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ARTICLE

From Fragmentation to Federation: Building the Political Architecture for a Free Iran

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Abstract

Despite decades of organizing, the Iranian opposition has failed to produce a political structure capable of credibly challenging the Islamic Republic. This article argues that the problem is not a lack of unity but a flawed architecture of unity. The dominant model, the unified front, demands premature ideological convergence, creates winner-take-all dynamics, and presents a single point of failure to a regime skilled at fracturing dissent. In its place, this article proposes a federated coalition model grounded in international human rights law, drawing on the coordination record of Iran's Kurdish political parties as a domestic proof of concept and on the democratic transitions of Spain, South Africa, and Sudan as comparative reference points. The article concludes that a federation anchored in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the right to self-determination, and transparent transitional governance mechanisms offers the most credible and durable path toward a free Iran.

Keywords: Iran, democratic transition, federated coalition, opposition politics, Kurdish political parties.

Rethinking Opposition Architecture in Authoritarian Contexts

This analysis begins not with optimism, but with a frank assessment of the structural conditions that have produced persistent opposition failure.

The Islamic Republic has now governed Iran for over four decades. In that time, the Iranian opposition has pursued every form of unified front politics available to it. Coalitions have been announced, charters have been signed, and joint statements have been issued. And

yet the regime endures. This is not a failure of individuals. It is, as Brumberg (2002) has argued in his foundational analysis of liberalized autocracies, a systemic failure produced when opposition forces adopt political architectures that the authoritarian state is structurally better equipped to manage than they are. Levitsky and Way (2022), in their updated comparative analysis of competitive authoritarianism, reinforce this point: regimes of this type survive less through raw coercion than through their ability to exploit the organizational weaknesses of their opponents, turning fragmentation into a durable form of authoritarian resilience.

The problem is not insufficient unity. The problem is the wrong architecture of unity. As long as the opposition rebuilds the same structure with different names, it will produce the same results. What is needed is a framework grounded in international law, in the comparative study of democratic transitions, and in the concrete political experience of Iranian political parties themselves. O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), in their seminal study of transitions from authoritarian rule, observed that negotiated transitions succeed not when oppositions present a unified ideological program but when they establish credible procedural commitments around which diverse actors can organize. That insight remains underutilized by the Iranian opposition. The following section situates these dynamics within the broader literature on authoritarian resilience and opposition politics.

Why the Unified Front Model Has Failed Iran

Theoretical Framework: Unified Fronts and Ethnic Pluralism in Iran

A unified front model assumes that diverse political forces can and should converge around a common political program, centralized leadership structure, and shared public identity prior to political transition. In theory, such an arrangement offers the international community a clear interlocutor and projects organizational coherence. In practice, however, transitional scholarship demonstrates that prematurely imposed political unity often generates recurring pathologies, including elite competition, ideological suppression, representational exclusion, and organizational paralysis (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Huntington, 1991).

In the Iranian context, these tensions are intensified by longstanding center–periphery asymmetries between the Persian political center and historically marginalized and minoritized ethnic communities, including Kurds, Baluchis, Ahwazi Arabs, Turkmen, and Azerbaijanis. On one hand, Alamdari (2005) argues that the Islamic Republic’s political structure has consolidated a hybrid system of authoritarian governance and clientelist power distribution, in which

authority is maintained through vertically organized patronage networks that restrict meaningful democratic participation and reinforce regional inequalities. On the other hand, Tohidi (2009) emphasizes that ethnic and religious minority politics in Iran are shaped by the intersection of authoritarian state practices, uneven development, and identity-based exclusion, producing structurally embedded disadvantages for peripheral communities.

Intersectional research highlights how marginalization operates across ethnicity, gender, and institutional exclusion, particularly within education and public service systems (Fallah et al., 2020). This scholarship demonstrates that minoritized populations experience exclusion not only through formal political structures but also through everyday bureaucratic and institutional practices that reproduce inequality and restrict social mobility.

Efforts to construct a singular opposition identity therefore risk reproducing majoritarian nationalist logics that subordinate or defer the demands of non-Persian communities in the name of "national unity." From this perspective, opposition frameworks that do not explicitly incorporate ethnic pluralism may inadvertently replicate the same center–periphery hierarchies documented in both structural political economy and intersectional field research. Consequently, rather than generating democratic legitimacy, premature unification around a homogenized national identity may deepen mistrust among historically marginalized constituencies and weaken the foundations for an inclusive and pluralistic post-authoritarian transition.

The first pathology is that it demands ideological convergence that does not exist and should not be forced. The Iranian opposition represents genuinely different visions for post-Islamic Republic governance. These are not signs of dysfunction. They are the normal spectrum of political opinion in any pluralist society. As Dahl (1971) demonstrated in his theory of polyarchy, competitive pluralism is not a problem to be solved before democracy can begin; it is the condition under which democratic governance becomes possible. Forcing premature convergence suppresses these differences until the pressure of governance causes them to explode.

The second pathology is that unified fronts create winner-take-all incentive structures. Every party that joins fears, correctly, that unity means eventual subordination. As Przeworski (1991) has shown in his game-theoretic analysis of democratic transitions, actors in transitional settings defect from coalitions not from irrationality but from a rational response to poorly designed institutional rules. The party with the largest base or the most aggressive leadership tends to dominate, and others defect before that domination becomes permanent.

Third, a single unified structure is a single target. The Islamic Republic's intelligence apparatus has four decades of experience in penetrating, discrediting, and fracturing opposition

networks. Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng (2021), in their comparative study of authoritarian strategies for managing opposition coalitions, documented how ruling regimes systematically exploit structural vulnerabilities in opposition organizations—selectively co-opting, dividing, and discrediting coalition members to neutralize collective threats before they consolidate. A unified front requires only one compromised node to unravel entirely.

Under international law, the right to political organization is inseparable from the right to political pluralism. Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) protects freedom of association, including the right to form political organizations. Article 25 guarantees every citizen the right to take part in public affairs. Neither provision envisions a single legitimate opposition. Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) affirms that no one may be compelled to belong to an association. The Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment No. 25 (1996), clarified that the right under Article 25 requires the existence of genuine, competitive political processes. Coalition architecture should reflect that legal and normative foundation from the outset.

The Federated Coalition: A Precise Definition

A federated coalition is not a merger. It is a structured framework in which each political party retains its identity, organizational autonomy, internal governance, and distinct political vision while agreeing to operate within a shared transitional framework on a limited, explicitly defined set of issues. This distinction matters enormously. As Stepan (2001) observed in his comparative study of federalism and democracy, federal arrangements succeed precisely because they do not require ideological uniformity; they require procedural agreement.

The architecture has four essential elements.

The first is a Minimum Transition Charter. Not a constitution, and not a full political platform, but a publicly signed, externally monitored agreement on the process of transition. The charter commits all signatories to free and fair elections in accordance with Article 25 ICCPR, freedom of the press and political organization under Articles 19 and 22 ICCPR, the immediate release of political prisoners consistent with Article 9 ICCPR prohibiting arbitrary detention, accountability mechanisms for crimes committed by the Islamic Republic, and the protection of the rights of all ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities under Article 27 ICCPR and the UN Declaration on Minority Rights (1992). The charter should also explicitly reference Iran's obligations under the Convention Against Torture (CAT, 1984), to which Iran is a state party, as a

non-negotiable baseline for the transitional period. Bassiouni (2002) has argued that grounding transitional charters in existing treaty obligations rather than partisan preferences provides the most durable foundation for international recognition.

The second element is a Joint Transitional Council with rotating leadership, transparent decision-making rules, and explicit veto protections on core charter issues. No single party dominates; no single party is silenced. The council's legitimacy derives not from the size of any member party but from the procedural integrity of its governance. This mirrors the institutional design principles that Lijphart (1977) identified in his theory of consociational democracy as essential for managing deep societal divisions without eliminating them.

The third element is a Shared Communications Protocol. Parties commit not to publicly undermine coalition positions and to coordinate on statements relating to the transitional charter. This closes the most exploitable gap the regime currently uses: contradictory public messaging that allows state media to portray the opposition as hopelessly divided. Al-Ali and Yuval-Davis (2001) documented precisely this dynamic in their study of diasporic political movements, noting that messaging incoherence is one of the primary tools authoritarian states use to delegitimize exile opposition.

The fourth element is structured review and renegotiation every six months. This removes the fear of permanent subordination. Parties join knowing the arrangement is dynamic, adaptive, and not a trap. It also creates regular accountability moments that prevent accumulated grievances from becoming ruptured. Diamond (1999) identified this kind of iterative, reviewable commitment structure as a defining feature of coalitions that survive the transition period rather than fragmenting on the eve of it.

The Kurdish Political Parties: Proof of Concept

The political experience of Kurdish parties in Iran represents the closest existing proof of concept for the federated model. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, Komala Party, and the Kurdistan Freedom Party represent genuinely different ideological traditions: social democratic, leftist, and nationalist respectively. And yet they have managed sustained periods of coordination without dissolving their distinct identities, doing so under conditions of extreme state violence and across diaspora and inside-Iran networks. Vali (2011), in his study of Kurdish nationalism in Iran, documented how this capacity for inter-party coordination emerged

specifically because Kurdish parties invested in institutional process rather than ideological convergence.

A point that warrants emphasis here is foundational to the broader argument. There is a tendency in transitional politics to treat political parties as problematic relics and social movements as the more authentic voice of the people. This is a serious analytical error. Movements mobilize. Parties govern. Chenoweth (2021), in her updated analysis of civil resistance and its political outcomes, makes exactly this distinction: while mass movements are effective at destabilizing authoritarian regimes, their transformative potential is only realized when organized political actors are positioned to convert mobilization into durable institutional change. Without organized political parties capable of aggregating diverse interests, drafting legislation, managing parliamentary coalitions, and being held electorally accountable, transitions do not produce democracy. They produce power vacuums.

Egypt after 2011 is the definitive cautionary case. As Brown (2013) documented, the uprising lacked organized party infrastructure, which left the military and the Muslim Brotherhood as the only forces with the organizational capacity to fill the void. The result was the replacement of one authoritarian system with another. Political parties are not obstacles to democratic transition. They are its necessary institutional vessels. Mainwaring and Scully (1995), in their comparative study of party systems in new democracies, demonstrated that institutionalized party systems are among the strongest predictors of successful democratic consolidation.

Addressing the Objections

The first objection is that previous coalitions have failed. What has been attempted in practice are unified fronts structured as coalitions. The federated model, with explicit procedural rules and guaranteed party autonomy, is architecturally distinct. As Bunce and Wolchik (2011) showed in their comparative study of electoral revolutions in post-communist and post-Soviet states, the failure of earlier opposition models is not evidence against coalition-building; it is the specification for what a better architecture must correct. Ong (2022), in her analysis of opposition coalition dynamics in hybrid regimes, reinforces this conclusion: coalitions structured around shared process rather than unified program demonstrate significantly greater durability and resistance to regime-engineered defection.

The second objection concerns how to handle the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)[1] question or the monarchy question. The federated model separates transitional governance from post-transition constitutional questions. What system of government Iran adopts, what role the monarchy plays, what the status of various political organizations will be: these are questions for Iranians inside Iran to decide through a free constitutional process. The coalition's job is to guarantee that process, not to predetermine its outcome. This is consistent with the principle established in UN General Assembly Resolution 46/137 (1991) that the form of government is for each state's people to determine freely through genuine periodic elections.

The third objection is that Iranians inside Iran do not trust the diaspora opposition. This objection is correct, and the federated model takes it seriously. Ghorashi (2003), in her study of Iranian diaspora political identity, found that the credibility deficit of exile organizations stems primarily from their perceived disconnection from domestic realities and their tendency to present factional preferences as national programs. Khosrokhavar (2024) and Mahdavi (2025), analyzing the political aftermath of the Woman Life Freedom uprising, sharpen this finding: the 2022 movement revealed a generational and structural gap between diaspora political actors and the domestic protest constituency—one compounded, as Mahdavi documents, by patterns of retrotopia, co-optation, and misrepresentation within diaspora opposition circles—one that procedural legitimacy grounded in international human rights norms, rather than personal or factional authority, is best positioned to bridge. A coalition grounded in Common Article 1 of the ICCPR and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), affirming the right of all peoples to freely determine their political status, derives its authority from international legal obligations rather than personal or factional standing.

The fourth objection is that international actors want a single interlocutor. International actors want a credible interlocutor. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Copenhagen Document (1990) and UN General Assembly Resolution 46/137 (1991) both establish that pluralism, competitive elections, and the rule of law are the benchmarks of political legitimacy that the international community recognizes, not structural unity. The European Union itself is the world's most successful example of federated political cooperation: unity through process, not through uniformity. As Whitehead (2002) has argued, international

[1] The Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), also known as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), is an Iranian opposition organization founded in 1965 that combines elements of revolutionary Islamism and Marxist-influenced political thought. The organization participated in opposition to the Shah and later against the Islamic Republic, eventually operating in exile. Its controversial history, including periods of armed struggle and alliance with Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq War, has made it one of the most polarizing actors within Iranian opposition politics.

legitimation of transitional actors follows demonstrated commitment to democratic norms, not organizational simplicity.

The fifth objection is that Kurdish and minoritized[2] parties have separatist agendas that threaten territorial integrity. This perception has historically been used to exclude minoritized political parties from coalition frameworks, weakening every coalition it has shaped. The right to self-determination, established in Article 1 of the UN Charter (1945), Common Article 1 of the ICCPR and ICESCR, and reaffirmed in UN General Assembly Resolution 2625 (1970), encompasses both external self-determination and internal self-determination, which is the right of peoples to participate meaningfully in governance. Cassese (1995), in his definitive legal analysis, confirmed that internal self-determination does not entail a right to secession for minoritized groups within functioning democratic states. Kurdish, Baluch, Arab, and Azerbaijani parties seeking autonomy and rights protections are making claims fully consistent with international legal norms. Article 27 ICCPR obliges states to ensure minoritized communities are not denied the right to use their language, practice their religion, and enjoy their culture. Minoritized parties signing a minimum transition charter are not pre-deciding the federal question. They agree that the answer belongs to a free constitutional process.

The Comparative Cases

Three transitions offer direct lessons. Spain in 1977 provides the first. After nearly four decades of Francoist authoritarianism[3], deeply opposed political forces agreed on the Moncloa Pacts before agreeing on anything else. These were procedural agreements on the rules of transition, not programmatic agreements on the future of Spain. Gunther, Sani, and Shabad (1986) demonstrated in their authoritative study that Spain's transition succeeded precisely because process-based agreement preceded and enabled substantive political bargaining, rather than the

[2] The term "minoritized" is preferred here over "minority" following Andreas Wimmer's analytical framework, which draws attention to the relational and political processes through which groups are constructed as minorities within nation-state systems, rather than treating minority status as an inherent or fixed characteristic. The term has gained currency in the academic literature on stateless nations, including Kurdish studies, precisely because it foregrounds the agency of dominant groups and state structures in producing subordinate status. See Wimmer, A. (2008). The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A multilevel process theory. American Journal of Sociology, 113(4), 970–1022. https://doi.org/10.1086/522803 .

[3] Francisco Franco (1892–1975) ruled Spain as dictator from 1939 until his death, following the Nationalist victory in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). His regime, known as Francoism (el franquismo), was characterized by authoritarian centralism, suppression of regional autonomy (particularly of Catalan, Basque, and Galician identities), state Catholicism, and the systematic elimination of political opposition. The Moncloa Pacts (1977) were negotiated after Franco's death during Spain's transition to democracy under King Juan Carlos I, representing a landmark example of elite pact-making between formerly antagonistic political forces. See Preston, P. (1993). Franco: A Biography. HarperCollins.

reverse. The method was explicitly designed to satisfy Article 25 ICCPR standards for genuine periodic elections and meaningful political participation.

South Africa between 1990 and 1994 offers the second lesson. The negotiated transition succeeded not because the African National Congress (ANC) absorbed all opposition but because the Freedom Charter created a framework of procedural commitments around which diverse forces could organize while retaining distinct identities.[4] As Wilson (2001) documented, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was grounded in Article 2(3) of the ICCPR, which requires effective remedy for rights violations, and in the principles later codified in UN General Assembly Resolution 60/147 (2005). The TRC was not a victor's justice but a legally grounded shared process for managing an unresolvable past.

Sudan in 2019 provides the most direct recent precedent. The Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) brought together political parties, professional associations, civil society organizations, and armed movements around a shared declaration of transition.[5] Its fragility, culminating in the 2021 military coup, is not evidence against the model. As de Waal (2019) argued, the coalition lacked sufficient defection-resistance mechanisms and the international guarantees contemplated under Chapter VI of the UN Charter and Article 4(p) of the African Union Constitutive Act (2000), which condemns unconstitutional changes of government. For Iran, Sudan's experience is a specification, not a deterrent.

Application: Translating Theory into Political Architecture

The theoretical frameworks assembled in this article do not remain at the level of abstraction. Each carries concrete institutional implications for how an Iranian federated coalition should be designed, governed, and evaluated. Applying them in combination produces a coherent

[4] The African National Congress (ANC) is South Africa's oldest liberation movement, founded in 1912. The Freedom Charter (1955) was a foundational document adopted at the Congress of the People, articulating the ANC's vision for a post-apartheid South Africa grounded in non-racialism, democracy, and socioeconomic rights. Apartheid (1948–1994) was the legally enforced system of racial segregation and white minority rule. The negotiated transition culminated in the first democratic elections in April 1994. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995, was a restorative justice mechanism designed to address gross human rights violations committed during the apartheid era. See Mandela, N. (1994). Long Walk to Freedom. Little, Brown.

[5] The Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) was a broad coalition of Sudanese political parties, professional associations, and civil society organizations that led the 2019 uprising against President Omar al-Bashir, who had governed Sudan since 1989. Following al-Bashir's removal by the military in April 2019, the FFC negotiated a transitional power-sharing arrangement with the Transitional Sovereignty Council. The coalition's fragility was exposed when the military, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, carried out a coup in October 2021, dissolving the transitional government. The Sudanese case illustrates both the possibilities and structural vulnerabilities of broad opposition coalitions operating without robust international enforcement mechanisms.

architecture that addresses the structural failures of prior opposition models while satisfying the legal and normative benchmarks that international recognition requires.

Brumberg's (2002) diagnosis of liberalized autocracy as a system that exploits opposition fragmentation yields the first applied prescription: the coalition must structurally deny the Islamic Republic the fragmentation it depends upon, not through enforced ideological unity, but through a binding procedural framework. The Minimum Transition Charter performs this function by committing signatories to shared process rather than shared program, thereby foreclosing the regime's most reliable strategy of selectively co-opting, discrediting, or driving wedges between opposition actors without requiring any party to surrender its distinct political identity. Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng's (2021) comparative findings on authoritarian co-optation reinforce the design imperative: structural vulnerability to defection is not a contingent risk but a predictable feature of poorly institutionalized coalitions. The charter's six-month review mechanism addresses this vulnerability directly by converting the fear of permanent subordination into a bounded and renegotiable commitment, reducing the rational incentive to defect preemptively.

Przeworski's (1991) game-theoretic account of transitional defection translates directly into the institutional design of the Joint Transitional Council. If actors defect not from irrationality but from rational responses to poorly structured incentive environments, then the council's architecture must systematically make defection less attractive than continued participation at each decision point. Rotating leadership eliminates the expectation of single-party dominance. Explicit veto protections on charter-level issues eliminate the risk of majoritarian override on core commitments. Transparent decision-making rules reduce the information asymmetries that authoritarian intelligence services exploit to manufacture distrust among coalition members. O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) foundational argument that negotiated transitions succeed through credible procedural commitment rather than programmatic convergence provides the governing principle: the council's legitimacy must derive not from the historical prestige or electoral base of any member party but from the procedural integrity of its governance arrangements.

Dahl's (1971) theory of polyarchy applies most directly to the question of ideological pluralism within the coalition. If competitive pluralism is not a defect to be corrected before democratic governance becomes possible but the condition under which it becomes possible, then the presence of social democratic, nationalist, leftist, and federalist parties within the same coalition framework is analytically unremarkable. It reflects the normal distribution of political

opinion in any pluralist society. The federated model institutionalizes this insight operationally: parties are not required to resolve their programmatic disagreements prior to joining, only to agree on the process through which those disagreements will ultimately be adjudicated democratically. Lijphart's (1977) consociational framework provides the complementary institutional specification, demonstrating that deeply divided societies generate durable democratic arrangements not through the suppression of difference but through institutions designed to manage it—guaranteed representation, proportionality in decision-making, and mutual veto protections on foundational commitments. The council's structural design instantiates each of these principles directly.

Chenoweth's (2021) analytical distinction between civil resistance and political institutionalization addresses what the foregoing analysis identifies as the most consequential gap in Iranian opposition capacity. Mass movements are effective instruments of authoritarian destabilization; they are structurally unsuited to the tasks of legislative drafting, coalition management, and electoral accountability that democratic consolidation requires. The Woman Life Freedom uprising of 2022 demonstrated the mobilizing potential and normative authority of domestic protest in Iran. What it could not supply was the organized political infrastructure necessary to convert that mobilization into durable institutional outcomes—a limitation not of the movement's character but of what social movements as a category can do. Mainwaring and Scully's (1995) cross-national finding that institutionalized party systems are among the strongest predictors of democratic consolidation identifies exactly what must complement civil resistance if transitions are to succeed. A federated coalition of established political parties does not compete with the protest movement for moral authority; it provides the institutional architecture that the movement cannot construct for itself.

The three comparative cases examined in the preceding section function within this applied framework as institutional specifications rather than models for wholesale replication. Spain's Moncloa Pacts demonstrate that elite procedural agreement can succeed between historically antagonistic actors when the agreement is explicitly bounded, externally observable, and carefully circumscribed so as not to require any party to pre-concede the outcomes of future democratic competition (Gunther, Sani, & Shabad, 1986). For the Iranian coalition, this implies that the Minimum Transition Charter must be equally explicit about its own jurisdictional limits: the constitutional form of government, the territorial organization of the state, and the legal status of particular political organizations are questions the charter must expressly reserve for a free constitutional process rather than resolve by implication. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission demonstrates that transitional accountability mechanisms can be

institutionalized without becoming preconditions for coalition formation, provided they are grounded in an externally verifiable legal standard—in that case, the effective remedy obligations codified in Article 2(3) ICCPR, rather than in factional bargaining (Wilson, 2001). Sudan's Forces of Freedom and Change demonstrates that the structural absence of defection-resistance mechanisms and enforceable international guarantees constitutes not a contingent weakness but a decisive vulnerability. For Iran, this implies that international engagement, including reference to Chapter VI of the UN Charter and the OSCE Copenhagen commitments on democratic governance, must be incorporated into the coalition's foundational documents from the outset rather than treated as a secondary diplomatic objective.

The international human rights law framework assembled throughout this article does not function merely as legitimating rhetoric. It constitutes the coalition's operative legal foundation. Articles 19, 22, and 25 of the ICCPR establish that political pluralism, freedom of association, and genuine periodic elections are not aspirational features of a desirable transition but the minimum legal content of any transition that can claim international recognition. Cassese's (1995) authoritative analysis of internal self-determination clarifies that the demands of Kurdish, Baluch, Arab, and Azerbaijani parties for autonomous governance and rights protections are not separatist claims requiring management but legally cognizable entitlements requiring accommodation within the coalition's framework. Grounding the Minimum Transition Charter in these treaty obligations rather than in factional compromise produces a qualitatively different kind of political document: one whose authority derives from existing international law rather than from the relative strength of its signatories, and one that forecloses the accusation that any member party is seeking preferential treatment by holding every signatory to the same externally verifiable standard. This is the federated coalition's most durable institutional foundation.

The Choice Before Us

The Islamic Republic has survived not because it is strong, but because its opponents have repeatedly enabled its continuity through their own fragmentation. As Keshavarzian (2007) documented in his analysis of Iranian political networks, the regime has consistently exploited opposition fragmentation as a strategic resource, requiring no direct repression when divisions accomplish the same result. Levitsky and Way (2022) confirm that this is not an Iranian peculiarity but a structural feature of competitive authoritarian regimes globally: the organizational weakness of opposition actors, more than regime strength, explains authoritarian durability.

The federated coalition model described here does not ask anyone to abandon their vision for Iran. It does not ask anyone to trust people they have legitimate historical reasons to distrust. It asks for agreement on process. Transparency on governance. The discipline to distinguish what must be decided now, the terms of transition, from what must be decided freely by the Iranian people themselves.

The international community's engagement with Iranian opposition forces will be determined not by which coalition appears most unified, but by which demonstrates the most durable, legitimate, and legally grounded commitment to genuine democratic transition. A federated coalition built on a Minimum Transition Charter anchored in the ICCPR, the ICESCR, the CAT, and the UN Declaration on Minority Rights, inclusive of Iran's full political diversity including its Kurdish and minoritized-community parties, and governed by transparent and accountable procedures, carries a credible claim on international support that no unified front has yet been able to sustain.

The Kurdish parties showed that organizational discipline and inter-party coordination are possible under the worst conditions. The comparative cases show that process-based agreements outlast program-based ones. International law shows that pluralism is not a weakness to be managed. It is the foundation of legitimate governance.

Iran's political future remains open-ended and will be shaped through ongoing social and political contestation rather than the trajectory of any single collective actor. Historical experience, including the 1979 Revolution, underscores that broad coalitions formed in moments of rupture often dissolve into competing projects once the existing order collapses, with institutional outcomes shaped by struggles over power, organization, and legitimacy. Within this context, the opposition cannot be understood as a unified subject with a singular mandate, but rather as a fragmented field of actors whose influence depends on their capacity to engage in institution-building under conditions of uncertainty. The central challenge, therefore, is not the realization of a predetermined political future, but the development of institutional arrangements capable of mediating conflict, constraining domination, and sustaining plural political participation over time.

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