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Adelia Rachman

Universitas Gadjah Mada, adelia@alumni.ui.ac.id

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MEDIA MISREPRESENTATION PREDISPOSING IRANIAN SOCIAL DIVIDE

Adelia Hanny Rachman

Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada,
Bulaksumur, Yogyakarta, 55281, Indonesia

E-mail: *adelia@alumni.ui.ac.id*

Abstract

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought Iran to be transformed into a new revolutionary theocratic republic. This is in line with the *raison d'être* of the Iranian constitution, realizing the life of the nation and state based on the noble and universal values of Islam. Meanwhile, the existence of power competition and conflicting conceptions of authority have been reflected in its political constellation. Islam in the realm of this state is not only understood as a religious institution but also a concept of political spirituality. The hijab policy, for example, has become part of Iranian culture ever since and became a political symbol after the government of Shah Pahlavi in 1936 banned the use of the hijab through the *Kashf e Hejab* decree. In addition, visual observations through various authentic and reliable video recordings and news reports from Iran over the past 5 years are made to examine what is misunderstood by the world about Iran and its people. Therefore, the results of the analysis should be able to explain how media distortion affects Iran's political decisions. Because politics plays an important role in the expression of public policy. If the policies implemented contain identity politics, then it will have a significant impact on the emergence of social divisions in Iranian society.

Keywords: Identity Politics, Iranian Society, Media Misrepresentation, Social Cleavage/Divide.

INTRODUCTION

Iran or Persia is one of the oldest civilizations in the world with a population almost 80 million people based on the 2016 census (*Statistical Center of Iran*, 2021), while in 2021 it is estimated will grow up to more than 85 million people. Located in West Asia with geopolitical mapping in the Middle East region, Iran is blessed with abundant extractive resources. Realized from the start on the potential of resources in the country,

Persia spread its wings of power to the territory of Eastern Europe and the Arabian Peninsula in 550 – 336 BC even its territory became the main battlefield of several great powers: the Ottoman Empire, Britain, Russia, and Germany in the 1910s (Jackson, 2018). The abundance of natural resources, on the other hand, become a trigger for the oil war. The British established an oil refinery company, *The Anglo-Persian Oil Company*, in Iran in the

early 1900s after finding good quality oil in the Khuzestan Province, this commercial reason then shifted Britain's focus to no longer guarding the British India border but maintaining the sustainability of oil supplies to support its war interests with Germany in World War I (Axworthy, 2013). At that time, politics became the main concern of a country because it was used as a tool to spread influence and control natural resources. Iranian oil was a 'vital' strategic asset (*sine qua non*) for Britain in wartime, the essentiality of which was also recognized by Germany (Axworthy, 2013; Jackson, 2018). The agreement between the two countries did not benefit Iran as the host and owner of natural resources so that it received strong criticism from nationalists throughout the country before finally in 1921, Britain withdrew its troops (except in Southwest Iran to protect the oil) as agreed with Reza Shah which at that moment was not prevented from establishing a new government, the Pahlavi dynasty (Axworthy, 2013). In subsequent oil wars, such as the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies in 1942 and Iraq to Kuwait in 1990, it was not based on a greedy desire to obtain foreign oil reserves but for security needs which were considered essential and demanded the regime's survival (Meierding, 2016).

The world economic depression around the 1930s became one of the driving factors for the onset of World War II, countries with strong military forces such as Germany challenged British and French interests in Iran and Iraq as a political step for regional expansion in line with America's presence in its commercial and private interests which at that time was seen as an opportunity for the Shah's government to support his country's political affairs (Jackson, 2018). The *coup d'état* of the Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh, in 1953 (28 Mordad *coup d'état*) was described as an effort to save Iran from international communism, an attempt by Britain and America to perpetuate economic interests in it related to international oil cartels, strengthen the monarchy, or be regarded as a spontaneous nationalist mass movements (claimed without foreign interference) that support national revival although the latter is not supported by historical facts (Abrahamian, 2008; Rahnema, 2015; Gözl, 2020).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Iran was aggressive in voicing change through the propaganda of new ideologies and constitutional reforms that had an impact on the mental and sociocultural transformation of Iranian society (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985). The Islamic revolution in 1979 brought Iran into an Islamic state that

established Islamic values and norms which were embodied in the implementation of *sharia* law. Islam is not only a religious entity but also part of the system of social and political order (Griffith, 1979). In Iran, until the late 1970s, there were two major political traditions: the Persian Empire and Shia Islam – the latter group ruling the Iranian regime until today with the same tendency to oppose secular (Western) rather than any other religious or belief-based authority, such as Sunni Islam (Griffith, 1979). According to Griffith, the tragedy of the killing and massacre of the great leader of the Shia, Imam Husayn (son of Ali bin Abi Talib and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) by Shimr bin Ziljaushan (commander of Yazid) on the orders of Yazid bin Muawiyah (Khalifah Sunni Yazid – Shah¹) considered a defeat of justice by the power of a tyrant.

Hitherto, the ambivalent attitude in Iran has remained in (i) the conflict between modernization and Western domination also (ii) the split between adherence to Shia Islam and Iran's pre-Islamic heritage – which resulted in several typologies of society, which are (a) Islamic reformer groups, who seeks to integrate Shia Islam with aspects of modern technology; (b) a westernized

modernization group, which tolerates Islam and emphasizes Iran's pre-Islamic heritage with modern technology; (c) modernist groups, who identify themselves as Muslim and emphasize adapting to social change, could even be added; and (d) heterodox groups (rebels), who adhere to heterodox principles such as millenarianism, perfectionism, elitism, and the secrecy of religion or belief when in a threatening situation or *taqiyyah* (Griffith, 1979). The Islamic revolution in Iran was marked by the change of regime from Pahlavi (Shah) to Shia Islam. The revolutionary movement involved several social groups such as *ulama*, young intellectuals, traders, middle class people (e.g. public or professional sector workers), and working-class people, migrant communities – then gave rise to dual sovereignty, the reign of Ayatollah Khomeini within the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (Ashraf and Banuazizi, 1985).

Since the formation of the Islamic republic in the 1979 revolution, there have been contradictions within Iran's government structure – competing power divisions and conflicting conceptions of political authority (Takeyh, 2003). *Raison d'être* of Iran's constitution is to realize the life of the nation and state in accordance with the noble and universal values of Islam. As a republic, Iran has a unique intersection between totalitarian

¹ Shah means king, in this case it is distinguished by the use of the term caliph (*khalifah*) as leader.

(theocracy-absolutism) and democracy. The reflection of this duality leads to different political goals so it cannot be ruled out that disagreements and tensions occur between those who seek to build a religion-based system of government and those who advocate a more representative democratic government (Takeyh, 2003). The reform movement emerged in the late 1990s, around 1998 when the reformist party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF) was formed when one of its leading members, Mohammad Khatami, ran in the 1997 Iranian presidential election (Takeyh, 2003). The emergence of quite intense turmoil or in other words the clear opposition of coalition and opposition made Iran's identity oscillate at a crossroads, namely between the promise of democratic modernity and retrogressive tradition (Takeyh, 2003).

Political relations among Iran and the United States are represented as less

Theoretical Framework

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was not only a manifestation of the crystallization of a new revolutionary theocratic republic based on spiritual experience, but a transformation of Shia Islam into a new intersubjective force of religiosity in creating a new concept of 'political spirituality' (as proposed by Foucault) of the dichotomy of what is sacred (regarding

harmonious. The vortex of conflict is not only in the midst of the two governments concerned, but also extends to their respective allies. It is undeniable that politics plays a very dominant role in the life of Iranian society. In fact, politics has entered the media lines, both mass media and social media, in the sense that the media does not only present news which is claimed to be neutral, but also tendentious to certain political interests or preferences. Moreover, social media has become a new medium for propaganda – thus having a great influence in driving public opinion. In this paper, I do not generalize the media but through analysis using the cleavage theory, I will show the effect of media misrepresentation on the emergence of social divisions in Iranian society.

religion) and profane (not related to religion or religious goals) as proposed by Émile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1995; Rahimi, 2012). Iran is the world's largest Shia population, but also home to several religions and beliefs. Before Islam spread to Iran, Iranian society in the past was mostly polytheistic. There are two gods: the Sun God and the Sky God, who are

believed to have an influence on social relations. In addition, Iran is also inseparable from other monotheistic beliefs besides Islam, namely Zoroastrianism or Magianism in 1200-1000 BC – believing in one God, which is Ahura Mazada² (The One Almighty God) – spread by the Zoroastrians and the reign of Cyrus the Great throughout Persia. The Zoroastrian holy book is the Avesta. The influence of beliefs that exist in Iranian (Persian) society cannot be separated from several major civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. Akkadian was spoken in ancient Mesopotamia which related to racial, religious, and linguistic equality.

The placement of women in unequal social status in the society is not more due to that desperation, but the absence of opportunities for women to be facilitated in order to make changes, especially basic changes in the economy. In a study conducted by Mohammadpur, *et al.* in 2014 it was said that the majority of women tend to avoid risk because of the influence of frustration and pessimism in their present and future lives so that they are encouraged to be conservative (Mohammadpur *et al.*, 2014). Education and work are two important things that

concern Iranian women because starting from intellectual development it is very possible to increase their social status so the society will regard them competent and capable. The development of social capital carried out by Iranian women, including building digital freedom, creating new dress up style and recreational (entertainment) opportunities, and changing social and sexual relationships (Salehia *et al.*, 2020).

This historical and cultural background shows there are social differences, accommodate interests' distinctions, although they do not necessarily lead to division, but the nature and intensity of emotions and reactions which espouse membership in these groups, as well as the types of social and political ties which institutionally unite individuals to join in a group (Bartonili, 2005). In this study, the cleavage is seen in the context of potential lines of division in a particular society as Scott C. Flanagan argues (Choe, 2003). Iranian social divide emphasizes ideological cleavage which related to differences in political preferences (ideology). This difference may not be seen and realized directly owing the subject of this research is Iranian society in general, not referring to members of a particular organization. The concept of division refers to three elements, which are: (a) empirical elements (socio-

² The figure of Ahura Mazada is contrasted with the figure of Ahriman or *druj* who comes from Angra Mainyu and considered to have negative energy.

structural), (b) normative elements regarding values and beliefs, and (c) organizational or behavioral elements including individual, institutional, and organizational interactions (Bartolini, 2000). According to Bartolini, the socio-structural, normative-cultural, and politics-organizational elements are interdependent in shaping individual attitudes and behavior (Bartolini, 2000). This divisions caused by historical experience, associated with certain attributes that are flexible – relatively volatile, and disorganized (Bartolini, 2000).

The influence dispersing through the implemented law and public policies, also media which is functionally present as a party that provides information and communication needs for the wider community. Reporting in the media serves the basic needs of accurate information and create an image representation of things, whether individuals, groups, countries, inanimate objects to ideological

Research Methods

This research was conducted by English in-depth interviews with 25 Iranian citizens online or via teleconference through social media platforms such as *Tandem*, *Instagram*, *WhatsApp*, *Skype*, and *Zoom* from 3 October to 30 November 2021. Interviews were conducted with Iranians ranging in

matters. Western media often do not show the positive side of Iran which actually can be seen from the point of view of the social life of its people. Reports about Iran in the (West) mass media tend to be dominated by negative and politically charged narratives, thus giving the impression of poor representation. In this era, the media often use the concept of sympathetic representation as a new strategy that raises racial stereotypes (Alsultany, 2012). Nevertheless, there are still a number of daily videos posted on *YouTube* or other social media platforms displaying the other side of Iranian people's lives which separated from the hustle-bustle of any political things. This is where the true personality of Iranians lives explored deeper and could be able to enlighten the global community. In the end, the media has more sovereignty and is relatively autonomous to frame politics and represent it (Castells, 2010).

age from 18 to 45 years with different genders, educational, and professional backgrounds. They are also scattered in several regions in Iran, such as Kerman, Ishfahan, Mashhad, etc. but the majority are based in Tehran. Observations were also made through authentic and credible video recordings and documentaries about

Iran and its people published on various social media in the period 2016 to 2021. Online meetings with Iranians in discussing and sharing their experiences as Iranian citizens, became the main source of this research in order to provide an overview of the real perspective of social life in Iran and its life preferences so as to further help determine the consequences of Iran's misrepresentation by the media. In order to find out the form of this misrepresentation, narrative exploration

Results and Discussion

Culture in Iranian society according to Sadeq Hedayat, an Iranian anthropologist who was popular in the 1910-1920s, is divided into two elements, namely Iranian and non-Iranian (from a modernist nationalist perspective) – here Islamic culture is placed as a foreign element which is considered irrational and anti-modern while the cultural heritage of pre-Islam is reckoned the original culture of Iranian society and is judged according to the values of modernity (Fazeli, 2006). One of the cultures deeply rooted in Iranian society is related to the gender-based dichotomy in access to human rights. Women's rights, in the extreme, are used as tools in the power struggle between the Pahlavi regime that favors modernity and conservative religious

was done on international news websites and presented several examples. The analysis is carried out using the cleavage theory to see the social phenomena as a whole by elaborating it with a dispersion model of the influence of misrepresentation. The use of qualitative research methods in this analytical method will be able to show the relationship of external influences on the internal life of Iranian society. In this way, the subtle social cleavage can be seen more clearly.

leaders who emphasize religious values (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010).

As an Islamic country, Iran controls the social order of its people, both in the media and in the public sphere, thereby limiting the freedom of expression of its citizens, although many Iranians enjoy this condition by utilizing public spaces in a "certain sense" such as traditional coffee shops (*qahvehkhane*) and the mosque as a discussion forum (Khosravi, 2008; Takeyh, 2021). Talking about political aspirations (*khasteha-ye siasi*) in coffee shops or public spaces in general is something that is very avoided by Iranians, often they only talk about social aspirations (*khasteha-ye ejtema'i*) relating to social issues, so according to Tagi Azadarmaki the coffee shop is an anti-political site but also a counter-site, the

social demands being discussed are actually part of political demands, for example issues related to social welfare (Khosravi, 2008). The politicization of lifestyle makes coffee shops also become a

“We used to party, both with fellow men and with women, which was usually done at the homes of friends, relatives, or family because in Iran there are no public spaces such as bars or clubs,” (Iranian man).

In the Iranian family tradition, men are considered to have a higher social status than women. Men in terms of playing the role of a husband or father are the undisputed masters who are responsible for the family economy (*khânevâdeh*), as well as kinship groups (*tâyefeh*) (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985). The kinship system is patrilineal or patriarchal based on male supremacy (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985). Therefore, women are required to obey their husbands or older people but this does not mean that women lose their personality and individuality. As modernization enters the line of family life, women have more career opportunities and this change also affects the division of roles based on gender in the family so that their domestic role is reduced while their role in determining policies and managing the family budget is increasing – what is unique is women (wife) in lower-middle class families must continue to work while taking care of

“In everyday life such as school and relationships in the family there is a separation between men and women, but not in friendship – “courtship” – it depends on the individual,” (Iranian men and women).

superficial political tool to create political opinion (Khosravi, 2008). On the other hand, in private space, Iranians have more freedom, for example, they can still organize parties, dance, etc.

domestic work which does not affect the superiority of men – husbands (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985).

Iranian families mostly apply Islamic culture and rules, for example parents encourage their children not to date or have relationships with the opposite sex outside of marriage (courtship). Even though in reality, some of the young Iranians still embrace the courtship. Here we can see that there is an imbalance between expectations and reality or as simple as a difference in perspective between parents and their children. Iranian youth often dichotomize their generation with their parents’ generation. The kinship network in the city (*khânedân*) and in the village (*tâyefeh*) still acts as a protective system. When a person achieves a high social status through education, career, etc. kinship networks emerge around it and create new socio-political pressure groups (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985).

Internalization of Islamic values and ideology in policy, for example related to dress code. The obligation to use the *hijab* (head cover) is an official government policy that has many pros and cons associated with human rights restrictions. Often it is also a tool for those who oppose to generalize the *hijab* wearer as a depressed subject even though many of them use it voluntarily for modesty reasons. Several movements are an effort to oppose the obligation to use the *hijab*, including the ‘*Change for Equality*’ movement in 2006, some Iranian women protest legal discrimination by signing a petition with a target of one million signatures to be submitted to the government. Furthermore, in 2014 there was *Compulsory Hijab: My Stealthy*

“I don’t agree with the mandatory wearing of the *hijab* but I neither don’t want to go down to the streets nor join *White Wednesday* because the worst consequence, I could be jailed,” (Iranian woman, some others have similar answers).

Dress code policy is not an appeal but an obligation so that in the context of its enforcement, the state has provided such ‘moral’ police as a repressive measure. In 1983, in the Islamic Punishment Rule (*Ta’zirat*) – punishments imposed for negligence or considered as a violation act toward Islamic *sharia* – Article 102 states that appearing in public without a *hijab* is a violation of public morality and can be punished according to *sharia* namely being lashed with 74 lashes (Mir-Hosseini,

Freedom campaign movement, followed by *White Wednesday* campaign in 2017. *Hijab* became a political symbol when the pro-western government, the Pahlavi, in 1936 banned the use of Islamic attributes such as the *hijab* and *chador* in the Decree of *Kashf e Hejab*. By feminists, the regulation is a form of progressive government action (Mahdi, 2004). *Hijab* has become part of Iranian culture since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Not all Iranian women who do not agree with this policy, voluntarily and bravely express their defense of their rights in public, because they are afraid that a larger authority will judge them so that the discourse of disapproval of the use of the *hijab* is a sensitive thing to talk about in public.

2002). Mir-Hosseini further explained that after 1997, a number of reports in the reformist media questioned the government’s policy regarding the mandatory use of the *hijab* which the group considered inappropriate anachronistic³ with the reform discourse advocated by reformist groups. An Iranian reformer, Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, in an article published in *Neshat* (1378 or 1999),

³ Placement of something that is not in accordance with the time.

“*Defending Values with the Logic of Democracy*,” revealed that differences of opinion regarding religion and moral values can be defended with one logic, the logic of democracy (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). Documentary video of “*Whispers from Iran*” by Alice Falco of 2018 shows the harmonious interfaith life in Iran and the expression of Iranian society in conditions of limited freedom. Apart from Islam, Zoroastrianism and Christianity are some of the beliefs and religions that are embraced by some Iranians. Zoroastrians show that religion is not a compulsion to be accepted by everyone, even their descendants until they can think logically and will it. Religion requires a harmonious life in moderation (Falco, 2018).

In addition to domestic affairs, Iran’s political power can penetrate national boundaries. These tendentious and biased reports dominate the international media, especially fake news or unfounded accusations against Iran. In many cases, the media contribute to the formation of a particular political statement, as between the United States and its allies with Iran. In 2019, the United States accused Iran of attacking Japanese tankers *Kokuka Courageous* and Norway's *Front Altair* on June 13, 2019 in the Gulf of Oman (Gambrell 2019). Earlier, on May 12, 2019, the United States National Security Adviser accused Iran of attacks on oil

tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates and the Saudi oil port of Yanbu in the Red Sea (Al Jazeera, 2019). The accusations against Iran, were opposed by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who doubted the veracity of the accusations considering that at the same time as these events, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is on a diplomatic visit to Tehran to help ease friction between Iran and the United States. Khomeini added that resistance does not mean military action – this is in line with analysts’ skepticism that the attack was highly doubtful by Iran considering that it will have major consequences for the United States and its regional allies, so will Iran involve its allies (Behraves, 2019).

Other reports, for example, poured provocative accusations that Iran had doubled uranium production and threatened to increase enrichment closer to weapons levels in an attempt to pressure Europe into the 2015 nuclear deal. In the context of reporting on nuclear issues alone, two or more countries have been busy preparing an attack strategy against Iran. This can be seen from the impact of rising tensions between these countries.⁴

⁴ Among those involved are countries that are members of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement Framework, they are member countries of the United Nations Security Council and the European Union, or allied countries of the United States such as Israel.

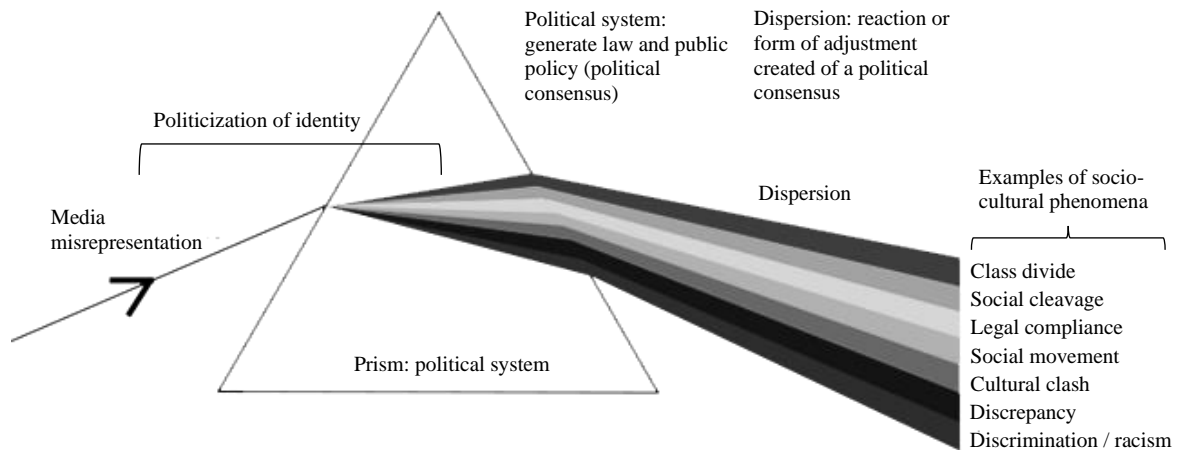
Several attacks were executed by its rivals, including the assassination of Iran's military leader, Qasem Soleimani, on January 3, 2020, through a United States drone attack at Baghdad International Airport. *Second*, the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh with a Belgian-made FN MAG 7.62mm machine gun mounted on a robot powered by artificial intelligence, as reported on *The New York Times* website that Fakhrizadeh was killed by Mossad, Israel's Intelligence Service. (Bergman & Fassihi, 2021).

Such political representations often stain Iran's relational relations with its rival countries to the point of giving the impression of a 'zero tolerance power struggle,' even though all parties are trying to make peace, the stalemate is one of the problems that results in the perpetuation of political sentiment among them. In this case, the media as an external party that has a very large influence takes an important role, starting from narrating to representing everything for the benefit of public consumption. The media is no longer limited to presenting empirical facts but also analyzing and even producing interpretive meanings that can have an impact on shaping public opinion.

The concept of social cleavage in this study adopts the theory of Bartolini and

Mair which has been simplified by Chiavacci, namely grouping into three divisions based on the following factors, (a) socio-economic (sociostructural), (b) collective identity and behavior (normative-cultural), and (c) politics-organizational (Bartolini, 2000; Chiavacci, 2010). So far, social divisions have occurred in the internal environment of Iranian society, particularly regarding differences in ideology, politics, social class, culture, and religion. In Iranian politics, apart from reformist groups, there are also neo-conservative intellectual groups, namely those who give recognition to the absolute supremacy of guardianship from Islamic jurists (*velayat-e faqih*) and rejection of Western democracy, opposition to the presumption of the people's voice (*vox populi*) is the voice of God (*vox dei*), and religious pluralism (Khosrokhavar, 2001). Western bias is seen as an accusation underlying Iran's conservative intellectual and political discourse in discrediting both reformers and a more open 'moderate' society (Khosrokhavar, 2001). In order to demand a change, the neo-conservatives try to enter the regime of the *status quo* government hoping the change starts from within the political system.

Scheme 1. Dispersion* The Effect of Iran's Misrepresentation.
 *Adopted Newton's physics theory of light dispersion symbol (Newton, 1730).



The influence dispersion model can describe socio-cultural phenomenon that arise due to the influence of media misrepresentation. Given that the media is a fundamental vehicle in communication, the diffusion of influence and the persuasion of certain parties, as long as the media is relatively autonomous (free – not bound) from political power, political actors must comply with the rules, technology, and media interests – in this case the media will frame any political matters (Castells, 2010). Not all media are neutral, being idealistic by showing their impartiality. There is still a tendency for the media to strengthen the position of certain parties. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in America, the stereotype of Muslims as terrorists is getting higher, as seen in the themes of

films or television shows exhibit counter-characters, Arabs and Muslims are depicted as a big threat to the national security of Western countries, one of which is America (Alsultany, 2012).

Western media, such as the United States, have for more than a century misrepresented and stereotyped Muslim and Arab societies (Alsultany, 2012). According to Alsultany, this misrepresentation contains the institutionalization of racial stereotypes, containing complex feelings such as grief, trauma, fear, anger, to racism. Sympathetic representation of these two identities becomes a new strategy that gives rise to racial stereotypes (Alsultany, 2012). "Repeated associations between Islam and terrorism will only increase anti-Muslim prejudice." – The Council on American-

Islam (BBC News, 2007). What happened in an Islamic country, Iran, can be assumed to be no different from the government in the Middle Ages, religion became a fundamental element, attached, and fused in the order of people's lives so that it was considered an important element of political culture which could not be separated from the tensions (Humphreys, 2021). Culture is concerned with the production, exchange of meaning – giving and receiving meaning, and interpretation of meaning – between individuals or groups in society (Hall, 2003). The media play a cultural role in this matter. Representation connects meaning, language, to culture (Hall, 2003). The representation system consists of individual concepts, ways of organizing, grouping, organizing, classifying concepts, and reconstructing complex relationships between them (Hall 2003, 17). Representation is a practice – uses material objects and effects but its meaning is not based on material quality but on its symbolic function (Hall, 2003). Simplified complex representation is a strategy used by the media in the post-racial era to show the impression of complex representations, internalizing rationalizations that legitimize racist policies and practices – generally signifying racial representations that can complicate previous stereotypes

and influence the creation of multicultural illusions (Alsultany, 2012).

The speed of teleportation of information and communication supports the migration and globalization of various aspects, such as economics, politics, and culture where the transnational character of media representation makes it difficult for countries to prevent contact with foreign influences (Gentz dan Kramer, 2006). The new world space of cultural products and national representations which are at the same time globalized and localized within the framework of global capitalism produces two opposing activities, coalitions and resistances in practical life, as it can be seen that free-market capitalism has a major influence on the local economy (Dissanayake, 2006). Massive coverage in the media allows the audience to reach a wider range of information, but on the other hand, the potential for duplicated, repetitive, and defective information is also unbearable (Anderson, 2009). The power of ideological narratives leads governments to devote resources and time to trying to shape and influence public perceptions in a way that is conducive to their chosen policies – involving the promotion of policies through carefully crafted public communication campaigns, exploits the relationship of journalists and media outlets, and takes advantage of their

attempts to dominate the information circumstances – propaganda (Robinson, 2013).

Sharia-based policies are a reflection of the Iranian government's concern on the basis of religious values and norms, not on the conflicting values of modernization as echoed by the media, but its disagreement with Western hegemony. Hill and Mannheim (1992) argue, “where worldviews have existed, ideology is often heard, suggesting representations that are contestable, socially positioned, . . . laden with political interests and structurally diverse” (Keller, 2011). One of Iran's political policies that have a very large influence on the international community is related to nuclear energy. On Iran's political decision on this matter, Western countries condemned it. Economic sanctions are a punitive instrument used by the United States in order to arrest Iran for its disagreements in the non-proliferation agreement. These economic sanctions have had such a huge impact on the Iranian economy, the most obvious thing is that inflationary pressures increased to 48% as of February 2021 as indicated by the depreciation of the Iranian currency which reached 0.000024/USD and the large number of unemployed reached 9.4% in the fourth quarter (Q4) in 2020 accompanied by a decrease in the number of job opportunities by more than 1

million from year to year especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2021),⁵ while as of June 2021, the unemployment rate in Iran reached 8.8% with the average female and urban unemployment being more than men and rural areas (Statistical Center of Iran, 2021). The average income of the Iranian people is 1:3 when compared to the average income of the Indonesian people.

Structural failures in the context of the implementation of public policies by the government have a major impact on the community when the tendency of these policies makes the country's economic condition unstable and getting worse. Disappointment and discontent surround the feelings of many Iranians who identify themselves as part of the opposition – disagreeing with the ideology of a sovereign government, especially the secularists, the proletariat and the counter-government. Another conventional Western perspective that can be accepted as a form of impression as well as criticism is regarding the concept of polarization in Iranian politics which then reduces tolerance, so that when the state issues policies containing identity politics as well as restrictive and repressive polarization, the state will implement them by force or threats (Siavoshi, 1997). In this

⁵ Exchange rate volatility has a negative impact on the Iranian stock market.

case the reduction of tolerance does not only occur in the vertical relationship between the government and society, but also horizontally among its communities. Given that politics has a big hand in manifesting public policy. If the policies implemented contain the politicization of identity, then this has a significant effect on the emergence of social divisions in society. The Iranian press shows the existence of an ideological dichotomy, which consists of a press that is affiliated with the state (government) and the private sector that favors the concept of civil society, while being afraid of the potential for latent dangers from the state's 'suspicion' of its people who regard it as an oppositional force and are articulated in a contradictory way (Berger, 2002; Khiabany, 2008).

As a result of implementing inappropriate policies, there will be gaps, both socially and economically. In particular it will reduce confidence in the opposition or the government. Economic instability is the main factor in the brain drain phenomenon, many Iranian scientists choose to leave their country in order to get a better life. Structural failures have an impact on decreasing the sense of nationalism and sense of belonging to the country. Brain drain is a social phenomenon where talented citizens (both

academically and non-academically) emigrate temporarily or permanently due to the economic and political instability of a country (Raghuram, 2009; Haghghi, Bijani, & Parhizkar, 2018). Policy reforms are needed in order to control the pace of movement of Iran's talented people, "principled planning" i.e. proposing policies and practices that offer elites a more substantial role in running the country, greater individual and social freedoms, increase job security and better compensation (Kamyab, 2015).

Western media has covered a lot of Iranian politics and the socio-economic impact of its people, but very little has been published about its humanity and social relations in which the values of personality and local wisdom are embedded which are far from negative representations. Iranian society essentially upholds high human values in an epic collaboration of culture and spirituality. Islamic culture imprinted in people's lives cannot be separated from religious values that are internalized and applied practically. So far, the Iranian people, known as the largest Shia adherents, one of the Islamic sects, are represented in political, racist narratives, even calling them terrorists just because they believe in Islam.

“One day I met a Brazilian online, but when I said I was from Iran, he didn’t reply to my messages and (probably) he thought I was a terrorist,” (Iranian man).

The values of nationalism, heroism, sportsmanship, justice, and caring (the idea of *pahlavan*) are a reflection of Iran’s cultural heritage as an Islamic country and pre-Islamic culture exemplified by Rostam

I spoke to a 30 years old Iranian man. At first, he didn't mind the *hijab* I was wearing but when I said that I was a Muslim and believed in Islam, he then showed the opposite attitude, even though in this case he lived in a Muslim family. According to him, being a Muslim is not being human. He builds a negative perception of Muslims and does not distinguish between religion in the context of personal spirituality and humanity in a social context.

The misrepresentation of the media and the conditions of economic instability in practical experience have made some Iranians have skeptic views and take a stand against the government’s ideology or show behavior that leads to racism. Social discrimination based on race and religion indicates moral decline through such a disrespectful treatment toward human dignity (Daly, 2013). They draw conclusions quickly by putting Islam and Muslims in an intolerant frame of mind. His disapproval seems to be absolute and he considers something right even though he does not respect for the religious freedom of others. This ambivalent behavior indicates resistance even by those who are in the vortex of Islamic ideology and culture. However, most Iranians behave tolerantly so that their disagreements on values-based matters (ideology), both towards the government and religion, are only limited to the

and Imam Ali (Chehabi, 1995). Iranian nationalism is the result of a combination of Islamic and modern Iranian cultural values (Bausani, 1960).

cognitive level and are not considered as something that threatens their existence, instead respecting the differences that exist. Iranian society is not only known to be friendly but also open-minded.

As we all know, Iran’s economic stability is currently being disrupted due to the imposition of economic sanctions by the United States, but there are some interesting things in relation to Iranian society. Negative representations and foreign ‘punishments’ for the country do not make its people feeling weaken or disempowered, but instead become a spur for them to become stronger in facing various problems in their lives, although on the other hand the negative impact of economic instability is clearly visible to the suffering of the people including the potential to weaken trust (social capital), both to the government and to fellow citizens. Low wages resulted declining Iranian purchasing power and currency

value, more over due to inflation. Almost all Iranians I met complained about the economic difficulties, including those who mentioned the lack of job opportunities. Even so, in that difficulty, they consider the orientation of the priority and larger interests of the family. Many Iranians choose to live permanently in Iran for this reason, some consider serving the country a moral responsibility.

Their hospitality and openness applied to everyone, even Americans. Iranian society has the same perspective that hospitality and openness are not racist and not also exclusive. This reflects a clear dichotomy between political affairs and social life. The idea of a 'distributed personality' initiated by Marilyn Strathern is reflected here, when they use their feelings as social beings in relational efficacy and call for a separation between the individual subject and the social totality as expressed by Alfred Gell (Rampley, 2005; Jiménez, 2008). Politics does not disturb their human realm. The media's negative representation of Iran does not make Iranians bring up hate to the West, even though some of them don't agree with Western ideology. Even though in reality many Iranians want to work and live in other parts of the world. Meanwhile, they also still want to hold onto their culture and/or religion, such as the Persian New Year (*Nowruz*), autumn

to winter (*Shab-e Yalda*), or nature day (*Sizdah Be-dar*) celebrations, which are sometimes not equated with religious observances such as Islamic holidays (*Eid*) or Christmas. Regardless of their political orientation, Iranian society is basically family oriented and therefore they visit each other's relatives often in many occasions. *Ta'ziyeh* is interpreted not as a tradition, a representation of Islam, but also a political legacy that starts with the martyrdom of the Islamic leader, Imam Hossein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad so that through *ta'ziyeh* the Iranian people express their sympathy, sorrow, and consolation (Chelkowski, 1977). The religiosity and communal nature of its people are reflected in a series of religious rituals carried out in the month of Muharram, the *Ashura* celebration, when Iranian people gather to mourn expressing sadness and grief (*gham o gosseh*), *dysphoria* which symbolizes one's emotional involvement in spirituality, psychology, and social nature and becomes a symbol of political loyalty (Good & Good, 1988). This cultural awareness shows the typical of a friendly society, both in family and community relationships.

Table 1. Iranians Social Divide based on Cleavage Theory.

Socio-Economic	Identity, Collective Behavior	Politics-Organizational
Bourgeois	Conservative	Pro-government
Middle 'class'	Moderate	Neutral (Middle-line)
Proletarian	Secular	Counter government

Iran also has distinctive characteristics, even though this country sets policies based on Islamic norms, but it is different from other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia or countries in the Arab Emirates region. The dress code isn't kept at a strict uniform standard, e.g. color demand and so on. Based on the style of dress, at least one can see the segmentation of Iranian society, namely conservative, moderate, or secular groups. The use of the words conservative and moderate does not indicate the level of religiosity but rather emphasizes the distinction based on physical appearance or values held. Religious groups usually wear long black clothes that cover head to toe, called *chador*. Meanwhile, moderate or secular groups heed the provisions of state law by using a *hijab* and cloth that are long enough to cover the lower waist, such as a manteau.

In addition, Iran upholds women's rights even though the equality is not fully implemented. Iranian women can fulfill their right to school. In the 1990s, conservative groups had concerns about the 'association of Muslim women' who

received formal education which bestowed them good literacy skills, they feared it would be used for 'forbidden' acts which threaten the honor of men and women (Rostam-Kolayi, 2008). This fear, in Rostam-Kolayi's perspective, has become so socially stigmatized that conservatives more unexpectedly consider education for women a 'sign of sexual and moral decay.' However, at the beginning of the 20th century, there were also heterodox scholars who supported education for women, let say: Haji Mirza Hadi Dawlatabadi, Shaykh Hadi Najmabadi, and Shaykh Muhammad-Husayn Yazdi (Rostam-Kolayi, 2008). In the 21st century, Iran provides wide opportunities for women to access education, many of whom are even working in the public sector.

Capitalism and politics of interest indirectly lead the media to expose things beyond common control, including for certain purposes the news is exploited so as to create an improper public image. The absence of the media in adequately reviewing the socio-cultural life of the community can make the representation

lame if it only contains such a political news. Therefore, the media must be able to balance the production of accurate information in order to prevent misrepresentation and contribute as an indirect mediator. Misrepresentation encourages those who are ‘wrongly’ represented to take defensive actions which are then at the same time considered as a form of threat by the opposing party. In this position, it is possible for the media to become an agent of pitting against each other (*divide et impera*). When misrepresentation worsens political relations between hostile countries, for example Iran and the United States. Domestic and foreign policies imposed on Iran as a form of repressive measure against Iran’s defensive efforts, will cause domestic economic chaos in Iran. The influence and politics of the United States in this regard seem much stronger so that the economic downturn was felt by the Iranian people. In this position, the community is the most vulnerable subject compared to the government because they have no influence in the process of formation and decision making so that blind hatred arises against the government. The government’s positive efforts in developing its society are still under criticism and pessimism from some people shows a vote of no confidence in the government. Misrepresentation has multi-

layered effects, including the emergence of other forms of misrepresentation and resulting in a lack of trust in the government even for other people with different political preferences. Furthermore, as a result of this resistance, there is fragmentation within society, which are pro-government, middle-line, and counter-government groups.

In the era of modern society, the economy is an important aspect of life and includes everything related to monetization which is regulated by law in its own rationality autonomously (Pratt, 2003). The construction of class politics is reflected in the actions taken in every class movement, containing criticisms that demand the resolution of economic problems such as wages and living standards to problems of social order by inserting a broader vision of what it means to be human and how society can be organized to create justice, equality, and greater autonomy (Pratt, 2003). This class movement is carried out through other mediums, by overcoming other types of identity, such as gender, region, religion – which is included in the main narrative of the class so that through such means the class movement will create a political culture in part as a result of reactions to rival political cultures (Pratt, 2003). Political culture is a collection of ideas, institutions, rituals, attitudes, and

orientations of citizens towards the political system and the life of the government of their country (Humphreys, 2021).

The division of society in Iran is not based on racism but rather a clear distinction of political preferences. Sunstein refers to the results of Iyengar and Westwood's research that significant trust can come from the relationship of individuals or groups with their political affiliations (Sunstein, 2016). Political ideology determines the level of this belief. The division of society in Iran stems from the problem of economic instability that limits its space for meeting its basic needs and accessing human rights. The demands of the people are actually focused on this, the Iranian people do not demand much about changing the political system in the government but policies which can improve the people's economy and give more freedom to the civil and political rights of their citizens. It is not expected to be done by certain interested parties, by taking advantage of the momentum. Actors with strong influence have a tendency to exploit certain events or practices in order to carry out their political and socio-economic agendas, and trigger broad opposition (Klein, 2007; Martin, 2022). This strategic operation is called disaster capitalism by Naomi Klein. If the Iranian government

uses this practice by setting policies that can have an impact on worsening economic conditions and include identity politics in it, this will actually trigger a negative representation of itself to its people.

Differences in political preferences are not based on desire but are legitimate disagreements which can then be transformed into a matter of principle – when this partyism (partisanship) is at a severe level – it is feared will have an impact on the policies implementation which actually aimed at improving social welfare but because of the embedded attitude of skepticism, it ultimately hinders the execution of these goals (Sunstein, 2016). Political attitudes and behavior depend on the social position in a nation (Almond & Verba, 1963). The possibility of reflex abandonment of positive ideas put forward by the government must be jointly realized by all elements of Iranian society. The in-group and out-group created are related to the alternative basis of group identity in which the divisions in society are partisan based on alignments (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Thus, Iranian social divisions are one of the consequences of media misrepresentation influence and the politicization of identity, both in the media and public policy which later affect social and economic instability.

Conclusion

The Islamic revolution or the Khomeini revolution tried to make religion the basis of politics (Adrahtas & Milani, 2021; Takeyh, 2021). Since then, the government has imposed *sharia* law, one of which requires Iranian women to wear a head covering, also known as the *hijab*. Some Iranians demand freedom to dress. Disapproval of whatever is happening in the country can be expressed more freely on social media or digital networks than expressed in the real public space because such matters are sensitive. The efforts could be made are basically based on the relaxation of basic human rights freedom restrictions. The development of the character or image of Iran by the Western media has so far been unbalanced, causing misrepresentation. The lack of exploration of the values of Iranian local wisdom makes the media only see Iran from one point of view, politics, which basically only reviews it on the surface. The analysis using the cleavage theory can show the relationship of external influences to the internal life of Iranian society. Social divisions in this study are related to differences in political preferences of the Iranian people who shows representations of ideology and values and are related to attitudes and opinions. Today, the division is not only determined by past experience but

empirical reality which contributes greatly to the formation of collective consciousness. When the media do not know more about a country and its people, then that's where prejudices are built and narrated in such a way that a negative stigma or stereotype is created about it. As a result, reports that are full of suspicion, inaccuracies, and charged with accusations are often posted only for certain interests and result in the deterioration of the relationship between the two warring parties. Furthermore, it has an impact on decision-making by the government and the public's response to the policy. The social division was caused by two very dominant things, namely the empirical reality of economic instability and identity politics in the policies issued by the Iranian government. This has the potential to weaken Iran's social capital, through the reduction of public trust in its government, even towards fellow Iranians who do not share the same ideology.

Social divisions in Iranian society can be recognized at least in several groups, which are (i) conservative, moderate, and secular groups; (ii) pro-government, middle-line, and counter-government groups; as well as (iii) the bourgeoisie, middle 'class', and proletariat. Conservative, pro-government, or bourgeois groups who can enjoy the

benefits of the country will tend to have a strong sense of belonging and regard their presence for their country as a moral responsibility, not just to gain economic benefits. A moderate, middle-line, or middle 'class' is better in adapting itself within the constraints of conservative pressures and the modern concept of 'freedom.' They tend to be neutral and impartial. Secular groups, counter-government, or proletariat tend to adhere to the notion of modernism and the concept of separation of religion and state which expressly shows their disagreement with the political system of their country. In addition, they often have ambitions to leave their country because of economic instability and the application of Islamic values in their country. At the same time, some Iranians want changes in their socio-economic life but others insist on maintaining the continuity of the existing system. Regarding the *hijab* policy, for example, which contains the politicization of identity in it, it divides the community because it involves intrusion into their privacy space, but on the other hand, a group heeds this on the grounds of ensuring the security of the dignity of the Iranian people. Today many young Iranians think optimistically about the future of their country even though they are faced with difficult realities, especially due to economic sanctions. It seems that

the causes of social division are no different in the context of more than 40 years ago and today. Iran's historical background shows its consistency in placing attention on the basis of religious values and norms, not on the conflicting values of modernization as echoed by the media, but on its disagreement toward Western hegemony. However, the social divide is not rigid and still opens the possibility of every Iranian selecting different preferences regardless to their socio-economic background. For example, it's undeniable that some of the middle 'class' people actively speak up against public policies or proletariat who keep engaged to the political loyalty toward their governments.

Thus, the misrepresentation of Iran by the media has resulted in Iran taking defensive actions which at the same time are considered as a form of action that threatens the sovereignty of the opposing party (the West). In this political interest, the media plays a role in creating negative stereotypes against Iran and its people and indirectly worsens political relations between countries and even foreign policies that are set as a reaction to Iran greatly have an impact on Iran's economic instability. The influence and politics of the United States in this regard seem much stronger so that the economic downturn was felt by the Iranian people. In the end,

the Iranian government must be able to control itself and pay more attention to pro-people policies, improve its diplomatic relations with Western countries, and

avoid politicizing identity in every policy in order to increase social capital and improve social, economic and political stability of Iran.

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