

## Weberian Insights on the Spiritual and Charismatic Leadership of Ayatullah Khamenei in Contemporary Iran

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**Abstract.** The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran gave birth to a unique model of leadership that combines religion and politics through the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih. This article analyzes the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei using Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, the Shia Imamiyah tradition, and Sufi 'irfan, in order to understand how religious charisma can survive in a modern political context. The research employs a qualitative-descriptive and interpretive approach based entirely on literature analysis. The sources used include Weber's *Economy and Society* (1978) as the main theoretical foundation, Shi'a theological writings on *Imamah* and *Wilayat al-Faqih*, and contemporary Sufi studies explaining 'irfan and spiritual leadership. The unit of analysis in this study is the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the Supreme Leader of Iran. The analysis reveals that unlike Khomeini, who possessed revolutionary and personal charisma, Khamenei has developed a form of charisma that is institutionalized through state structures such as the Guardian Council and the IRGC, yet he continues to strengthen his authority through moral-spiritual legitimacy rooted in the values of simplicity, religious ethics, and 'irfan nuances. This demonstrates that charisma does not only endure through personal figures but also through political institutionalization enriched with religious legitimacy. Thus, Khamenei's leadership represents a synthesis between spirituality and institutions, while offering global relevance as an alternative model of contemporary political legitimacy amid the authority crises faced by many modern nations.

**Keywords:** Spiritual-Political Legitimacy, Institutional Charisma, Wilayat al-Faqih

### 1. Introduction

In this study, the term 'charismatic leadership' is understood as the extraordinary capacity of a leader to inspire and mobilise followers through both spiritual and moral legitimacy, beyond formal positional authority. Drawing on Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, it is the relational bond between leader and followers based on perceived extraordinary qualities that justifies the leader's dominance. Furthermore, this understanding is expanded by the literature on spiritual leadership, which emphasises intrinsic motivation, vision, and values-based ethical living. [1]

A cleric dedicated to religious teaching and study successfully led a political movement that overthrew the despotic regime in Iran, namely the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979. [2] This event shocked the world. Considered one of the most important revolutions of the 20th century, this event, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, is often compared to the French and Bolshevik Revolutions. However, they differ in that they were based on religion rather than socialism, humanism, or secularism. According to Sujati (2019), the Islamic Revolution in Iran not only reconstructed Iran's domestic political landscape but also became an important momentum for Muslim communities and countries in the Global South, emphasizing the close connection between religion and politics in contemporary dynamics.[3] This phenomenon demonstrates that religion became not merely a moral force but also a sociopolitical catalyst for structural transformation in modern Iran.

The success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, or *inqilāb islāmī*, created the Islamic Republic of Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. With this political change came the doctrine of *Wilāyah al-Faqīh* (Leadership of the Jurist), rooted in Shiite theology about *Imāmah*, where clerics hold state authority. In Weberian terms, this transformation can be seen as the early institutionalization of religious charisma, where divine legitimacy was translated into bureaucratic authority. [4] However, several studies show that Iran offers a unique democratic model rooted in Islamic values, challenging the secular belief that democracy and Islam cannot coexist well. Khomeini viewed leadership as both a political and spiritual matter. [5] In his view, religion without a political dimension would be “empty talk.” Therefore, he emphasized that Islam encompasses social justice, anti-imperialism, and the struggle against oppression worldwide. This political theology then shaped the structure of the Islamic Republic, and this charismatic leadership style was later inherited by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, his successor.

When religion, politics, and charisma come together, modern Iranian leadership becomes a unique phenomenon. In 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei assumed the role of Supreme Leader after succeeding Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Unlike Khomeini’s revolutionary charisma, Khamenei’s authority reflects what Weber defines as the *routinization of charisma*, where personal magnetism evolves into institutionalized legitimacy through clerical and constitutional mechanisms. He became a key figure in this dynamic. Khamenei’s authority stems from the strong spiritual and charismatic aspects of Iranian society, in addition to the institutional framework of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Leadership of the Faqih). [6] Due to this combination, Iran is an intriguing case study for understanding leadership tied to religious legitimacy.

Max Weber’s theory of charismatic authority provides an important conceptual foundation for examining this phenomenon. Weber defined charisma as the extraordinary quality of an individual who is believed to possess supernatural or extraordinary powers not shared by ordinary people. [7] However, according to Weber, this personal and temporary charisma must be “institutionalized” and formalized to endure over the long term. In the Iranian context, this process of institutionalizing charisma is clearly evident in the institution of the Supreme Leader, which underpins personal authority with theological and constitutional foundations.

The debate over the origins and nature of Khamenei’s charisma cannot be separated from the historical context of Persia, where Shi’ite and Sufi traditions often intertwine. [8] This intersection provides the foundation for examining how Iran’s political leadership embodies both rational-legal authority and mystical legitimacy, a synthesis rarely discussed in Weberian studies. Within this framework, some scholars argue that his leadership reflects Sufi nuances. A number of scholars highlight how his charisma is rooted in Persian religious traditions, which have a long history of interaction between Shi’ism and Sufism. However, the debate remains open regarding the source and nature of this charisma: does Khamenei’s leadership truly contain Sufi elements, or is his charisma purely born out of contemporary Shiite doctrine?

So far, studies on Khamenei have focused more on the political aspects of *Wilayat al-Faqih* as the basis for the legitimacy of his leadership, while the Sufi and spiritual dimensions have received relatively little systematic attention. [9] This is the gap that the author seeks to address in this study. The main questions posed are: does Khamenei’s leadership exhibit Sufi aspects, and how are they expressed? Furthermore, can *Wilayat al-Faqih* be understood as a continuation of the Sufi tradition, or is it a distinct Shi’ite construct separate from classical Sufism?

Accordingly, this study aims to (1) analyze the spiritual and charismatic dimensions of Khamenei’s leadership through a Weberian framework, (2) identify the *‘irfan*-based moral foundations sustaining his authority, and (3) highlight the relevance of these findings to the contemporary crisis of political legitimacy. Through this approach, this study seeks to demonstrate how religious charisma can endure through the process of institutionalization, while also highlighting its relevance in shaping political legitimacy in the contemporary era.

## 2. Method

The data used in this research are entirely derived from secondary sources through extensive library research. These include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and recent publications (2018–2025) that discuss Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, Shi'a political theology, and *'irfani* spirituality in the context of Iran.

The study also draws on analyses and policy reports from international research institutions such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Brookings Institution to ensure contextual relevance and theoretical depth. This literature-based approach allows the researcher to critically interpret how Khamenei's leadership embodies a synthesis between Weberian institutional charisma and the spiritual ethics rooted in Shi'a thought, providing a comprehensive understanding without relying on empirical field data.

## 3. Result And Discussion

### 3.1. The Charismatic Leadership of Khamenei

Max Weber distinguished charisma as authority that arises from the personal qualities of a leader from charisma that is later institutionalized within social-political structures. [7] Within this framework, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei presents a different type of leadership from his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini. While Khomeini appeared as a revolutionary figure with a spiritual-mystical aura that captivated the masses, Khamenei gained his position through political compromise in 1989. [9] Therefore, his charisma is not the result of personal charm, but rather the outcome of what Weber calls the "routinization of charisma," a process that transforms emotional devotion into bureaucratic legitimacy through institutions such as the Guardian Council and the Revolutionary Guard.

Although his charisma is more institutional in nature, Khamenei still strives to construct spiritual-moral authority to complement his leadership. By reiterating the core ideas of the Islamic Revolution, such as the supremacy of Islam, resistance to the West, and solidarity among the Muslim world, he presents himself as not only a political leader but also a moral one. [10] The religious rhetoric employed by Khamenei serves to provide additional legitimacy rooted in religious values, thereby strengthening the resilience of his leadership despite the limitations of his personal charisma.

Thus, from a Weberian perspective, Khamenei's leadership can be understood as a form of charisma that is institutionalized and maintained by moral-spiritual authority. He is not a mystical figure who emotionally mobilizes the masses like Khomeini, but rather a leader who combines institutional control with religious symbols to build his legitimacy. This kind of charisma is not something natural, but rather something that is continuously produced and reproduced by Iran's political structure, which explains why Khamenei has remained the supreme authority to this day. [11] Within the Weberian framework, the transformation from personal charisma to institutionalized charisma is an important phase in political stability. Khamenei's case shows how charisma can be inherited not through extraordinary personal appeal, but through legal mechanisms and state structures that support a leader's religious claims. This process creates a more durable form of leadership, although it is vulnerable to crises of legitimacy if state institutions fail to maintain a balance between political and moral authority.

### 3.2. Sufistic Aspects

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's leadership is often seen as more institutional than Khomeini's. However, as noted in Khomeini's own *Sharh Du'a al-Sahar* and *Arba'in Hadith* (Khomeini, 1989), the spiritual foundation of leadership in Shi'ite thought cannot be separated from *'irfan* or mystical philosophy. [12] These texts reflect how Sufi ethics such as self-discipline (*mujahadat al-nafs*), simplicity, and moral purification were internalized into Khomeini's conception of authority. [13]

Hence, while Khamenei's charisma is more bureaucratically embedded, its spiritual-moral dimension remains rooted in the same *'irfani* framework inherited from his predecessor.

However, limiting Khamenei to an institutional framework would overlook another important aspect, namely the spiritual-moral dimension. Other studies emphasize that Khamenei affirms continuity with the core ideas of the Islamic Revolution—Islamic supremacy, resistance to the West, and solidarity with the Muslim world by framing them in religious language. [5] Religious rhetoric and claims of public morality function as instruments to strengthen the legitimacy of his leadership, ensuring that his political charisma remains grounded in religious nuances that impart ethical weight.

Furthermore, there is an argument that Khamenei also has connections to the tradition of *'irfan* (Shiite mystical philosophy), which in some ways approaches the Sufi dimension. The influence of *'irfan* is evident in his emphasis on simplicity, moral ethics, and religious piety as the foundation of leadership. [14] Although Khamenei is not a Sufi, his spirituality reflects a philosophical Sufism that gives his political authority an inner legitimacy. Thus, while Khamenei is not a formal adherent of Sufi orders, his moral discipline and emphasis on humility, ethical governance, and *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) demonstrate a development of charisma through the philosophical Sufism inherited from Khomeini's thought. In other words, Khamenei's charisma did not arise directly from Sufi doctrine but evolved within a religious culture deeply shaped by *'irfan* values that bridge politics and spirituality.

### 3.3. The Wilayat Al-Faqih and Khamenei's Leadership in the Modern Context

As explained through Weberian perspective, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's charisma does not stem from personal charm like Khomeini's, but rather from the institutionalization of charisma. Khomeini was known for his revolutionary and mystical aura, while Khamenei rose to leadership through political compromise in 1989. [11] Thus, Khamenei's authority relies more on Wilayat al-Faqih and the support of state institutions that underpin his claim to leadership, making him a figure with institutionalized charisma.[13]

However, limiting Khamenei's leadership to the political-institutional dimension would overlook another important aspect, namely moral and spiritual authority. Although Wilayat al-Faqih clearly originated from the Shi'a Imamiyah doctrine and not from the Sufi tradition, Khamenei's leadership style resonates with Sufi values through its connection to the *'irfan* tradition. [3] His emphasis on simplicity of life, moral ethics, and religious legitimacy creates a spiritual image that strengthens his position, even though he does not come from a Sufi order. [4] In this context, Khamenei successfully combines claims of spirituality with realist political instruments. He maintains himself as a moral figure through religious rhetoric, while relying on the military power of the IRGC, the political oversight of the Guardian Council, and control over the national economy. [10] This blend of morality and realism makes him a leader capable of surviving domestic and international pressures, demonstrating how institutional charisma can still be enriched with a religious dimension.[15]

From a Weberian perspective, this phenomenon illustrates the transformation of charisma: from revolutionary personal charisma (Khomeini) to institutionalized charisma that remains spiritual in nature (Khamenei). [7] The mechanism of charisma reproduction is carried out not only through political structures, but also through the religious symbols and ethical values that he emphasizes. [9] Thus, Khamenei provides a concrete example of how charisma can be inherited, adapted, and maintained in the context of contemporary Islamic politics.

Finally, Khamenei's leadership demonstrates a unique model that connects modern political power with spiritual-moral legitimacy. [11] He is not merely a political ruler but also a religious leader who upholds the continuity of the *'irfan* tradition within the framework of Shi'a Imamiyah. [16] This combination explains why his authority has been able to endure and remain relevant in the modern era. Thus, a Weberian analysis of Khamenei reveals the unique dynamics of leadership in

Iran: a synthesis of institutional charisma, religious morality, and political realism that is rarely found in other leadership models.

### ● **Spiritual leadership today**

In the context of contemporary politics, spiritual leadership remains an important source of state legitimacy. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei demonstrates that political power can endure not only through military, legal, and economic control, but also through the moral legitimacy inherent in the religious image of the leader. [6] By emphasizing piety, ethics, and Islamic values, Khamenei has successfully presented himself not merely as head of state, but as a moral figure guiding the nation. This forms the foundation for Iran's political stability amid external pressures and domestic conflicts, as the public perceives leadership that is not only rational-political but also rooted in spirituality.

### ● **Institutional charisma**

One important contribution to Weberian studies of Khamenei is the idea of “institutional charisma.” Khomeini's charisma was revolutionary and personal, but Khamenei's charisma is maintained through institutionalization within the political structure. Wilayat al-Faqih, the IRGC, and the Guardian Council serve as mechanisms that systematically reproduce this charisma. [17] This process demonstrates that charismatic authority does not necessarily disappear with the founding figure, but can be inherited and strengthened through formal institutions. Thus, Iran offers a leadership model that shows how charisma can be transformed into long-term political power.

### ● **Global insight**

Khamenei's leadership model also provides important insights for global leadership studies. Many modern countries face a crisis of legitimacy, especially when legal-rational authority is no longer able to respond to the aspirations of the people. In this context, the combination of spirituality, morality, and the institutionalization of charisma offers an alternative to contemporary forms of political legitimacy. [3] Although Iran's context differs from that of other countries, the principle that stable leadership requires a moral foundation alongside institutional structures can be applied more broadly. The Iranian model demonstrates how legitimacy can be built through a synthesis of religious authority and modern political mechanisms.

## **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's leadership embodies a transformation of Weberian *charisma* into a spiritually institutionalized form of authority. The term *charismatic* here does not merely refer to personal magnetism as defined by Weber, but extends to moral and spiritual legitimacy grounded in Islamic mysticism (*'irfan*) and ascetic values. By integrating Weber's concept of *routinization of charisma* with insights from spiritual leadership theory, the research highlights how charisma can persist within rational-legal and bureaucratic frameworks while maintaining its transcendent and ethical character. This synthesis offers a new perspective on the endurance of faith-based political authority in the modern era, showing that spiritual charisma remains a sustainable source of legitimacy in Islamic governance.



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