

# A Historical Assessment of Rationality, Consultation and Decision-Making in Iran

*From the Achaemenid Empire to Contemporary Iran: A Qualitative Framework for Comparing Science, Knowledge, Abstract Reason, Religion, Superstition, Emotionalism and Political Performance*

Prepared as a scientific-analytical essay on the relationship between thought, consultation, practical testing, institutional learning and the transfer of experience across different periods of Iranian history.

**Methodological note: this article does not claim to offer an exact numerical measurement. It uses a transparent qualitative scale to compare historical periods according to institutional and intellectual evidence.**

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## Abstract

This article proposes an analytical framework for assessing the historical role of rationality in Iranian political and social decision-making. The central question is: in different periods of Iranian history, to what extent were decisions shaped by science, practical knowledge, administrative experience, consultation, abstract reason, documentation, testing and institutional learning; and to what extent were they shaped by politicised religion, superstition, emotional mobilisation, theatrical loyalty and decision-making based on charisma or sanctification? The article uses a qualitative scale of high, medium and low, translated into a simple ordinal score, to compare major historical periods. The aim is not to reduce history to numbers, but to create a disciplined comparative model that can be debated, corrected and expanded.

## Preface: The Process of Optimal Thinking from Plato to the Present

Before entering the historical table, one chronological point must be clarified. Cyrus the Great and the foundation of the Achaemenid state historically predate Plato. Therefore, it would not be accurate to say that the Achaemenid Empire learned its mechanism of thought from Plato. The Achaemenids developed their own form of practical imperial rationality: administration, roads, taxation, satrapies, inscriptional communication, tolerance toward local elites and the management of a vast multi-ethnic empire. Plato, however, later formulated a philosophical model of rational inquiry that remains useful for analysing decision-making in any civilisation, including Iran.

With this correction, one may say that the essential process of optimal thinking has not fundamentally changed from Plato to the present, although its instruments have changed. Human beings still need to define the problem, distinguish facts from emotion, gather evidence, consult competent minds, test assumptions, compare alternatives and learn from consequences. Modern science has added statistics, experimentation, peer review, modelling, public accountability and institutional audit; yet the skeleton of rational decision-making remains recognisably similar.

For Plato, thinking was not the mere production of opinion. It was the movement from doxa — unexamined belief or appearance — toward episteme — knowledge — through questioning, dialogue and logical testing. In the dialectical tradition, a raw opinion must be exposed to questioning; its contradictions must become visible; and through this process the mind approaches a more stable understanding. This is why consultation, argument and structured disagreement are not signs of weakness. They are the very machinery of reason.

The optimal mechanism of decision-making may therefore be summarised in seven stages: 1) precise definition of the problem; 2) separation of reality from emotion, propaganda and collective hysteria; 3) collection of knowledge, data and historical precedent; 4) consultation with experts, stakeholders and those affected by the decision; 5)

construction of several scenarios; 6) small-scale testing and correction; and 7) large-scale implementation followed by documentation, institutional memory and transfer of experience to future generations.

Any society that weakens this cycle gradually replaces reason with performance. Instead of asking what works, it asks who is loyal. Instead of testing assumptions, it sanctifies slogans. Instead of correcting failure, it explains failure through conspiracy, treason or divine destiny. In such a society, the mechanism of learning collapses. The history of Iran contains both traditions: the tradition of rational statecraft, administration, translation, medicine, law and constitutionalism; and the tradition of sanctified power, ideological rigidity, emotional mobilisation and spectacular politics.

### Definition of Indicators and Scoring Method

To avoid the false precision of invented statistics, this article uses an ordinal scale. “High” is scored as 3, “medium” as 2 and “low” as 1. Intermediate expressions such as “medium to high” are used where the historical evidence is mixed. The numbers do not represent laboratory measurement; they are a comparative device for disciplined historical discussion.

The positive indicators are: a) science and practical technology; b) administrative and legal knowledge; c) consultation and decision-support institutions; d) abstract and philosophical reason; e) recording, archiving and transmission of experience; and f) capacity for testing, correction and learning. The negative or non-rational indicators are: a) politicised religion that cannot be questioned; b) superstition and magical thinking; c) emotional decision-making; d) theatrical loyalty and symbolic performance; and e) suppression of criticism and feedback.

In this model, religion is not automatically equated with superstition. Religion can be a source of ethics, legitimacy and social order. The problem begins when political power replaces argument, testing, criticism and correction with sanctification. In that situation, religion ceases to operate as ethical meaning and becomes a mechanism for closing the mind.

### Historical Assessment Table

Guide: high = 3, medium = 2, low = 1. The rationality index is a qualitative average of science, administrative knowledge, consultation/thought and testing/learning. The non-rational influence index reflects the relative weight of uncriticisable politicised religion, superstition, emotionalism and political spectacle in decision-making.

| Historical period                        | Science & technology               | Administrative/legal knowledge | Thinking & consultation | Testing/learning | Rationality index | Non-rational influence                  | Balance                                       |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Achaemenids                              | High                               | High                           | Medium to high          | Medium to high   | 2.7               | Low to medium                           | Strong positive                               |
| Parthians                                | Medium                             | Medium                         | Medium                  | Low to medium    | 1.9               | Medium                                  | Balanced                                      |
| Sasanians                                | Medium to high                     | High                           | Medium                  | Medium to high   | 2.4               | Medium to high                          | Positive but ideological                      |
| Early Islamic and Abbasid-Iranian world  | High                               | Medium to high                 | High                    | High             | 2.8               | Medium                                  | Strong positive                               |
| Samanids, Buyids, Seljuks                | High                               | Medium to high                 | Medium to high          | Medium           | 2.5               | Medium                                  | Positive                                      |
| Mongol, Ilkhanid, Timurid                | Medium to high after recovery      | Medium                         | Medium                  | Medium           | 2.1               | Medium                                  | Mixed                                         |
| Safavids                                 | Medium                             | Medium to high                 | Low to medium           | Low to medium    | 1.8               | High                                    | Ideological-religious                         |
| Afsharid and Zand                        | Low to medium                      | Low to medium                  | Low to medium           | Low              | 1.3               | Medium                                  | Military/crisis-driven                        |
| Qajar                                    | Low to medium                      | Low                            | Low to medium           | Low              | 1.2               | High                                    | Negative                                      |
| Constitutional Revolution                | Medium                             | Medium                         | High                    | Medium           | 2.2               | Medium                                  | Reformist positive                            |
| Pahlavi period                           | High                               | High                           | Medium                  | Medium to high   | 2.6               | Medium                                  | Modernising but centralised                   |
| Islamic Republic                         | Medium to high technically         | Medium                         | Low                     | Low              | 1.6               | High                                    | Technical capacity without public rationality |
| Iranian diaspora and opposition politics | Medium to high knowledge resources | Low institutionalisation       | Low to medium           | Low              | 1.5               | Medium to high emotionalism/performance | Fragmented                                    |
| Future rational national model           | High                               | High                           | High                    | High             | 3.0               | Low                                     | Optimal model                                 |

*Explanation: the rationality index is a qualitative average of scientific capacity, administrative knowledge, consultation, thought and testing/learning. The non-rational influence index indicates the relative weight of unchallengeable politicised religion, superstition, emotionalism and political theatre. The table should be understood as a conceptual model rather than a final statistical claim.*

## Period-by-Period Analysis

### 1. The Achaemenids: Practical Rationality of Empire

The Achaemenid state could not administer an enormous territory merely through emotion, tribe or sacred rhetoric. The satrapal system, roads, taxation, imperial communication, inscriptions, administrative languages and accommodation of local traditions indicate a high degree of practical rationality. This was not philosophical rationalism in the Platonic sense; it was administrative reason at imperial scale. The main limitation was the absence of broad public deliberation. Decision-making remained royal and hierarchical.

### 2. The Sasanians: Strong Bureaucracy and the Risk of Ideological Hardening

The Sasanian period is important for centralised administration, law, army organisation, taxation, urban development and the link between power and official knowledge. Yet as state and official religion became more tightly fused, internal criticism became more difficult. In such a structure, knowledge exists, but it is constrained by sacred legitimacy. The result is a relatively high administrative rationality combined with the risk of ideological rigidity.

### 3. The Islamic-Iranian Period: Scientific Flourishing and the Duality of Reason and Legitimacy

In the early Islamic centuries, especially in the Abbasid and Iranian intellectual spheres, translation, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, astronomy and bureaucracy developed strongly. Iranian participation in administration and knowledge production was significant. At the same time, a basic tension emerged between philosophical reason, theology, jurisprudence and political legitimacy. The period produced extraordinary intellectual achievements, yet the institutional protection of critical reason remained uneven.

### 4. Samanids, Buyids and Seljuks: Relative Balance between Culture, Religion and Administration

The Samanids and Buyids played a key role in the revival of Persian language and the growth of philosophy, medicine and literature. The Seljuks, especially through Nizam al-Mulk and the *Siyasat-nama*, offer an important example of advisory and administrative rationality. Nevertheless, decision-making institutions were not independent in the modern sense; they remained vulnerable to court politics, military power and religious authority.

### 5. Mongol, Ilkhanid and Timurid Periods: Destruction, Recovery and Court-Dependent Knowledge

The Mongol invasion severely damaged urban and scholarly institutions. After Ilkhanid stabilisation, however, historiography, astronomy, administration and certain sciences recovered. Under the Timurids, art, mathematics, astronomy and architecture flourished. The central weakness was that knowledge was often dependent on court patronage rather than protected by stable and autonomous institutions. Rationality existed, but it was fragile.

### 6. The Safavids: Rebuilding Political Iran while Religiousising Decision-Making

The Safavid period is crucial for the reconstruction of Iran as a political unit. State-building, bureaucracy and territorial unity were major achievements. Yet the officialisation of Shiism and the direct fusion of political legitimacy with religion increasingly pushed decision-making into a sacred-ideological framework. The Safavid state made Iran politically coherent, but in many areas it narrowed the space for plural reasoning and institutional criticism.

### 7. The Qajar Period: The Gap between the New World and the Traditional State

The Qajar state faced modern science, European imperial pressure, new military technology and the modern bureaucratic state, but it lacked the institutional capacity to respond rationally. The reforms of Amir Kabir showed

that rational statecraft was possible, yet such reforms were not protected by durable institutions. Court intrigue, foreign pressure, weak administration and superstition prevented systematic learning.

## 8. The Constitutional Revolution and the Pahlavi Period: Law and Modern Science, but Limited Sustainable Criticism

The Constitutional Revolution was the greatest Iranian attempt to translate political reason into law, parliament, the press and public oversight. The Pahlavi period expanded education, the army, bureaucracy, universities and the modern state. However, centralisation of power, weak political parties, limited pluralism and the fragility of public accountability restricted the full development of institutional rationality. Modernisation advanced, but the feedback mechanism remained incomplete.

## 9. The Islamic Republic: Technical Knowledge without Public Political Rationality

In the Islamic Republic, technical capacity and public political rationality must be separated. In fields such as medicine, engineering, military industries and technology, substantial capacities exist. However, macro-level decision-making is often ideological, security-driven, non-transparent and resistant to correction. The result is a system that can produce expertise but cannot reliably translate knowledge into accountable public policy. This is precisely the condition in which science exists as technique, while political reason is subordinated to ideology.

## A Proposed Model for National Rationality

To escape the historical cycle of rupture and discontinuity, future Iran needs a national decision-making system. Such a system must separate decisions from theatrical loyalty, collective anger, personal charisma, sanctification and slogan-based mobilisation. It must attach decisions to data, consultation, testing, transparency, correction and institutional memory.

This system should contain several principles. First, every major decision must be problem-centred rather than personality-centred. Second, every claim must have sources, evidence and the possibility of criticism. Third, consultation must be institutional rather than factional or informal. Fourth, every policy must be tested at a smaller scale before national implementation. Fifth, failure must not be hidden; it must be recorded, analysed and used as a source of future learning. Sixth, emotional mobilisation may create energy, but it cannot replace rational design.

In this sense, a return to Iranian greatness does not mean a romantic return to the past. It means recovering the part of the Iranian tradition that was able to build empire, preserve language and culture, translate knowledge, demand law, create bureaucracy, found universities and seek constitutional government. The future of Iran depends not merely on courage or loyalty, but on the rebuilding of the mechanism of thought.

## Conclusion

Iranian history shows that whenever rationality became institutional, Iran was able to act at large scale: from Achaemenid imperial administration to Sasanian bureaucracy, from scientific flourishing in the Islamic-Iranian world to the Constitutional Revolution and modern education. Conversely, whenever decision-making was captured by sanctification, superstition, court intrigue, ideological closure or political performance, Iran lost its capacity to learn.

The key lesson is that national success is not produced by emotion alone. Emotion may ignite movements, but only reason can govern them. Consultation, testing, documentation and institutional learning are the bridge between political desire and historical achievement. The scientific study of Iran's past is therefore not an antiquarian exercise; it is a practical guide for building a future state capable of thinking, learning and correcting itself.

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