasise the potential specific characteristics of religions and cultures, which have consistency with attitudes toward democracy or, conversely, allow societies to be immune from new values; i.g., the positive effect of Christianity and negative impact of Islam and Confucianism (Huntington, 1996, pp. 300-310), Protestantism versus Islam and Catholicism (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, pp. 61-65; Lipset, 1994), and the influence of British colonial heritage (Clague et al., 2001; Lee & Paine, 2019).

Here, we focus on two main schools (modernisation theory and the small world approach) that introduce factors and mechanisms which are responsible for value and attitude variations or transformations. They provide insights into the various trajectories of the political culture that societies take. Although, they emphasise different factors and existential conditions engaging in creating variation inter and intra-country, but are useful to identify the main cultural gaps and dynamics within societies, especially ethnically and economically divided ones such as Iran.

## DPC and modernisation theory

Initially, from a predominantly structural viewpoint Lipset (1959) drew a relationship between democracy and economic development. According to him, the democratisation process and consolidation of democracy are more likely in developed countries. He defined economic development as wealth, industrialisation, urbanisation, and education.

Confirming this relationship, subsequent studies of modernisation theory introduced more mechanisms like the expansion of the middle class, reducing class conflict, and more access to education and media, through which socio-economic development exerts its force on democracy (Diamond, 1993a; Lipset et al., 1993) and also highlighted human development parameters as a measure of wellbeing rather than economic growth (Diamond, 1992). Furthermore, modernisation theory has shown that cultural change in societies exposed to socio-economic development is inevitable (Dalton, 2013; Diamond, 1999, p. 18; Lerner, 1958). Subsequent researchers have focussed on these new emerging democratic values and attitudes as the factor directing societies toward democratisation.

Ronald Inglehart and his colleagues (2000; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2009; 2010), employing longitudinal data throughout the world, proposed an altered thesis of the modernisation theory called human development and emphasised the significance of civil values on the transition toward democracy. He argues that values relevant to democracy emerge under the influence of the emancipating forces of development. Human development theory suggests that increasing socioeconomic resources reduce individuals’ restrictions, advance their autonomy financially and communicationally, increase individuals' access to information and education, and promote their existential security. This process, in turn, drives them to self-expression values "that emphasize human emancipation, giving liberty priority over discipline, diversity over conformity and autonomy over authority" (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, pp. 151-152). This cultural shift makes it critical for people to pursue their political and civil rights, and also puts pressure on institutions to recognise private and public liberties. Ultimately, these new ethos and values encourage people to organise and initiate collective actions, putting authoritarian regimes under pressure and pushing society toward a democratic one. In a recent attempt, Welzel (2013; 2014) proposes the theory of emancipation, reaffirming the significance of values and attitudes originated from modernisation for a democratic

transition. He describes modernisation as the process of empowerment, through which the lives of ordinary people are improved and their choices expanded. In other words, modernisation provides people with more action resources including intellectual resources (knowledge, skills, and information), connective resources (networks of exchange and contact interfaces), and material resources (equipment, tools, and income). In his view, the capability of people to exercise their freedoms is a direct reflection of their available resources, and so people with more resources enjoy more freedom; in the sense that they are freer to pursue what is valuable to them (2013, p. 46). So, the causal pattern he draws is as follows: development provides more action resources, then enjoying resources of action gives rise to emancipative values. Alternatively, resources of action and emancipative values give rise to citizenship rights (2013, pp. 167-168). He insists that the converse path which institutionalist defend, that is, citizenship rights affect either development or emancipative values, is not plausible (2019). In this way, it is emancipative values that become the resource of collective actions, which shape more liberation-oriented social movements. The more people carry these values in society, the more people connect to each other, and the more social movements arise. Hence, these values have more to do with social movements than civil rights and even mere resources of action (pp. 240-246).

Totally, modernisation theory considers the DPC an intervening factor originated by development, which in turn motivates demands for democracy. Providing substantial evidence confirming the relationship between development and DPC, this approach has played a great role in explaining the democratisation process from a cultural viewpoint.

Although the modernisation theories enjoy strong empirical supports and the mechanisms they introduce are plausible, almost all results have been obtained from national level statistics and cross-national comparison studies, so complexities and dynamics within countries are not considered. One problem with such studies is that they ignore demographic, political, cultural, and economic diversities within societies that cannot be simply covered by national-level averages. This approach holds a non-mentioned premise that economic development is an inclusive process that diffuses throughout the country and covers all the nation-state equally. Put differently, most research, focusing on the national level, associates the level of economic development (e.g., GDP) to the political culture mean scores. This is especially problematic in some developing and non-democratic regimes like Iran that have experienced uneven regional development and core-periphery systems. Snyder (2001) illustrates how national-level mean data can be illusory, concealing gaps and differentiations across a country, and leading to “Mean-Spirited analysis”, which “inappropriately employs highly aggregated data to code cases”. Combining and averaging all of these potential differences attenuates the reliability of mean numbers to represent societies in terms of both development and political culture.

On the other hand, the strong logic of emancipation through access to more action resources can be applied at other levels (Welzel, 2013, p. 95). This relationship is close to what Sayer (1992) calls necessary relation, that is, “the particular ways-of-acting or mechanisms exist necessarily in virtue of their object’s nature. Nature or constitution of an object and its causal powers are internally or necessarily related” (p. 105). In other words, according to the causal relationship that modernisation theory considers, development can and should unavoidably influence values and attitudes at every level, so the diverse levels of development should bring about different value changes. Therefore, if part of the differences in emerged democratic values around the world is the result of the differentiation in the countries’ level of socio-economic development, then constant and stable intra-country differences in development levels, like what Iran has experienced, should lead to value divergence and cultural heterogeneity within countries. In this way, natural characteristics, diverse views of sovereignty, written and unwritten racial, religious laws, and political and economic policies may result in different developmental consequences for regions within countries; and thus, it may have implications on the nation-states' political culture structure.

## Cultural heritages of small worlds

From the very beginning of the introduction to modern political and social studies, the political culture term has had a two-sided basis: national level measuring and cross-country comparisons. In this regard, the potential and impact of local communities, ethnic and religious groups, immigrants, and diverse economic contexts have been marginalised in political culture literature and research. Critics believe that the lack of attention to intra-country diversities cannot be interpreted as homogeneity and consistency in the political culture of societies and also can not imply the lack of regional potential for nurturing their own political culture (Henderson, 2004; Silver & Dowley, 2000). Despite the dominance of national-level studies, there have been perspectives emphasising intra-country regions and communities as the sources of producing independent political culture. As one of the first to focus on this level, Elazar (1966; 1994) found three different types of political culture among residents of the United States called moral, individual, and traditional. These three types of political culture are based on the immigrant origins of its inhabitants, who have carried with them the basic attitudes and principles of the origins into the destination regions and have preserved them for generations. According to him, American national political culture is a combination of these three distinct types of political culture from diverse geographical origins but distributed throughout the United States by persistent migration. Some other scholars have emphasised the potential of "small worlds" to shape the political culture (Elkins & Simeon, 1980; Henderson, 2004; Hepburn, 2010; Simeon & Elkins, 1974). In an ongoing debate, they believe that the sub-national units have a significant role in the formation of political culture diversity in the societies. These small worlds refer to sub-national state units, such as provinces and states, as well as demographic groups such as ethnic groups and immigrants. Therefore, two rival approaches emerged to explain the factors involved in the socialisation process in these small worlds. First, the institution-based approach attributes sub-national differences of political cultures to the long-run influences of local political institutions; the second, the “group-based” approach insists on the different socio-economic contexts of the regions as the main factor which brings about diversity in the values and attitudes (Henderson, 2010). In this view, the heterogeneous political culture within nations originates from either different economic situations or ethnic and immigrant residential concentrations.

In recent decades, criticising national-level and cross-national comparisons of political culture, identity politics studies have emphasised particular values and beliefs of marginalised groups, including ethnic and racial groups, sexual groups, environmentalists, youth, and other interest groups. According to this perspective, these sub-population groups provide the possibility of polarisation, contention, and conflicts within the country (Wiarda, 2014, pp. 147-149). These groups, as Huntington (2004) puts it, can pose a serious threat to cultural cohesion and canonical values of societies and as a whole to what is considered as a nation; e.g., chaos and disintegration in Yugoslavia, former Soviet and the U.S. in 1860 are viewed as the results of these gaps.

In sum, employing available national data and conducting cross-national research, the mainstream of political culture has illustrated a strong linkage between socioeconomic development and the emergence and growth of values related to democracy. On the other hand, many scholars are not rejecting the influence of development forces, but criticising the national mean data and giving credence to the communities and regions as powerful units that can generate their own ethos and principles. They believe there is a great deal of diversity in sub-national divisions coming from either the different socio-economic contexts of regions or the unique cultural and religious potential of residents. Accordingly, since Iran is a developing mosaic country with a centre-periphery economy, both factors can influence and bias its DPC as an essential condition toward democratisation; an issue which is examined in the next section.

## Research hypotheses and questions

As previously explained, differences in the levels of development, affect the rate of emerging values associated with democracy across the world in a particularly effective way. On account of specific

policies and planning of successive regimes, disparities in the development levels of the provinces of Iran have continued over a long period of time, and differences have relatively been stabled. Here, we employ the human development index to measure of these disparities. Human development is attributed to a condition in which human wellbeing, the richness of human life, and enjoying more opportunities and choices are provided (UNDP, 1990). This approach to development goes beyond mere economic growth and concentrates on the capability of individuals to advance their goals, enhance their agency and pursue what they value (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). Both because of the theoretical emphasis on the significance of human empowerment in directing values and because oil and other natural resources extracted in certain provinces can artificially raise their GDP, using the inclusive human development index better depicts the development situation of provinces. From this perspective, we examine whether the human development level in sub-state units (Iranian provinces) can cause the same effect and distinguish these units in terms of DPC.

Moreover, we investigate whether there are differences among ethnic groups' DPC and if they can affect the national political culture trend to create heterogeneity. Hence, the two research questions of this study are as follows:

- Does the HDI and its components in Iranian provinces influence their DPC?
- Does ethnic cultural heritage really matter? Do different Iranian ethnic groups report a significantly different DPC?

## Methodology

### *Research design*

As for most studies on sub-national regions, investigating relationships is statistically problematic. The primary purposes of most surveys related to political values conducted by international institutions are national-level analyses and cross-national comparisons, and so they systematically fail to cover and represent the sub-national units. Another problem comes from the limitation in the number of cases that restrict the analysis to existing instances. Furthermore, as the experience of Iran shows, there might be manipulation of the sub-state boundaries due to administrative, political, and economical purposes. Both recent regimes' policies have led to a gradual rise in the number of provinces which have become detached from their historical ethnic identity. Not only were large units (Emarats) torn into small pieces, but in some cases even the newly established provinces crossed the geographical boundaries of ethnic communities; a situation that makes it hard to designate the precise identity of each province ethnically and religiously. Finally, lack of interest in most governments to collect data at the ethnic community level, including development levels, has resulted in a serious shortage of reliable data throughout multi-ethnic societies.

Taking all of these concerns into account, to follow up on the questions raised, a dual strategy was adopted to investigate the differences in sub-national units: First, measuring the relationship between development and democratic values at the provincial level, regardless of their ethnic context. The provinces are the second-level administrative division in the unitary country of Iran, which comprise several municipalities and are managed by a governor, appointed by the executive power. Second, exploring ethnic groups in terms of the emerged democratic values regardless of provincial divisions. Therefore, at first, it is diagnosed whether provincial DPCs are responding to their levels of development pro-rata and, if so, how effective the development is. To examine the second question, and to discover the ethnic heritage capabilities to affect the trajectory, the DPC differences among ethnic communities are analysed.

The main independent variable in the analyses is the human development index, whose data were obtained from the *Office for Planning and Macroeconomics Management of Presidential Deputyship for Planning and Strategic Monitoring*.[3] Although provincial differences in human development have been quite constant over a relatively long time, to avoid issues of exogeneity, data from two years

3 Recently merged with the Planning and Budget Organization: http://www.mporg.ir/

before the survey, i.e., 2005 were employed.

To construct the democratic political culture model, data from the World Value Survey (WVS) Wave 5 (2005-2009) was employed. This survey was conducted in Iran with a sample size of 2,667 respondents in 2007 and is the most recent and the only reliable dataset on the values and attitudes of Iranians. Fortunately, the WVS dataset contains demographic information including respondents' ethnic origin and their province of residence, which allows for implementing comparative tests. However, due to low sample sizes, six provinces including Ilam, Bushehr, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, Semnan, Kohgiluyeh, and Boyer-Ahmad, and Yazd were excluded from the analyses. Moreover, the WVS data for the Khorasan province, which recently split into three provinces of South, North, and Razavi Khorasan, merged into one case named Khorasan due to common historical roots, as well as adapting to HDI data.

According to the Human Development theory, as people's socio-economic conditions improve, some changes in cultural beliefs emerge. These changes are inclined toward democratic attitudes and beliefs, and as the development process moves forward, there is a shift from materialistic and survival values to post-materialist values and from giving priority to survival needs toward free choice, tolerance, gender equality, environmental concerns, and interpersonal trust (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, pp. 48-71).

Although Inglehart and Welzel employ tolerance as one of the sub-indexes of DPC, it was replaced with the attitude toward democracy index in this study since the tolerance index, which includes more acceptance of homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, and divorce is not a useful discriminatory criterion in Islamic societies, where rejecting these items is an essential and inseparable part of the faith and people have to openly declare their disagreement with these attitudes. Furthermore, the index of attitude toward democracy is regularly used as a benchmark for measuring DPC (Tessler, 2002; 2008; 2012) in Middle Eastern countries. Consequently, the DPC model consists of four indexes: post-materialistic values, autonomy, gender equality, and democratic attitudes.[4]

4 The DPC measurement model along with all details have been provided in the appendix.

**Table 1:** Items and sub-indexes of the DPC and HDI indexes

| Indexes | Variables | Eigenvalue | Cronbach's Alpha |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender Equality** | When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women | 2.481 | 0.767 |
| | Men make better political leaders than women do | | |
| | University education is more important for a boy than for a girl | | |
| | Men make better business executives than women do | | |
| **Post-materialism Values** | Giving priority to<br>Say in government vs. order and stable prices.<br>Say in local affairs vs. strong defense and fighting crime.<br>Protecting freedom of speech vs. order and stable prices | | Calculated in previous studies (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) |
| **Independence** | Giving priority to independence vs. faith, obedience and authority | | Calculated in previous studies (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) |
| **Attitude to Democracy** | Having a strong leader | 2.303 | 0.733 |
| | Having the army rule | | |
| | Having a democratic political system | | |
| | Importance of Democracy | | |
| **DPC** | Post-materialism Values | 2.533 | 0.627 |
| | Independence | | |
| | Gender Equality | | |
| | Attitude to Democracy | | |
| **Human Development Index (HDI)** | Income Per Capita | 2.539 | 0.873 |
| | Education | | |
| | Life Expectancy | | |

*Source:* own calculations, based on WVS data, Wave 5 (2005-2009)
**Note:** Cronbach's alpha was used to calculate the internal consistency coefficients of the items included in the DPC model and its sub-indexes as well as the HDI components. The other column lists the Eigenvalues associated with each factor in Exploratory Factor Analysis.

Table 2 presents the rankings and ratings of the provinces' scores for HDI, DPC, and its sub-indexes. Although there is a correspondence between the rankings of DPC and human development in several provinces, an evident gap was observed between the rankings of the first two cases in the DPC list. Assessing the DPC scores for outliers, it was observed that two cases, Kurdistan and Zanjan, are outlier cases.

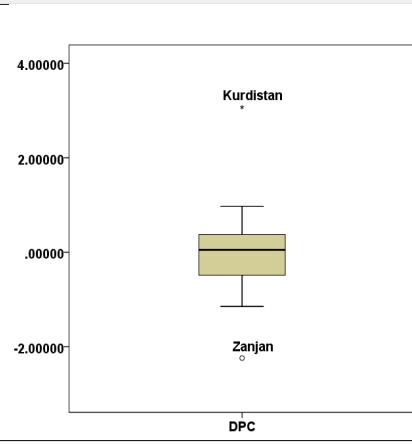
**Table 2:** HDI and DPC Ranks and the ethnic and religious composition of provinces

| Provinces | HDI | HDI Rank | DPC Rank | Main Ethnicity Group | Main Religious Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tehran | 0.796 | 1 | 3 | Persian | Shiite |
| Isfahan | 0.765 | 2 | 10 | Persian | Shiite |
| Qazvin | 0.765 | 3 | 15 | Persian | Shiite |
| Gilan | 0.753 | 4 | 6 | Gilak | Shiite |
| Fars | 0.747 | 5 | 12 | Persian | Shiite |
| Khuzestan | 0.738 | 6 | 7 | Mixed: Arabs, Persians, and Lurs | Shiite |
| Mazandaran | 0.738 | 7 | 4 | Mazany-Persian | Shiite |
| Markazy | 0.734 | 8 | 8 | Persian | Shiite |
| Qom | 0.733 | 9 | 16 | Persian | Shiite |
| Golestan | 0.726 | 10 | 14 | Mixed: Turkman-Mazani | Mixed: Shiite- Sunni |
| Khorasan | 0.723 | 11 | 19 | Persian | Shiite |
| Kerman | 0.721 | 12 | 11 | Persian | Shiite |
| Hormozgan | 0.718 | 13 | 21 | Hormozi- Persian-Arab | Mixed: Shiite -Sunni |
| East Azerbaijan | 0.716 | 14 | 13 | Turk | Shiite |
| Zanjan | 0.712 | 15 | 22 | Turk | Shiite |
| Hamadan | 0.710 | 16 | 18 | Persian- Turk | Shiite |
| Kermanshah | 0.708 | 17 | 2 | Kurd | Mixed: Sunni - Shiite |
| Ardabil | 0.703 | 18 | 17 | Turk | Shiite |
| Lorestan | 0.703 | 19 | 9 | Lur | Shiite |
| West Azerbaijan | 0.699 | 20 | 5 | Mixed: Kurd- Turk | Mixed: Sunni - Shiite |
| Kurdistan | 0.667 | 21 | 1 | Kurd | Sunni |
| Sistan and Baluchestan | 0.652 | 22 | 20 | Balouch | Sunni |

*Source:* own calculations, based on WVS data, Wave 5 (2005-2009) and also, Planning and Budget Organization: http://www.mporg.ir/

Also, Kermanshah, which ranks second on the DPC list, is a problematic case. Due to sharing a similar ethnic and development background with the first province on the list, it was treated as an outlier case. Therefore, all three cases were temporarily excluded from the study but would be expounded upon in the subsequent stage. Consequently, regression analysis is based on 19 provinces.

**Table 3:** Provinces with the lowest and highest DPC scores and outlier cases

| Extreme Values | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | PROVINCES | Value | |
| DPC | Highest | 1 | Kurdistan | 3.06853 |  |
| | | 2 | Kermanshah | .97171 | |
| | | 3 | Tehran | .76616 | |
| | | 4 | Mazandaran | .71277 | |
| | | 5 | West Azerbaijan | .48092 | |
| | Lowest | 1 | Zanjan | -2.24018 | |
| | | 2 | Hormozgan | -1.14667 | |
| | | 3 | Sistan and balouchistan | -1.13852 | |
| | | 4 | Khorasan | -.56214 | |
| | | 5 | Hamadan | -.55146 | |



*Source:* own calculations, based on WVS data, Wave 5 (2005-2009).
**Note:** The table shows the highest and lowest rankings of provinces in terms of DPC scores. The boxplot depicts the DPC mean scores distribution: The horizontal line in the middle of the box denotes the median; the box comprises the middle 50% of observations; upper and lower whiskers represent the largest and smallest observed values; the provinces of Zanjan as a lower outlier case (more than 1.5 times of lower quartile) and Kurdistan as an extreme upper outlier case (more than 3 times of upper quartile).

## HDI and DPC at provincial level

A linear regression model (OLS) was used to test whether the HDI and its components as independent variables affect the DPC as a dependent variable at the provincial level. According to the findings (Model 1), HDI has a positive effect on the DPC index ($\beta = 2.970$), which indicates a higher level of human development, correlates with a higher level of DPC, i.e., there is a relatively strong correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.530$) in which the variance in human development explains 28 percent of the variance in DPC. In the next step, human development components were checked to find out if there is a relationship between them and DPC. To avoid multicollinearity, only one independent variable was included in the model at a time.

**Table 4:** Regression analyses of human development and DPC

| *Independent variables* | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *HDI* | 2.970<br>(1.151)<br>0.019 | | | |
| *Income per capita* | | 5.672<br>(2.358)<br>0.028 | | |
| *Education* | | | 7.351<br>(4.222)<br>0.100 | |
| *Life Expectancy* | | | | 11.100<br>(3.870)<br>0.011 |
| *Constant* | -6.606<br>(2.522)<br>0.018 | -3.603<br>(1.459)<br>0.024 | -6.333<br>(3.579)<br>0.095 | -8.154<br>(2.808)<br>0.010 |
| *r* | 0.530 | 0.504 | 0.389 | 0.571 |
| *r2* | 0.281 | 0.254 | 0.151 | 0.326 |

*Source:* own calculation.
**Note:** The table presents the unstandardised regression coefficients, standard errors (in parentheses), level of significance (in italic), correlation (Pearson's' r), and coefficients of determination (r2).

Apart from education, the other dimensions of HDI, including income per capita and life expectancy were found to be significant predictors of DPC by positive correlations of (0.50) and (0.57), respectively. Thus, as provinces' income per capita and higher life expectancy increase, so does the level of democratic values and attitudes. These results provide empirical support for the assertion that there is a causal nexus between human development and DPC, such that provinces with higher levels of human development tend to also have higher levels of DPC.

The results indicate that even at lower levels development can affect the political culture and drive the sub-national units toward democratic types to a certain extent. In other words, similarly to the nation-state level, the equilibrium between development and democratic values and attitudes operates at lower levels. In this way, democratic values are more likely to emerge in more developed sub-national units. Eventually, there seems to be a necessary relation between development and the emergence of democratic values, so that the essence of development strongly impacts the configuration of the national political culture. In addition, and more importantly, the regional inequality within a country can establish a heterogeneous political culture and cause cultural disintegration. Regardless of the official claims, as well as the slogans about national unity, governments' regional development policies appear to have a greater impact on the homogeneity and/or heterogeneity of the nation's political culture.

As mentioned, there has been an economic gap among various provinces created through regional biased development planning and policies, and while some regions have substantially benefited, others have been excluded or left out of the opportunities and privileges. The further this process goes, the deeper the gap becomes. As the results show, this economic gap has led to a disparity in the regions' political culture, and the deeper the objective inequality, the greater the subjective gap. In this way, as the experience of Iran indicates, inequality not only divides a country economically but also culturally. It is not surprising that Tehran as the most developed city of Iran and a few other economically advanced cities are the centres of pro-democracy demonstrations and protest rallies against the regime. In contrast, there are some other deprived areas and poor communities whose members are struggling to meet basic survival needs such as food, housing, drinking water, etc. They are either almost silent or their protesting voices and reactions are not the ones that make the world satisfied.

## Ethnic or national political culture

As mentioned, theoretically, ethnic and religious diversity can be a potential source of difference in political culture. There can be small worlds that nurture their own values and attitudes and resist national trends. Therefore, the WVS dataset was analysed based on ethnicity, and five main Iranian ethnic groups were compared in terms of all DPC indices to find probable differences between them. This issue is also doubly important because there were three outlier provinces in the previous stage that may have originated from ethnic backgrounds.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of ethnicity on the DPC. The analysis of variance shows that the effect of ethnicity on the DPC is significant, $F(4, 2530) = 18.27$, $p=.000$). Subsequent Post-hoc comparisons using the Scheffe HSD test revealed that the Kurds ($M = .552$, $SD = 1.167$) had a significantly higher average score on the measure of DPC than all other ethnic groups, and except for a significant difference between Persians and Turks, the other pairwise comparisons between five main ethnic groups show no significant differences. Likewise, there are two identified subsets of ethnic groups with categories of Kurds in a subset of its own and other ones in another subset, in which their mean scores of DPC are not different from each other ($p=.207<\alpha=.05$). Overall, these results show a gap between the Kurds and other Iranian ethnic groups in terms of DPC and also a significantly higher difference of Persians compared to Turks. This recent difference may justify the situation of Zanjan as an outlier; since the Turkish community, which Zanjan belongs to, obtains the lowest DPC score. As the Kurdish area of Iran is almost the most underdeveloped region of the country, it was theoretically expected to rank lowest in the DPC index but stood at the top. The Kurdish area stretches across four provinces including Kurdistan, Kermanshah, West Azarbaijan, and Ilam, in which all four provinces share the common trend in the DPC scores; such that the two first with high scores of DPC were excluded as outliers in OLS regression, while the third one was expected to rank low due to its low HDI score but ranked fifth in the DPC index.

**Table 5:** Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard errors of DPC scores in main Iranian ethnic groups

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Persian | 1526 | -.006 | .993 | .025 | -.056 | .043 |
| Lur | 138 | -.040 | .960 | .081 | -.202 | .121 |
| Gilak | 120 | .064 | .911 | .083 | -.100 | .229 |
| Kurd | 185 | .552 | 1.167 | .086 | .383 | .721 |
| Turk | 566 | -.168 | .920 | .039 | -.244 | -.0915 |

*Source:* own calculation, based on WVS data, Wave 5 (2005-2009)

**Table 6:** Ethnicity effect on DPC and test for homogeneity of ethnic groups

| | Mean differences and significance level | | | | | Homogeneous subsets alpha = 0.05 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnic Groups | Kurds | Persians | Lurs | Gilaks | Turks | 1 | 2 |
| Kurds | 0 | .56* | .59* | .49* | .72* | | .552 |
| Sig. | | (.000) | (.000) | (.001) | (.000) | | |
| Persians | | 0 | .034 | -.070 | .16* | -.006 | |
| Sig. | | | (.997) | (.967) | (.026) | | |
| Lurs | | | 0 | -.10 | .13 | -.040 | |
| Sig. | | | | (.949) | (.763) | | |
| Gilaks | | | | 0 | .23 | .064 | |
| Sig. | | | | | (.243) | | |
| Turks | | | | | 0 | -.168 | |
| Sig. | | | | | | .207 | 1.000 |

*Source:* own calculation, based on WVS data, Wave 5 (2005-2009)
**Note:** Post-hoc comparisons between ethnic groups using Scheffe. * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level. Homogeneous subsets of groups are displayed.

As the northerly part of the Kurdish region is a Sunni-populated area, the data were explored to determine the impact of denominational affiliations in DPC's scores, both among the Kurds and among the entire population without the Kurds. In this regard, paired T-tests were applied to compare all DPC sub-index scores in possible differentiation points. Such comparisons allow inconsistencies in sub-indexes to be detected. At the initial stage, comparing Kurds with other Iranians yielded significant differences between them in all DPC sub-indexes. The differences became even more profound when Sunni Kurds separately were compared with other Iranians that are predominantly Shiite.

**Table 7:** T-test results for the denomination effect on DPC

| | Sub-Indexes of DPC | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Post-materialism (0 – 5) | Autonomy (-2 – +2) | Gender equality | Attitudes to democracy |
| Kurds | 2.27 | 0.08 | 0.26 | 0.24 |
| Others | 1.81 | -0.12 | -0.02 | -0.02 |
| Differences (sig.) | 0.46 (0.000) | 0.20 (0.012) | 0.28 (0.000) | 0.25 (0.000) |
| | | | | |
| Sunni Kurds | 2.45 | 0.16 | 0.37 | 0.23 |
| Other Iranians | 1.82 | -0.12 | -0.14 | -0.01 |
| Difference (sig.) | 0.63 (0.000) | 0.28 (0.035) | 0.39 (0.000) | 0.24 (0.000) |
| | | | | |
| Iranian Shiites | 1.81 | -0.10 | -0.012 | -0.02 |
| Iranian Sunnis (Without Kurds) | 1.67 | -0.49 | -0.19 | -0.06 |
| Difference (sig.) | 0.14 (0.132) | 0.38 (0.000) | 0.17 (0.005) | 0.05 (0.44) |

*Source:* own calculation, based on WVS data, Wave 5 (2005-2009).
**Note:** The table presents the mean, mean differences and significance level (in parentheses) for each group.

Although at first the results suggested an effect of denominational affiliation on DPC scores, the comparison between Shiites and Sunnis led to the opposite result. In other words, when analysis takes into account denominational affiliations among Iranians without Kurds, Shiites obtain higher means in two sub-indexes of DPC and significantly higher means in two others. Simply put, these findings indicate that denominational affiliation cannot explain why the Kurdish ethnic group does not correspond to the Iranian political culture trend. Although there is a lack of studies investigating the characteristics of Iranian ethnic groups' political culture, using domestic data (Abdollahi & Hosseinbor, 2007), the distinct trajectory of Kurds has already been demonstrated. It is likely that either the struggles and campaigns against successive authoritarian regimes of Iran have affected their attitudes and values or it is possible that the mystical and Sufi nature of the religion in the Kurdish area (Van Bruinessen, 1992, pp. 203-267) has influenced their political culture.

Accordingly, these results suggest that one "small world" with the capability of generating unique attitudes can be discerned in the multi-ethnic society of Iran. Except for this gap, there were no considerable differences between ethnic groups and no meaningful differences between Shiites and Sunnis as the main denominations of Iran in terms of DPC.

## Conclusion

Theoretically, two critical factors are threatening the homogeneity of the national political culture structure and act as key determinants of its deformation in multi-ethnic societies: biased regional development forces of modernisation that may disturb the balance among various regions and ethno-religious heritage of small worlds. As the results of this research indicate, the concentration of power and wealth in certain areas and exclusion of others can create inconsistencies in new emerging values and make the regions more scattered in terms of political culture. Hence, disparity in regional development influences the democratic attitudes and values people practice, even in sub-national units. That is, the more developed the region, the more prevalent DPC, and the deeper the inequality, the more profound the political culture gap among the regions. This evidence suggests that establishing systematic economic discrimination across the Iranian nation-state has brought about heterogeneity in the cultural foundations and created disparity within society's political culture structure. The second factor, ethno-religious heritage, was a little complicated. As far as the results of this study are concerned, except for the Kurds' community, other ethnic groups in Iran show no broad differences in democratic values. Hence, although these small worlds are sources of cultural diversity, they are not necessarily generating their own political values and attitudes or capable of biasing the impact of modernisation forces. Since this empirical research was limited to democratic political culture and our measure examines only democratic values, it is unplausible to go further and appraise possible variations in other political culture components among these communities. Yet, further studies can properly monitor other gaps, for instance, low institutional confidence, which is a source of potential instability (Ruck et al., 2020).

Although Iran suffers from both sources of disparity in its political culture, results suggest the effects of these factors on political culture heterogeneity are not equal, because just one community (Kurds) was found as unique. However, the impact of long-lasting biased modernisation has profoundly affected this country's political culture. Therefore, the most significant factor that threatens the cultural homogeneity of a developing country like Iran does not lie in its diversity, but in the centre-periphery economic structure. Thus, as long as this uneven development condition maintains, neither the political revolution nor the reformist movements could succeed in democratising the country. As the first study exploring variation in Iranian political culture from a different perspective, we uncovered some aspects and potential obstacles to the democratisation process which other approaches including structuralist, elitist, and even mainstream approaches of political culture have neglected or underestimated. Most of these approaches analyse Tehran rather than Iran and generalise the developments of the centre to the wholeness of the country. These results are also consonant with political events. Almost all pro-democracy movements and collective actions have been initiated and organised in Tehran and a few other developed cities

and have not spread out to other regions. Conversely, livelihood movements such as the so-called "Aban Protests" (2017) or "Gas Protests" (2019) spread all over the country, while pro-democracy forces mostly concentrated in Tehran remained silent and couldn't take a stand.

These results can also be helpful in the study of other transition countries with similar backgrounds. For instance, it may explain why the Arab Spring in some fragile societies of the Middle East failed, where peaceful street demonstrations began against authoritarian regimes in a few major developed cities and then escalated into bloody civil wars, as the protests spread across the countries. In fact, diverse methods of protesting and dealing with social conflicts emerge from varied political values and the even, preferred regime type people demand would be influenced by their values (Welzel, 2014). Notably, a synergistic effect of both factors of inequality and small worlds may provoke hatred among the ethnic communities, demolish the peaceful coexistence and inter-community bonds. That is, if inequalities arising from biased economic policies stand on ethnic borders, it may lead to fragmentation, polarisation, and a possible collapse of the foundations of society in critical moments of the nation's history.

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## Appendix

The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) model of DPC constructed using WVS data and AMOS software. All variables were entered into the model after standardisation (Z standard scores) in SPSS. From the four indexes of DPC, the Post-Materialistic and the Independence have been treated as observed variables, since they have been calculated in the WVS dataset. Two remaining indexes of Gender Equality and Attitude toward Democracy are considered as latent variables.

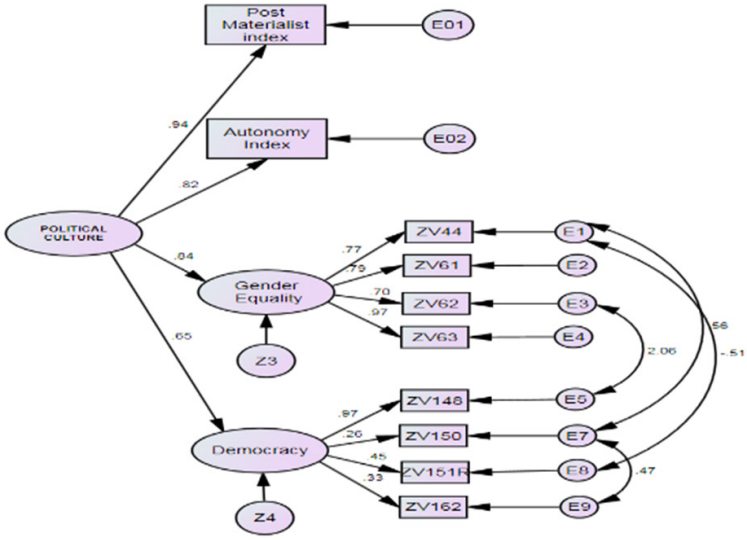


**Figure A1:** Measurement model of democratic political culture (DPC) and its factor loadings
*Source:* own elaboration, based on WVS data, Wave 5 (2005-2009).

**Table A1:** Chi-square and degree of freedom of the DPC model

| model | NPAR | CMIN | DF | P | CMIN/DF |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Default model | 26 | 33.570 | 29 | 0.255 | 1.158 |
| Saturated model | 55 | 0.0 | 0 | | |
| Independence model | 10 | 177.325 | 45 | 0.0 | 3.941 |

*Source:* own elaboration.

**Table A2:** Model fit indices for the DPC

| Model | CFI | TLI | PNFI | PCFI | RMSEA | GFI | AGFI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0.965 | 0.946 | 0.522 | 0.622 | 0.087 | 0.755 | 0.535 |

*Source:* own elaboration.

**Table A3:** Standard and unstandardised estimates of regression weights with significant levels

| *Estimate* | | S. E | C.R | P | Regression Weights |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Unstandardized* | *standardized* | | | | |
| 1.0 | 0.935 | | | | Y001 <--- POLITICAL_CULTURE |
| 0.795 | 0.817 | 0.159 | 4.990 | 0.0 | Y003 <--- POLITICAL_CULTURE |
| 0.540 | 0.836 | 0.126 | 4.269 | 0.0 | Gender_ Equality <--- POLITICAL_ CULTURE |
| 1.0 | 0.767 | | | | ZV44 <--- Gender_ Equality |
| 1.268 | 0.786 | 0.274 | 4.628 | 0.0 | ZV61<--- Gender_ Equality |
| 0.718 | 0.698 | 0.183 | 3.922 | 0.0 | ZV62<--- Gender_ Equality |
| 1.205 | 0.967 | 0.176 | 6.847 | 0.0 | ZV63<--- Gender_ Equality |
| 0.466 | 0.650 | 0.136 | 3.424 | 0.0 | Democracy <--- POLITICAL_ CULTURE |
| 1.0 | 0.972 | | | | ZV148 <--- Democracy |
| 0.354 | 0.263 | 0.259 | 1.368 | 0.071 | ZV150<--- Democracy |
| 0.387 | 0.447 | 0.216 | 1.787 | 0.074 | ZV151R <--- Democracy |
| 0.312 | 0.330 | 0.220 | 1.420 | 0.055 | ZV162 <--- Democracy |

*Source:* own elaboration.