To square this “dissonant” [*Brumberg 2000: 130–131*] nature of the Iranian politics and capture the intricate structure of the authoritarian power, a different approach, according to me, has to be taken. According to Schmitt [*1985; see also 2014*] the ultimate power within the state and polity is not derived from the control over the institutions and laws, but rather from the remit and ability to infringe on them.

While during the “normal” course of the political process, a degree of pluralism and distribution of the power between its various centers can be indeed evidenced in the Iranian system, this situation radically changes in dealing with the advent of an *exceptional* situation or issue. In such situation, the “theocratic” component of the governmental system (emanating from the office of the *rahbar*)comes to the fore and use its *exceptional* prerogatives to deal with that issue, sidelining all the other actors and forces and suspending all the laws and norms preventing such action.

The ruling hierocracy thus exercises the *sovereign power* over the polity. And as the true sovereign it *decides by itself when the situation is exceptional* [*cf. Schmitt 1975: 13*]. In practice that means, that it can apply the exceptional measures *whenever* it deems necessary. Typically, this occurs precisely in the situations when its decisive position within the political system could be endangered [*cf. ibid.: 5–7*]. The vetting and vetoing remit *vis-a-vis* the elections and the legislature must be counted as the typical exceptional powers in this sense, despite their expansion into the matter of routine. The others comprise especially the control over the judiciary and the armed forces, constituting together decisive means of coercion. The elected republican institutions are not equipped with similar powers and have little options to resist them.

As the Picture 1 shows, the Islamic Republic’s governmental system thus constitutes a two-tier power structure. While its components may seem to coexist with one another and hold different “shares” on the total pool of power, more adequate description is that there are two different kinds of power, distributed in a completely uneven way. The power of the clerical elite is a sovereign one while the power of the President and *Majlis* is not.

*Pic. 1*

This also shows why its “democratic” component cannot be taken seriously. Actually, this configuration is subtly expressed by the language of the Constitution. Whereas the *rahbar* holds “absolute authority”, the public partake only in the “administration” of the state affairs.[[1]](#footnote-1) The exceptional powers both in their legal, institutional form (stipulated by the Constitution) and their effective applicability (facilitated by the robust and loyal coercive system) constitute the actual means by which the clerical elite has exercised this authority and retained and exercised its “conciliar” rule over the state in the years after the end Khomeini’s charismatic leadership [See *Arjomand 2009: 41–52*].

The transition from this state of affairs presupposes first and foremost curbing of these exceptional powers which form the backbone of the Khomeinist regime, from the 1990s up to now: the liberalization through the protection of the individual rights from the arbitrary infringement on the part of the coercive apparatus (i.e. the judiciary, security forces or vigilantes) and the democratization through the protection of the already established democratic processes from the arbitrary intervention on the part of the unelected institutions (i.e. the GC vetoing the laws and candidacies).

1. See Article 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)