

# IRANIAN GOVERNMENT

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## ANCIENT PERIOD

### Persia

**The Classical period** Several major regions of the world developed somewhat more elaborate societies, in comparison to the river-valley civilizations, beginning in the centuries after about 1000 BCE. Their development in turn forms the principal feature of the classical period of world history, in which these key regions evolved characteristic features – such as the emergence of Hinduism in India – that would continue to flourish for many centuries, and in some cases to the present day. The formation of distinctive approaches to government was part of this process. In all cases, the classical societies experimented with expansive empires – extending a process that had already been visible in Mesopotamia, but now often applied to larger territories – but other political structures and cultures were advanced as well. Classical societies benefited from the political precedents already established by river-valley civilizations, though their geographical focus shifted somewhat. They also featured some tools and weapons that reflected the advent of the use of iron – introduced around 1500 BCE – which offered some improvements in productivity and lethality over previous instruments, though the conversion to iron was gradual.

**Persian Empire** The Persian Empire is somewhat distinctive among the classical societies, because its legacies were somewhat less clear thanks to the later arrival of Islam and periods of Arab control. The Empire in some ways constituted simply a later version of the various conquest regimes that had spread through the Middle East from the Sumerian city-states onward. However, the power and expanse of the Empire created a relevant political memory for present-day Iran. The empire was territorially larger and arguably more aggressive than many of its predecessors. And, most to the point, it developed a number of new organizational features and functions that added to the characteristics of government.

**Chronology and expanse** The Persian (or Achaemenid) empire began to take shape in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, with a series of conquests under Cyrus the Great, who proclaimed himself emperor after having served previously as a regional king. Various successors continued to expand the empire – though as usual with hereditary empires and monarchies the quality of particular rulers varied considerably, and some were decidedly less interested in military goals than others. Under Xerxes I, early in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the empire stretched from the Balkans in the west, to the Indus River valley, and included Egypt and much of the Caucasus (as far as the Aral Sea) as well. This was the largest empire ever constructed to that point, covering 2.1 million square miles. The empire was finally defeated by Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and while successor regimes arose in and around presentday Iran they never achieved the size of the original.

**Innovations in government** To maintain this territory, which embraced a wide variety of ethnicities and languages, a variety of innovations were essential. Basically, Persian rulers managed a combination of centralized, bureaucratic rule, including a large professional army with at least 10,000 troops, with accommodations to internal diversity. Different regional sub-units, or *satraps*, each had a governor of its own, with a military commander (responsible for recruitment) and state secretary (responsible for record-keeping) reporting to the governor. There were variously 20 to 30 satraps in all.

**Taxation and monetary policy** Tax policy was tailored to the economic potential of each satrap, with taxes levied primarily on subject peoples. Babylon for example (at the highest rate) annually paid in a large amount of silver plus enough food to sustain the army for four months. Egypt had a lower silver

payment but a larger grain requirement. It seems likely that the government also sponsored private sales of slaves and levied what was essentially a sales tax on each slave sold (possibly the world's first sales tax). The Empire also introduced standard gold and silver coinage, another first.

**Expansion of functions** Beginning with Cyrus the government also expanded its public works functions beyond any previous precedent. It sponsored an impressive road network that helped link other parts of Asia to the Mediterranean. While this was designed partly to facilitate troop movement, it also highlighted commerce. Cyrus also spaced inns along the major routes, each about a day's ride from the other, another boon to merchants. Cyrus also introduced the world's first postal system, another interesting extension of the functions of the state. Under later emperors the government also embraced the religion of Zoroastrianism and also introduced a standardized solar calendar that is still used in Iran. Not all of these functions were sustained by later regimes, particularly when Alexander the Great's empire devolved into separate regional entities, but the precedents were significant.

**Decline** Ultimately the empire foundered partly because the tax exactions became excessive, burdening the economy as a whole. Subject territories were paying in a massive amount, supporting the huge army, the central government, plus lining the pockets of regional governors. (Alexander the Great was able to seize the equivalent of \$2.7 billion from royal coffers alone, which he plowed back into the general economy through expanded public works and monuments.) Nor was there any effort to create imperial cultural unity, which ultimately affected military cohesion as well, with the troops drawn from so many separate ethnic identities. Finally, territorial overexpansion brought successful resistance and rebellion, first in frontier areas such as Greece – neither the first or last case in which government military ambitions were not carefully calibrated to durability over time.

### Study questions

1. How did Persian rulers adapt government to the demands of its unprecedentedly large territory?
2. Why was a postal system now seen as a relevant function of government?
3. What brought the Empire down?

### Further reading

Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: a history of the Persian Empire* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002)

Maria Brosius, *A History of Ancient Persia* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021)

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

### Safavid Empire

**Overview** Safavid conquests pressed into Iran in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, creating another major Middle Eastern empire and a tense border with the Ottomans that gave rise to recurrent warfare. The Ottoman empire survived far longer than the Safavids, who faded by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century;

**Military recruitment** Safavids came to depend heavily on military forces raised from Christian territories. The Safavids utilized slave soldiers brought in from Russia, some of whom gained great political influence. For the Safavids this came to a rather abrupt halt after a major defeat by Ottoman forces.

**Palace culture** Safavids generated an elaborate palace culture, with a large harem of wives and concubines, who often contributed to an atmosphere of considerable intrigue. Safavid rule, particularly, deteriorated by the later 17<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the indulgent lifestyle. The empire sponsored considerable artistic and cultural activity. Safavid rule helped establish Farsi as the dominant language of the region.

**Religion** Initial Safavid rulers were deeply committed to Shia Islam, and made this the religion of state – a new element in Persian politics. Shia scholars were brought in from other areas. Religious and civil law were intertwined. The government supported Shia missionary efforts and a network of schools – in which the emperor was supposed to be praised on a weekly basis. Grants of land created an upper class dependent on the state, where religious loyalty was assumed. The Safavids were quite tolerant of most

religious minorities, including Christians and Jews, but oppressed the Sunni population. Overall, religion and state became closely intertwined, a legacy that continues in this region today. As the Safavid dynasty weakened, it was in fact briefly replaced by an Islamic republic, of Shia religious officials bent on a theocratic state, though this fell quickly to outside invasion.

**Safavid administration** The Safavid Shah, or emperor, maintained firm control over his administration in the early decades. Bureaucrats were recruited by merit, and carefully supervised (and not infrequently replaced) – this was not a hereditary aristocracy. Every office was overseen by an official who reported directly to the Shah. A prime minister served the Shah, and under him were specialized agencies responsible for revenues, the system of justice, and the military. Provincial and local administrators served under the central state. In cities, artisan and merchant guilds gained considerable power, introducing a somewhat democratic element into what was otherwise an autocratic system. Under the early Safavids, the government revived the Persian tradition of substantial public works, with highways and inns designed to encourage commerce., with guards employed to prevent brigandage. (Poor people were allowed to stay as long as they wished in the inns, without payment.)

**Limitations: a debate** Some historians argue that despite great success, particularly for the Ottomans, the Middle Eastern Islamic empires must be faulted for failing to take adequate account of the growing dynamism of the neighboring European powers. Their empires traded actively with Europeans, giving their merchants special legal privileges in an atmosphere of free trade (a contrast with East Asian policy at the same time). But little account was taken of innovations in commercial practice or the rise of science.

### **Study questions**

1. What were the major functions of the state besides religion?
2. Should the empire be faulted for their failure to import more Western ideas and practices (as Russia was doing in this period)?

### **Further reading**

Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Martin Sicker, *The Islamic World in Decline: from the Treaty of Karlowitz to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire* (Greenwood, 2001)