

Pahlavism, Technocracy, and National Reconciliation in Iran's Transition

From Symbolic Loyalty and Civic Discipline to Scientific Government, Political Bridge-Building, and National Reconstruction

Analytical-scientific paper with a public-policy and democratic-transition approach

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Abstract

This paper analyses “Pahlavism” not merely as emotional loyalty to a royal family, but as a multilayered political and social package. The first layer is symbolic and ceremonial: monarchy, national splendour, bodily discipline, social health, and a sense of belonging to the country. The second layer is modernist and technocratic: education, science, medicine, law, agriculture, water, energy, transport, housing, national security, and institutional reconstruction. The third layer is political transition: without bridge-building with leftist, republican, ethnic, labour, non-state religious, and even historically anti-monarchical forces, the project may slide into polarisation, political casualties, and the reproduction of exclusion. The central argument is that if Pahlavism is to become a model of modern state-building during Iran's transition, it must move from “performance of loyalty” to “architecture of consensus”; from “symbolic beauty” to “executive capacity”; and from “elimination of rivals” to the legally regulated incorporation of opponents. Drawing on the Achaemenid experience, the Greek tradition of philosophical counsel, the Pahlavi experience of modernisation, theories of transition from authoritarianism, and the Iran Prosperity Project, this paper proposes a framework for reconciling royal grandeur, scientific government, and constitutional democracy.

Keywords: Pahlavism, constitutional monarchy, technocracy, national reconciliation, democratic transition, Iran, Cyrus, Iran Prosperity Project, Iranian left, scientific government.

1. Introduction: The Two Faces of Pahlavism

For many Iranians, the name “Pahlavi” carries two simultaneous meanings. The first is monarchy, historical grandeur, crown and throne, ceremony, flag, order, dress, military salutation, bodily health, avoidance of addiction and social disorder, and the practice of belonging to a national centre. In this layer, monarchy is not merely a legal institution; it is a symbolic language for rebuilding collective pride. A society that has endured years of poverty, humiliation, migration, repression, corruption, narcotics, mistrust, and the collapse of national symbols needs signs that tell it: “You are still a nation,” not merely a dispersed and wounded population.

The second layer, however, is more important and more durable: Pahlavism as technocratic modernism. In this sense, Pahlavism evokes a project that sought to move Iran from tribal, clan-based, tradition-bound, religion-centred, and fragmented relations toward a central state, modern education, a modern army, bureaucracy, railways, universities, modern medicine, modern law, industry, urban planning, and infrastructural development. If separated from authoritarianism and political exclusion, this second face may be strategically important for Iran's future.

The question of this paper is how these two faces can be connected to a third layer: national reconciliation and political bridge-building. Any transition project that relies only on its loyalists and classifies all historical

opponents as “red and black reaction” may appear coherent in the short term, but in the long term it will face resistance, fragmentation, fear, wars of narrative, and a crisis of legitimacy.

2. Conceptual Framework: From Ceremonial Loyalty to Scientific Government

Political loyalty in the monarchical tradition has always combined emotion, order, and historical imagination. People do not become loyal to crown and throne only because of law; they become loyal because of the story the crown tells about history, honour, security, and the future. Yet in the era of the modern state, loyalty without performance is insufficient. A government that cannot produce water, electricity, bread, security, hospitals, schools, jobs, judicial justice, and civic dignity will sooner or later lose legitimacy, even if its symbols are splendid.

Therefore, forward-looking Pahlavism must rest on three pillars: the symbolic pillar, the technocratic pillar, and the national-reconciliation pillar. The symbolic pillar reconstructs society emotionally and identitarianly. The technocratic pillar reconstructs the country administratively and institutionally. The national-reconciliation pillar prevents the new state from becoming, from the outset, a project of revenge, exclusion, or cold civil war.

Pillar	Main function	Risk if exaggerated	Necessary correction
Loyalty and royal grandeur	Rebuilding national pride, discipline, public beauty, and belonging	Reducing politics to performances of loyalty and exclusion of critics	Loyalty must be tied to the constitution, the nation, and the public interest
Technocracy and modernism	Using scientific elites for water, food, health, law, security, and infrastructure	Neglect of politics, society, and social justice	Combination of scientific government with democratic accountability
National reconciliation and bridge-building	Incorporating law-abiding opponents and reducing the cost of transition	Unprincipled compromise with anti-democratic forces	Clear boundary: no to violence, yes to lawful participation

3. Historical Roots: Cyrus, Satrapy, and the Management of Diversity

In Iran’s national memory, Cyrus the Great is a symbol of a plural empire, the management of peoples, and respect for local cults and customs. In scientific historiography, one must avoid simplistic myth-making: Cyrus was an ancient ruler, not a modern liberal democrat. Yet evidence such as the Cyrus Cylinder and Babylonian and Jewish sources suggests that Achaemenid policy, compared with many ancient empires, had a greater capacity to respect local gods, temples, and elites. The British Museum describes the Cyrus Cylinder as a Babylonian account of the conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE and the return of divine statues to their shrines; the Metropolitan Museum of Art also emphasises the return of displaced peoples and the restoration of sanctuaries in the Cylinder’s narrative (British Museum, n.d.; Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).

The Achaemenid satrapal system also offers an important lesson: a great empire is not governed by eliminating diversity; it is governed by combining a strong centre, local administration, taxation, security, and networks of loyalty. Encyclopaedia Iranica identifies satrapies as administrative units of the Achaemenid Empire, and Britannica explains that the division of the empire into provinces was completed under Darius I (Encyclopaedia Iranica, n.d.; Britannica, n.d.). This experience cannot be transferred literally to the twenty-first century, but its principle can be retained: the national centre must be strong, yet if it does not listen to ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional diversity, it becomes internally fragile.

4. Alexander and Aristotle: Political Power Without Philosophical Counsel Is Blind

In the Greek tradition, the symbolic relationship between Alexander and Aristotle illustrates the bond between power and wisdom. Britannica reports that Alexander was educated by Aristotle from the age of 13 to 16 and that Aristotle inspired in him an interest in philosophy, medicine, and scientific investigation (Britannica, 2026). This point matters for Iran: no political leader, however charismatic and popular, can manage the complex transition of a large country without a system of scientific, ethical, economic, security, and legal counsel.

If Cyrus symbolises the management of diversity, and Alexander educated by Aristotle symbolises the union of sword and philosophy, then the theoretical lesson for Iran is clear: the future state must possess both power and reason; it must have security capacity and scientific advisers; it must have a modern army and intelligence organisation, but also legal oversight, a constitution, and public ethics.

5. The Pahlavi Experience: Modernisation, Technocracy, and the Problem of Authoritarianism

Historically, the Pahlavi era contains a paradox. On one hand, Iran under the Pahlavis witnessed state-building, educational modernisation, expansion of bureaucracy, the army, infrastructure, education, public health, and industry. Britannica's account of the White Revolution refers to land reform, the Literacy and Health Corps, the reduction of tribal power, and social and legal reforms related to women (Britannica, 2026). Historical scholarship on education in the Pahlavi period also shows that modern education reached wider sections of society, although this modernisation occurred alongside political control and conflict with traditional and religious forces (Karamipour, 2021; Matthee, 1993).

On the other hand, the classic problem of authoritarian modernisation is that it substitutes technocracy for politics. Scientific and administrative elites are mobilised, but parties, trade unions, associations, opponents, and civil-society forces either remain weak or are securitised. The result is that the state may be able to build dams, roads, universities, and factories, while a mature, lawful, participatory political society does not emerge. This gap was one of the reasons religious, leftist, nationalist, and revolutionary forces were able, during the 1979 crisis, to become a negative coalition against the monarchy.

Thus, defending the positive aspects of Pahlavism must not lead to ignoring the critique of authoritarianism. Future Pahlavism should preserve modernism, but combine it with political participation, the rights of opponents, free media, an independent judiciary, and a constitution that limits power.

6. The Iran Prosperity Project: Technocracy as a Reconstruction Map

In recent years, the Iran Prosperity Project has been presented as an attempt to offer a reconstruction roadmap for the post-Islamic Republic era. The project's official website describes it as "a comprehensive blueprint for rebuilding Iran" in governance, security, economy, and society; Reza Pahlavi's official remarks introducing the project also emphasise the reconstruction of Iran, prosperity, dignity, an open economy, and the readiness of experts and specialists for the transition period (Iran Prosperity Project, n.d.; Pahlavi, 2025; Pahlavi, 2026).

The project is important because it moves the discussion from the level of slogans to the level of executive planning. If tomorrow Iran faces crises in electricity, water, public salaries, hospitals, banks, borders, prisons, municipalities, schools, currency, inflation, and security, symbolic loyalty will not be enough. Operational teams, jurists, physicians, engineers, water specialists, farmers, urban managers, economists, professional military officers, cyber-security experts, and advisers in social reconciliation will be required.

7. The Principal Risk: Bypassing Leftists, Ethnic Forces, the Mojahedin, and Republicans Instead of Regulating Them Legally

The weakness of parts of the pro-Pahlavi discourse is that, because of the bitter experience of the 1979 Revolution, it places all leftist, revolutionary religious, Mojahedin, ethnic, and republican forces into a single category of “causes of Iran’s misery.” This analysis is emotionally understandable, but dangerous from the standpoint of transition engineering. Political forces do not disappear through symbolic exclusion. If they are denied the possibility of lawful participation, they either become structural enemies or take refuge in underground, foreign, media-based, and destructive networks.

The issue is not that all forces must enter power unconditionally. The issue is that three categories must be distinguished: law-abiding and dialogue-capable forces; ideological but legally containable forces; and violent or anti-democratic forces. The red line should be violence, terrorism, armed separatism, violation of human rights, and practical opposition to free elections, not merely a history of being left-wing, republican, or critical of monarchy.

Political/social group	Main concern	Proposed strategy
Liberal leftists and social democrats	Fear of a return to authoritarianism and class inequality	Invite lawful competition; guarantee labour rights, trade unions, and social justice in the constitution
Revolutionary communists	Anti-monarchical and sometimes anti-liberal discourse	Distinguish expression of opinion from violent action; permit party activity within the law
Ethnic and regional groups	Fear of centralism, linguistic discrimination, and securitisation of identity	Administrative decentralisation, cultural rights, and mother-tongue education within territorial unity
Mojahedin and rigid ideological organisations	Closed organisational structure, history of violence, and public trust deficit	Clear legal boundary: non-violence, financial transparency, acceptance of free elections, and judicial oversight
National and secular republicans	Opposition to monarchy in principle or anxiety about hereditary symbolism	Acceptance of a free referendum on the form of government and cooperation during the transition

8. Transition Theory: Why Bridge-Building Reduces Casualties

The scholarly literature on transitions from authoritarianism shows that successful transitions usually occur not through the complete elimination of all sides, but through some form of agreement, risk-sharing, minimal guarantees, and the entry of rival forces into new rules. The classic works of O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead on transitions from authoritarian rule emphasise that democratisation is a process in which the rules of citizenship are extended to groups previously excluded (O'Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead, 1986). Recent research on pacted transitions also shows that the composition of actors, institutional guarantees, and a minimum level of trust affect the success or failure of transition (Iakovlev, 2023).

In Iran's context, this means monarchists, nationalists, law-abiding leftists, republicans, ethnic forces, secular religious citizens, workers, women, students, and specialists must agree on a minimal common language: Iran's territorial integrity, separation of religion and state, equal rights of citizens, free elections, prohibition of political violence, an independent judiciary, and the right of parties to compete. Such a framework allows constitutional monarchy to be presented as one lawful option, not as the prior elimination of all other options.

9. Constructive Pahlavism Versus Performative Pahlavism

One must distinguish between two types of Pahlavism. Performative Pahlavism reduces politics to flags, photographs, slogans, loyalty, attacks on the left, attacks on the Mojahedin, attacks on intellectuals, and displays of historical anger. This kind of Pahlavism may generate energy on social media, but it does not have the capacity for state-building. Constructive Pahlavism, by contrast, converts loyalty into discipline, science, health, law, work, production, infrastructure, and national reconciliation.

Constructive Pahlavism says that if an Iranian young person loves the crown and flag, that love should be translated into studying, exercise, entrepreneurship, engineering, medicine, law, agriculture, urban order, lawful military skill within the national army, avoidance of narcotics, respect for women, public cleanliness, and civic responsibility. This kind of loyalty is not merely political chest-beating; it produces human capital.

10. A Proposed Framework for Political Bridge-Building

For Pahlavism to become a national project rather than the project of one camp, a “National Bridge-Building Council” or a similar mechanism should be formed. This council should not replace political leadership or a provisional government; rather, its mission should be dialogue, reduction of suspicion, drafting a charter of opposition rights, and designing constitutional guarantees.

- First principle: every Iranian who accepts territorial integrity, free elections, human rights, and non-violence has the right to political participation, even if opposed to monarchy.
- Second principle: constitutional monarchy must be defined as a system with a symbolic monarch, an accountable government, and an elected parliament, not as a return to absolute monarchy.
- Third principle: law-abiding leftist forces must be assured that labour rights, unions, insurance, public health, and social justice will be taken seriously in the future system.
- Fourth principle: ethnic groups must be assured that Iran will remain united while their language, culture, local administration, and regional development are recognised.
- Fifth principle: future security and military forces must be professional, national, non-partisan, and subject to constitutional oversight.
- Sixth principle: transitional justice must balance truth-seeking, compensation, prosecution of serious human-rights violators, and avoidance of collective revenge.

11. Policy Model: Grandeur, Health, Modern Army, Legal Intelligence Service, and Technocracy

Future Iran needs a combination of four capacities. First, symbolic capacity: the country must become beautiful, orderly, dignified, healthy, and hopeful again. Second, defence capacity: the national army must be professional, equipped, lawful, and independent of party politics. Third, intelligence capacity: the intelligence and security organisation must be ready to defend the country against terrorism, foreign penetration, sabotage, and organised crime, but it must operate under the supervision of law, parliament, and courts. Fourth, technocratic capacity: the state must use physicians, engineers, jurists, economists, water and energy specialists, farmers, and industrial managers.

If these four capacities are separated from one another, they become dangerous. Grandeur without technocracy becomes spectacle. Security without law becomes repression. Technocracy without justice becomes soulless elitism. Reconciliation without security becomes chaos. The correct formula is the combination of all four elements within a constitutional framework.

12. Conclusion

For Iranians, Pahlavi is not merely the name of a family; it is a field of meaning in which grandeur connects with order, history with the future, monarchy with the state, and national feeling with technocracy. Yet if this field is reduced to hatred of historical opponents and the exclusion of leftist, ethnic, republican, and non-state religious forces, it can lose part of its own capacity.

Reza Pahlavi's path and the Iran Prosperity Project are important because they push politics toward programme, expertise, economy, governance, and reconstruction. Yet for this path to be less costly, more inclusive, and more durable, it needs an Iran-oriented intelligentsia versed in Marxist literature, nationalism, republicanism, ethnicity, political Islam, constitutional law, and transition theory—an intelligentsia capable of building bridges for the Prince and for Iran.

The desirable future of Iran is neither a simple return to the past nor a repetition of ideological revolution. The desirable future is a combination of national grandeur, social health, modern army and security, scientific technocracy, constitutional law, rights of opponents, transitional justice, and national reconciliation. If Pahlavism can move from emotional loyalty to institutional architecture, it can become not merely a nostalgia, but one of the important languages of Iranian state-building in the twenty-first century.

Strategic Summary Table

Axis	Raw and risky version	Corrected and state-building version
Loyalty to monarchy	Exclusion of critics and performance of loyalty	Loyalty to the nation, constitution, and constitutional monarchy
Modernisation	Top-down modernisation without participation	Accountable technocracy with parties and civil society
Security	Security organisation outside oversight	Professional national security under the rule of law
Left and opponents	Rejecting all as “red reaction”	Incorporating legalists and containing violent actors
Ethnic groups	Securitising local identities	Territorial unity with cultural rights and administrative decentralisation
Prosperity Project	Expert programme limited to close elites	Open national platform for specialists and law-abiding social groups

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