



## Book Review: The Iran National Front and the Struggle for Democracy

Kazemzadeh. M. (2022). The Iran National Front and the Struggle for Democracy. Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 359 pp. ISBN: 9783110782059.

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In this persuasive yet debatable work, Kazemzadeh has tried to present a political history of the Iran National Front (INF): a major opposition group in Iran to the fundamentalist regime installed after the 1979 revolution. The book traces its history from its formation as a coalition to the present times. The author follows the developments within the party and links them to the unique dynamics of Iran since 1949, e.g., Muhammad Mossadegh's ascendancy to the office of prime minister, the coup of 1953, the 1979 revolution, waves of repression by the fundamentalist regimes, and recent protests.

The author is a USA-based researcher and Associate Professor of Political Science, and this book is a continuation of his research and publications on Iran. Iranian National Front (INF) is a coalition of opposition groups in Iran that remain committed to a democratic and secular Iran. Kazemzadeh, after a discussion on real political parties, is willing to treat it as a real political party in Iran despite its reluctance to take part in various recent elections in Iran and its lack of representation in Iran's parliament.

Although the author aims at a factual description of the activities of INF, the book's scope is not confined to that. The author is also keen to analyze various actions and omissions associated with INF. For instance, the book provides a detailed analysis of why and how INF joined hands with Islamists to overthrow the monarchy in 1979 and why, despite staunch opposition to the Islamist regime, INF is not looking forward to forming a partnership with monarchists against the current regime in Iran. Moreover, the author is also keen to discuss the prospects of INF or the opportunities it might have in the future in the face of an allegedly crippling Islamist regime.

This book is a welcome addition to the series of works which underscore the importance of actors that are not in the corridors of power, yet their understanding is crucial to developing a thorough understanding of a conflict-ridden polity. The fact that INF was able to form a democratically elected popular government in Iran and required a CIA and British intelligence-supported coup to remove it from power in 1953 and had to be banned in 1981 after the Islamist regime resolved to crush any dissenting political actors makes its political importance apparent. Although excellent scholarship exists on its first leader Mossadegh's life and politics, a gap in the literature exists in understanding what INF has been after Mossadegh. This book is a much-needed attempt to fill that gap.

The book starts by describing how Mossadegh and INF gained popular support for their slogan to nationalize Iranian oil and free Iran from the shackles of foreign subservience.



A factual description of the infamous coup of 1953 for which there is now documentary support that the CIA was actively involved in assuring its success follows. Kazemzadeh, with credible historical evidence and logical support, maintains that the Shah of Iran, who rose to absolute power in the aftermath of this coup, treated the INF and not the Islamists as his enemy number one. Hence, although the INF stood staunchly against the socially modernizing but politically oppressing monarch, and regarded him as a foreign puppet.

This antagonism toward the Shah and deceptive promises of free speech by Ruhollah Khomeini led to an alliance between INF and Islamists in 1979. Subsequently, INF played a crucial role in bringing about the 1979 revolution. However, the author believes that although INF soon realized the designs of the Islamists, the reactionary nature of the Islamic struggle against a Westernized monarch and the street charisma of Khomeini took control over the situation, and INF had little power to control. What followed was the brutal repression of INF and its treatment as an existential threat to the Islamist regime.

The author also vividly discusses intraparty differences within the party, e.g., to support or not reformist fundamentalists in polls, and its relationship with religion: which it believes consensually, at least now, should be a matter of the private sphere of one's life. The author has also discussed the reasons behind INF's failures, and all these arguments maintain that INF's naïve insistence on non-violence led to its inability to prevent the 1953 coup and also to its failure to overthrow a fundamentalist regime which does not hesitate from brutal violence, whenever required, to repress political opposition. Finally, the author presents the current regime in Iran as one which is facing multiple challenges of legitimacy, succession, and a crippling economy. Kazemzadeh believes the prospects for INF's reorganization and becoming an instrumental player in Iranian politics remain significant as the current regime is crumbling.

The book deserves various credits. First of all, it is a complete account of the activities of the INF. It follows INF from its inception to its present existence. Primary documents and archival sources back the factual description of Kazemzadeh. Proper investigation of its role and transitions offers a thorough understanding of INF. The book also offers a critique of the INF and its weaknesses. The author is also aware of the different internal rifts that take place from time to time. Hence, he has come up with a comprehensive account of INF.

Secondly, the author does not treat the topic in isolation. He establishes linkages of INF with events and other significant actors. For instance, the author has discussed INF's relationship with other political forces, e.g., the Tudeh party, the United States, and Islamic fundamentalists. This analysis helps in understanding the events in a coordinated manner.

The author also goes beyond a superficial understanding of all of these actors. While discussing INF, he discusses different views the party took in joining hands with Islamists during the revolution of 1979 and has highlighted that a minority view predicted that an Islamist dictatorship could be catastrophic. Similarly, while discussing its relationship with religion, although it is apparent that it maintains a secular posture, Kazemzadeh convinces that the charge of apostasy leveled against it by the Islamist regime falls flat as the party members have included even Ayotallahs; although they differed from Ruhollah Khomeini.



However, Kazemzadeh concedes in the first chapter that INF is a real political party. The rest of his work treats INF, even after its banishment in 1981, as a political party rather than a political force. However, he does not defend this treatment. INF has boycotted some of the electoral activities and has urged the people to participate at some times, i.e., when it decides to support a reformist Islamist. Hence, it adopts an inconsistent stance and shifts from believing that reformist Islamists are better than hardliners to offering no participation in the current system as it would give legitimacy to the regime. The reasoning behind treating INF as a 'real political party' with this inconsistent approach is unexplained.

Another presupposition comes in the final chapters of this book that describe today's Iran and discuss the future prospects of INF. When the author proposes considerable opportunities for the INF in the future, this analysis rests on the assumption that the current regime is crumbling. Although the author describes that the current regime is facing multiple crises, this analysis can be best taken as a one-sided description as the author struggles hard to bring every argument, and sometimes not very vigorous, to maintain that the current regime is not upbeat today.

Weakness of argument is also visible when Kazemzadeh portrays the reluctance of Mossadegh to arrange street protests against the 1953 coup and the party's current insistence on non-violent means as its 'weaknesses. He maintains that had Mossadegh allowed the people to fight against the coup preparators in 1953, Iran could have been saved from 70 years of repressive rule. However, it is a unidirectional argument. What if it would have only resulted in civilian bloodshed, and the regime would have been able to establish its coercive control as the Islamists did in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution? Moreover, if INF resorts to violent measures against the current regime, would it not lose its credibility in its constituency of moderates?

Finally, a few might subject some language to reasonable suspicion. For instance, in multiple places, the author has drawn parallels between the Islamist theory in Iran and fascism in twentieth-century Europe but has not justified his theoretical allegation. Furthermore, the book presents INF as the embodiment of a struggle for freedom against an oppressive regime. Hence, the author's arguments do not even start from value neutrality.

Overall, it is a welcome addition highly recommended for anyone who wants to understand the nature of oppositional politics and in politics of Iran. However, some areas of the book must be trodden with considerable caution.