

How do Iranian postwar rallies reshape domestic power structures and long-term national stability by altering accountability mechanisms among key political factions?

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Executive Summary

Iranian postwar rallies have fundamentally reshaped domestic power structures and long-term national stability by systematically altering accountability mechanisms, primarily by consolidating the influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and diminishing civilian executive authority. Evidence suggests these rallies function as top-down hardline tools that instrumentalize securitized nationalism to bypass formal institutional oversight, thereby entrenching a de facto military-clerical alliance. While this strategy provides short-to-medium-term stability by suppressing dissent, it risks long-term national fracture due to unaddressed economic grievances and the hollowing out of traditional civilian accountability.

Key Findings

IRGC Dominance and Erosion of Civilian Accountability

Postwar rallies have been instrumental in eroding civilian executive authority and entrenching IRGC dominance, fundamentally altering Iran's domestic power structures. The wartime environment redirected resources toward defense, reducing the space for traditional civilian oversight [14]. This erosion is evident in public clashes, such as when the IRGC openly criticized President Masoud Pezeshkian and forced him to rescind a diplomatic apology, demonstrating a clear breakdown in civilian control over elected officials [14]. The war militarized Iranian politics, concentrating power in coercive bodies like the IRGC and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) [14, 15]. Public opinion shifted significantly toward supporting a political role for the IRGC, with the share who agreed rising by 19 percentage points following Iran's direct missile attack on Israel [14].

Formal republican institutions have been structurally weakened, with the presidency and parliament seeing their roles diminished by the Supreme Leader's consolidation of power

[4]. The parliament has largely become an "echo chamber" for hardliners after the exclusion of reformist candidates in the 2020 and 2024 elections [4]. This structural shift directly answers how rallies reshape domestic power structures by permanently altering the balance of authority between civilian executives and security institutions [14, 15].

Rallies as Tools for Hardline Instrumentalization

Postwar rallies primarily function as top-down hardline tools that constrain civilian agency and permanently shift policy control to militarized institutions. Following the April 8, 2026 ceasefire, street mobilizations evolved from initial national cohesion events into forums for hardline political demands, specifically opposing negotiations with the United States [13]. Hardline groups like the Steadfastness Front utilized these gatherings to frame diplomatic compromises as ideological betrayals, effectively using public mobilization to pressure the government and reject accountability for foreign policy shifts [13].

This instrumentalization subordinates the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the IRGC's regional strategy, effectively making foreign policy an extension of the battlefield [15]. Consequently, diplomatic outcomes are judged through a hardline ideological lens rather than pragmatic state interests [15]. This process undermines the regime's long-term strategic flexibility by tethering domestic legitimacy to anti-Western narratives, locking the regime into rigid positions that make future diplomatic compromises politically costly for civilian leaders [13, 15].

Shift in Accountability Mechanisms to Securitized Nationalism

The post-2026 conflict consolidation has functionally reoriented accountability toward securitized nationalism and hardline-controlled street mobilization, aligning regime survival with public sentiment rather than restoring substantive civilian oversight. Postwar rallies function as mechanisms to bypass formal checks, shifting accountability from formal institutional processes to informal factional pressure that inherently favors the IRGC's security-first agenda [13].

This dynamic is reinforced by structural changes. The establishment of the "Defense Council" in early August 2025 centralized defense program oversight, moving accountability away from traditional civilian oversight toward a military-dominated institution [18]. Furthermore, following the death of Ali Larijani, former IRGC commander Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr was appointed as the new secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) in March 2026, shifting the SNSC's presiding authority

to a security-focused hardliner with deep IRGC ties [6, 17]. Comprehensive U.S. sanctions also successfully unified even moderate opposition factions with the state's external-threat narrative, proving the regime survival mechanism was securitization-driven rather than civilian-accountability-driven [3, 8].

Short-term Stability Masks Long-term Vulnerability

The observed postwar "rally-around-the-flag" effect represents a durable integration of military power into a resilient nationalist-security state, providing short-to-medium-term stability, but it simultaneously masks accelerating institutional erosion that risks long-term fracture. The Iranian state has demonstrated significant resilience despite severe internal protests, economic hardship, and external military pressure [1, 5, 7, 9, 10, 16]. The regime has successfully used social cohesion, Shi'a narratives, and ethnonational identity to consolidate national identity and renew the social contract around national defense rather than internal governance accountability [9, 13, 17]. This "effective authoritarian accountability" maintains alignment between leadership and the mobilized base, preventing immediate internal fragmentation [2, 10, 16].

However, this stability masks accelerating institutional erosion. The wartime environment has concentrated power in coercive institutions, significantly reducing civilian oversight and accountability [14]. The judiciary operates with impunity, and the parliament has become an "echo chamber" for hardline supporters, hollowing out traditional checks on power [4]. While the regime's adaptive nature suggests it is not on the verge of collapse [5, 7, 9, 16], the structural nature of Iran's crisis and deep-rooted vulnerabilities mean that if economic strain-such as the rial's depreciation to 1,445,000 to the dollar in late 2025 and worsening living conditions-persists without substantive civilian accountability mechanisms, the system could face systemic disruption rather than gradual reform [4, 7, 11, 12, 17].

Performative Legitimacy Substitutes Accountability

Postwar authorities strategically deploy ethnonational and religious narratives in rallies to effectively substitute traditional domestic accountability demands with performative legitimacy [17]. By framing political opposition as a betrayal of revolutionary and national ideals, hardline factions instrumentalize these gatherings to resist diplomatic compromises and hold the executive branch accountable only through an ideological lens rather than policy performance [13]. This "spiritual-political authoritarianism" generates

normative conformity and charismatic legitimacy, allowing the regime to bypass traditional institutional oversight [17].

This substitution temporarily stabilizes the regime by depoliticizing economic grievances through a powerful wartime rally-around-the-flag effect [10]. The external threat narrows the space for public protest against internal governance, redirecting attention from pre-war frustrations over soaring inflation and currency depreciation to national survival [4, 10]. This primarily postpones systemic disruption until external shocks subside or economic strain becomes unbearable, leaving underlying governance failures unaddressed [9, 13].

As comparative context, in the United States during the 1940s-1960s, the government used Keynesian policies like the Employment Act of 1946 and the Federal Interstate Highway Program of 1956 to deliver widespread economic prosperity, which acted as a performative response to secure public acceptance of the political system and pre-empt demands for deeper political accountability [20]. Similarly, in authoritarian states like China since the 1980s, "performance legitimacy" through sustained economic growth has explicitly replaced democratic participation as a means to sustain power [19].

Implications

The findings indicate that Iranian postwar rallies have profound implications for the country's political trajectory. The systematic empowerment of the IRGC and the corresponding diminishment of civilian accountability suggest a long-term shift towards a more militarized and ideologically rigid state. This reorientation of accountability mechanisms means that foreign policy decisions will likely remain subordinate to security-first ideological metrics, limiting Iran's strategic flexibility in international relations and making diplomatic compromises politically challenging for any civilian leadership. While the regime has achieved short-to-medium-term stability by leveraging securitized nationalism and performative legitimacy to suppress dissent and depoliticize economic grievances, this approach creates a brittle power structure. The unaddressed structural economic vulnerabilities and the hollowing out of civilian institutions mean that persistent economic strain could eventually lead to systemic disruption, challenging the long-term national stability that the current strategy aims to secure.

Limitations and Caveats

The research provides a strong qualitative understanding of how postwar rallies alter power structures and accountability. However, direct quantitative data on specific post-2026 reconstruction contracts awarded to IRGC-affiliated conglomerates versus civilian firms is not available, limiting the ability to precisely quantify the economic shift towards military institutions. Similarly, specific postwar parliamentary seat changes for hardline factions are not detailed, though the general trend of hardline dominance is established. While the report discusses the impact of economic strain, granular economic indicators (e.g., inflation rates in specific sectors like housing and energy) correlated with provincial rally intensities are not provided, making it difficult to pinpoint where performative legitimacy might be failing to mask grievances at a local level. The long-term stability versus fracture debate remains a tension, with the current evidence suggesting a postponement of systemic disruption rather than a definitive resolution.

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