CHAPTER TWO

POWER STRUCTURES AND FACTIONAL RIVALRIES IN
THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

2.1 Introduction

The Islamic revolution caused a fundamental change in the composition of the political elite in Iran, whose secular oriented members were replaced by mainly clergies and religious laypersons. On the one hand, the post-revolutionary Iranian political elite introduced a semi-theocratic mode of rule based on the velayat-e faqih system (the Governance of the Jurist, see chapter 2.2)—in 1988 reinforced by adding a new dimension the Absolute Governance of the Jurist (velayat-e motlaqah-e faqih, see chapter 1.6)—institutionalized according to the constitution of 1979. On the other hand, the political institutions of the IRI are based on a modern state that finds its origins in the constitution of 1906. The political power structure of the IRI is composed of connected, but also competitive, formal and informal political power structures. The formal political power structure consists of state institutions and their aligned institutions: the religious supervisory bodies, the republican institutions, and the religious foundations (bonyads). Besides the formal power structure there exists also an informal power structure. The informal power structure has two levels: (1) The different political factions of the political elite (the Conservative faction, the Pragmatist faction, and the Reformist faction) that cut across the state institutions and their aligned institutions. As there are no legal political parties in Iran, it is the political factions that represent the different ideas on economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy; (2) The informal power structure consists not only of those people who have power according to their position in state institutions, but also of those individuals that influence, or attempt to influence, the political discourse. Here, three interrelated levels of power can be distinguished: the inner circle elite, the administrative, and the discourse elite. The rivalries among the different political factions have a great impact on policy formulation in Iran, as they pose an obstacle to the formulation of coherent domestic and foreign policies. While most state institutions in Iran are weak, due
to the principle of the *velayat-e faqih*, personal networks are strong. As a consequence, the formal system for policy formulation is often ignored or bypassed in favor of the informal power structure, based on personal networks and power relations.

This chapter analyzes: the formal and informal power structures in the IRI since the Islamic revolution; the (changing) position of the different factions of the Iranian political elite on economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy issues; the political elite’s control of state institutions as well as their economic resources. It also discusses from an historical perspective, the emergence of the different political factions, with their rivalries, alliances, and counter alliances, from the time of the Islamic revolution, in 1979, until March 2008.

### 2.2 The Formal Power Structure

The formal political power structure of the IRI is composed of the supreme leader\(^1\) and three sets of institutions (Moslem 2002: 33–34): (1) The religious supervisory bodies; (2) The republican institutions; (3) The religious foundations (see figure 2.1).

The power of the supreme leader (or *vali-e faqih*) is based on the *velayat-e faqih* system.\(^2\) The supreme leader is the ultimate decision-maker in the IRI. The office of the supreme leader was established when the constitution of the IRI was drafted in 1979. The supreme leader has the power to declare war, to mobilize the troops and to dismiss many senior position holders in the IRI. These senior positions include: the head of the judiciary; the head of state radio and television; the supreme commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC); the supreme commander of the regular military and the security services; as well as the clerical jurists in the Council of the Guardian (Tellenbach 1990: 71).

\(^{1}\) See also the website of the supreme leader [http://www.leader.ir](http://www.leader.ir)

\(^{2}\) For the responsibilities of the supreme leader see Article 110 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Algar, H. *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 67–68.