

The Iranian policy advisory system: Contained politicisation and emerging technicisation

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Abstract

A lot of literature on policy advisory systems (PASs) is based on Western liberal democracies, with scant attention paid to policymaking systems in authoritarian regimes. This paper examines the Iran's PAS and how it has changed between 1989 and 2023. The paper documents four distinctive phases in Iran's PAS: in-house 'institutionalisation', transitional 'politicisation', technocratic 'externalisation', and 'technicisation'. We examine 16 representative advisory organisations (1989–2023) and show that while the Iranian PAS is well institutionalised and increasingly becoming externalised, there is still a tradition of centralisation and limited bureaucratic openness. Further, Iran's PAS has become less political due to constitutional preferences preventing advisory organisations from dealing with politically sensitive issues, as well as the decline of political party traditions and institutions. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the emerging 'technicisation' of Iran's PAS, indicating an expansion of and reliance on technology-assisted tools and instruments by advisory organisations.

KEYWORDS

externalisation, policy advisory system, politicisation, technicisation

Points for practitioners

- Regardless of differences in political systems, policy advisory systems are an indispensable part of public policymaking machinery.
- To enhance the quality of public policies, policy-makers should support a diversified and competent advisory system.
- To keep externalised organisations alive and effective, they must be supported by public measures and protected by a legal framework.
- A form of technocratic-political balance in PAS is necessary. A well-developed policy advisory system not only includes non-partisan and technocratic advisory institutions, it also consists of politicised institutions providing political advice for policymakers too.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The policy advisory system (PAS) is a framework that sheds light on the institutional arrangements of providing policy-relevant advice to policymakers (Halligan, 1995). It includes the characteristics of advisory agencies, like their institutional proximity, political support, content quality, analytical autonomy, and the level of policy capacity. Later on, PAS has widened its perception of the institutional arrangement of providing advice from a structure to a system (Craft & Halligan, 2020). As such, policy learning could happen through an ‘interlocking set of actors and organisations’, including governmental agencies, non-state advisory organisations, and individual advisors, that collectively frame policy advice and influence policymakers’ perception of complex issues and their decisions about relevant policies (Craft & Howlett, 2013; Halligan, 1995). Even further, in his ‘second wave’ frame, Jonathan Craft moves beyond the borders of PAS per se, contextualising PAS within the subsystem it operates (Craft & Widler, 2017; Hussain et al., 2023). In a similar conceptualisation, Campbell Pedersen (2015) introduces knowledge regimes as ‘the organisational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas that influence public debate and policymaking’. In sum, modern PAS has now, more or less, been increasingly institutionalised as an indispensable part of policy machinery and the main source of policy advice provision. As such, PAS is always considered ‘context specific’; thus, it might represent different institutional features depending on each country’s socio-political system (Bakir, 2023; Migone & Howlett, 2023).

This paper aims to study the Iranian PAS characteristics and evolutions. As such, it first briefly reviews the application of the PAS framework in various political systems. Then, it provides an overview of the distinctive socio-political system in Iran and its main features framing policy advice provisions. Section 4 explains how the representative sample of 16 institutions, including governmental agencies and non-state organisations, was selected out of 159 institutions listed. It

also describes data-gathering mixed methods applied here, including document analysis, interviews, and focus groups. The next section outlines a four-dimensional analytical framework used in this paper. The empirical section analyses PAS in Iran across four distinctive post-revolutionary periods. The paper concludes with a short discussion section providing an overall overview of the evolution of the Iranian PAS over more than 40 years.

The paper argues that Iran's PAS reflects less politicised characteristics, except for a temporary government-led over-politicisation period. As such, it is expected to provide policy advice in line with the constitutional and ideological preferences, and to deal cautiously with politically sensitive issues. The study also points to comparatively less-institutionalised non-governmental organisations due to the limitation of private funding and supporting schemes, while it highlights the institutionalisation of governmental advisory agencies, generally in line with PAS literature. Similarly, this paper supports the inevitable PAS externalisation in Iran. However, it shows a limited level of policy openness to externalised organisations rather than public agencies. Further, it provides empirical evidence reflecting instrumental and institutional PAS technicisation in Iran. Altogether, this paper contributes in PAS literature through studying a distinctive socio-political context rather than Western liberal democracies and consolidated autocracies.

2 | PAS IN DIFFERENT SOCIO-POLITICAL SYSTEMS

The literature on PAS originated in Westminster-style political systems (Craft & Halligan, 2016, 2020; Craft & Henderson, 2023) and then was applied to developed European countries (Fobé et al., 2013; Fraussen & Halpin, 2017; Galanti & Lippi, 2023; Hadorn et al., 2022; Head, 2023; Hustedt & Vent, 2017; Kelstrup, 2017; Pattyn et al., 2022; Peters & Barker, 1993; Van den Berg, 2016) and the United States (Pfiffner, 2005; Ponder, 2000). What is common with those countries is their political systems, which are mainly characterised as Western liberal democracies. In such a democratic regime, PAS broadly refers to 'the multiple sources of policy advice' (Howlett, 2019) that is not only a matter of more professional policy development, but also could lead to a greater public legitimacy and a 'more open and democratic appearance' (Peters & Barker, 1993).

The literature on PAS has recently shown a growing interest in studying other socio-political systems than the OECD¹ countries (Howlett, 2019; Hustedt, 2019), while there is still a disproportionately limited number of PAS publications there. In a systematic literature review, Bakir (2023) claims that up to February 2023, only 17 articles, out of almost 584, have mainly recently been published conducting policy advice in subtypes of 'autocratic political regimes'. They have studied PAS in China as a 'communist single-party regime' (Dimitrov, 2015; Li, 2012; Ma, 2023; Nachiappan, 2013; Perry, 2020; Shen et al., 2022; Zhu, 2020); non-communist single-party regimes particularly Russia (Belyaeva, 2019; Hanson & Kopstein, 2022; Zaytsev, 2019) and Kazakhstan (Furstenberg, 2018; Knox, 2020); and non-democratic monarchies including Arab countries based in the Persian Gulf (Jones, 2019). There are also a few comparative case studies (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2016; Uldanov, 2019). Djordjevic and Stone (2022) have also studied PAS in the Western Balkans' 'captured states' in a similar European work.

As such, 'authoritarian PAS' has been characterised as 'hierarchical', 'closed' with no space for external agents, 'overtly politicised' with 'weak' and 'sidelined' bureaucracies, and based on 'patrimonial' and personal relationships (Hustedt, 2019). In his 'vicious circle' conceptualisation, Bakir (2023) has pointed to 'repression', 'co-optation', containment, and 'legitimation' as the primary features of instrumental PAS in 'consolidated autocracies'. However, moving beyond the 'democratic-autocratic dichotomy', the PAS literature still suffers from a gap in characterising

various evolving, 'increasingly authoritarianising' political regimes. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on PAS by applying it to Iran's substantially distinctive socio-political context.

3 | AN OVERVIEW OF THE IRANIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

In order to theorise PAS in Iran's specific political context, this section briefly reviews a few frameworks aiming at conceptualising political systems other than Western democracies. Mukherjee (2010) and Mauzy (1997) have tried to figure out to what extent the 'Asian democracies' are distinctive from classical types, particularly concerning the role of religion and values. The 'centralised' political system is another frame against de-centralised, devolved, and federalist democracies (Wolman, 1990). Also, the 'rentier state' model (Beblawi & Luciani, 2015) has been used to understand the Iranian system as an oil-based political economy (MirTorabi, 2005; MosallaNejad, 2020). Going back to the democracy versus authoritarian dichotomy, FreedomHouse (2022) defines 'consolidated authoritarian' regimes as 'closed societies in which dictators prevent political competition and pluralism' (cited in Bakir, 2023). In rather contrast, 'competitive authoritarian regimes' are characterised by 'unfair competition' (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

In order to contextualise the Iranian PAS within the overarching socio-political system it has been surrounded with, this section highlights a few relevant characteristics that frame the whole process of policymaking in Iran, particularly the institutional configuration of the machinery providing policy advice there.

3.1 | The rentier state model and a central tradition of public sector

In Iran, like most developing countries, the government has been traditionally seen as the sole responsible actor for public service delivery. Early decades of modern government history in Iran coincided with the post-WWII years and the worldwide rise of the welfare state idea. Moreover, Iran was then seen as one of the front borders against the aggressive communism promoted by the Soviet Union. Hence, the then Western-oriented Iranian Kingdom was obliged to provide a centralised public service to safeguard society against infiltrating socialist ideas (Mokhtari & Shafiei, 2019). Experiencing the sharp rise in oil prices in the 1970s, the monarchy also reinforced the legacy of an oil-based economy, leading to a form of the rentier state model.

Together, such a mix of a welfare-state style of public service as well as the classical rentier state model resulted in 'an excessive centralised public sector' which not only expanded an enormous service delivery machinery but also followed the 'government always knows best' model of policy advice (Karimi & Nili, 2022; Sarzaieem, 2020). The model remained almost persistent even in the post-1979 Islamic Revolution years. The Iran–Iraq war and the economic recovery era in the 1990s also reinforced the philosophy behind a large-scale government model.

From a PAS point of view, such public service centralisation has inevitably reinforced an in-house policy advice mentality. This fact has traditionally limited the Iranian public sector's openness towards external policy advice.

3.2 | A semi-democratic political system: A form of multi-level governance

Moving beyond the traditional kingdom led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution; the post-revolutionary constitution proposed a presidential political system consisting of ‘democratically elected’² government and parliament, alongside the judiciary as three branches of power. Above all, the Supreme Leader represents religious authorities responsible for supervising the political system. Amending the constitution in 1989, a set of ‘supra-governmental’ Supreme Councils³ were introduced not only to tackle the lack of ‘policy integration and cohesion’ derived from the excessive separation of power but also to provide ‘policy stability and consistency’ throughout subsequent elected governments and parliaments (Emamian, 2024). The councils enjoy the authority to propose overarching strategies, so-called ‘Macro Policies’ by the Iranian legal terminology, beyond regular political and electoral cycles. They also frame public policies within, though a relatively wide definition of, constitutional ‘religious and revolutionary’ values, in line with what is called ‘ideological preferences’ by Bakir (2023). Those constitutional preferences then provide a rather broad framework that PAS policy advices are conceived as legitimised within.

Altogether, those political institutions represent a form of a ‘multi-level governance’ model (Emamian, 2024) with semi-democratic characteristics. Such a complicated institutional design has created several policy venues for the Iranian PAS to get involved in different levels of the policymaking process. At the same time, such a level of complexity has also created significant challenges in influencing ultimate policies in practice.

3.3 | The weak political institutionalisation: A less politicised PAS

Established as a relatively young and semi-democratic political system, the Iranian politics still suffers from the lack of a well-institutionalised tradition of party politics. Moreover, from a political philosophy point of view, there is yet a form of fundamental disagreement and divergence about the appropriate role that political parties could play in such a distinctive political system (Akhavan Kazemi, 2017; Feirahi, 2017). Together, the lack of a professional and competitive political machinery reinforced by such a ‘party scepticism’ mentality has led to a relatively ‘weak political institutionalisation’ (Emamian, 2024). It is manifested in ‘personal’ electoral system resulting in ‘individual-centred’ governments and parliaments, not necessarily representing any political party.

As a result, the weakness of political institution in Iran has provided a contradictory context for the Iranian PAS to operate within. On the one hand, it has still kept opportunities open for non-partisan and technocratic advisory institutions to influence public policies. On the other hand, it has prevented the PAS from being substantially politicised and influencing high-level politicians and politically significant issues.

3.4 | The challenging international relations: The PAS nationalism tradition

Inspired by the ‘independence’ political ideology⁴ of the 1979 Islamic Revolution as well as constant geopolitical and security concerns, the Iranian political system has long been characterised

by an 'international scepticism' tradition (Afshani & Emamian, 2022; Khajesarvi, 2011). The plethora of constant US-led sanctions for decades, the broad international support of Iraq during the war, Israel's direct involvement in security operations inside the country, and the regional conflict with some GCC⁵ members have consolidated such an inward and rather securitised approach into the Iranian policymaking process, resulting in a very particular institutional design and governance model. As such, the Iranian PAS has also been almost disconnected from the international PAS. Even financially, the Iranian institutions have never been granted any international funds or donations, not only due to imposed sanctions, but also due to security-related constraints in the way of policy institutions' international funding. Altogether, they have created a tradition of 'PAS nationalism' in Iran.

3.5 | The emergence of a semi-privatised techno-economy

Following the amendment of the 44th principle of the constitution in 2005, the Iranian economy was supposed to become private in almost all economic sectors. Whilst in practice, the fully fledged privatisation process has been constrained by several institutional challenges, such a still incomplete process has substantially shifted the role of the state from the sole provider of large-scale public services towards a form of 'regulatory state' (Emamian et al., 2018, 2024). Likewise, privileged by a massive investment in technology and innovation policy, the Iranian economy has recently witnessed the rise of a generation of technologically advanced and mainly digitalised private corporations. Altogether, they have opened up windows of opportunity for the Iranian PAS to get externalised and follow a technical advancement policy. Both will be discussed later on.

To summarise, it is clear that the Iranian socio-political system does not represent a Western liberal democracy. However, this study argues that it is also analytically oversimplified to categorise it under 'consolidated authoritarian' regimes as characterised by Bakir (2023). Instead, this section has aimed to move beyond the 'democratic-authoritarian' dichotomy, figuring out its main features affecting policy provision machinery. As shown, while it is traditionally bureaucratically central and less open to external advisory organisations, its multi-level design and complexity provide several venues for externalised PAS to get access and influence. This fact differs from what is seen in autocratic regimes (Hustedt, 2019; Uldanov, 2019).

Furthermore, it is less politically institutionalised. Such a marginal PAS politicisation is also in clear contrast with what literature describes as 'overtly politicised' authoritarian PASs that are usually formed around and directed by leading political parties at the centre of PAS (Belyaeva, 2019; Hustedt, 2019; Nachiappan, 2013; Zhu, 2020). However, this feature supports the argument that Iranian PAS focuses mainly on 'politically less sensitive issues' (Shen et al., 2022; Uldanov, 2019; Zaytsev, 2019) and political system's preferences broadly frame its policy advices.

In addition, the Iranian socio-political context has recently paved the way for PAS technical advancement and marginal externalisation. Nevertheless, it seems traditionally less welcoming to the politicisation and internationalisation of PAS in Iran. Altogether, the section conceptualises a distinctive, complex socio-political system rather than classical democracies or authoritarians.

4 | CASE SELECTION AND METHODS

Having briefly reviewed the socio-political context framing PAS in Iran, this section aims to provide an empirical basis for analysing the Iranian PAS. The expanded and updated Iran Thinktank's

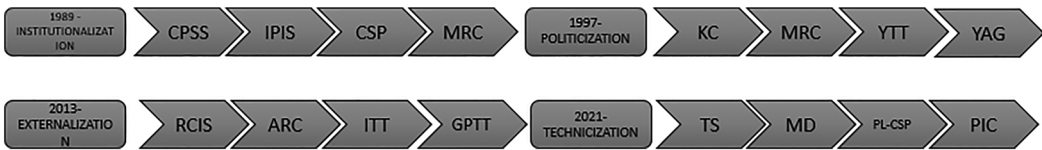


FIGURE 1 Timeline of the selected institution's establishment.

(2021) most recent report recognises 123 policy advisory institutions. This paper has provided a complementary list representing 159 policy advice-producing institutions including governmental agencies and non-governmental advisory organisations (available in Appendix S2).

Based on the experience of 11 subsequent governments⁶ after the revolution in 1979, the study has highlighted four distinctive socio-political contexts that presumably have framed the Iranian PAS. Considering it is empirically challenging to study all 159 institutions (Appendix S2), this study has selected a few cases as a representative sample. They are expected to first highly reflect their own era's socio-political context. Secondly, all listed institutions are by no means at the same level of policy significance and influence. As such, this study has mainly focused on a few of the most influential cases of each period, based on their activity level, for example, publication and media appearance, their institutional size and budget, and their political saliency and proximity to the then government. Finally, there are also a few empirical constraints like limitations in accessing their data -either due to their secrecy or because of their limited durability and weak documentation- that have practically affected the study's case selection too.

A selection committee consisting of PAS experts from public departments, academia, and think tank industry, as listed in Appendix A, has ultimately decided about the representative sample. Through conducting several focus groups evaluating dimensions mentioned above, the committee has selected 16 institutions out of 159 listed, almost four institutions per each socio-political era. Figure 1 visualises the timeline of those institutions' establishment.

However, such a representative sample needs to provide a more comprehensive empirical basis for analysing the whole Iranian PAS. For this purpose, it not only needs to study all advisory institutions per se, but it also requires to cover the full diversity of PAS components including individual advisors. So, the representative sample merely provides 'illustrative examples' with a 'limited generalisability'⁷ of PAS evolution in Iran.

The representative sample's 16 institutions were then deeply analysed by reviewing their web pages and annual reports and conducting 36 semi-structured interviews. The interviews were mainly focused on studying a 12-dimensional analytical framework that will be elaborated later on. The interviewee list (available in Appendix S3) included representatives of selected institutions, a few researchers from the Iran Think Tank Society, several public departments' relevant staff as main clients of PAS in Iran, and academics who study the Iranian policy process, including the advisory institutions. More importantly, the list was originally founded upon members of the select committee who, building upon such a contextual understanding, had been given the final say on providing the main research dataset presented in Table 1.

5 | THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper primarily relies on characterising three overall PAS trends, already discussed in its literature, to determine the evolution of the Iranian PAS through the analysis of 16 selected

TABLE 1 The main dataset: Applying the framework's dimensions on the selected cases using a 'Likert like' scoring system.

Institutions/ dimensions	Official establishment	Durability and continuity	Investment and equipment	Legal-structural autonomy	Independent agenda setting	Independent appointment	Politically shifting identity and direction	The ratio of politicians to policy staff	Political content	Application of techno-innovative methods	Techno-innovative outputs	The ratio of technicians to policy staff
CPSS	3	5	2	0	2	2	4	4	3	1	0	0
IPIS	4	5	3	1	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	0
CSP	4	5	3	2	3	2	1	0	0	2	2	1
MRC	5	5	5	2	3	1	3	1	2	1	2	1
KC	0	1	0	3	3	3	5	4	4	1	1	0
RMC	1	3	5	3	3	3	5	5	5	0	1	2
YTT	0	3	1	3	3	3	3	5	5	1	2	2
YAG	2	3	2	0	2	2	5	4	4	1	0	1
RCIS	2	4	3	4	4	3	1	0	1	2	1	2
ARC	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	1
ITT	3	4	3	3	4	4	2	2	2	2	2	2
GPTT	4	4	3	5	5	5	0	1	1	1	2	2
TYS	3	2	3	5	5	5	0	0	0	4	5	3
MD	3	2	3	5	5	5	0	0	1	5	4	4
PL-CSP	2	0	1	3	4	0	0	0	0	4	3	3
PIC	3	1	3	3	4	2	2	2	1	3	2	3

Abbreviations: ARC, AARA Research Center; CPSS, Centre for Presidential Strategic Studies; CSP, Center for Science Policy; GPTT, Governance and Policy Thinktank; IPIS, Institute for Political and International Studies; ITT, ITAN Thinktank; KC, KIAN Circle; MD, MetaData; MRC, MAJLIS Research Center; PIC, Parliamentary Innovation Center; PL-CSP, Policy Lab—Center for Science Policy; RCIS, ROSHD Center of Imam Sadigh University; RMC, The Reformist Media Chain; TYS, TANZIM YAR Startup Studio; YAG, Young Advisory Group; YTT, YAGHIN Thinktank.

advisory institutions: institutionalisation, externalisation, and politicisation. Hence, the framework conceives agencies as increasingly institutionalised inside the public sector as the primary source of policy advice provision, enjoying 'institutional proximity' (Craft & Howlett, 2013) and 'locational access' privileges (Craft & Howlett, 2012). In a comparative study of Danish and Belgian PASs, Fobe et al. (2013) have characterised the level of 'institutionalisation regarding factors like institutional continuity, the amount of budget, the size of staff, and the structural scale'. This study follows this line by picking institutional continuity and durability as a subdimension. Other logistical factors have also been collectively pointed in under the title of 'investment and equipment'. An additional subdimension is also proposed here to characterise the extent of legality and officiality of the institution, reflecting the extent to which the institution is well recognised and institutionalised within the Iranian legal framework.

The growing participation of non-governmental organisations has then challenged the locational superiority of in-house advisory agencies due to the increasing complexities of policy issues, bureaucratic overloading, and the challenge of political loyalty and trust (Bevir & Rhodes, 2001; Bevir et al., 2003; Howlett & Lindquist, 2004; Mayer et al., 2013). Such a 're-location' process, as Arnošt Veselý (2013) phrased it, led to the 'externalisation' of policy advice, which resulted in a more competitive and marketised style of contemporary PAS (Van den Berg, 2016). He conceptualises the process of PAS externalisation as the 'professionalisation of policy competence outside the public service'. It points to the level of content, financial, and managerial independence from the government. The trend that Veselý (2013) has also characterised is the institutional distance of the institution from the centre of government as well as the extent to which the substance and the process of advice giving are controlled by public authorities. Similarly, in this study, the extent of 'legal-structural autonomy' and 'independent agenda setting' alongside the symbolic significance of 'autonomous appointment' of the institution's senior figures constitutes three subdimensions measuring the level of actual externalisation of selected institutions.

Furthermore, the PAS scholarship proposes 'politicisation' to point out that a significant proportion of advice to policymakers could be categorised within the wide range of political advice, particularly the advice regarding party-political or electoral issues, rather than technical (Craft & Howlett, 2012). Besides such a 'substantial' politicisation, it also could be manifested in the 'procedural' positioning of political institutions as the gatekeepers of the policy advisory process (Veit et al., 2017). As such, Askim, Bach, and Christensen, in a comparative study of Danish and Norwegian PAS in 2018, point to the political recruitment and firing of senior staff as a sign of increasing politicisation (Askim et al., 2018). Accordingly, this study proposes the extent to which the institution's policy mandate might be affected due to political shifts, the proportion of political staff there, and the extent of the political substance of contents provided by the institution as three sub-dimensions analysed throughout the paper.

Most recently, the PAS scholarship has been attracted to studying the emergence of 'non-traditional knowledge systems' and, in particular, the role of 'technology-assisted tools' in providing policy advice (GDN, 2022). A few studies have also been recently published analysing the role of 'new sources of policy knowledge' derived from technological advancements in 'algorithmic programming, machine learning, and artificial intelligence'. Based on the COVID-19 pandemic policies in Morocco, Hamid El-Caid (2022) argues that 'technology-assisted policy tools supplement the traditional roles of traditional policy experts'. Similarly, Moon (2022) points to the pattern of 'algorithmisation' in South Korea, resulting in the 'hybridisation of human and AI-based policy advice'. Overall, they point to the empirical fact that policymakers are increasingly concerned about, influenced by, and relying upon policy analysis that is produced and packaged using sophisticated technical approaches like Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, quantitative social science, digital apps, social platforms, behavioural science, cognitive methods, and so on. This emerging trend might represent a move beyond traditional policy advice methods that have long been merely based on qualitative policy analysis. Institutionally, it also could sign a form of 'technical-policy nexus', which manifests itself into a new institutional configuration of the PAS in which its boundaries extend to include technical institutions like data analysing institutes, policy labs, RegTechs, and GovTechs that provide policy-related techniques and instruments too.

Relying on emerging literature, this study proposes the fourth dimension, 'technicisation', to be tested. Compared to well-studied substantive shifts like politicisation and externalisation, this paper assumes it represents a mainly methodological and institutional shift away from traditional PAS. Hence, to make such a proposition testable and measurable, this study analyses the level

of technicality of selected institutions regarding the extent of technology-assisted methods and tools they are applying, the ratio of technical staff they are recruiting, and the extent of technical outputs and services they are providing.

In sum, this study proposes a four-dimensional framework leading to a set of 12 sub-dimensional instruments, as presented below. This instrument is developed to provide more concrete and applicable characteristics of four initial conceptions. Those sub-dimensions were then characterised based on a 'Likert-like scale'⁸ between 0 and 5 representing, in sequence, the lowest and the highest level of that sub-dimension. The select committee then scored them based on gathered data and through conducting a few focus groups.

Belows are four dimensions of the analytical framework followed by each one's three sub-dimensional instruments:

1. Institutionalisation:

a. Official establishment: whether or not they have been established based upon a specific act, as part of a generic legislation, or other forms of officiality and documentation.

b. Durability and continuity: the extent to which they have existed and actively provided policy advice.

c. Investment and equipment: the level of investment and logistical preparation devoted to the institution, including the budget, number of staff, required infrastructure, and so forth.

2. Externalisation

a. Legal-structural autonomy: whether or not there is any direct or indirect link reflecting any form of ownership or institutional authority of a public department over the organisation.

b. Independent agenda setting: whether there is any limitation on or direction over policy agendas and issues the organisation deals with from a public department.

c. Independent appointment: the extent to which a higher level organisational appointment is directed, endorsed, or influenced by a public department.

3. Politicisation:

a. Politically shifting identity and policy direction: the extent to which the substance of the institution's operation is affected by political shifts and transitions.

b. The ratio of political to policy staff: the proportion of politically motivated staff compared to policy analysts.

c. Political content: the proportion of political advice the institution provides compared to technical policy advice.

4. Technicisation:

a. The application of techno-innovative methods: the extent to which the institution is well prepared to use technically advanced analytical methods and approaches.

b. The techno-innovative outputs: the proportion of technically rich and professionally packaged policy advice compared to traditional policy outputs.

c. The ratio of technicians to policy staff: the size and the superiority of technical experts compared to policy staff.

6 | DEVELOPING THE MAIN DATASET

In order to create the main data source for further analyses, the paper has provided a table by applying all 12 sub-dimensions of the adopted analytical framework to 16 selected cases. The dataset has been elaborately filled throughout the select committee's focus groups based on

their own contextualised deep understanding of the Iranian PAS alongside reviewing official documents, the institutions' web pages, and annual reports.

7 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Mutually relating the dynamics of PAS and the broader socio-political and policy landscape, this section aims to provide a contextual analysis of the history of the post-revolutionary Iranian PAS in different periods through 43 years. This section provides an illustrative overview of PAS patterns in Iran without claiming any form of comprehensive generalisability after studying a representative sample of 4 institutions each year.

7.1 | The post-war economic development Era (1989–1997): An 'in-house institutionalisation'

Moving beyond a disastrous wartime era, the first analytical period represents two 'Economic Recovery' administrations led by the late President Hashemi. His central policy was infrastructural development and monetary reforms (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2012; Aghahoseini & Babri, 2008). Given prioritised economic objectives over everything else, he deliberately initiated a form of depoliticisation⁹, particularly within the bureaucratic machinery. He started to modernise and expand public sector departments to fill the wartime gap (Interview 31, November 2022). Nonetheless, framed by the central predominant mentality of the time, Hashemi's administration approach led to a form of 'in-house institutionalisation' of policy advisory agencies (Interview 28, December 2022).

Amongst newly established agencies, The Centre for Presidential Strategic Studies (CPSS) was clearly at the heart of Hashemi's depoliticisation policy (Interview 1, April 2022). Having positioned within his personal office's proximity while isolated from the administration machinery, he aimed to contain and neutralise the prominent, then-called left-wing, reformist political leaders. As quoted by a senior officer at CPSS:

In the absence of a well-institutionalised party-political system, the basis of the formation of CPSS was to position and contain the political elites who no longer had an official position within the political system (Interview 1, April 2022).

Such a 'prestigious isolation' provided them an opportunity to develop the reformists' main 'political development plan', playing the role of the 'policy brain' for the next two reformist governments (Interviews 1 and 2, April 2022). Interestingly, the CPSS manifested an over-politicised advisory agency derived from the Hashemi administration's depoliticisation policy. Overall, Figure 2 introduces it as a durable part—but less institutionalised due to its partisan political nature—of the 'political machinery' of the subsequent governments.

Another instance of such an in-house institutionalisation policy was the establishment of the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS)¹⁰, as the highly prestigious research and advice provision agency to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). It had the following functions: role of a 'political backyard' for the MFA, providing new policies, training successive generations of diplomats, occasionally as the track-two diplomacy agent, and a more open platform to discuss foreign policy issues outside of diplomatic protocols and official constraints (Interview 34,

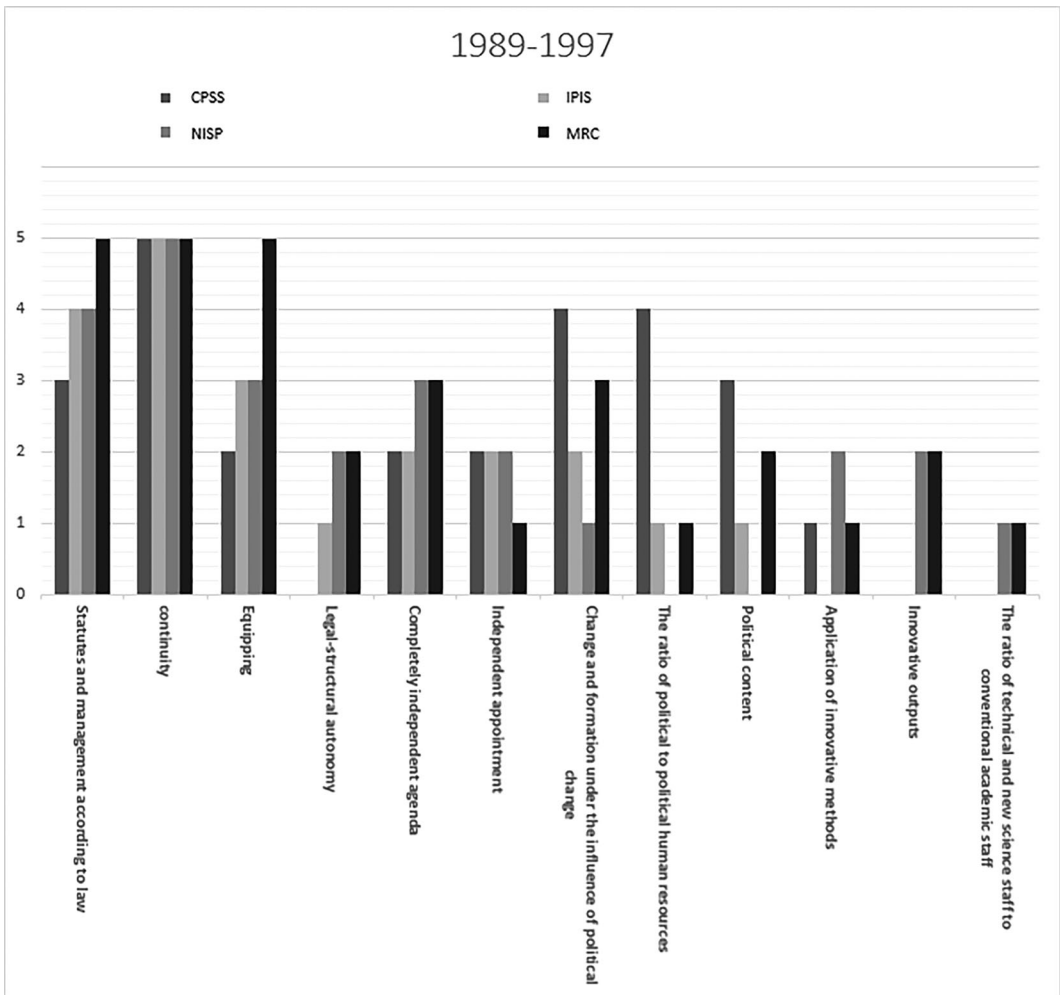


FIGURE 2 The characteristics of economic development era’s policy advisory system (PAS)-selected agencies.

November 2021). Moving beyond its golden age, it gradually turned into a well-institutionalised but less innovative bureaucratic department playing the role of the MFA’s ‘policy gatekeeper’ preoccupied with former senior diplomats (Interview 35, November 2021), as reflected in Figure 2.

The third agency that this section has studied is the Center for Science Policy (CSP). CSP was amongst a few institutions initiated to provide relevant advice for Iran’s herculean higher education investment policy (Nrisp, 2023). As another well-institutionalised durable in-side agency, it was gradually preoccupied with academics and post-grad programs, arguably ‘replicating universities’ under the title of a policy agency (Interview 26, December 2023). However, its distance from the political centre and safeguarded by academic traditions has kept CSP in a relatively more independent and less politicised status.

The last but arguably the most critical agency the section aims to analyse is the MAJLIS Research Center (MRC), the parliamentary official advisory institution. As the former director framed it, the MRC was created to be the ‘brain of the parliament’ (Interview 6, April 2022). Comparatively, this study finds MRC as the best institutionalised and predominantly technical,

compared to its position at the heart of politics (Figure 2). Nevertheless, the advisory instruments used are still predominantly traditional per se. Establishing a specific parliamentary act, recruiting hundreds of policy staff, being regularly invited by the Parliamentary commissions, and providing an enormous number of policy reports and notes about the legislative drafts have provided MRC with an 'unprecedented level of institutionalisation' (Interviews 20 and 21, June 2021). Having positioned inside the Parliament also has imposed MRC a set of 'strict bureaucracy' and 'political conservatism' (Interview 20, June 2021).

To summarise, Figure 2 reflects a clear link between the overarching political and policy landscape and how PAS is being adapted. This period has been characterised by a firm institutionalisation, though in a fairly internalised way. It has also represented an overall limited level of politicisation, except in the case of CPSS. Moreover, as it is usual for traditional public sector departments, there is almost no evidence of PAS technical advancement recorded. An interesting observation was also the high level of adaption of durable agencies with general traditions of public service leading to a form of gradual 'bureaucratisation' of advisory institutions.

7.2 | The political reform and populism nexus (1997–2013): The transitional politicisation era

In a public response to almost 8 years of depoliticisation policy, in the aftermath of the 1997 presidential election, the Iranian PAS experienced unprecedented 'excessive politicisation' (Interview 1, April 2022). With President Khatami's administration's deliberate prioritisation of political reform, there was a network of substantial political institutions like media outlets that replaced the role of the policy advice machinery.

In a very distinctive informal design, a group of reformist intellectuals and political philosophers who had already published their thoughts in several magazines like KIAN for decades gradually initiated a form of semi-institutionalised network that then was labelled as the 'KIAN Circle (KC)' by critics. To provide relevant policy advice to the two former Khatami administrations, their specific role was mainly in 'theorising' and 'philosophising political discourses and policies' (Interview 29, December 2022; Interview 2, April 2022). Figure 3 reflects institutional weakness, particularly transitional duration, fair independence from public departments, and politicisation.

In another strange institutional design, a group of well-funded media outlets, mainly newsletters, created a network then called the Reformist Media Chain (RMC). Influenced by an intensely polarised political context, they played the role of vanguard developers and promoters of reformist policies, replacing traditional advisory agencies (Interview 24, June 2022). Using political techniques like campaigning, 'aggressively attacking' policy critics, and 'over-simplification' of technically sophisticated policy issues led to the 'polarisation' of the policy domain (Interview 30, December 2022). As such, some analysts argue that RMC was playing the role of a 'political war machinery' and it was 'weaponising' political policies (Interview 24, June 2022). Figure 3 summarises RMC as well equipped, officially externalised though politically safeguarded by the then administration, highly politicised, and fairly technically innovative in exercising political and media techniques.

Surprisingly 8 years later, under a highly opposite socio-political direction, such a PAS politicisation trend remained fairly alive, albeit in a different institutional configuration. Its critics widely accuse President Ahmadinejad of a 'populist' administration due to its 'divisive political discourse', 'anti-elitism', 'nationalism', and a sharp rise in public expenditure (Sarzaeem, 2020).

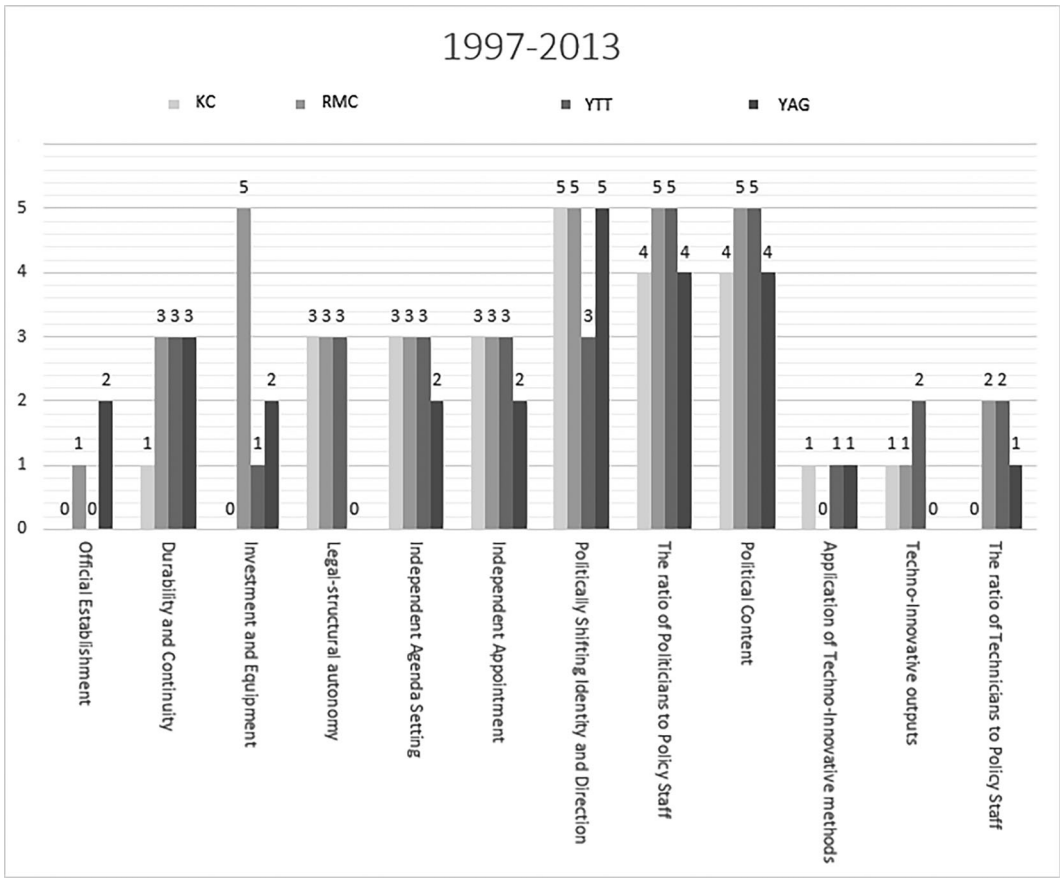


FIGURE 3 The characteristics of political populism era's policy advisory system (PAS)-selected institutions.

Regardless, his move resulted in a new generation of organisations politically targeting public opinion more than policymakers. For instance, YAGHIN Thinktank (YTT) aims to target the public rather than political elites (Yaghin Thinktank, 2023). As shown in Figure 3, YTT is relatively institutionalised and durable, officially independent while unofficially has long enjoyed some form of public department support, excessively politicised, and technically capable mainly in publicisation of policy issues.

However, the Young Advisory Group (YAG) was an important institutional innovation. Using a very central model under the supervision of his personal office, President Ahmadinejad was thinking of creating a network of a 'politically loyal' generation of senior policymakers (Interview 33, November 2022). Without well-institutionalised political parties in Iran, YAG was perceived as 'political networking' across the public department (Interview 33, November 2022). Such an ambitious political project was then gradually sidelined due to its tremendously central characteristics and weak institutionalisation. However, it led to a high PAS politicisation driven directly by the Presidential office (Figure 3).

In summary, Figure 3 displays that replacing technical policy agencies with substantial political institutions is again interrelated primarily to the overall political direction. From an institutional point of view, such a politicisation process usually results in a very 'weak institutionalisation' of PAS due to the 'personal' and 'temporary' nature of politics in Iran (Ashtarian, 2017). This fact

has framed such a period of PAS politicisation in Iran as a ‘transitional partisan project’ rather than a substantial characteristic (Interview 24, June 2022). Furthermore, from a technical point of view, over-politicised advisory institutions are exercising literally ‘aggressive and divisive’ political techniques rather than analytical and sophisticated policy instruments.

7.3 | The politically moderate era (2013–2021): Towards technocratic externalisation

Having reacted to almost 16 years of politically polarised period, President Rouhani’s marginal victory and his political moderation agenda¹¹ opened an opportunity window for technical policy organisations to get more involved in policymaking (Interview 21, June 2022). At the same time, the emergence of significant policy problems, exacerbated by international sanctions, led not only to a move beyond traditional ‘bureaucratic lock-in’ beyond the PASTOOR’s¹² gates, but also to a ‘constructive’ approach to political opposition through investing in establishing quasi-independent advisory organisations (Interview 21, June 2022). The then Governmental Innovation policy reinforced a technocratic externalisation trend in supporting technological start-ups and innovative business models. Despite the predominant technical-business mentality of the relevant authority¹³, the independent Iranian PAS was also inspired and marginally supported, leading to the emergence of a form of ‘policy entrepreneurship’ (Interview 26, June 2022).

As another example, the ROSHD Center of Imam Sadigh University (RCIS), based in the periphery of a privately owned but politically influential university, issues public degrees aimed to incentivise postgraduate students to get practically involved with complicated policy issues and also to train the ‘most likely’ next generation of senior politicians (Interview 25, June 2022). RCIS was perceived as a ‘policy investment in a susceptible political community’, filling the traditional ‘policy–political gap’ in Iran (Interview 25, June 2022).

As another politically motivated technical institution, the AARA Research Center (ARC) was initiated by a group of politicians who decided to enrich their policy capacity and reputation once in opposition. ARC has skilfully covered up its political mandate by following professional institutionalisation procedures and was described as a ‘technically rebranded political institution’ (Interview 29, December 2023). However, it was always seen as a ‘temporary-transitional institution’ until its senior team’s return to political power (Interview 24, June 2023).

As an extension to the Presidential Technology Cooperation Office (PTCO), ITAN Thinktank (ITT) was a symbolic instance of the PAS externalisation leading to a mixed institutional form of an ‘officially endorsed’ externalised policy organisation mainly promoting and ‘campaigning’ for the PTCO’s policy proposals (Interview 26, June 2022). ITT’s unique ‘policy capacity’ is perceived not necessarily in providing sophisticated policy advice, but it is well equipped to ‘publicise’ and ‘implement’ policies instead (Interview 26, June 2022).

Likewise, Sharif Governance and Policy Thinktank (GPTT) was deliberately established as a substantially technocratic and apolitical university-affiliated institution (Figure 4). GPTT was also widely perceived as a sign of a shift towards policy involvement by the technical scholarship community (Interview 31, November 2022). Critics also accused it of ‘superficialisation’ and ‘oversimplification’ of policy advice by substantially technical engineers (Interview 36, December 2020). Moving beyond the official borders of the Sharif University of Technology, GPTT has become more directly involved in the policy process and also more open to a broader multi-disciplinary expert pool (Interview 25, June 2022). GPTT is displayed in Figure 4 as

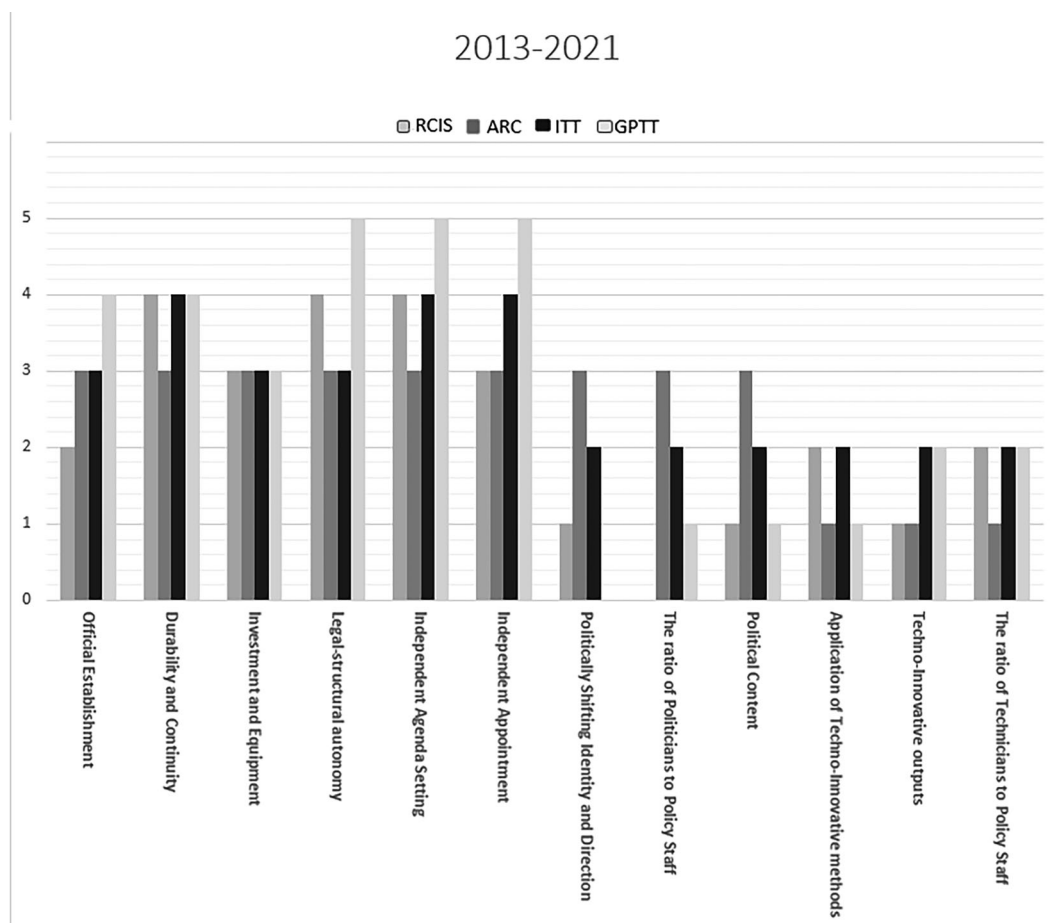


FIGURE 4 The characteristics of politically moderate era's policy advisory system (PAS)-selected organisations.

a well-institutionalised, highly externalised, politically neutral, but technically less advanced institution.

To conclude, such a technical externalisation era consists of somewhat institutionalised organisations though less funded than public departments, carefully depoliticised even politically established ones, and highly externalised¹⁴. Finally, we observed that academia, by tradition, has also been long over-estimated in providing technological solutions or policy proposals. So, such an externalisation went mainly beyond academic departments towards the 'professionalisation' and the 'agencification' of advisory institutions (Interview 26, June 2023).

7.4 | Beyond traditional policy advice (2021 onwards): The PAS technicisation

Having been supported for almost a decade by an ambitious technology and innovation policy, Iran is enjoying the emergence of a generation of technologically advanced start-ups and businesses, particularly—but by no means limited to—in the digital economy. As a spillover effect,

the Iranian PAS has recently been gradually affected by such a thriving techno-innovative ecosystem. It is now witnessing newcomer institutions mainly with technical expertise and portfolios, but policymakers very much welcome their technology-assisted policy advice.

The first institution is TANZIM YAR Startup Studio (TYS), a substantially software-based company commissioned primarily by an official authority¹⁵, aiming to provide technical regulatory instruments. Using a mixed team of regulatory experts and digital technicians, TYS has been expected to reconcile those fields of expertise to provide a technical platform facilitating the implementation of regulations (Interview 22, June 2023).

Like TYS, MetoData (MD) enjoys input from a mixed expertise of data analysts, social scientists, and policy researchers. Its central focus is on analysing big data rather than policy formulation and implementation. However, MD represents a gradual move towards 'the emergence of quantitative policy institutions' (Interview 22, June 2023).

As another development, having reviewed CSP earlier as the replication of universities, it has recently initiated a 'technical extension' to simulate or model the consequences of competitive policy scenarios. The Center for Science Policy—Policy Lab (CSP-PL) also works on the 'instrumentation' of policy-related techniques that is perceived by some as an attempt to 'modernise in-house expertise' (Interview 26, December 2022).

Likewise, MRC has also followed a 'technical extension and internal modernisation' strategy. Also, it has recently established the Parliamentary Innovation Center (PIC) as an 'arm-length techno-innovative extension' (Interview 3, May 2022).

As a primary summarisation of such an emerging trend of 'PAS Technicisation', as shown in Figure 5, the analysis of this period suggests that the Iranian PAS is gradually moving beyond the traditional institutional landscape. While it is still committed to the externalisation legacy, it is now even more politically conservative, with a significant technical capability and sophistication investment.

8 | TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

Having analysed selected institutions of each period of the Iranian PAS based on the adopted analytical framework, Figure 6 visualises the fluctuation of 4 main dimensions on average of selected institutions throughout four distinctive study periods. From an institutionalisation point of view, Figure 6 reflects a fluctuation status starting from a firm institutionalisation in the post-war era. Its immediate sharp decline represents the political-populism era's partisan institutions that had literally been established to stay for just a political circle. The independent organisations enhanced the level of institutionalisation, though they still needed to catch up with official public agencies. It truly reflects the central tradition of the public sector in Iran with an emerging window, though still very limited, for private organisations to get rather institutionalised.

The externalisation graph in Figure 6 shows a moderately growing trend from the in-house institutionalisation era towards the proxy political warfare period. Then, the relatively sharp increase represents the technical externalisation era that has been a reasonably long-lasting legacy of the Iranian PAS since then. It shows that despite the traditional dominance of public agencies, the increasing complexity of policy issues and bureaucratic incompetencies has inevitably opened some windows for non-governmental organisations. However, such marginal externalisation reflects that the Iranian political system and policy machinery still present limited openness for externalised PAS to get access and influence.

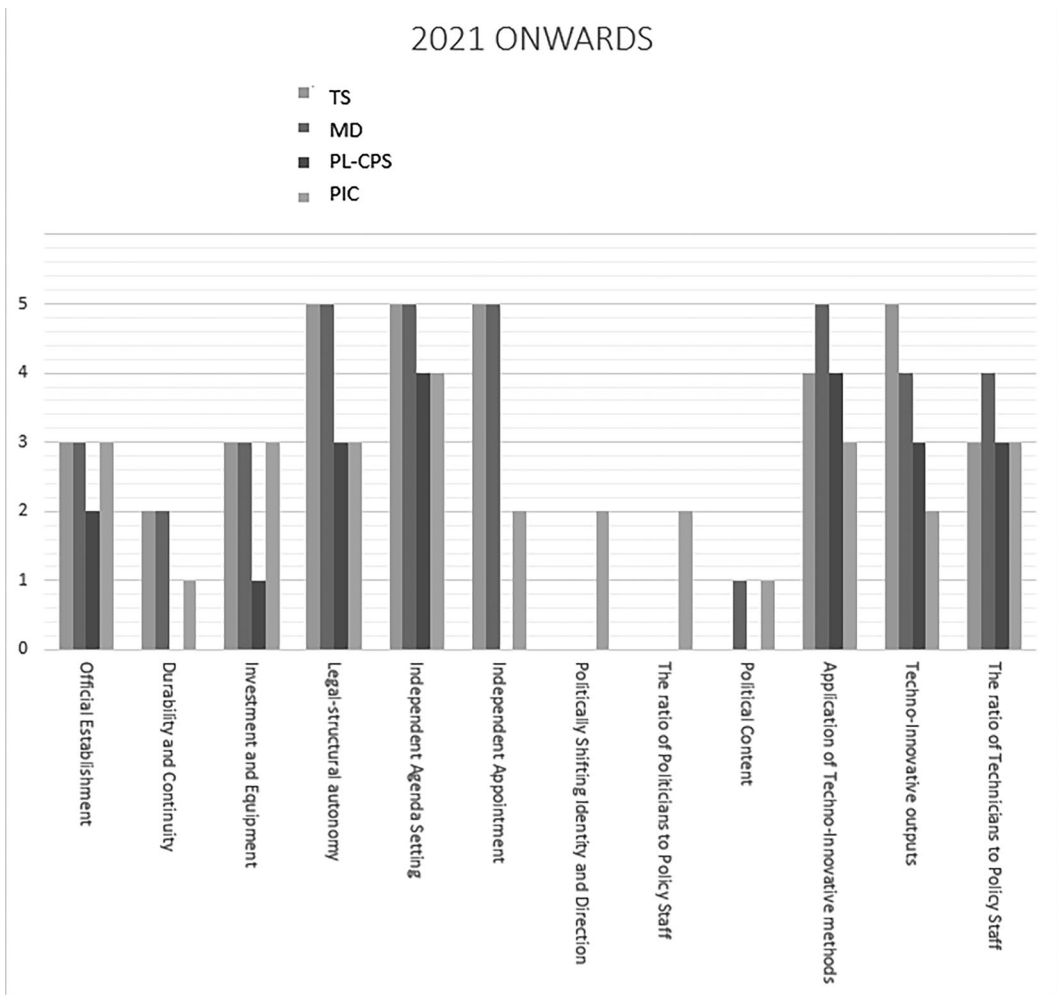


FIGURE 5 The average characteristics of the technicisation era's selected institutions.

Contrary to the externalisation legacy, the politicisation graph in Figure 6 points to a temporary and shock-style pattern of political policy institutions in Iran. We can see that, unlike Western democracies, Iran's weak political institutions and the predominant 'technocratic' perception of policy advice have substantially depoliticised institutions there (Interview 24, June 2022). It is also in contrast with autocratic PAS's overpoliticisation. This fact ultimately reduces the quality, the professionalism, and the transparency of inevitable political advice provision (Interview 24, June 2022). It also reflects the classical government control concept of the PAS literature (Craft & Halligan, 2016; Diamond, 2020), suggesting that even the relatively short period of politicisation was overwhelmingly influenced by the government's political direction and instruments. Without well-established party politics and democratic institutions, the government in power has a relatively open hand over public funds and policy access. This enables it to artificially politicise advisory institutions in speed and 'ways not available in liberal democracies'. Nevertheless, unlike classical consolidated authoritarian regimes, such a politicisation would only last for a short time beyond electoral cycles due to the high possibility of shifting political power. Most importantly,

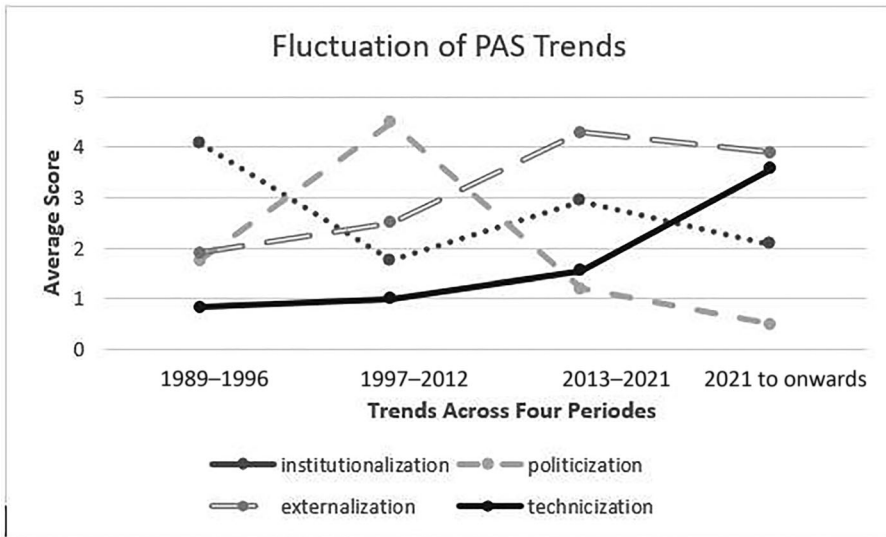


FIGURE 6 The average score of the four trends for selected institutions throughout four periods of study.

politicised institutions are less likely to stay alive as there is no institutionalised opposition party to continue supporting them, as in Western liberal democracies.

Apart from that temporary government-driven PAS politicisation period, this graph presents the substantial depoliticised nature of PAS in Iran, affected by the overarching ‘weak political institutionalisation’. It also supports the presumption that the legitimised scope of the Iranian PAS is limited to mainly technocratic and less politically sensitive issues, broadly framed by constitutional preferences.

Finally, this study provides primary observation of a very emerging pattern of technicisation. Figure 6 clearly envisages a thriving prospect for technical–policy nexus and could be seen as a sign of a shift towards the next generation of technically sophisticated policy advice provisions. Furthermore, the sharp increase in the technicisation characteristics of the last two periods might reflect a possible correlation between technicisation and externalisation patterns. Such a correlation might represent an increasing institutional diversity of the Iranian PAS, resulting from originally technical organisations as newcomer advisory institutions. However, the last period also reflects the marginal revival of public sector investment in technical extensions of traditional internal institutions.

9 | SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Having reviewed a representative sample of 16 out of 159 listed institutions throughout four periods of the Iranian post-revolutionary PAS, this paper shows that the PAS framework has moved beyond its original birthplace within Western liberal democracies and fairly applies to other political systems. It means that regardless of the broad divergence in characteristics of political systems, a well-institutionalised policy advice provision machinery is almost an indispensable part of modern public policymaking. Nonetheless, having observed four distinct periods of PAS in Iran, without being trapped in the ‘democracy versus authoritarian dichotomy’,

empirical evidence here shows that Iran's overreaching distinctive socio-political context heavily frames its PAS characteristics.

Compared to autocratic political systems, the Iranian PAS reflects less politicised characteristics, except for a temporary government-led politicisation period. Moreover, PAS is legitimised within the frame of constitutional preferences, and it deals with less politically sensitive and mainly technocratic issues. The paper also argues that it generally follows the international patterns of PAS institutionalisation, though with limited private funding and supporting schemes available for non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, while this study supports the inevitable PAS externalisation in Iran, it argues that the policy process still presents limited openness to externalised organisations rather than public agencies. The paper also contributes soundly to the emerging literature of technology-assisted PAS by providing notable evidence supporting instrumental and institutional PAS technicisation in Iran.

However, the study still lacks a reliable empirical basis and suffers from limited generalisability about the Iranian PAS. While those selected institutions do not represent all components of the Iranian PAS and, by no means, do they claim a generalisable conclusion, the study could provide an illustrative overview of the PAS evolution throughout four distinct analysis periods. However, this paper provides primary observations for future studies on the interrelation between PAS politicisation and the characteristics of political institutions. It also keeps doors open for more empirical studies comparing PAS characteristics in other distinctive socio-political systems than Western liberal democracies or consolidated autocracies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

²Whether or not there is fair political competition and free election has long been a matter of political controversy and divergence.

³Those councils consist of the President, heads of Parliament, and the Judiciary system, along with a few relevant public departments and individuals appointed by the Supreme Leader.

⁴During the revolution, there was a symbolic sentence: 'Neither Western, Neither Eastern, (only) Islamic Republic'.

⁵Gulf Cooperation Council.

⁶There are 13 subsequent governments in the Iranian post-revolutionary era. However, two first governmental periods were aborted, one due to a parliamentary impeachment and the latter due to a terrorist attack.

⁷We got those phrases from comments provided by the anonymous referee of *AJPA*.

⁸We got this phrase from a comment provided by an anonymous referee of *AJPA*.

- ⁹The depoliticization approach was publicly stated several times by President Hashemi himself.
- ¹⁰While the initial establishment of IPIS goes back even earlier in the mid-1980s by a very influential politician, Javad Larjani, it became an advisory agency during President Hashemi's era.
- ¹¹Tough merely in internal policies contrary to the very controversial Rouhani's foreign policy.
- ¹²The Tehran central neighborhood that the Presidential office is located in.
- ¹³The Presidential Deputy for Science and Innovation.
- ¹⁴Even though some with official origins had kept more or less a form of indirect connections to their institutional—mainly academic—hosts.
- ¹⁵SATRA, the Iranian Audiovisual Regulatory Authority.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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APPENDIX A: THE SELECT COMMITTEE

	Position	Selecting representative sample	Applying the framework to the representative sample
1	Co-founder of a thinktank	*	*
2	Policy researcher 1	*	*
3	Policy researcher 2	*	*
4	Researcher in Iran thinktanks	*	*
5	Researcher in Iran thinktanks	*	*
6	A former senior civil servant	*	*
7	A former political policymaker	*	*
8	Former Director of Technical thinktank 1		*
9	Former Director of Technical thinktank 2		*