





# The Impact of Local Governance Models on National Unity and Cohesion After the Victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran

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This article examines the impact of local governance models on national unity and cohesion in Iran following the victory of the Islamic Revolution. Employing a historical-analytical approach and drawing upon existing documents and records, the study investigates the transformations in the local governance system from the era of initial democratic decentralization (1979–1988) to the hybrid bureaucratic and decentralized model (1988–2021). Focusing on the tripartite dimensions of national cohesion—namely, social cohesion (emphasizing social inclusion and equality), cultural cohesion (emphasizing cultural identity), and political cohesion (emphasizing political participation and trust in the government)—this study analyzes how each governance model has contributed to either strengthening or weakening national cohesion. Findings indicate that in the realm of social cohesion, although efforts have been made to enhance social inclusion and social justice, challenges such as the expansion of state bureaucracy and dependency on oil rent have posed significant obstacles. In the area of cultural cohesion, there has been a notable emphasis on Islamic values and traditions within the framework of the Islamic Republic; however, concerns have also emerged regarding political restrictions and their impact on cultural diversity. This study demonstrates that national cohesion is a multifaceted concept requiring a balance between social, cultural, and political components, as well as a nuanced understanding of the diversity of local communities. Ultimately, it is concluded that effective local governance can play a pivotal role in enhancing national cohesion by promoting local participation, reinforcing social inclusion, and fostering trust and collaboration.

**Keywords:** National cohesion, local governance, Islamic Revolution, political, social, cultural

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## 1. Introduction

Today, in advanced societies, the transformation in the concept of governance has pushed communities toward democratic practices and accelerated the democratization process—a form of

ideal governance that can encompass the interests of both the state and the people through interaction and cooperation. Local and regional governance entails managing complex networks of actors at national, provincial, and local levels, including social and political groups, pressure groups and stakeholders, social



institutions, and commercial and private organizations. In this context, the state can no longer act as the dominant actor traditionally imposing its will. Based on local and regional governance, which encompasses the rights of the entire society, governments require mechanisms that establish appropriate structures for interaction and collaboration. This structure must be decentralized and non-concentrated so that other institutions, endowed with broad authority and significant responsibility, can play a role in delivering public services and act creatively.

Iran's political history indicates that local-popular institutions and their underlying ideology have not held a prominent place (Qalibaf, 2001). Historically, Iranian governments have been predominantly individualistic, absolute, autocratic, and self-centered, resulting in the formation of a centralized governance system in Iran. With the victory of the Constitutional Revolution and the development of concepts such as democracy and civil rights, the first step toward decentralizing the political system in Iran was taken. The Constitutional Revolution led to the establishment of democratic institutions and organizations such as the Constitution, the National Assembly, and councils. During this period, public participation in determining the fate and administration of society, as well as the formation of local and regional institutions such as provincial and district councils, gained attention, and certain local affairs were delegated to these institutions (Hafeznia, 2014).

The creation of solidarity and national cohesion, and ultimately the attainment of sustainable security at national and international levels, is considered a fundamental pillar in establishing and preserving the framework of national integration in many historical eras. In traditional societies, numerous factors such as racial, tribal, and ethnic ties contributed to social cohesion and security. However, with the onset of the modern age—characterized by development and significant transformations across various domains—previous bonding elements have weakened, and prior forms of communication and consensus have faced serious challenges.

The emergence of governance networks has been described as units under a comprehensive meta-governance system (Dekker, 2004). These sub-units do not operate independently; rather, there exists interdependence among them and in their engagement

with private organizations. Government networks are the outputs of governance by public authorities who utilize regulations to provide public services (Mohammad Zadeh Asl et al., 2016). A general framework begins to take shape, showing how these units, although independent, must operate interdependently under a central authority. Hence, the necessity of governance lies in a central thread that enables these organizations to function within this dynamic.

Political sociology examines the relationship between the state and society, but the influence of the state on society is not equal to society's influence on the state. The state, as the embodiment of sovereign will, exercises its power and authority over society, while society's relationship with the state can be analyzed through the concept of "determinacy" (Bassford, 2007). In this regard, the local government, as the most significant growing grassroots institution in urban administration globally, functions based on democratic mechanisms and "bottom-up" decision-making and planning. Accurate identification of the status of this institution in Iranian cities, through the study of local governance across various dimensions, can contribute to national cohesion. Therefore, any research in this field can inform the scientific and research communities as well as policymakers and decision-makers about the do's and don'ts in this arena.

A review of the literature on local governance indicates that theoretical and applied research in this area within Iran is relatively recent, and existing studies have mostly been conducted separately in fields such as management, economics, identity, and national cohesion. Nevertheless, one of the fields directly affected by the implementation of local governance is political sociology. In other words, the necessity and significance of examining local governance in political sociology are particularly emphasized. Today, in order to achieve effective governance, countries and governments must identify and specify their local and indigenous models of good governance. To this end, recognizing the historical experience, culture, and native values of each country is essential (Naderi, 2011). Iran, with its millennia-old civilization, has always been exposed to invasions from various ethnic and religious groups due to its geographical and political position. These invasions have profoundly influenced the demographic composition

and the economic, cultural, and political structure of Iranian society. Thus, understanding the structure, function, and demographic-ethnic nature of society is highly significant for various decision-making and planning efforts (Seifollahi & Hafez Amini, 2009). Additionally, if we accept that issues in political sociology stem from social divisions and the social groups formed by them, then considering the factors that create state-nation gaps further underscores the importance of research in this field. Despite the intrinsic connection between the concept of local governance and national cohesion in Iranian society, comprehensive studies and analyses in this area have so far been largely neglected. Therefore, this study seeks to utilize theories and conceptual foundations from social science thinkers in the domain of national cohesion and local governance to analyze historical events and investigate the role and impact of various types of local governance on the strengthening or weakening of national cohesion in Iran after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. In other words, the present study aims to answer the central question: How has the local governance model in Iran during the aforementioned periods affected national cohesion?

## 2. Research Background

Research on the impact of local governance models on national cohesion emerges from the broader literature on social cohesion, governance, and decentralization. Scholars and researchers have employed various methods including case studies, surveys, comparative analysis, and statistical modeling to examine the relationship between local governance models and national cohesion.

Overall, these studies indicate that effective local governance can contribute to national cohesion by enhancing citizen participation, fostering dialogue and trust, and addressing local grievances. However, the specific mechanisms through which local governance contributes to national cohesion may vary depending on the context and the specific challenges a country faces.

The study by Zare Neystanak (2015) demonstrates that Iran's national identity—comprising national, religious, cultural, social, and human values across various dimensions—is essential for achieving national unity. Strengthening national components and embracing all ethnic, cultural, and religious identities are key to

achieving national unity and cohesion in Iran. This requires government commitment to establishing equitable conditions, respectful relationships, and recognition of the political and social rights of diverse ethnic groups (Zareh Nistanak, 2015).

Hyrenko (2022) shows that digitalization can improve the management of local government bodies (LGBs) through various means, including online access to public information, facilitating citizen participation in decision-making (e-democracy), simplifying internal processes, offering online public services, and implementing smart technologies in local infrastructure. The importance of adapting approaches to the specific needs and priorities of each community is emphasized in this process (Hyrenko, 2022).

Paul Anderson, in a 2022 study titled *Local Government and Community Participation: The Unified Committee Model in Ghana's Decentralization Program*, examines Ghana's Unified Committee System, which was designed to bring decision-making power closer to the people. The study reveals a gap between public expectations of these committees and their actual capabilities. While communities expect these committees to offer diverse solutions, limited funding constrains even their essential activities (Anderson, 2022). This results in a combination of unrealistic expectations and insufficient resources, which undermines the system's overall effectiveness. Anderson proposes two strategies to improve the situation:

1. Educating the public on the roles and limitations of the committees to manage expectations.
2. Providing better financial support to the committees so they can carry out more critical tasks and serve their communities more effectively.

Addressing these challenges could transform the Unified Committee System into a powerful tool for enhancing local participation in decision-making and development. Chyrok, in a 2021 article titled *State Administration and Local Government of German Settler Colonies in the Russian Empire (Late 18th – Early 19th Century)*, analyzes the administrative structure and self-governance practices of German colonies in southern Russia, founded between the late 1700s and early 1800s. The article highlights how the Russian government implemented policies to attract German immigrants, including tax exemptions, military service exemptions,

and the right to local self-governance. It closely examines state institutions such as the State Economy Expedition Board and Guardianship Offices, which were responsible for overseeing the lives and activities of the German settlers. Additionally, the study delves into the complex details of local self-governance in these colonies. Elected officials like the Ober-Schultheiß, Schultheiß, and Beisitzer were chosen by the community and then confirmed by government offices. The article stresses the importance of adhering to existing laws to ensure settlers' quality of life. Interestingly, it reveals that social life was not governed solely by official laws; the colonists also developed their own body of customary law, which coexisted with the formal legal system and contributed to the unique social order of the colonies. This fusion of official and local laws created a distinct administrative and social environment in the colonies (Chyrko, 2021).

In his 2010 article titled *Expanding Diversity of Government in Global Governance: State Parliamentarians and Local Governments*, Chadwick argues that traditional views of global governance, which focus solely on national governments, are outdated. The emergence of interconnected technologies has broadened the range of global issues and enabled actors beyond nation-states to increasingly participate in addressing them. The author refers to the long-standing history of international organizations for local governments (established in 1913) and for parliamentarians (established in 1889). Despite their established presence, their influence on global decision-making has largely been overlooked. The article proposes that these institutions, alongside similar entities, deserve a more prominent role in shaping international policy (Chadwick, 2010).

Liberati et al. (2012), in a study titled *Tax Decentralization and the Size of Local Government*, examine the relationship between fiscal federalism (i.e., the division of taxing and spending powers) and the size of local governments. Unlike earlier studies that generally examined grants and taxes as undifferentiated categories, this research takes a more detailed look at the impact of specific tax structures. The central argument is that local governments with greater control over independently collected taxes (i.e., tax separation) are less likely to increase their expenditures compared to those that share a tax base with higher levels of government. Using data from OECD countries, the study

shows that property taxes—typically collected independently by local governments—are associated with a smaller local government size (Liberati & Sacchi, 2012).

Sharifi, in a 2016 article titled *A Historical Review of Decentralization and Local Government in Albania*, examines key transformations in Albania's local governance system over time. He notes that these changes were driven not only by internal shifts but also by broader trends in regional management. Before achieving autonomy from the Ottoman Empire, Albanians had established regional governing bodies known as Pashaliks, which laid the groundwork for decentralized governance structures. In the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire itself proposed decentralization reforms. After Albania's independence, the new state adopted a similar model, creating a hierarchy of provinces and districts modeled after Ottoman administrative structures. Major reforms in 1992 introduced municipal units (smaller local governments) and reorganized local governance, representing another step toward decentralization and strengthening local authority. These reforms improved local institutions and enhanced governmental accountability to citizens, gradually transforming Albania's local governance structure. These developments not only affected local administration but also contributed to improved quality of life and public services for citizens (Sherifi, 2016).

### 3. Governance

Governance refers to the exercise of authority and the process of leading and regulating political, economic, and social affairs through which society assigns value to itself. The capacity of a governance system to function and integrate its actions has increasingly been recognized as the foundation of a society's advancement and development (Memarzadeh & Ahmadi, 2013). Governance acknowledges the existence of power both within and beyond the authority of formal and informal institutions, encompassing major groups of actors from the government, the private sector, and civil society. It also includes the processes by which decisions are identified and formulated. The World Bank outlines six essential characteristics of governance: accountability, efficiency, rule of law, anti-corruption, minimal state intervention, and stability. Governance is thus a process

for managing the social, political, economic, and cultural affairs of society, through strategic planning for government systems and the design and function of the state apparatus at local, national, regional, international, and global levels (Badii Azandahi et al., 2018).

Three main features of local governance are: 1) Trustworthiness – doing the right thing, delivering services aligned with or focused on citizens' preferences; 2) Responsiveness – doing the right thing the right way, or performing better at lower cost, with benchmarking against best practices; and 3) Accountability – toward citizens through a rights-based approach. This perspective is rooted in the history of industrial nations. Local government was the original form of governance until wars and centralizing victories transferred responsibilities to regional and central governments. This trend continued until the age of globalization and the information revolution, which revealed the shortcomings of centralized governance in improving quality of life and social outputs.

The terms *governance* and *government* are theoretical and technical concepts that are often used interchangeably, meaning literally to guide or direct (Seifollahi & Hafez Amini, 2009). Given features such as decentralization, democratic structures, localized and people-oriented planning and decision-making, increased roles of non-governmental institutions and civil society, attention to public interest, equitable distribution of opportunities, and the promotion of social and geographic justice, local government—due to its specific nature and functions—can be regarded as an effective and optimal example of a cooperative (national) government practicing good governance (Zarghani & Ahmadi, 2019). Local governance, rooted in good governance, stems from indigenous models and local paradigms with distinct intellectual foundations, aiming to revive key values such as "accountability and the right to voice opinions," "transparency," "participation," and "flexibility." Clearly, local governance can directly contribute to national cohesion by deepening the connection between state and society or, in other words, by entangling the state and nation within a region. Thus, due to the importance of uniting people, generations, and ethnic groups and ensuring national integration, which plays a direct role in the political and economic development of societies, countries seek to consolidate

their structures through the process of nation-building—offering a unified definition of the nation and legitimizing it to form a cohesive and united populace (Aminian, 2007). To achieve this cohesion in Iran, which is characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, local governors play a significant role in promoting shared understandings and commonalities, thereby fostering deeper connections between the public and the state and paving the way for national unity. On this basis, realizing the indicators of regional and local governance can facilitate institutionalized political participation and a modern system for regions of the country to exercise their right to self-determination.

Governance does not merely refer to government but to society as a whole, in which government is merely one actor. Government is an internal mechanism that, depending on each country's political system, constitution, and territorial structure, possesses a unique style of governing. Government refers to the political system or a component of the state that bears responsibility for organizing the national political space through ensuring security, adjudication, and the welfare of society (Hafeznia, 2014). Governance, or good governance, coordinates the three main sectors (government, civil society, and the private sector) in regulating relations with governmental institutions, the public, other countries, and organizations at local, regional, and international levels. Within governance, civil institutions are seen as defenders of civil rights, promoting public participation to influence policymaking. The private sector is viewed as the engine of investment, contributing to the growth of gross national product through increased per capita income, economic dynamism, and relative welfare. Lastly, the government's role is evaluated as a facilitator of public activities, ensuring an environment conducive to sustainable development and promoting social justice (Aminian, 2007). Governance thus represents a broader concept than government; it is essentially an effort toward the rule of law, transparency, responsibility, participation, equality, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and strategic vision in exercising political, economic, and administrative authority (Midri, 2006; Midri & Kheirkhah, 2004). Moreover, government is only one pillar of governance, which becomes fully realized through collaboration with the other two sectors.



**Table 1**

*Comparison of Key Characteristics of Government and Governance*

Factors	Government	Governance
Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Very limited number of participants;</li> <li>– Primarily state actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Very large number of participants;</li> <li>– Actors from both private and public sectors</li> </ul>
Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No consultation;</li> <li>– No cooperation in policy formulation and execution;</li> <li>– Broad scope of political topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Consultation processes;</li> <li>– Maximum possible cooperation in policy design and execution;</li> <li>– Narrower scope of political topics</li> </ul>
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Closed boundaries;</li> <li>– Involuntary membership;</li> <li>– Limited frequency and duration of interaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Open boundaries;</li> <li>– Voluntary membership;</li> <li>– Frequent and prolonged interaction</li> </ul>

#### 4. Principles of Local Governance

Local government, as an intermediary institution between the people of various regions and the central government, plays a facilitating and supportive role for the central state. On the one hand, it aids in strengthening the central government's supervision over different regions (including peripheral, ethnic, and geographically distant areas), and on the other hand, it enhances public participation in better management of regional and national affairs. The primary objective of local government is to decentralize the central state's authority normatively across all elements—political, economic, administrative, geographic, technical, and social. This includes safeguarding minority rights, achieving socio-spatial justice, and demonstrating real democracy for the entire society. It is through mutual action and cooperation between local and central governments that development, welfare, and economic, social, and cultural growth of residents in geographical units are realized. The central government, motivated by the need to maintain security, public calm, and a sense of loyalty from local populations—along with its increasing burden of duties (especially in unitary states), bureaucratic expansion, and concern over local discontent—often attempts to delegate part of its responsibilities, particularly executive powers, to the local level. However, the acceptance of certain responsibilities by local government should not be interpreted as a challenge to, or negation of, the central government's authority. Local government is neither an opponent of nor a passive agent of the central government; rather, it is a complementary structure and its partner in the local domain.

Undoubtedly, the effectiveness and functions of local government depend on the central government's discretion, which holds the authority to oversee and expand local governance. In such a context, local governance can lead to national unity. The extent of authority and scope of local government's role is influenced by the type of political system (centralized, decentralized, federated, confederated), the society's political culture (democratic or otherwise), and the economic, social, and administrative conditions of governance, as well as political leaders' attitudes. These conditions vary significantly across countries and governments.

An important point is that the concept of governance today is applied across local, national, and international scales. Governance, as a new approach to public administration, has found extensive application in supranational, national, and local realms. What defines the "locality" of governance is the extent of effective participation by citizens and local actors in determining local aspirations and demands, and their collaborative efforts to realize community goals. This process is led by the state, but advanced through collaboration with the private sector and civil society (Dekker, 2004, p. 156). Thus, in such decentralizing, accelerating, and development-oriented interpretations of governance, local government is seen as a modality of governance (good governance) aimed at achieving these objectives. In essence, local governments are institutions established through democratic processes and based on citizen administration, operating at subnational scales to make decisions and manage local affairs (Veisi, 2013). In any structure or model, local governments must possess the following features to perform effectively:

1. They must be under the sovereignty of the national government.
2. Their officials must be elected by local residents, with the public playing a direct role in their formation.
3. They must be inherently local institutions, with operations confined to the local level.
4. They must have organizational status with legal personality, enabling them to enter contracts with state and non-state entities, appear in court, and litigate.
5. They must possess adequate authority, power, and autonomy to manage and administer their jurisdictions, implement policies, prepare budgets, and exercise some degree of control over their personnel.
6. They must have financial power and sufficient resources, since financial dependence on state institutions undermines operational autonomy (Chadwick, 2010).

These characteristics not only improve the organizational efficiency of local government but also distinguish local and community institutions from other organizations operating in the same area. The most crucial feature of local government is its autonomy and authority within its jurisdiction. From this perspective, local governance—through local government—exercises political, economic, and administrative authority in managing local community affairs. It encompasses the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups express their interests, exercise legal rights, fulfill obligations, and mediate differences. In local governance, a network of actors—including local governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, and representatives of the central government—collaboratively identify local priorities and issues and work toward realizing shared objectives and resolving challenges.

Although in some literature, good local governance is equated with good government, the two should not be considered synonymous, as the executive branch does not encompass all societal institutions, and other entities also contribute to the functioning of a country. Nonetheless, many scholars agree that the existence of good government is a necessary condition for good local governance. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has identified key principles

of good local governance and the factors that reinforce them. Governments can take meaningful steps toward sustainable development by respecting and implementing these principles. The key principles of good local governance are as follows:

- **Participation:** The level of public participation in community affairs is one of the most critical pillars of good local governance. Participation can be direct or indirect. While it is unrealistic to expect all views to be considered in national decision-making, participation here refers to freedom of expression, diversity of viewpoints, and the organization of a civil society.
- **Rule of Law:** Good local governance requires a fair legal framework that ensures full protection of individual rights, especially for minorities, and is properly enforced. The fair application of laws necessitates an independent judiciary and a non-corrupt executive arm (e.g., police force).
- **Transparency:** Transparency refers to the free flow of information and its easy accessibility for all. It also implies that people are informed about how decisions are made and implemented. In such settings, the media can freely analyze and critique policies and decisions made by governing bodies.
- **Accountability:** Institutional and organizational accountability, within a defined legal and temporal framework, to members and clients, is one of the foundational elements of good local governance.
- **Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making:** As noted, the facilitation of diverse opinions in political, social, and economic spheres is a principle of local governance. The local governor must guide differing perspectives toward a national consensus that aligns with broader societal goals. This critical role requires a precise understanding of the long-term needs of the community on the path to sustainable development.

Given the above, the issues central to local governance include the spatial distribution of power (territorial governance), relations between different levels of government and citizens (political governance), informal institutions and social movements, and citizen

participation (social governance)—all of which are closely related to the concept of national cohesion.

Humans have historically established cohesion and social institutions as a means of ensuring security. Since the replacement of fragmented feudal rule and empires with nation-states as the primary units in international relations, eliminating discrimination has become essential to enhancing national security. Iran's political history, fragile geopolitical position, and unique topography all indicate actual and potential threats. Therefore, effective management of the country's political-geographic space is a political imperative for ensuring national security and cohesion. Furthermore, modern history has shown that the central government alone—especially through hierarchical structures—cannot maintain sustainable security or fulfill economic and service-related functions. Accordingly, carefully delegating responsibilities to locally elected institutions across the country, and promoting democratic development of its regions, are viable strategies for strengthening national security and countering internal and external threats.

Additionally, Iran's ethnic and cultural diversity is a defining characteristic of its demographic composition. Aware of this, adversaries of the nation have sought to exploit this diversity by deliberately promoting ethnic nationalism and covertly or overtly supporting extremist separatist and Salafist movements, thereby undermining national unity and cohesion.

In summary, effective local governance can promote trust and cooperation within communities, foster social inclusion, and strengthen a shared sense of belonging and identity—all of which contribute to national cohesion.

**Effective local governance can contribute to national cohesion in the following ways:**

1. **Promoting Local Participation:** When citizens actively participate in local decision-making processes, they develop a sense of ownership and responsibility toward their communities. This can enhance civic engagement and strengthen their connection to the broader national community.
2. **Strengthening Social Inclusion:** Effective local government ensures that all community members have access to public services and resources. This fosters social inclusion, reduces

inequalities, and cultivates a shared sense of identity and purpose among citizens.

3. **Creating Opportunities for Engagement:** Local government can provide opportunities for citizens to engage with their communities through volunteering, civil organizations, and other forms of social participation. This helps build social capital and strengthen community bonds, supporting national cohesion.
4. **Building Trust and Cooperation:** Effective local governance fosters transparency and accountability, which helps build trust and cooperation among community members. When citizens feel their voices are heard and their needs addressed, they are more likely to trust local institutions and collaborate toward common goals.

In general, effective local governance plays a pivotal role in enhancing national cohesion by fostering trust, encouraging cooperation, promoting inclusion, and creating opportunities for civic participation. By empowering local communities, we lay the foundation for a stronger and more unified nation.

## 5. National Cohesion and Its Components

The best concise definition of *national cohesion* is the capacity of a society to foster a shared sense of identity, purpose, and loyalty among its citizens, despite their diverse backgrounds and interests. This involves establishing a set of shared values, norms, and beliefs that form the foundation of social trust, cooperation, and mutual support within a society. The concept of national cohesion is closely linked to the idea of the nation-state, which is a political entity that claims a defined territory and seeks to govern the people living within it. National cohesion is considered essential for the functioning of a modern state, as it provides a foundation for social stability, political legitimacy, and economic development. However, achieving national cohesion in diverse societies can be challenging due to significant differences in language, culture, religion, and history among people living within the same territory. Furthermore, globalization, migration, and the rise of identity politics have made it increasingly difficult to foster a shared sense of identity and purpose in society. Policies that promote social inclusion, economic opportunities, and equal access to public services are



deemed essential to achieving national cohesion in diverse societies. These include multiculturalist policies, the celebration of cultural diversity and traditions, as well as policies that address economic inequality and provide upward social mobility opportunities (Fukuyama, 2018; Walzer, 2004; Weber & Talcott, 1920). In general, national cohesion is a complex and multidimensional concept, and ongoing debates among scholars and policymakers exist concerning the best methods for achieving it in various contexts.

The most important components of national cohesion can be outlined as follows:

**Social Cohesion:** Social cohesion is a key element of national cohesion, referring to the level of trust, mutual support, and shared identity among citizens within a society. A strong sense of social cohesion can lead to greater societal stability, increased economic productivity, and improved health outcomes, while its absence may contribute to social fragmentation, inequality, and conflict.

**Cultural Cohesion:** Cultural cohesion refers to a shared set of values, traditions, and cultural practices that define a society's national identity. This includes shared language, history, and cultural symbols, along with a sense of pride and loyalty toward national heritage. Cultural cohesion can foster a sense of belonging and identity among citizens, but if certain groups feel excluded or marginalized from the dominant culture, it can contribute to tensions and conflict.

**Political Cohesion:** Political cohesion refers to the degree of collective commitment among citizens to the institutions and political processes governing society. This includes state legitimacy, rule of law, and the extent of political participation and representation. Political cohesion is vital for democratic governance as it ensures that citizens have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. However, political polarization, corruption, and the erosion of democratic norms and institutions can threaten political cohesion.

Overall, the three components—social, cultural, and political cohesion—are interdependent and can either reinforce or undermine one another. A strong sense of national cohesion requires a balance between these components and a recognition of the diversity and complexity of modern societies. Together, they contribute to the feeling of national cohesion, which underpins social stability, political legitimacy, and

economic development. Social cohesion provides the groundwork for cultural and political cohesion by fostering a sense of unity and shared identity among individuals and groups. Cultural cohesion, in turn, strengthens social cohesion through shared values and collective identity. Political cohesion builds upon both by creating a shared vision of governance and establishing institutions that reflect the values and needs of the community.

Ultimately, these components can be viewed as interconnected layers: social cohesion as the foundation, cultural cohesion as the next layer, and political cohesion as the final layer. Policies and interventions that enhance all three can help create a more cohesive and resilient society where individuals and groups collaborate toward common goals and shared interests.

### Research Method

This study seeks to analyze the impact of local governance models on national cohesion in Iran following the victory of the Islamic Revolution. It examines the effects of these models on national cohesion across historically defined periods using the operational indicators of the three main components—social cohesion, cultural cohesion, and political cohesion—through comparative, holistic, and rational analytical approaches. The study first draws upon theoretical literature to define the concept of simple governance systems and their features. It then employs a descriptive-analytical method to assess how local governance systems have either strengthened or weakened national cohesion, based on the prevailing natural and human geography of Iran. Finally, a survey of experts and scholars was conducted to derive more precise conclusions.

To evaluate the impact of local governance systems on national cohesion in Iran after the Islamic Revolution, historical propositions and events related to each concept were collected and interpreted from documents and sources. In doing so, the study identifies how local governance models influenced the three core dimensions of national cohesion:

**Social Cohesion**—including sense of belonging, shared values and norms, social inclusion and equality, participatory decision-making, safety and security;

**Cultural Cohesion**—including cultural diversity, intercultural contact, cultural participation, cultural knowledge, and cultural identity;

**Political Cohesion**—including trust in government, political participation, political identity, political tolerance, and political culture.

This research focuses on the *hybrid/bureaucratic and decentralized* model of local governance from the post-revolutionary period to the present (1979–2021).

**Democratic/Decentralized (1979–1988):** Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran established a decentralized and democratic local government system based on elected councils and popular participation. The new Constitution of the Islamic Republic created a local government framework granting significant powers to local councils to manage local affairs. These councils were responsible for budgeting, planning, and service provision and were elected by local communities. The system was characterized by a bottom-up approach with significant community involvement. However, it also faced critical challenges, including political and social tensions, limited resources, and restricted autonomy for local councils. An example of this system is Iran's city council model, in which councils are elected by the public and have decision-making authority over local issues. They are accountable to the public and required to hold regular public meetings to discuss local matters, representing a participatory and democratic local governance model.

An alternative example, however, was the appointment of governors and mayors by the central government after the Revolution. These appointed officials often had little to no connection to the local community and were usually selected based on political affiliations with the central government.

**Hybrid/Bureaucratic and Decentralized (1988–2021):** In the post-revolutionary period, Iran developed a hybrid local governance system combining elements of both bureaucratic and decentralized models. In this system, the central government appoints local officials and provides guidance and resources, while local councils retain significant authority to manage local affairs and engage communities in decision-making. This system has been evolving and has undergone substantial changes over recent decades. A key example is the city councils that exist in many cities, consisting of both elected and appointed members responsible for urban planning, service delivery, and infrastructure development.

This model of local governance originated during the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 but only gained practical attention after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It is characterized by a bottom-up approach, strong community participation, and public accountability. Local officials are elected by the people and are accountable to them. The local governance system is founded on the principles of decentralization, democracy, and participatory government.

To classify local governance in terms of its contribution to national cohesion in Iran, it is important to consider that widely cited typologies—particularly those based on vertical power relations, such as those proposed by Page and Goldsmith, and Hesse and Sharpe—are often based on the geographic grouping of European countries (North vs. South). These typologies reflect geographic proximity and corresponding similarities in cultural, social, and historical contexts, which have led to the formation of relatively homogeneous political and administrative clusters in Europe. Therefore, rather than using these models to analyze local governance in Iran, this study adopts the institutional typology proposed by Wollmann, which emphasizes institutional characteristics over geographic proximity.

According to Woolcock's (2000) typology, local government systems can be classified based on three binary criteria:

1. **Single vs. Dual Competence,**
2. **Uniform vs. Split Tasks,**
3. **Separated vs. Integrated Relations (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).**

Based on this framework, Iran's current local governance system in relation to national cohesion can be described as a *dual-competence model*, with *uniform tasks* and an *integrated relationship* approach.

## 6. Findings Analysis

### 6.1. Social Cohesion

The concept of "*social inclusion and equality*", which was initially influenced by the characteristics of the third governance model (democratic/decentralized) and later by the fourth model (hybrid/bureaucratic and decentralized), led to the establishment of a local governance system in Iran that combined elements of bureaucratic, democratic, and decentralized systems. During this period, *social inclusion and equality* remained

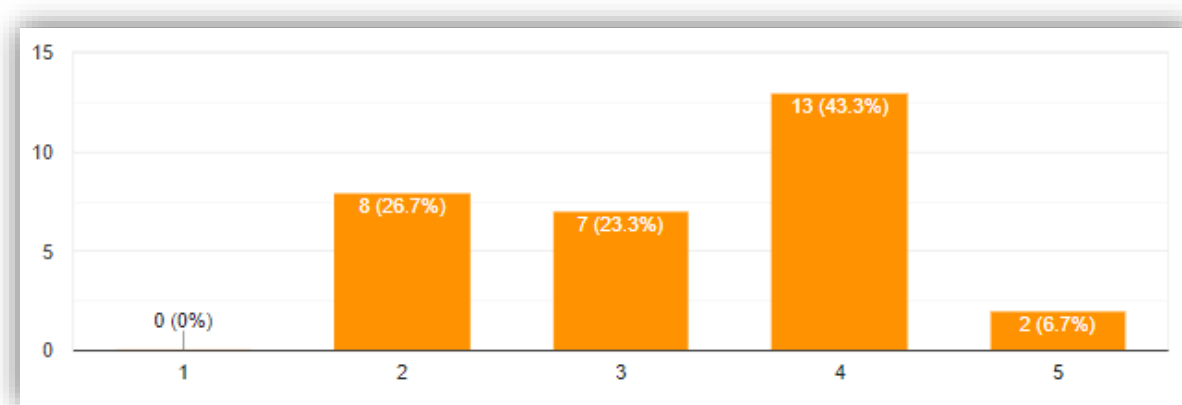
a priority through the implementation of a wide range of policies aimed at addressing social inequalities and promoting social justice. These policies included the expansion of social welfare programs, job creation, and the provision of affordable housing.

The research findings, which show that the concept of “social inclusion and equality” remained a priority in Iranian history during this period through a range of

social justice-oriented policies, are generally supported by expert opinion. Most experts (24 out of 31) agreed with this conclusion, while only 6 disagreed. The average relative intensity of social cohesion regarding social inclusion and equality, based on expert assessments, was 3.3 out of 5. This indicates a moderate to strong level of social cohesion during this period, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Frequency of Relative Intensity of “Social Inclusion and Equality”*



Many experts emphasized the efforts of the Islamic Revolution and subsequent governments to enhance inclusion and social equity. They referred to the establishment of institutions such as the *Imam Khomeini Relief Committee* and the *Foundation of the Oppressed*, as well as the emphasis on social justice in national development plans. However, some experts also noted that these efforts were not always successful in reducing inequality and promoting justice. They cited factors such as increased bureaucratic expansion, social network dependencies, and reliance on oil rents as obstacles to achieving social cohesion.

The analysis of expert responses suggests a nuanced view of social cohesion in this historical period. While there is general agreement that “social inclusion and equality” was a priority, there is also recognition that achieving these goals was challenging. The reasons include the complexity of society, the expansion of the state bureaucracy, and reliance on oil revenues.

## 6.2. Cultural Cohesion: Cultural Identity Dimension

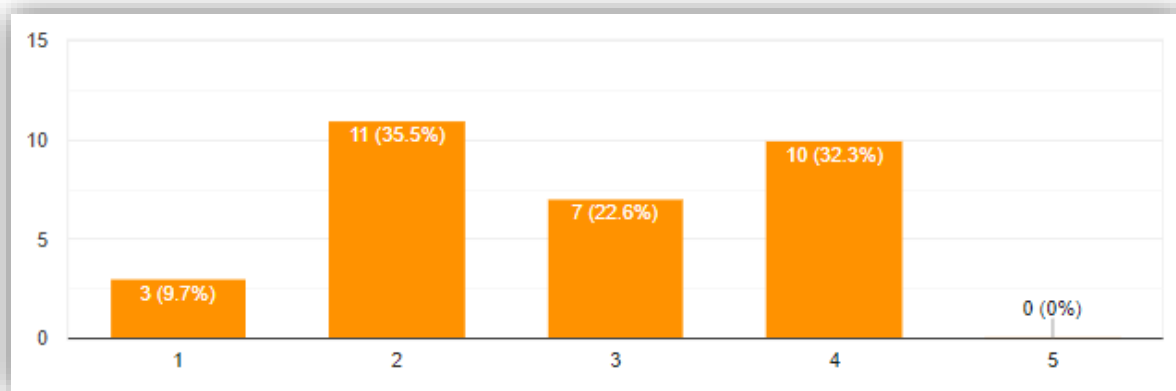
The concept of “cultural identity”, influenced by the third (democratic/decentralized) and later the fourth

(hybrid/bureaucratic and decentralized) governance models, also evolved under a local governance system that integrated bureaucratic, democratic, and decentralized features. In general, the local governance system in the fourth historical phase of Iran was hierarchical, characterized by the establishment of Parliament as an elected institution and the creation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a significant institutional transformation. Within the Islamic Republic, the concept of *cultural identity* was emphasized through the promotion of Islamic values and traditions. Nonetheless, concerns regarding the suppression of cultural diversity and political dissent also emerged.

A majority of experts (26 out of 31) agreed with the study’s conclusion that cultural cohesion during this historical period in Iran was relatively strong. However, expert opinions varied on the specific factors contributing to this cohesion. Some experts (14 out of 26) attributed it primarily to the emphasis on Islamic values and traditions, while others (12 out of 26) believed that promoting local identities and cultural diversity also played a role.

**Figure 2**

*Frequency of Relative Intensity of "Cultural Identity"*



The average relative intensity of this concept from the experts' perspective was 2.77, indicating a relative strengthening during this period, as shown in Figure 2. Some experts expressed concern over the suppression of cultural diversity and noted that at times, the government prioritized Islamic values over other cultural expressions. Nevertheless, they also acknowledged that the Islamic Republic took measures to support cultural diversity, such as introducing minority languages in schools.

The analysis of expert responses and research findings suggests that while cultural cohesion was relatively strong during this period, it was not without its challenges. Government emphasis on Islamic traditions at times led to the suppression of cultural diversity, and concerns were raised about the lack of a clear legal framework for protecting cultural expressions.

Despite these challenges, the Islamic Republic made progress in promoting cultural cohesion. Steps were taken to enhance local identities and cultural diversity, demonstrating a commitment to preserving Iran's rich cultural heritage.

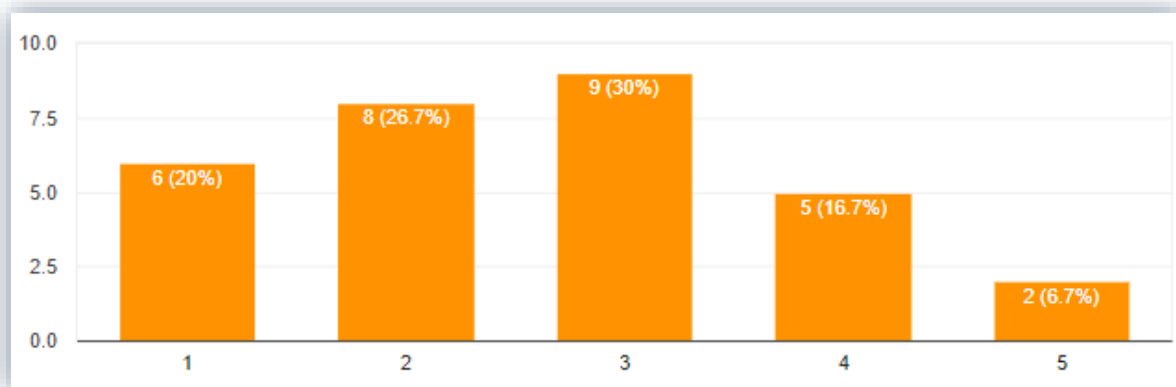
### 6.3. Political Cohesion: Trust in Government

The concept of "trust in government", shaped initially by the third governance model (democratic/decentralized) and later by the fourth (hybrid/bureaucratic and decentralized), reflects a hybrid system combining bureaucratic, democratic, and decentralized elements. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran's local governance system has emphasized Islamic principles and decentralized decision-making through elected councils. While this structure has enabled greater political participation and empowerment at the local level, the extent to which it has strengthened or weakened public trust in government remains debatable.

A majority of experts (25 out of 31) agreed with the study's conclusion that trust in government during this period has fluctuated. They cited several contributing factors, including the decentralization of decision-making via elected councils, the impact of foreign media attacks, and the expansion of parallel institutions.

**Figure 3**

*Frequency of Relative Intensity of "Trust in Government"*



Some experts also noted that there were periods of high public trust, particularly in the early years following the Islamic Revolution. However, they argued that these periods were followed by declines in trust. The average relative intensity for this dimension was 2.63, as presented in Figure 3. The analysis indicates that public trust in government has been unstable since the Revolution, likely due to the complex interaction of factors such as decentralization efforts, media influence, and the emergence of parallel power structures.

Table 2 below presents the analysis of national cohesion based on its three components: social, cultural, and political cohesion. Overall, national cohesion during the period under review was moderate. While social cohesion scored higher than the other two components, political cohesion was the weakest, suggesting that political challenges may have impacted other aspects of national cohesion.

**Table 2**

*National Cohesion: Components of Social, Cultural, and Political Cohesion (1979–2021)*

Period (1979–2021)	Avg. Social Cohesion	Avg. Cultural Cohesion	Avg. Political Cohesion	Avg. National Cohesion
Mean (0–5 Scale)	3.3	2.77	2.63	2.9
Percent (%)	66%	55.4%	52.6%	58%

- **Social Cohesion:** With an average of 3.3 and 66%, this component scored the highest, suggesting that during this period, social interactions and intergroup relations were stronger relative to the other dimensions.
- **Cultural Cohesion:** With an average of 2.77 and 55.4%, this dimension was moderate, indicating challenges in maintaining and promoting shared cultural identity and values.
- **Political Cohesion:** With an average of 2.63 and 52.6%, this was the weakest component, potentially reflecting political disagreements, lack of consensus on national direction, and questions surrounding the legitimacy of political institutions.

## 7. Conclusion

*National cohesion* is a complex and multidimensional concept, composed fundamentally of three core components: *social cohesion*, *cultural cohesion*, and *political cohesion*.

Social cohesion refers to the degree to which individuals and groups within a society share a sense of identity, belonging, and mutual commitment. It is closely linked to *social capital*, which includes networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and coordination. Key dimensions and indicators of social cohesion include trust, social networks, civic participation, and a sense of belonging and identity.



Cultural cohesion refers to the extent to which individuals and groups in a society share common values, beliefs, and practices. It is closely associated with *social identity* and can generate a collective sense of purpose and belonging. Key aspects of cultural cohesion include shared cultural practices, values and beliefs, as well as cultural diversity and tolerance.

Political cohesion reflects the degree to which individuals and groups within a society align with shared political values, goals, and institutions. It is tightly linked to governance and can enhance the stability and effectiveness of political institutions. Indicators include trust in political institutions, participation in political processes, and agreement on fundamental political values and goals.

These three components are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Social cohesion provides the foundation for both cultural and political cohesion, by fostering unity and a shared identity. Cultural cohesion, in turn, strengthens social cohesion by promoting shared values and a sense of commonality. Political cohesion builds on the other two by creating a shared vision for governance and establishing institutions that reflect communal values and address societal needs.

To conceptualize national cohesion structurally, these components can be viewed as interconnected layers: *social cohesion* forms the base, *cultural cohesion* constitutes the middle layer, and *political cohesion* sits at the top. Policies and interventions that promote all three can help foster a more cohesive and resilient society, one in which individuals and groups work together toward common objectives and mutual interests.

Various strategies can be employed to enhance national cohesion, depending on the context and objectives of the intervention. Common approaches include investing in education, promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding, strengthening trust and social networks, and reinforcing democratic institutions and processes. By advancing social, cultural, and political cohesion, more inclusive and resilient communities can be built where all individuals and groups have opportunities to thrive.

Accordingly, the present study offers a comprehensive analysis of these three components of national cohesion in the post-1979 Islamic Revolution period in Iran.

After the Revolution, Iran adopted the Islamic Republic governance system, which emphasized public

participation in local decision-making. The government established new local councils, known as *shorās* (Islamic councils), to represent local communities. These councils, along with other community-based organizations, were tasked with addressing local issues and providing services. This emphasis on citizen engagement helped to strengthen social cohesion and build trust between citizens and the state.

During this period, the concept of social cohesion was shaped by evolving models of local governance. Immediately following the Revolution, Iran implemented a decentralized system with substantial autonomy for local governments. The Islamic Republic created a structure of elected councils at the city, village, and neighborhood levels, known collectively as the *Islamic City Council* system. These councils were directly elected and responsible for managing local affairs, including budgeting, service provision, and social development initiatives.

However, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the central government began reasserting control over local governance. Governors and mayors were appointed centrally, and the powers of elected councils were curtailed. In recent years, renewed efforts have been made to strengthen the role of local government by placing greater emphasis on participation and community development.

One example of a local governance initiative aimed at increasing social cohesion is the “*City of Peace*” project launched in 2017 in Mashhad, Iran’s second-largest city. The project aimed to foster a more peaceful and cohesive community by addressing issues such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural diversity. It involved collaboration between local residents, NGOs, and governmental bodies, with initiatives like urban gardening, community art projects, and neighborhood clean-up programs.

Another example is the “*Urban Services Plan*”, launched in 2018 in Tehran, which aimed to improve the quality of urban services and enhance connections between citizens and local government. Initiatives included the installation of public Wi-Fi hotspots, introduction of smart parking systems, and development of mobile apps to facilitate citizen participation. Nevertheless, persistent challenges to social cohesion remain in Iran, including economic inequality, political corruption, and social exclusion. Centralized power continues to limit the

autonomy of local governments, potentially hindering their ability to respond to local needs effectively.

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has maintained a decentralized governance system with locally elected councils and governors. However, the central government—particularly the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council—retains considerable authority and can override local decisions. Under the current system, local government in Iran is structured into four main levels: cities, counties, rural districts, and townships. Each level has its own council, elected by local residents, responsible for a wide range of services including healthcare, sanitation, water supply, road maintenance, and waste management.

In addition to these councils, Iran established the *Islamic Councils*, tasked with promoting Islamic values and ensuring local government alignment with religious principles. These councils have the authority to veto local decisions if deemed contrary to Islamic law.

Since the Revolution, this system has faced criticism. Some argue that it has led to corruption and inefficiency, with local officials accused of budget misuse and nepotism. Others claim the system does not permit sufficient autonomy due to the central government's overarching control.

Despite such criticisms, decentralization has enabled greater local participation and representation in governance, which in turn has contributed to a stronger sense of local identity and cultural cohesion. The emphasis on Islamic governance has provided a shared cultural framework for many Iranians, regardless of ethnic or linguistic background. Nonetheless, tensions persist—particularly with ethnic and religious minorities who feel marginalized by the dominant cultural narrative.

In recent years, the Iranian government has shown a tendency toward centralization and increased control over local decision-making, prompting criticisms that the local governance system is inefficient and unresponsive to local community needs, thereby weakening *political cohesion*.

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, a new governance system based on Islamic democracy and citizen participation was introduced. The 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic institutionalized the principles of decentralization and the delegation of authority to local councils. These

councils were mandated to provide public services and respond to citizens' needs in their jurisdictions. They also oversaw local implementation of national policies.

Iran's local councils are categorized into *city councils* and *village councils*. Both are directly elected and operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior. These councils hold significant authority in local decision-making, including budget approvals, development plans, and social, cultural, and environmental initiatives. They also monitor local government performance and hold them accountable.

A notable development in local governance post-Revolution has been the participation of *women* in local councils. Women were granted the right to vote and run for office, resulting in significant increases in female participation in local politics and many being elected to serve in councils.

*Political cohesion* within Iran's local governance system during this period has been influenced by Islamic democratic principles and public participation. Local councils have provided a platform for people to voice concerns and participate in decision-making, thereby enhancing their sense of empowerment and political cohesion. However, political instability at times has affected the cohesion of the local governance system.

In general, Iran's post-Revolution local governance system has experienced a significant shift toward decentralization and the delegation of authority to local councils, with an accompanying rise in public participation in decision-making processes.

Overall, the models of local governance developed in Iran have had varied impacts on political cohesion. While some models have increased civic engagement and political identity, others have centralized power and reduced autonomy, thereby weakening political cohesion.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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