

# Politicization, Ratification of International Agreements, and Domestic Political Competition in Non-Democracies: The Case of Iran and the Paris Climate Accords

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## Abstract

While some degree of competition is present in many authoritarian regimes, the implications of such controlled competition on international issues have not received much consideration, including towards international environmental accords. We attempt to rectify this through a framework where we focus on internal political competition in a hybrid, nondemocratic system where national elections are held regularly. Specifically, we argue that the presence of multiple actors competing in elections in nondemocratic settings results in them assuming positions on various issues, justifying their positions, and attempting to mobilize their supporters with considerable implications for international environmental policies. We display our argument in the context of Iranian debates on the ratification of the Paris Climate Accords. Our findings demonstrate that the competing Iranian sides rely on different justifications for their environmental positions, resulting in extensive (negative) competitions of rhetoric where the international dimension emerges as an important feature in the internal competition. Overall, we show that political competition within non-democracies is likely to add to the complexity of international (environmental) negotiations and cooperation.

**Keywords:** international negotiations on climate change; competing narratives and elections in authoritarian regimes; political factions; environment and sanctions; regime survival

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## Introduction

The Paris Climate Change Agreement, a legally binding international treaty that sets goals for temperature increases, was adopted by 196 parties at the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, France, on 12 December 2015 and entered into force on 4 November 2016. Iranian officials signed the accords on 22 April 2016 followed by approval from the majority of Iranian parliamentarians on 14 November 2016. Iranian officials, including the oil minister, were so enthusiastic about the accords that they pledged,

considering the reference year 2010, a 4% reduction of its greenhouse gases (GHGs) by 2030, while the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat was reportedly notified that Iran would consider voluntarily reducing 4% of its GHG emissions even before the ratification of the accords (Fakhkhar 2020). Puzzlingly, the Iranian parliament approved the Paris Accords bill but it was subsequently vetoed by the supervisory body, i.e., Guardian Council. The subsequent national elections contributed to a decidedly different Iranian position, which demanded sanctions reduction in return for ratifying the accords.

The politics of (non-)ratification of international agreements in democratic societies partly due to the presence of elections and competing narratives has received extensive interest particularly in areas such as human rights and trade (Putnam 1988; Oomen 2018; Wratil et al. 2022; Rickard and Caraway 2014). However, the same cannot be said for the study of international negotiations and policies in non-democratic societies despite increasing recent recognition about domestic constraints in non-democracies (Hyde and Saunders 2020). The brief discussion above suggests overlooked features in the non-democracy-negotiation literature such as Iranian officials facing constraints in ratification, turnover of elected elites, and a parliament that was not necessarily acting in tandem with other domestic institutions. Stakeholders in non-democracies can have heterogeneous preferences and positions. Since hybrid, competitive authoritarian regimes allow some degree of political space for competition, the ratification stage of an international (environmental) accord can become part of the wider competition between relevant political actors as they engage with the treaty and attempt to highlight and justify their various positions. As such, the actors compete over narratives on various treaty items, which turn particularly negative due to the stakes in a non-democratic setting, with domestic opponents being represented as traitors. It is these mostly overlooked competing narratives that the sides use to justify their position within a non-democratic setting.

To better understand debates in environmental politics in hybrid authoritarian settings and their implications for international cooperation, we thus offer a novel argument that incorporates competition and position-taking by political actors (Carter 2013; Spoon et al. 2014). If there is competition, even in a highly controlled setting, competing narratives and conflicting information can be expected to emerge as the various contending elements need to distinguish themselves from each other and the issue becomes highly politicized. In this case, (international) environment policy becomes a key area of contention as other topics might not be permissible. Thus, by focusing on the position-taking narratives and the justifications of the competing sides, we highlight the politics of ratification in a non-democratic setting and demonstrate the complexities of international cooperation within non-democracies.

### ***Case selection***

The presence of competition among various political groups in an authoritarian setting makes Iran particularly appropriate for in-depth analyses on environment negotiations (Bernauer 2013). Iran is a hard case for discussions on ratification and environmental politics due to the restrictions imposed by the presence of a theocratic leadership and institutions like the Guardian Council that vet out candidates for public office. Unlike other non-democracies such as China and Russia, it is also one of the few UNFCCC members that has not ratified the Paris Accords and it is also a top 10 GHG emitter. Not only is Iran an important case

due to its non-ratification and high-emission, but Iran's hybrid authoritarian regime has changed little since the 1979 Revolution, making it one of the longest surviving authoritarian polities where regular national-level elections with competition for unicameral parliament and presidency occur periodically. This enables a unique contextualization that helps to elucidate the dynamics. Moreover, mainstream actors that shape government policies drive discussions as there is no ecological party: Despite the range of climate-related (and non-climate-related) issues facing Iran, two primary actors broadly labelled as conservative and reformist here took decidedly opposite positions on the ratification of the accords. We collected, examined, and analyzed Iranian language speeches, documents, and media articles 2005 onwards. Through our examination of this case, we can understand better the competition between the actors as well as how actors in non-democracies justify their positions with implications for international cooperation.

### **Argument**

We first outline how competition works in non-democracies where some form of national elections occurs. In non-democratic countries, "internal regime consolidation" (Selvik 2018: 1115; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Ayoob 1983-1984) has been widely assumed as a key goal of the regime. The regime benefits from an economically well-functioning, militarily secure country but this requires the cooperation of a larger group. Within a setting of extensive repression, one way to obtain cooperation is by allowing for deliberation space through which the regime provides "incentives for people to reveal their private information, to work, and to save" (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007: 1281) at the same as contributing to the (procedural) legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. This deliberation space – in the form of allowing for legislatures and elections within an authoritarian setting – assists the regime to know better what people are thinking, help with the responsiveness of the regime which in turn can translate into socioeconomic performance, and determine which elites should be rewarded (Gandhi 2008; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017).

Yet, such a space in an authoritarian setting brings to the surface "intra-elite factionalism and competition... and handling succession" (Geddes 2003: 49), allowing for elite defragmentation and societal demands (Selvik 2018) to find expression through multiple political actors (e.g., political parties or factions). These entities face a reputation-loyalty dilemma: while staying within the rules of the game and demonstrating their loyalty to the regime (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007: 1283), they also need supporters which requires showing to the electorate and key actors that they are credible and distinct from the regime and other political actors (Armstrong et al. 2020). This results in a delicate balancing of engagement with issues of importance without fundamentally threatening the regime (Chen 2012). As a result of a political actor being associated with a particular issue, individuals for whom that issue is salient might become part of the actor's core supporters. In turn, the actor can try to keep such an issue higher on the national agenda and attempt to demonstrate that its reputation for the issue is well-deserved. Thus, political actors in authoritarian systems can engage in position-taking and framing issues, convey them to the broader public, and ultimately shape attitude on issues and mobilize supporters (Williamson and Magaloni 2020).

Environmental issues can be one of the areas where the actors in authoritarian settings can highlight their differences from others. While some topics can be off-limits for actors to engage within an authoritarian setting, engaging with environmental issues is permissible in many authoritarian settings as it can help the regime to show its responsiveness. Even if the environment might not be the most pressing issue for most individuals in an authoritarian society, environmental degradation, e.g., air, soil, or water quality, destruction of ecosystems, or wildlife, affects a broad section of society. This in turn means that position-taking on the environment can be beneficial to a political actor as there might be people potentially attracted to the actor through their environmental stance.

While no entity in a polity might want water scarcity or toxic pollution, the framing and prioritizing of these issues can change depending on the actor and then can affect the (international) policy outcomes. The presence of such political actors with different perspectives on the environment can generate multiple competition over rhetoric, i.e., rhetorical contests where rhetoric includes all speech acts that are publicly made both with the goal of persuasion and “through skillful framing, to leave their opponents without access to the rhetorical materials needed to craft a socially sustainable rebuttal” (Krebs and Jackson 2007: 36). Yet, there is little consideration of a rhetorical contest in environmental politics of non-democracies (Zhang and Orbie 2019). This is problematic as authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda are crucial features of authoritarian regimes (Fozzi 2016; Weeden 1998; Guriev and Treisman 2019). It potentially enables the regime and others to signal their strength (Huang 2015), contributes to domestic public approval (Weiss and Dafoe 2019; Alrababa’h and Blaydes 2021), and increases ingroup cohesion through rhetorical competitions (Neumann 1999; Lebas 2006) while ‘othering’ opponents (Selvik 2018; Tezcür 2012) as the ‘enemy within’ or ‘fifth columnists’.

Control over the narrative on climate change can buttress the legitimacy of the political actors and electoral accountability (Criado 2017). In this regard, the debates on the signing, ratification, and implementation of international accords become an extension of an internal debate between various key political actors within hybrid authoritarian settings. These actors can have differing foreign policy priorities due to different interests and ideological orientations. The sides can try to influence the wider public’s perspective on the negotiation issue at hand by raising security concerns, including regime survival, to mobilize them.

Overall, when political actors are allowed to operate openly in non-democracies, (international) environmental issues and international cooperation more broadly can emerge as a matter of contention where rival actors within the regime can have differing policy preferences. In the ensuing competitions of rhetoric, they not only justify their positions but also engage in extensive negative rhetoric as they attempt to control the narrative on environmental issues. Unlike the expectations in much of the international negotiation literature, this contributes to there being little overlap and continuation among the political actors towards international environmental issues such that national positions in international arena can be highly fluid. In issues where contention is permitted then, changes in power holders albeit within the same non-democratic, hybrid regime, result in highly differing positions in international negotiations and in ratification and implementation of international multilateral agreements.

## Iranian Politics and the Environment

Before we analyze the Iranian debates, we first briefly offer background on the Iranian political system. Iran has a popularly elected president, elected legislature, and a powerful judiciary that, according to the Iranian Constitution, is functioning under the supervision of the Supreme Leader. Among other powers, the Supreme Leader, as the highest political and religious authority, appoints/dismisses top security and judiciary officials. While the elected president is the head of the powerful supreme council for national security, the president's power is limited by the constitution in favor of the Leader who determines general policies, such as on defense. Like the president, Iran's unicameral legislature, with 290 publicly elected members is elected for four years. Iran's parliament is responsible for drafting legislation, ratifying international treaties, and approving the country's budget. However, no bill can be law without the 12-member-constitutionally-mandated Guardian Council's approval (of which the Leader selects six members and appoints the Chief Justice who nominates the other members to be approved by the parliament). This Council has barred many candidates running for parliament. It examines the parliament's bills in terms of compliance with Islamic laws and constitution with the power of vetoing and referring them back to the parliament. This system has changed little over time.

Facing a nearly bankrupt economy and an impoverished population, different factions that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini had held together after the 1979 revolution with his charisma, influence, and weight, fragmented fast after his death in 1989 (Ehsani 2009). Many young, educated Iranians who had limited memory of the revolution demanded civil society, bureaucracy, and marketplace reform. Thus, beneath Iran's Supreme Leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (president between 1981-1989), his office, and representatives, there is a pluralistic political system with its own internal struggles and activists (Moslem 2002; Hurst 2016; Green et al. 2009; Rivetti 2017). Intra-elite leadership competition further exacerbates the situation, partly due to the Shi'i clergy's pluralistic structure, characterized by diverse opinions and schools of thought (Buchta 2000). The middle class and youth are credited with propelling the reformist Mohammad Khatami to win a landslide presidential election in 1997 (Ehsani 2009; Gheisari and Nasr 2006).

Faction politics became crystalized in the sixth parliament election (2000-2004). With President Khatami as the leader, a newly established reformist political party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front (*Jebheye Mosharekate Iran-e Eslaami*), could gather forces under the reformist flag, winning the majority. Electoral candidates at the national level emerge from factions, i.e., "loosely assembled groups that form along multiple lines of interests, ranging from shared economic interests to shared positions on cultural and social policies" (Rivetti 2019, 33). While originally, three main overlapping factions could be identified (conservatives, reformists, and centrists/pragmatists) (Green et al. 2009), the latter two consolidated together. These factions had power struggles in various arenas: from parliament and consultative forums to government agencies and from Friday prayer sermons to mass media. Over time the conservatives' pressure on reformists and centrists/pragmatists (now widely called moderates) has increased, especially following widespread protests against the regime such as Mahsa Amini's death while in police custody in 2022. In his 13 August

2023 speech for prominent reformists, former president Khatami reiterated that he was against both overthrowing the regime and the governance approach (of conservatives) as the regime “would not last” (Didban Iran 2023). The factions also have had very different environmental policies. For instance, while recently the former president Rouhani’s head of the Department of Environment (DoE), Isa Kalantari, called conservatives “idiots” for not being fast enough to restore the dying Lake Urmia (Arman Melli 2023), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) spokesman accused critics of attempting to “break the authority” and “questioning the capability” of the Islamic Republic (Radio Farda 2023). Despite economic hardship and political repression, environmental issues have remained significant for Iran’s society, which led to keeping the environmental discussion a part of factional politics.

### *The Environment*

The effects of climate change on Iran are among the worst in the Middle East region. Iran was the 15th largest emitter of GHGs in the first years after the revolution but became the 7th in 2018 (11th per capita) (Crippa et al. 2018), and the country’s GHG emissions increased 20 percent between 2015 and 2020 (Ritchie and Roser, 2020). Desertification, poor air quality, drought, and water scarcity (Madani 2021) are all present. Several recent major protests in Iran have been connected to environmental issues, such as the widespread November 2018 and July 2021 protests. When considered next to other dynamics in Iranian society such as population growth, urbanization, and the livelihood of agricultural workers, the importance of climate-related issues become magnified.

Parallel to the effects of climate change, societal transformations in Iran affected environmental concerns (Fadaee 2011). The reformist political faction seized the environmental issue, such that the reformist-backed leader Hasan Rouhani labeled his first administration as ‘the government of environment.’ Not only was it reflecting an item of interest for some reformist core domestic supporters, i.e., youth, urban, and the middle class (Rivetti 2019), the environment was connected to other dimensions of importance to reformists, such as broadening civil society. The conservative faction, concentrated around the Supreme Leader Khamenei, had a decidedly different position on the environment. Their main principles and approaches have broadly remained intact since the revolution, including a patriarchal Islamic government, consolidating the results of the revolution, protecting traditional lifestyle, self-sufficiency, and cultural purity. Moreover, their bases have traditionally been among IRGC members, the rural population, lower-ranking preachers, certain radical clerical figures, some bazaaries (the merchant class and workers of the traditional marketplaces), and the lower middle class (Green et al. 2009).

The environment has become a greater concern for the regime over time. Thus, although in February 2005, the Guardian Council initially rejected the Kyoto Protocol, highlighting the legal and economic independence of the country (IRNA 2005), it was ratified in August 2005. The difference in ratification processes is connected to the differing obligations on developing countries to make emission cuts. Moreover, the economic issues and corruption facing Iran have further increased over time resulting in increasing pressure on the conservatives to control the narrative on all issues, including the environment.

The following vignettes show the differences in policy between reformist and conservative factions and suggest that any differences regarding the Paris Accords reflect wider consolidated differences over the environment over time. Building upon previous research (Carter 2003), we focus on policy differences rather than emission data differences, as the latter change little from one administration to another. Moreover, the scale of sanctions against Iran greatly affected the level of emissions.

The main Iranian public entity on the environment is the DoE, which is under the president's supervision and the head of the organization is a deputy president. The faction in power considerably shapes the entity. While during a conservative era, the DoE relaxed environmental clearances for development and construction projects including in forests and wetlands (Nili 2009), in an ensuing reformist administration, the government repealed 160 "destructive environmental decrees" (IANA 2017) of the previous conservative administration. The importance given to the entity vastly differs: During the reformist faction administration of President Khatamayi, under the reformist head of DoE, Masoumeh Ebtekar, (Lotfian and Fakhrdavoud 2018: 103), the DoE expanded, with more than 1500 new official posts, 57 offices in smaller cities, ten new research facilities in provinces, and 50 labs to measure air, water, and soil pollution, leading Ebtekar to be recognized by the UN for her services to the environment. In the ensuing conservative President Ahmadinejad's term (2005-2013), individuals with poor environmental records or relationships with environmental NGOs like Mohammad Javad Mohammadzadeh were appointed as heads of the DoE (Afkar News 2017). Thus, the standing and policies of DoE are affected by the administration.

Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) face many restrictions in all authoritarian locations (Wu and Martus 2021). Given the nature of the regime – where the judiciary is seen as aligned with the conservative faction – there are limits to how ENGOS can operate under any administration. Indeed, at least 63 environmental activists were arrested in 2018 (Amnesty International 2019), despite ENGOS refraining from street protests, "[a] European method that could not be proper and effective in Iran," (Doyle and Simpson 2006, 760) and the fact that "there has never been any organization or action touching upon" the nuclear energy issue (Fadaee 2016: 19). Nonetheless, whether the reformists or conservatives occupy the presidency still affects them. ENGOS exploded during the reformist era from around 20 in 1997 to 640 in 2005 (Fadaee 2011). Moreover, ENGOS faced more security restrictions under the conservative faction-led administration. For example, "all ENGOS were banned from contacting or receiving funds from international organizations and NGOs" (Moheimany 2021: 257).

The reformists, when in government, attempted to develop environmental awareness among the public and to change the environmental discourse through greater public outreach. For example, during reformist Khatami's administration, in order "to encourage the public's engagement with environmental issues," the Public Participation Bureau within the DoE was established (Fadaee 2016: 19). Through such public outreach work, the reformists also shared their position on the environment and attempted to maintain their core supporters. Yet, religious leaders deeming that the reformist administration promoted non-Islamic ideologies (Mirzadegi 2019; Jahane-Sanat 2019), resulted in, for example, the termination of the 'nature schools movement', an outdoor educational experience for children. Moreover, rather than continuing

the reformist DoE's approach to civil society and public outreach, under the conservative administrations, the DoE increased its interaction with the IRGC, Ministry of Intelligence, and the conservative Judiciary such that the DoE's discourse became summarized as: "ideologically Islamic, politically exclusive, and technically conformist" (Moheimany 2021: 253).

Overall, these vignettes suggest that there can be considerable differences on environment policies in a hybrid, non-democratic setting and that even the limited competitive features of the system allow for the differences among the factions to surface on issues. Even though the reformists have other issues that they prioritize and their environmental record is not spotless, e.g., Miankale Petrochemical project, the vignettes highlight differences in orientation and policy from the conservatives. Yet, these vignettes do not reveal how the sides justified their positions, particularly for major international environmental accords. To understand how the factions justify their positions, we next turn to an examination of the debates surrounding Paris Accords.

## Iranian Paris Accords Debates

We start by considering the Supreme Leader. Past research highlights the potential for increased legitimacy that the regime can achieve through (environmental) responsiveness where Chinese and Russian leaders have assumed definite positions (Wu and Martus 2021). This is partly seen in Iran, where the nature of environmental problems is grave enough that the Supreme Leader Khamenei recognized the 'everyday' nature of environmental concerns. "People have expressed their grief, but there can be no complaint about that because the issue of water is not a small issue, particularly in the hot climate of Khuzestan" and that if "the authorities had heeded his previous advice," the situation "would certainly not have arisen" (The Office of the Supreme Leader 2021). Moreover, while Khamenei has not explicitly assumed a position about the Paris Accords, his general opinion about international conventions is skeptical while not automatically rejecting them as seen in his speech for the parliament on 20 June 2018:

'Look, these international treaties,...a few big powers...cook something for their own interests, and then [others] follow them...If an independent government... like the Islamic Republic... says, for example, "I do not accept this; I do not accept this convention, this international treaty," they say, "Sir! 120 countries, 150 countries, 200 countries accepted this; How can you not accept?"... What should we do now? Some of these international treaties and conventions have useful articles. Very well, that is okay...[but] there is no need for us to accept things that we do not know the bottom of them or know have problems alongside positive aspects.' (Khamenei.ir 2021).

This ambiguity creates considerable space for all concerned to interpret his position. Consider that while the Iranian parliament approved the Paris Accords, it was subsequently vetoed by the supervisory Guardian Council and returned to be changed. While this is suggestive of a definitive stance of the regime, this is not the case as emerges from an interview with Masud Tajrishi, the deputy of Human Environment of the DoE: "the Guardian Council said that we have no ambiguity [about what needs to be fixed] and now the ball is in the Assembly's court, but if you ask the parliament now, [it] says the Guardian Council



did not answer us” (Abdollahpour 2021). Relatedly, former DoE officials maintained that the Guardian Council’s decision to veto was based on the existence of a ‘problematic’ appendix in the Paris Accords but there is no evidence of such an appendix, which the (conservative) media overlooks (Fakhkhar 2020; Alef 2019; Zandi et al. 2019: 278).

On the one hand, through such acts of ‘passivity’ or distraction, e.g., a nonexistent appendix, the regime can be inducing a sense of unassailability regarding discussion on climate change that we encounter in studies of non-democracies (Wedeen 2015; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017). Such acts also highlight the various forms of tactics other than repression and cooptation that a change-seeking (reformist) faction can face (regarding the environment). On the other hand, the ambiguity is double-edged for the regime: specifically, the Supreme Leader adopting an ambiguous environmental stance permits the reformist faction to engage with this issue in the first place, as challenging a clear position taken by the Supreme Leader would call their loyalty to the regime into question.

The conservative’s key position is to further consolidate power in the theocratic regime’s clerical bodies (Gheisari and Nasr 2006), even in relation to the environment. At IRGC’s “Environmental meeting”, Ali Salajegheh, a former environmental official and future conservative era head of the DoE, maintained that the organization of “natural resources should be subordinated to the Supreme Leader” (IRIB News Agency 2021). This policy is in direct opposition to the reformist stance on building civil society. Yet, giving the importance of showing loyalty to the regime, the reformists justify their position by making connections to the Supreme Leader’s position and essentially engage in “borrowing power from the stronger” (Zartman and Rubin 2000: 278). Thus, they rely (selectively) on speeches and documents of the Leader that align with their stance. They often highlight sections from the Supreme Leader’s *General Strategies of Environment* (November 2015) that are consistent with the Paris Accords, e.g., on encouraging green economy and low carbon industries or developing environmental policies through international cooperation (Tasnim News 2015).

We find that reformists also attempt to justify their position by showing that it is backed by the Iranian Constitution of 1979, one of the first constitutions to include not only an article on the environment but also a statement on responsibilities towards future generations in its Article 50: “In the Islamic Republic, it is considered a public duty to preserve the environment where the present and future generations may have an improved social life. Consequently, any activity, economic or other, that leads to the pollution of the environment or its irreparable damage will be forbidden.” As a counter-narrative, the conservatives highlight articles from the Constitution which highlight a maximalist interpretation of sovereignty such as “the complete rejection of colonialism and the prevention of foreign influence” (article 3, item 5), “preventing the economic dominance of foreigners in the national economy” (article 43, item 8), and “the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and submission to it” (article 152) (Tasnim News 2017; Zandi et al. 2019: 280-281). Moreover, the conservative opponents of the accords raise the Islamic jurisprudential principle of “Nafye Sabil,” i.e., the rejection of nonbelievers’ rule on Islamic authorities (Keyhan 2017; Narimani 2008). Thus, the Paris Climate Accords and international negotiations become subservient to a much wider rhetorical competition within Iranian politics.

The conservatives particularly connect their position on the accords to their wider economic stance. The reformist narrative – that tackling environmental issues is not by definition costly to the economy and that Iran’s climate pledge could help meet the country’s development target – is countered by the conservatives. The dominant conservative-controlled media narrative maintains that the Guardian Council’s veto was due to its worry over the unwanted financial burden for Iran (Fars News 2021) and that a 4% cut in GHGs emissions costs the country 1.12% of its economy, and a 12% reduction in GHGs causes a loss of around 7.2% of the economy (Keyhan 2017).

For states that rely on oil and similar commodities, fulfilling the economic needs of supporters is crucial to stay in power (Mahdavi 1970; Skocpol 1982). More broadly, economic performance contributes to the non-democratic regime maintaining key supporters/constituencies on its side, e.g., business and military (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007) resulting in granting (monetary) rewards or privileges to them. A key entity within the conservative camp, IRGC was transformed from a small voluntary based force after the revolution to a massive military and economic power (Rezaei and Khodaei 2018) and had become involved in finance and natural resources. Thus, in the 2021 presidential elections, the conservatives emphasized the people’s economic hardship and the false promises of the reformist incumbents: that is, that economic growth through “entente with the West (JCPOA agreement) and liberal economic and free-market economic policies” did not come about and that “80% of the country’s [economic] problems [were] due to [reformist Rouhani’s] government, not sanctions” (Karkhanei 2018). Here is it noteworthy that even though sanctions clearly affect Iranian society and environment, sanctions themselves become part of the factions’ competitions.

This is connected to a wider economic position on development and sufficiency. The Paris Accords are presented as against Iran’s “Resistive economy,” which focuses on developing the oil and natural gas industry and exploring potential new oil and gas resources (Roknabadi 2017). One conservative member of the energy committee and the head of the nuclear committee in the 9th legislature, pondered over “why some are worried about global warming instead of being worried about the country’s industry” contending that implementing the accords is tantamount to “self-sanctioning” (Karkhanei 2018: para. 7). Moreover, it is deemed “natural” for a developing country to work with the total capacity of its “polluting industries” like cement, steel, and oil; thus, GHGs cap becomes an “obstacle” against development (Tasnim News 2018).

### ***International Dimension of the Debate***

The domestic discussions are highly connected to the international arena with little national unity: The rhetoric on development becomes conspiratorial (Tezcür 2012), whereby the Paris Agreement is seen as the work of a hostile international community that seeks the “closure” of Iranian industries “under the pretext of climate change” (Mohebbi 2018). Moreover, the conservatives insist that the rich countries have developed thanks to the same hydrocarbon resources that they want to prevent developing countries from utilizing. Given that Iran will have oil and natural gas reserves for some time more, developed countries’ turn from “fossil energy importers” to “renewable energy exporters” is seen as happening at the expense of Iran’s economy (Ghasemi 2018).

Zhang, Shih, and Liu (2018) have highlighted how authoritarian regimes benefit from portraying a world posing existential threats to the regime. The Conservatives in Iran depict themselves as recognizing and fighting the external threat. Conservatives' deep mistrust towards the West is reflected in their opposition to international agreements. In foreign policy, conservatives are committed to Islamic and anti-Western activism, and are against cultural imperialism and American hegemony. The United States is seen as seeking regime change in Iran through economic sanctions and direct invasion and/or through 'cultural invasion' (Relman 2020). In 2018, "a high-ranking IRGC commander described the occurrence of climate change as a foreign conspiracy and an attempt by 'enemies' to steal Iran's clouds!" (Shahi and Abdoh-Tabrizi 2020: 25). In this sort of a siege mentality, it is not surprising that even releasing GHGs emissions data of "strategic industries" is presented as a danger to the country's security (Keyhan 2017).

Reformists appear to see the environment as part of a wider array of tools for peacebuilding and rapprochement in foreign policy. For example, reformist Khatami called for global cooperation through his 'dialogue among civilizations' policy which had an environmental dimension and connected climate issues to poverty and injustice (Aslipur and Sharifzadeh 2015). Similarly, regional cooperation is also highlighted.

Thus, the reformists present a counter-narrative that other marginalized non-democratic countries have adopted: Iran as a 'responsible global power' (Andonova and Alexieva 2012). Specifically, while the stance of the reformist faction regarding the Paris Accords cannot be seen solely as a global image-building tool (Hovi, Sprinz, and Bang 2012), joining the agreement was presented as necessary to improve "Iran's international image not only among states but also in the eyes of the world's people" (Haghshenas 2018: 10). Foreign Minister Zarif warned that climate change was an important international issue and that Iran could face even more negative consequences from the international community if they abstained from participation (DW Persian 2018). Similarly, unlike conservatives who underscored the Accords's negative impacts on the oil industry, Oil Minister Zangeneh maintained that regardless of Iran's position, the world would continue shifting to renewable energy. In failing to join the Paris agreement, Iran would be isolated, losing stature and influence in OPEC (Fararu 2018).

These factional differences and polarizations are intense enough that the rhetorical competition can result in 'othering' of the domestic opponents through stigmatization (Fallon, Aunio and Kim 2018). Reformist calls for international cooperation are presented by the regime as demonstrating treachery. According to Supreme Leader Khamenei "[they receive] orders from strangers, [their] heart is beating for strangers; [their] heart is beating for the return of America" (quoted by Selvik 2018, 1123). Tasnim news agency, with close ties with the IRGC, warned about "environmental spies" gathering the country's information under the cover of international climate organizations (Tasnim News 2018). The agency highlighted Tehran-based Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation (PWHF), which has long-running relationships with UN agencies, international NGOs, and grassroots conservation groups; PWHF members were later found guilty of "collaborating with the hostile government of America" (Vahdat 2020: para.7) and spying on military bases under the cover of environmentalism and arrested.

Many people were accused of “infiltrating the Iranian scientific community,” “gathering information from critical areas of the country, including the country’s missile bases,” and “spying on the country’s strategic water resources” (Fars News 2019). Thus, the repression of environmental issues went hand in hand with competition over narratives. Moreover, besides the domestic dimension, i.e., shifting the preferences of individuals who are sympathetic to the opposition, there is also an international dimension to their rhetoric, i.e., appearing to give (domestic or international) concessions in such an atmosphere can even be construed as going against the will of the public (Hellmeier 2021).

Even when the rhetoric competition is not as hostile, the narrative can focus on gullibility. Thus, another line of strategy by the conservatives is to question the science behind climate change and highlight the work of climate change skeptics and deniers. Conservative and hardline media praise Iranian scholars that question anthropogenic climate change. By challenging mainstream ‘Western’ climate science, they highlight their anti-West credentials while discrediting the reformist factions who are accused of being soft on the West. The Western countries are construed as producing manipulated science and disguising it as impartial data, under the cover of the UN:

We must also keep in mind that in the world, the media and large organizations and institutions such as NASA, which operate under the domination of developed countries, transmit to us data and information on scientific issues that may have been manipulated based on the policies of these countries. It is unlikely that with the costs incurred by these organizations, information will be provided to other countries just as easily and without receiving a concession (Khabbaz 2020).

The lack of trust in international organizations is highly palpable. “International organizations under imperialist powers’ pressures” are suspected of aiming to hurt Iran (Keyhan 2017). In this narrative, European countries are purported to have designed the Paris Agreement to control the world’s energy supply, transforming the climate issue into an energy security case. According to the news agency close to IRGC, *Mashregh*, European countries do not have enough fossil fuels but are equipped with alternative energy technologies. Thus, the Paris Accords’s focus on reducing fossil fuel consumption is to force oil producers and the rest of the world to depend on Europeans for the new energy technologies in their possession (Mashregh 2019). This becomes connected to the nuclear issue, as the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty and Iran’s nuclear deal are presented as Western countries’ plans to dominate the world’s energy. The world powers, “which monopolize the world’s nuclear power with NPT levers,” seek to establish their domination in so-called green energy and eliminate reliance on fossil fuels that they are running short of (Karkhanei 2018). Overall, the narrative here is that real science is marginalized.-

The reformists connect their responsible foreign policy narrative to Iran’s energy sector. Noting that the energy sector is the key emitter, they argue that the country could easily meet the Accords’s goals through reforming this sector, i.e., with good management it estimated the country can cut its GHG emission by about 40% by 2050 (Sobouti 2018). Even enhancing the efficiency of fossil-fueled power plants to 46% by the 2026–2030 period, in addition to curbing

routine gas flaring up to 90%, could cover 12% reduction in GHG emissions compared to the business-as-usual scenario (Ghadaksaz and Saboohi 2020: 9). The narrative of Rouhani's government was thus focused on reforming Iran's fossil-fuel industries. Joining international agreements and conventions would help to meet the country's demands, particularly regarding technology and financial investment (Zandi et al. 2019). Moreover, reformists focused on renewable energy production, specifically solar energy where the country "is potentially one of the best regions for solar energy utilization...with 300 sunny days per year on  $\frac{2}{3}$  of its land area" (Aguilar et al. 2016: 33). Shortly after the reducing the sanctions following the signing of JCPOA, foreign companies invested in Iran's untapped 80-million market, with four European companies signing agreements with Iran to build solar power plants, increasing Iran's solar energy capacity to more than 1000 MW (Adesnik and Ghasseminejad 2018). At the same time, there is a certain amount of derision in the reformist rhetoric: The 2018 reformist report reiterates that only old technology industries and officials afraid of their failures in GHGs emissions control are against Iran's climate pledge, and they mock "some officials" who want to hide the country's emissions from other countries while satellite technologies reveal "our level of emissions well" (Haghshenas 2018).

## Conclusion

The politicization of international cooperation is not limited to populists in democracies (De Vries, Hobolt and Walter 2021). International negotiation analyses focus primarily on democracies where a central premise is that democratic leaders face internal competition unlike their autocratic counterparts. The Iranian case demonstrates that Iranian factional competition impacts Iran's position on global negotiations. The discussion above showed that the competition in non-democratic societies results in domestic rivals justifying their positions. Thus, even when non-democracies sign agreements, their ratification and implementation stages may be fraught with difficulties due to internal competition. Moreover, while rhetorical competition is often associated with democracies (Christoff 2013), as we show above politicization of international negotiations can result in similar competition in hybrid authoritarian regimes.

Our examination demonstrated that climate change discussions become an extension of Iranian domestic politics. Environment-related issues in Iran are salient enough that Iranian political factions (Doyle and Sampson 2006; Rivetti 2017) see them as another space to contest their rival positions. In the case of Iran, because the Supreme Leader did not impose his position on climate change, including the ratification of the Paris Climate Accords, this allowed for debate between the opposing camps with considerable implications for Iran's stance on the Paris Climate Accords and more widely other non-democracies' approach to international negotiations. It is the regime's ambiguity that creates the space to engage with environmental issues and the Accords. Thus, we add to discussions on regime type and international (environmental) accords and cooperation, which have been primarily focused on democracies, by showing how even the limited space of contention among the actors in non-democracies can generate extensive policy discussions and position-taking making international cooperation over global problems more difficult.

Our argument and examination of the Iranian case have implications for discussions of regime type and environmental policies (von Stein 2022). Unlike in democratic societies, the environment becoming a subject of political competition does not result in actors attempting to be the greenest party in non-democracies (Carter 2013). However, unlike what the environmental authoritarianism literature suggests, mainly based on the Chinese experience (Beeson 2010), our examination of Iran demonstrates that autocracies are not necessarily better structured to tackle environmental problems. Moreover, the literature would suggest that Iran's climate woes would result in more concern about climate change as people experience more climate change-related issues (Spoon et al. 2014), but even in democracies the framing by political parties is an important intervening variable and in the context of hybrid authoritarian regime, the narrative competition between factions is heightened due to the stakes for the regime. The conservative media's emphasis of the agreement's missing appendixes (Fars News 2021), despite evidence to the contrary, demonstrates the extent, type, and level of this competition.

Competition among political actors in a non-democracy can be particularly polarized with extensive reliance on conspiracy theories (Tezcür 2012). Due to the stakes involved, regime survival, discussions demonstrate heightened degrees of animosity towards domestic opponents but also to others such as international organizations. In such an atmosphere, policies can change with considerable ease with significant implications for the environment and international cooperation and negotiations. Examining whether themes that emerge in this Iranian case study such as sovereignty, conspiracy, and morality (Kıprızlı 2022; Kaya 2017) are also present in internal debates elsewhere in what is broadly labelled as the Global South would be useful for both theoretical purposes as well as policy implications for the design and conduct of international (environmental) negotiations.

Overall, international negotiation analyses need to pay greater attention to the domestic politics of non-democratic societies. Consider that the Kyoto Protocol was ratified during conservative Ahmedinjad's administration. This is in line with arguments that 'hawkish' leaders can make moves in international negotiations that that their relatively more 'dovish' counterparts cannot. However, whether such a turning point (Druckman 2020) can be achieved is connected to other features including domestic political scene: In the 2021 Glasgow COP 26 summit, conservative Raisi's administration insisted that removing the sanctions was the pre-requisite of reducing GHG emissions more effectively. Rather, without the sanctions being lifted, they claimed that "at present, we have no international commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions." (ISNA 2021). Economic deals have been connected to improving environmental standards (Hufbauer and Goodrich 2004), and issue linkages are one way to make progress in international negotiations. Yet, in a context of high distrust and very low levels of peace, i.e., Iran-U.S. relations, such linkages become more difficult to achieve. Moreover, the little progress that Iran has shown on environmental issues since ratifying the Kyoto Protocol further increases the distrust. Thus, while Iranian authorities expressing a *quid pro quo* in turn for ratifying international environment agreements is not necessarily exceptional, the nature of the relationship combined with the internal competition makes this highly doubtful.

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