



# The Arena of Political Competition among Rival Domestic Discourses in the Islamic Republic of Iran

(Case Study: 1997 AD/1376 SH–2013 AD/1392 SH)

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## Article Info

**Article type:**  
Scientific Research

**Article history:**  
Received: 2025/05/27  
Received in revised form: 2025/09/02  
Accepted: 2026/01/04  
Available online: 2026/01/04

### Keywords:

Political Arena of  
Competition; Reformist  
Discourse; Principlist  
Discourse; Islamic Republic  
of Iran..

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The political arena of the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a site of confrontation among rival discourses that seek to establish their own hegemony through the semantic articulation of fundamental concepts such as the "People," "Guardianship," "Justice," and "Law." This competition, primarily between the Reformist and Principlist currents, not only shapes policymaking trajectories and the distribution of power, but also reflects a deeper semantic struggle over political legitimacy. Nevertheless, existing studies have largely been either mono-discursive or confined to specific historical junctures, leaving a noticeable gap in comprehensive analyses of this discursive confrontation across a continuous period.

**Method:** This study adopts a qualitative approach and employs Critical Discourse Analysis grounded in the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The data consist of official statements, key speeches, press materials, and documentary texts produced by the two dominant political currents during the period 1997 AD/1376 SH–2013 AD/1392 SH. These materials were selected through purposive sampling and analyzed with a focus on central signifiers and their modes of articulation.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that the Reformist discourse, centered on signifiers such as the "People," "Law," and "Political Development," and the Principlist discourse, emphasizing "Velayat-e Faqih," "Islamic Values," and "Justice," each sought to redefine the field of meaning in their own favor. The study demonstrates that discursive competition during this period was dynamic, unstable, and highly contingent upon political and social contextual factors.

**Conclusion:** The analysis of rival discourses during this period reveals that Iran's political arena is characterized by an ongoing semantic confrontation in which each discourse attempts to establish hegemony by reconfiguring central signifiers and strategically mobilizing political and social contexts. This semantic struggle reflects a structural tension embedded in the relationship between republicanism and Islamism within Iran's political system.

**Cite this article:** Moradi Bahmaei & A (2026). The Arena of Political Competition among Rival Domestic Discourses in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Case Study: 1997 AD/1376 SH–2013 AD/1392 SH). *Contemporary Researches on Islamic Revolution*, 8 (27), 97-128. <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcir.2025.400612.1731>



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Publisher: University of Tehran.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcir.2025.400612.1731>

## Introduction

Within the political sphere of the Islamic Republic of Iran, political discourses function not merely as semantic frameworks for interpreting political issues, but also as instruments for organizing power, representing legitimacy, and guiding public opinion. Since the early 1990s, alongside a relative opening of the political space, two prominent political discourses with distinct articulatory identities have emerged and consolidated: "Reformism and Principlism." Each of these discourses has relied on specific key concepts in its effort to dominate the political arena and to prevail over its rival through the redefinition and reproduction of fundamental notions such as the "People," "Guardianship," "Freedom," "Justice," "Law," and "Development." This conceptual struggle extends beyond electoral competition and constitutes, in effect, an attempt to establish semantic hegemony within a polarized society.

The significance of the present study lies in its focus on the period from 1997 to 2013, which is widely recognized as a critical phase of political, social, and discursive transformation in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This period begins with the rise to power of the Reformist government following Mohammad Khatami's electoral victory in 1997 and concludes with the end of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second presidential term in 2013. During these years, not only did two administrations with fundamentally different political orientations govern the country, but also competing and, at times, conflicting projects of meaning-making came to dominate the public sphere. The selection of this temporal scope is particularly important because discursive confrontation between Reformism and Principlism reached its peak, coinciding with key events such as the 2nd of Khordad *movement*, the student movement, the ninth and tenth presidential elections, and the post-election protests of 2009, events that reshaped not only political practices but also discursive formations.

During this period, Reformists emphasized concepts such as civil society, the rule of law, civil liberties, and political development, proposing a project aimed at expanding religious democracy within the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. In contrast, Principlists, through a reinterpretation of concepts such as justice, Velayat-e Faqih, revolutionary values, and resistance to cultural threats, sought to reassert the original ideals of the Islamic Revolution. This confrontation was marked by social polarization, semantic mobilization, and attempts at hegemonizing meaning. From this perspective, each discourse endeavored to articulate floating signifiers into a coherent chain of signification in order to establish its preferred interpretation as the "dominant meaning" within society.

Despite the growing body of research on political discourse analysis in Iran, a substantial gap remains in comparative analyses of political discourses grounded in a coherent theoretical framework such as Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Many existing studies are either purely descriptive or limited to the analysis of a single discourse, neglecting the dynamic and relational nature of discursive competition. Laclau and Mouffe's theory, with concepts such as articulation, floating signifier, empty signifier, closure, and hegemony, provides a powerful analytical toolkit for understanding the mechanisms of semantic competition among political discourses and for illuminating the deeper dimensions of conceptual struggles.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the arena of competition between Reformist and Principlist discourses during the period 1997–2013 through the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe. The central research question is: 'How did rival political discourses in the Islamic Republic of Iran shape the arena of political competition between 1997 and 2013 through the articulation of floating signifiers and efforts to establish hegemony?' In addressing this question, the study analyzes the representation of meaning through each discourse's key concepts, the symbolic mechanisms of legitimacy construction, and the modes of discursive confrontation.

The scope of the research is deliberately confined to this period and focuses on the comparative analysis of the two political discourses that exerted the greatest influence on power configurations in the Islamic Republic. The article proceeds by first reviewing the key concepts and relevant literature, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework. It then presents the research methodology and empirical analysis across two main sub-periods (the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations). Finally, the findings are discussed and interpreted, and concluding remarks are offered. This study seeks to provide a more precise understanding of the dynamics of political discourses in contemporary Iran through a rigorous, theory-driven analysis grounded in credible sources.

## **1. Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework**

### **1.1. Definition of Key Concepts**

#### **A) Political Field**

In the theory of Laclau and Mouffe, the political field is understood as a discursive space in which discourses compete over meaning. It is a structural and discursive arena into

which floating signifiers enters in pursuit of semantic stabilization and legitimacy (Howarth et al., 2000: 6).

The political field comprises floating signifiers, diverse discourses, and multiple actors, within which meaning is continuously articulated and rearticulated in confrontation with semantic rivals (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 110–112). This theoretical perspective is particularly applicable to the analysis of Iranian politics, as it enables the researcher to examine how rival discourses—such as Reformism and Principlism, construct meaning and how semantic competition unfolds across different periods. Moreover, the structure of the political field renders discursive analysis operational by facilitating the identification of nodal points, floating signifiers, and semantic operations.

### **B) Hegemony**

Hegemony refers to the process through which a discourse articulates floating signifiers in favor of its own legitimacy and temporarily stabilizes a framework of meaning. Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that hegemony should not be equated with absolute or fixed domination; rather, meaning is always contingent, incomplete, and dependent on ongoing competition (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Hegemony thus denotes the provisional and relative fixation of meaning within the discursive field. As Laclau and Mouffe argue, "Hegemony must be understood as a contingent and incomplete process, not as a total form of domination." (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 3–4) At its core, the concept of hegemony concerns the question of who prevails in shaping politics and society, namely, which political force determines dominant patterns of behavior and which definitions of signifiers and signifieds become socially dominant. In this study, hegemony is analyzed as the manner in which Reformist or Principlist discourses become temporarily stabilized and how they block or absorb the signifiers of rival discourses. In this sense, hegemony serves as an explanatory structural tool for understanding channels of political legitimacy and semantic competition in Iran's public sphere.

### **C) Articulation**

Articulation is the process through which floating signifiers are linked and temporarily fixed within a discursive structure. Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize articulation as the practice that constructs the field of meaning within discourses and enables hegemonic positions to emerge. It allows semantic elements to be connected and stabilized, thereby forming a discourse and generating political identity (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 113). In the context of this study,

analyzing articulation enables an examination of how floating signifiers such as "Justice" or the "People" are incorporated into distinct structures of meaning within each discourse. Articulation plays a strategic role in understanding discursive stabilization and semantic competition, as hegemony is achieved when successful articulation leads to the relative closure of rival discourses.

#### **D) Master Signifier**

In Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, the nodal point (or central signifier) refers to a signifier that functions as a point of relative stability, articulating other signifiers around it and organizing their meanings. This signifier plays the role of the axis of discourse and, in its effort to create semantic coherence within the chain of equivalence, refers other concepts back to itself. In other words, as a semantic nodal point, the central signifier seeks to order floating signifiers in such a way as to produce a temporary fixation of meaning within the discursive field (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 114). These signifiers not only stabilize meaning but, by virtue of their position at the center of the semantic chain, also provide the conditions for the inclusion or exclusion of other signifiers.

From another perspective, the term central signifier refers to a person, symbol, or concept around which other signifiers are gathered and articulated. The central signifier functions like the main pole of a tent: if it is removed, the entire structure collapses. Discourse is a coherent system, and the dominant signifier constitutes its core; the gravitational force of this central core (the nodal signifier) draws other signs toward itself (Khalaji, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 54). "Semantic coherence" is achieved through the articulation of signifiers around the central signifier (Kasraei and Poozesh Shirazi, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 344).

In political discourses, the central signifier is typically a symbol or concept at the intersection of identity, power, and legitimacy. For example, in the discourse of Islamic Republic conservatism, Velayat-e Faqih functions as the central signifier, organizing concepts such as "Justice," "Independence," and "Revolutionary Values" around itself. By contrast, in reformist discourse, the signifier the people plays this role, articulating notions such as "Rule of Law," "Civil Society," and "Freedom" around it (Sotoudehnia et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH: 330). In analyzing the political discourse of the Islamic Republic, identifying the central signifier of each current helps to elucidate the mechanisms of competition, negation, representation, and the imposition of meaning among rival discourses.

### **E) Floating Signifier**

A floating signifier is a sign that has not yet acquired a fixed meaning and can be articulated by different discourses in the course of discursive competition. Signifiers such as "Justice," "Freedom," and "The People" are capable of absorbing diverse meanings (Laclau, 2005: 133). A floating signifier is one whose signified remains fluid (unstable); in other words, it possesses multiple signifieds, and different political groups compete to attach their preferred signifieds to it (Kasraei and Poozesh Shirazi, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 345).

In this study, identifying key floating signifiers and examining how they are articulated by reformist or conservative discourses is essential for analyzing their hegemonic projects. The analysis of floating signifiers demonstrates that meaning is produced through interpretive competition and that no signifier possesses an absolute meaning; rather, meanings emerge as the outcome of discursive struggle.

### **F) Binary Construction**

In Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, binary construction constitutes one of the fundamental mechanisms of meaning-making and refers to the process through which concepts and identities are defined via binary oppositions. In this process, meaning is not established in isolation but rather in relation to an "Other" or an antagonistic counterpart. Accordingly, a discourse must define an opposing or contradictory position in order to stabilize its own meaning and legitimacy, such as "Us" versus "Them," "Guardianship" versus "Westernization," or "Religious Democracy" versus "Secularism." These oppositions not only delineate semantic boundaries but also function as instruments for organizing social forces around a central signifier (Howarth, 2000: 103). Indeed, the identity of any discourse is contingent upon the existence of other; hence, discourses continuously engage in processes of otherness to constitute their own identity (Kasraei and Poozesh Shirazi, 2011 AD/1390 SH: 230).

Within the political arena of the Islamic Republic of Iran, binary construction has played a pivotal role in the formation and reproduction of rival discourses. The Principlist discourse commonly frames Reformists through signifiers such as "Tolerance," "Westernization," or the "Erosion of Values," while simultaneously presenting itself as the defender of "Authentic Islam," "Justice," and "Guardianship." Conversely, Reformists depict their opponents as symbols of "Authoritarianism," "Monopolization," or the "Imposition of an official interpretation of religion." In this sense, binary construction is not merely a linguistic

opposition but a form of discursive organization with political, normative, and social consequences that underpins the foundations of semantic competition in Iran's political sphere (Tajik, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 213).

## 1.2. Review of the Literature

In the field of political discourse analysis in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly regarding the competition between Reformist and Principlist discourses, numerous studies have been conducted using qualitative, discourse-analytic, and content-analytic approaches. However, most of these studies are either confined to specific periods or focus on a single discourse, thereby neglecting a comprehensive, theoretically grounded comparative analysis. Below, selected key Persian- and English-language studies relevant to the present research are summarized to facilitate comparison and critical assessment.

**Table 1. Review of Selected Previous Studies**

Research Issue	Year	Author(s)	Research method	Research Conclusion
Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory as an Effective Tool for Understanding Political Phenomena	2009 AD/1388 SH	Mohammad Salar Kasraei & Ali Pouzesh Shirazi	Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis	Introduces articulation, floating signifiers, and hegemony as tools of political analysis; critiques conceptual fragmentation in domestic applications of the theory.
A Critique and Evaluation of Laclau's Discourse Analysis and Its Application to Politics	2012 AD/1391 SH	Bahram Akhavan Kazemi	Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis	Emphasizes postmodern limitations and the necessity of theoretical localization in Islamic political studies.
Analyzing the Formation and Consolidation of the Islamic Revolution	2013 AD/1392 SH	Yadollah Honari & Ali Azarmi	Discourse analysis	Demonstrates that the Islamic Revolution produced a discursive



Discourse Based on Laclau and Mouffe's Theory				system centered on "Jurisprudential political Islam," with extreme nationalism and Western secularism functioning as constitutive Others.
The Discourse of the Islamic Revolution and the Requirements for Disseminating Its Values in the Era of Globalization	2016 AD/1395 SH	Mohsen Rezaei Jafari et al.	Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis	Argues that through Shi'i Islamic foundations, ijthihad, and expediency, the revolutionary discourse can achieve hegemonic expansion under globalization.
A Comparative Study of Reformist and Principlist Signifiers in the Sixth and Seventh Parliaments	2019 AD/1398 SH	Mir Ebrahim Sedigh et al.	Comparative and theoretical framework of discourse analysis	Suggests that without theoretical innovation and institutional reform, both discourses risk declining legitimacy and accessibility.
Theological–Political Strategies for Regulating Political Competition in the Islamic Republic	2019 AD/1398 SH	Ali Aghajani	Theological Ijtihad method (rational inference and quotation from religious sources)	Proposes moderate political theology and institutionalized pluralism as solutions to tensions between Islamism/Republicanism and unity/diversity.
Modes of Struggle in the Political Competition of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Subject: The period of reformists and	2023 AD/1402 SH	Ali Jan Moradi Joo	Descriptive–analytical	Identifies Reformist reliance on intellectual elites and social movements, and Principlist reliance on religious networks and state



fundamentalists)				media.
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The innovation of the present study lies in its direct and systematic examination of the discursive field of competition between the two officially dominant political currents, Reformism and Principlism, during the period 1997–2013. This domain has received limited attention in structured research, as most existing analyses focus either on the discourse of the Islamic Revolution or on single-discourse studies. Drawing explicitly on Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework and emphasizing concepts such as floating signifiers, articulation, and hegemony, this article analyzes meaning-making processes within a structurally competitive discursive field.

### **1.3. Theoretical Framework**

Understanding the mechanisms of competition among political discourses in the Islamic Republic of Iran requires a theory capable of simultaneously explaining power, meaning, and hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, with its post-structuralist foundations and emphasis on conceptual struggle in the public sphere, provides an appropriate analytical framework. Moving beyond classical essentialism, this theory conceives meaning not as fixed or definitive but as the product of articulatory processes within discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 112).

In this framework, discourse is understood as a network of signifiers organized around central or empty signifiers. The meaning of a signifier is not derived from reference to an external essence or objective truth but from its differential relations with other signifiers within the discursive structure (Howarth, 2000: 101). Rival discourses thus attempt to stabilize their preferred semantic order through articulation while exposing the contingency and instability of alternative meanings.

A key concept in this theory is articulation, defined as the process through which a discourse links dispersed signifiers into a coherent chain of meaning. For example, the Reformist discourse may articulate signifiers such as the "People," "Law," and "Freedom" into a chain that directly contradicts the Principlist discourse organized around "Guardianship," "Justice," and "Islamic Values."

Equally central is the concept of hegemony, which refers to a condition in which a discourse successfully imposes its semantic order upon others, transforming it into the dominant meaning (Laclau, 2005: 93). Such hegemony is always provisional, contingent, and subject to challenge; consequently, the political field remains perpetually open to discursive reconfiguration. In the Islamic Republic, political discourses have persistently sought to consolidate hegemony through conceptual mobilization and the exclusion of others (Hejazi and Bahrami, 2019 AD/1398 SH: 11).

Another foundational concept is the floating signifier. Signifiers such as the "People," "Justice," or "Democracy" are inherently open to multiple interpretations and can be appropriated by different discourses (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 36). Hence, the political field is fundamentally a site of struggle over the interpretation and ownership of these signifiers. In Iran, for instance, the "People" may signify loyal supporters of Velayat-e Faqih in the Principlist discourse, while in the Reformist discourse it denotes rights-bearing civic actors.

The notion of the empty signifier plays a crucial role in unifying chains of signification. Concepts such as "Islam," "Revolution," "Iran," or "Guardianship" can be partially emptied of fixed content, allowing diverse social groups to project their own meanings onto them without achieving full semantic unity (Laclau, 2005: 98). This indeterminacy enhances political mobilization and facilitates hegemonic inclusivity (Hejazi and Bahrami, 2019 AD/1398 SH: 12).

Laclau and Mouffe's theory emerged from the Essex School, an interdisciplinary approach concerned with the interrelations among power, language, and ideology. By moving beyond traditional left-right dichotomies, the Essex School emphasizes semantic struggle in modern societies and its role in the reproduction of power (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 8). From this perspective, discourse analysis is particularly effective for multi-discursive societies such as Iran in identifying symbolic practices, semantic closures, and hegemonic transformations.

Based on this theoretical framework, the present study examines the formation, persistence, and confrontation of the two dominant political discourses in Iran, Reformism and Principlism, through their competition over central signifiers, semantic articulation, and hegemonic consolidation. Given that Laclau and Mouffe's theory acknowledges the inherently antagonistic and incomplete nature of meaning, it offers a flexible and robust framework for analyzing this dynamic field of competition.

Ultimately, the theoretical framework of this article rests on the assumption that in the political arena of the Islamic Republic, fundamental concepts do not exist in isolation but are engaged in constant semantic struggle. Political discourses, through their internal structures of

meaning, not only represent power but actively reproduce it. Accordingly, analyzing rival discourses through Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical tools enables the identification of hegemonic strategies, exclusionary mechanisms, resonance effects, and processes of semantic redefinition within Iran's political competition.

## **2. The Political Field of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been constituted by a synthesis of two structural components: Islamicity as the ideological content and Republicanism as the political form and mechanism. Article one of the Constitutions defines the system as an Islamic Republic, in which Republicanism represents the institutional framework and Islamicity its substantive foundation (Mirzadeh Kouhshahi and Farsi, 2022 AD/1389 SH: 131).

In the revolutionary and constitutional discourse, Imam Khomeini's interpretation emphasized that Republicanism derives from popular choice, while Islamicity gains legitimacy from divine will and religious authority. These two elements are not contradictory but complementary: "Isلمicity cannot endure without popular support, and Republicanism lacks meaning without religious content." (Khosravi et al., 2016 AD/1395 SH: 134) There are also perspectives that claim a theoretical contradiction exists between Islamicity and republicanism within the Islamic Republic. In particular, some liberal and non-religious currents regard republicanism as being in conflict with Islamicity, while others argue that this semantic tension is merely nominal and that the discursive reality of the system demonstrates that the two have been employed in a complementary manner (Arasta, 2003 AD/1382 SH: 11).

Through an analysis of the discourse of the regime's legitimacy, Palizban shows that following the victory of the Revolution, the utopian atmosphere gave way to discursive competition, and the dominant discourse of the Islamic Republic came to confront two sub-discourses: traditionalist Islamicity and modern republicanism. This competition reflects the system's will to articulate the two concepts within a single discursive framework (Palizban, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 117). Soltani likewise notes that the official revolutionary discourse, embodied in the political system of the Islamic Republic, articulated two central signifiers, "Isلمicity" and "Republicanism." Islamicity represented religious identity, juristic authority, and the Velayat-e Faqih, while republicanism represented popular participation, the rule of law, and free elections (Soltani, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 231).

In addressing why Iran's political field was formed around Islamicity and republicanism, it can be argued that these two concepts function as discursive nodal points around which other sub-discourses coalesced. Discourses such as antagonism toward the West, liberal secular republicanism, or justice-oriented movements each emphasized one of these two axes in order to stabilize their political identities (Palizban, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 121).

Consequently, the political field of the Islamic Republic can be understood as a dynamic space of discursive competition in which Islamicity, as the substance of religious legitimacy, and republicanism, as the framework of popular legitimacy, constitute its two principal pillars. This meaningful combination provides the mechanism for the system's durability while simultaneously preserving the potential for ongoing discursive transformation.

### **3. Characteristics and Requirements of the Discursive Competitive Field in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

#### **1) Bipolar Structure**

Since the 1990s, Iran's political structure has been characterized by a bipolar discursive configuration consisting of the Principlist (or conservative) discourse, which emphasizes Velayat-e Faqih and religious identity, and the Reformist discourse, which seeks legitimacy through popular sovereignty and political participation. This bipolarity is indicative of a struggle over meaning, as each discourse attempts to marginalize its rival by foregrounding its own normative values and questioning the human or divine legitimacy of the opposing camp.

From the perspective of political field theory, this polarization signifies the emergence of two parallel fields of critique and legitimacy, each enabling a discourse to stabilize its hegemonic element around a nodal signifier, "Guardianship" for Principlists and the "People" or "Freedom" for Reformists. This structural binary significantly constrains the space for a genuine third or centrist discourse, as semantic competition is institutionally configured as antagonistic, compelling moderate positions to gravitate toward one of the two poles.

Although additional internal discourses, such as justice-oriented movements, have emerged, the overall framework of competition continues to revolve around these two dominant poles (Bay et al., 2019 AD/1398 SH: 375). Hence, bipolarity constitutes a structural feature of the discursive field, reflecting both the historical trajectory of contemporary Iranian politics and the intensified drive of discourses to stabilize meaning and power.

## **2) Struggle for the Accumulation of Political Capital**

Discursive competition between Principlists and Reformists in Iran's political field is fundamentally a struggle over the accumulation and stabilization of political capital, understood as political legitimacy and access to decision-making institutions. Discourses seek to reinterpret the meaning and sources of legitimacy in their own favor (Bay et al., 2019 AD/1398 SH: 380).

Principlists ground their symbolic capital in the signifier of "Guardianship" and religious legitimacy, maintaining that political legitimacy should flow primarily from above, through Velayat-e Faqih, rather than solely from popular vote (Ghasemi et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH: 53). In contrast, Reformists locate their capital in signifiers such as the "People," "Freedom," and "Free Elections," arguing that legitimacy originates from below, through popular will rather than exclusively through religious authority.

This semantic struggle has generated a strategic competition over words, symbols, and narratives, from official statements to electoral slogans, each seeking hegemonic recognition within the political field. The outcome has been the emergence of period-specific dominant discourses (relative hegemonies), as observed during the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations. Accordingly, contestation over discursive political capital constitutes a core dimension of the competitive field, transforming struggles over meaning into struggles over political legitimacy.

## **3) Adherence to Velayat-e Faqih: The Formation of a Discursive Habitus**

Another defining feature of Iran's political competitive field is the formal and structural adherence to Velayat-e Faqih, which has become institutionalized as a **discursive habitus** within the system. Principlists explicitly derive their legitimacy from allegiance to the Supreme Leader, while other discourses must also demonstrate compatibility or loyalty to Velayat-e Faqih in order to achieve political legitimacy (Ghasemi et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH: 56).

This discursive habitus shapes the articulation of key signifiers such as "Guardianship," "Leadership," and "Religious Authority," marginalizing alternatives, such as secular or non-guardianship-based positions, even when they enjoy popular support. The normalization of this habitus functions as a mechanism for controlling meaning and preventing discursive deviation toward political exclusion.

At the same time, it generates a form of relative semantic closure: "Discourses that emphasize popular sovereignty without sufficient reference to Velayat-e Faqih risk having their religious

legitimacy questioned. Thus, discursive adherence to Velayat-e Faqih is not merely an indicator of formal authority but a crucial mechanism for stabilizing the political field and delimiting acceptable political alternatives."

The political field of the Islamic Republic is rooted in a distinctive articulation of Islamicity and *Republicanism*, institutionalized through the Constitution, politico-religious leadership, and a combination of elected and appointed institutions. Within this overarching field, political competition, particularly between Reformist and Principlist discourses, takes place in a sub-field governed by specific rules, including discursive bipolarity, competition over political capital, and commitment to Velayat-e Faqih.

The following table conceptually distinguishes between the general political field and the specific requirements of the discursive competitive field in Iran.

**Table 2. Comparison of the Political Field and the Discursive Competitive Field in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

No.	Key Issues of the Political Field in the Islamic Republic	Characteristics and Requirements of the Political Competition Field in the Islamic Republic
1	The dual combination of Islamicity and republicanism in the political and legal structure	The existence of an active bipolarity between reformist and principlist (conservative) discourses, each offering a different interpretation of Islamicity and republicanism
2	A political structure based on the Velayat-e Faqih and divine sovereignty alongside elected institutions	The requirements of competition within the framework of preserving the system and adhering to the principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist, even when criticizing the performance of official institutions
3	A religion-based political field with ideological capacity for mass mobilization	Competition over the appropriation of key concepts such as justice, the people, freedom, development, and resistance; each discourse seeks to define its own specific meaning of these signifiers

4	Interaction and occasional tension between religious legitimacy and popular acceptance	The necessity of articulating floating signifiers within a framework that simultaneously produces social acceptance and religious validation
5	Discursive shifts influenced by domestic and regional developments (such as the 2nd of Khordad, the 2009 elections, and sanctions)	The fluidity of the competitive field and the possibility of continual redefinition of discourses in response to changing conditions, crises, and political opportunities
6	The significant influence of non-elected institutions in decision-making processes	Competition within an institutionally constrained and often unequal arena, where media and institutional resources are distributed unevenly among discourses
7	The use of symbolic tools, religious rituals, and ideology for legitimacy-building	The requirement to employ rituals, religious language, and symbolic instruments to stabilize hegemony and effect the semantic exclusion of rival discourses
8	The importance of official discourse in organizing governance institutions and macro-level policymaking	Competition at a level beyond elections, encompassing media, formal education, the judiciary, and religious and cultural institutions

This table represents an effort to conceptually and functionally distinguish between two levels of political dynamics within the structure of the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, it examines the general and foundational components of the political field, such as the duality of Islamicity and republicanism, the role of formal and traditional institutions, and the authority of the Velayat-e Faqih. On the other hand, it focuses on the characteristics and requirements of the field of political competition, including the bipolar nature of the discursive structure (Reformist/Principlist), struggles over the acquisition of symbolic capital and power, and the formation of dispositions of conformity or differentiation. This conceptual distinction facilitates a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of political action in Iran and demonstrates how macro-level structures shape, constrain, or direct the rules of political competition.



#### **4. Research Methodology**

##### **1) Research Design and General Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's Essex School framework. Rather than treating political competition merely as a set of policy positions, the study conceptualizes it as a field of meaning, hegemonic struggle, and signifier articulation.

##### **2) Temporal Scope and Rationale**

The study covers the period from 1997 to 2013, spanning from the beginning of Mohammad Khatami's Reformist presidency to the end of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term. This period was selected due to its intense discursive confrontations, significant political shifts, and heightened conceptual rivalry over key signifiers such as the "People," "Law," "Guardianship," and "Freedom."

##### **3) Corpus and Data Sources**

The unit of analysis consists of discursive texts produced by the two dominant political currents. These include key speeches, party statements, and editorials from influential newspapers, electoral debates, official media positions, and campaign materials. Data were selected purposively based on national circulation, discursive impact, and analytical relevance to Laclau and Mouffe's framework.

##### **4) Coding Procedure**

Data coding was conducted in three stages:

1. Open coding: identification of key signifiers and initial concepts;
2. Axial coding: organization of codes into broader categories (central signifiers, floating signifiers, articulations);
3. Selective coding: identification of equivalently chains and hegemonic axes.

##### **5) Analytical Process**

Analysis proceeded through identifying discursive elements, extracting central and floating signifiers, and examining strategies of hegemonic fixation, semantic closure, and exclusion. Concepts such as empty signifier, chain of equivalence, and otherness making guided interpretation.

##### **6) Analysis of central signifiers and articulations**

In reformist discourse, the central signifier the people is articulated in such a way that concepts such as "Freedom," "Civil Society," and "Rule of Law" are positioned in a meaningful chain around it. By contrast, principlists place the signifier Velayat (Guardianship) at the center of their discourse and organize concepts such as "Justice," "Islamic Values," and "Service" in a chain articulated around it. The manner in which these signifiers are articulated reveals the ideological orientation of each discourse within the field of competition.

#### **7) Examining hegemony and the closure of meaning**

Each of the discourses under study has sought, through the use of symbolic, media, and institutional resources, to stabilize its preferred meanings and to close the semantic space to the rival discourse. These efforts have at times met with relative success, but in other instances have failed due to social resistance or counter-discursive challenges. A dynamic analysis of these interactions demonstrates that none of the discourses has been able to fully secure hegemonic fixation.

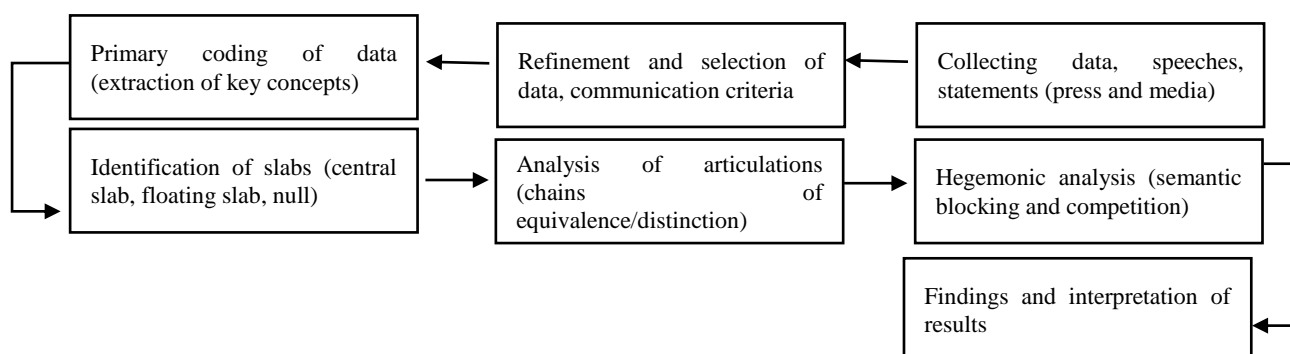
#### **8) Reliability report**

To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the coding process, two measures were employed. First, expert review by a specialist in political discourse analysis was conducted, during which the extracted categories were evaluated and validated. Second, Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated between two independent coders. The result yielded a value of 0.82, indicating a high level of agreement and reliability in the coding process.

#### **9) Methodological advantages in understanding the dynamics of discursive competition**

The application of Laclau and Mouffe's theory in this study enables a multilayered understanding of political contestation in Iran. Unlike purely descriptive or structuralize analyses, this approach allows for the examination of meaning-making mechanisms, the construction of the other, and attempts at discursive monopolization. Accordingly, the methodology employed not only serves to address the research question but also offers a model for analyzing discursive competition in other political contexts.

**Figure 1. Flowchart of the research methodology**



## 5. Research Findings

### 1) Formation of the Political Discursive Field in the Islamic Republic

The findings indicate that the political field of the Islamic Republic has been fundamentally structured around the dual articulation of Islamicity and Republicanism. However, divergent interpretations, prioritizations, and articulations of these two elements by competing political discourses have shaped the trajectory of Iran's political dynamics. Both Reformist and Principlist discourses have selectively emphasized aspects of this duality, rearticulating key signifiers such as the people, guardianship, law, justice, and freedom, thereby transforming political competition into a sustained struggle over meaning.

### 2) Reformist Discourse and Democratic Articulation

Between 1997 and 2005, the reformist discourse articulated a chain of equivalence centered on the master signifier the people, incorporating floating signifiers such as political development, civil society, rule of law, and freedom. This discourse sought to constitute itself, through differentiation from authoritarianism, as the embodiment of republicanism and a representative of political modernization. At the semantic level, reformists attempted to transform the political field into a space of dialogue, transparency, and legitimate competition; however, these efforts encountered persistent resistance from entrenched institutions.

### 3) Redefinition of Principlist Discourse and the Consolidation of the Signifier of Velayat

In response to the reformist discourse, principlists from the early 2000s endeavored to stabilize the signifier Velayat as the central nodal point, articulating around it signifiers such

as revolutionary values, social justice, anti-corruption, and service to the underprivileged (Seddigh et al., 2019 AD/1398 SH: 218). During the Ahmadinejad presidency, this discourse, through the use of populist and accessible rhetoric, opposition to elitism, and reliance on leadership, offered a redefinition of popular Islamism and temporarily captured a significant portion of the discursive field.

#### **4) Floating Signifiers and Semantic Contestation**

Signifiers such as the people, law, justice, and even freedom functioned as floating signifiers and constituted the primary terrain of contestation between the two discourses. Each discourse attempted to anchor these signifiers to its own preferred meanings. For instance, reformists defined the people as bearers of will and citizens' rights, whereas principlists construed them as a faithful mass loyal to leadership. This semantic rivalry penetrated the core of Iran's political field and generated substantial theoretical and practical challenges (Mirzaei & Rabbani Khorasgani, 2015 AD/1394 SH: 45).

#### **5) Structural Responses of Power Institutions to Discursive Competition**

One of the key findings indicates that the institutional structure of the Islamic Republic, by prioritizing the principle of Velayat-e Faqih and appointed bodies, exhibits greater affinity with the principlist discourse. This overlap enabled principlists to benefit from broader institutional and media support, granting them greater access to hegemonic and exclusionary mechanisms. Conversely, the reformist discourse repeatedly faced restrictions, containment, and political or media marginalization.

#### **6) The Impossibility of Absolute Hegemonic Fixation**

Despite extensive efforts by both discourses to impose their preferred meanings on central signifiers, neither succeeded in achieving full hegemonic closure (Karimi, 2012 AD/1391 SH: 176). Events such as the 2009 presidential election and its aftermath revealed a profound semantic crisis, intensified discursive confrontation, and the impossibility of complete closure by a single discourse. During this period, Iran's political space remained less a domain of unified meaning than an arena of ongoing struggle and discursive rearticulating.

#### **7) The Role of Media and Rituals in Discursive Reinforcement**

The findings demonstrate that media outlets, religious ceremonies, and revolutionary symbols functioned as crucial instruments for meaning fixation and discursive confrontation. Both currents sought to articulate floating signifiers in their favor and inculcate them within public

opinion. The Principlist discourse, in particular, relied heavily on official media and ritualized practices, such as Friday prayers and mass rallies, for the reproduction of its discourse.

### 8) A Third Discourse? Openings or Blockages

At certain moments within the studied period, attempts emerged to transcend the traditional binary and construct alternative discourses. However, these efforts were largely absorbed into one of the two dominant discourses or were prevented from materializing due to institutional blockages. Consequently, the field of competition remained largely confined to these two discourses, with transformations occurring primarily in intra-discursive or adaptive forms.

Overall, the findings indicate that the political field of the Islamic Republic is, on the one hand, highly meaning-centered and grounded in discursive competition, while on the other hand, its institutional structure tends to privilege the stabilization of a particular discourse. This tension between structural constraints and semantic dynamism has rendered the political arena a permanent site of interaction, exclusion, and redefinition. Although neither discourse achieved complete semantic closure or absolute hegemony, Principlism, especially in the latter period, was able to impose a broader degree of semantic stabilization due to its access to institutional power resources (Izadi and Rezaei Panah, 2013 AD/1392 SH: 66). Reformism, despite its conceptual capacity and social support, failed to consolidate its dominant meaning due to the absence of sustained supportive structures (Aghajari et al., 2022 AD/1401 SH: 311).

**Table 3. Sample Data Coding Based on Laclau and Mouffe's Theory**

Raw Text / Data	Initial Code	Core Category	Type of Signifier	Articulation/ Chain of Meaning	Discursive Position
The people are the true owners of the country (Speech by Mohammad Khatami, 1998)	People	Republicanism	Central Signifier	People → Law → Freedom → Political Development	Reformist
The Constitution is our red line	Constitution	Political Institutionalization	Floating Signifier	Law → People → Civil Society	Reformist

(Interview, Sobh-e Emrooz, 1999)					
Civil society is a tool for collective participation (Khatami, 2000)	Civil Society	Political Participation	Floating Signifier	Civil Society → Freedom → Reform	Reformist
Velayat-e Faqih is the axis of the system's identity (Supreme Leader, 2005)	Velayat-e Faqih	Islamic Legitimacy	Central Signifier	Velayat → Justice → Islamic Values	Principlist
Justice is the foundation of governmental legitimacy (Ahmadinejad, 2007)	Justice	Social Justice	Floating Signifier	Justice → Service → Velayat	Principlist
"Western cultural invasion threatens the youth" (Friday Prayer Sermon, 2003)	Cultural Threat	Confrontation with other	Floating Signifier	Cultural Threat → Velayat → Islamic Identity	Principlist

This table shows that the raw data (speeches and official texts) were first transformed into initial codes. These codes were then categorized into core categories, and their positions as either central signifiers or floating signifiers were identified. Finally, based on the articulations, the semantic relationships among signifiers were mapped within chains of

equivalence and difference, and each case was attributed to either the reformist or the Principlist discourse.

Subsequently, the key findings of the study are presented in the form of an analytical table. The table is organized comparatively and illustrates the various dimensions of discursive competition between the reformist and Principlist currents in the Islamic Republic of Iran (1997–2013), from the perspective of the key concepts of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory (central signifier, articulation, hegemony, and so forth).

**Table 4. Analytical Findings of the Two Main Discourses in the Islamic Republic of Iran (1997–2013)**

<b>Analytical Dimension</b>	<b>Reformist Discourse</b>	<b>Principlist Discourse</b>
Central Signifier	People	Velayat-e Faqih
Key Floating Signifiers	Law, Freedom, Civil Society, Political Development	Justice, Service, Islamic Values, Cultural Threat
Nodal Point	Republicanism, Right to Choose	Islamism, Leadership
Mode of Articulation	People-centered chain emphasizing participation and transparency	Velayat-centered chain emphasizing obedience, security, and order
Source of Legitimacy	Popular will, elections, intra-system reform	Religious authority, revolutionary tradition
Discursive Instruments	Free press, electoral debates, intellectuals, universities	Friday prayers, state media, official cultural institutions
Competitive Strategy	Democratic expansion, dialogue, anti-monopoly	Defense of values, exclusion of rival discourse
Hegemonic Status	Fragile and unstable	Relative and institutionally reinforced
Outcome	Semantic blockage, limited political continuity	Relative stabilization, intensified closure

This table illustrates the formation of a structured field of semantic competition in the Islamic Republic, within which the two main discourses, reformism and principlism, have sought to



stabilize their central signifiers and impose their hegemony over the political field. While reformists emphasized the signifier *the people* and concepts associated with democracy, transparency, and structural reform, principlists, drawing on *Velayat-e Faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurist) and concepts such as justice, cultural threat, and Islamic values, sought to institutionalize their discourse. The analysis indicates that although both discourses have been influential in the political field at different periods, the structural support of official institutions for the principlist discourse has placed it on a path toward relative stabilization, whereas the reformist discourse has encountered institutional obstacles and political closures. This structural confrontation persists and reflects the dynamism, poly-vocally, and ongoing struggle over meaning in the political space of the Islamic Republic.

## **6. Discussion and Interpretation of Findings**

### **1) Discursive Competition as a Struggle over Meaning and Legitimacy**

The competition between reformist and Principlist discourses in the Islamic Republic of Iran is not merely electoral or partisan, but fundamentally a struggle over the meaning of core political concepts. Signifiers such as people, Velayat, law, freedom, and justice possess no fixed meaning; rather, they are continuously contested. Each discourse seeks to impose its own interpretation in pursuit of hegemonic dominance.

### **2) Central Signifiers and Temporary Fixation of Meaning**

The reformist discourse, centered on *the people*, and the Principlist discourse, centered on Velayat, articulated chains of equivalence that both highlighted their values and excluded the other. Nonetheless, neither discourse succeeded in fully fixing meaning throughout the entire period, underscoring the fluidity of the discursive field.

### **3) Discursive Instruments and Power Resources**

Reformists relied primarily on the press, intellectuals, universities, and public debates, whereas Principlists benefited from institutional resources such as state broadcasting, Friday prayers, and religious-cultural organizations. This asymmetry generated discursive inequality, enabling Principlism to achieve periods of dominance while reformism was frequently marginalized.

#### **4) Instability of Discursive Closure**

No discourse achieved total semantic closure. Critical junctures, most notably the 2009 election, reactivated marginalized meanings and returned them to the center of contestation. This persistent instability confirms Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on the contingency of meaning and the perpetual struggle required to stabilize it.

#### **5) Institutional Structure and Discursive Balance**

The political structure of the Islamic Republic privileges certain discourses through institutional support. Principlism, due to its proximity to appointed institutions, enjoyed sustained advantages, whereas reformism remained dependent on electoral institutions and civil society—contributing to its instability over time.

#### **6) Symbolic Confrontation at the Discursive Level**

One of the most important arenas of competition is the battle over symbols, key vocabulary, and statements. Each discourse, through the repeated use of specific terms, ideological rituals, and the representation of a particular narrative of the Revolution, has sought to present itself as the authentic embodiment of the discourse of the Islamic Revolution. For example, Principlists constructed and emphasized terms such as resistance to arrogance, insight, sedition, the Imam's line, and loyalty to the Guardianship, while reformists produced meaning through concepts such as demand-making, rule of law, accountability, and religious democracy.

#### **7) Reactions to changes in governments and discursive dynamics**

Although changes in governments have led to relative shifts within the discursive field, lasting hegemony has not been attainable for either discourse. The Khatami administration strengthened reformist discourse but encountered institutional closure. The Ahmadinejad administration reinforced Principlist discourse, yet intra-discursive tensions and performance crises prevented the full consolidation of hegemony. Consequently, political changes have not necessarily resulted in durable transformations of the discursive field.

#### **8) The challenge of continuity and reproduction of discourses**

One of the key findings of the study is the absence of institutionalized mechanisms for the meaningful continuity and long-term stabilization of discourses. Neither reformism succeeded in effective institutionalization, nor did Principlism manage to attract a broad spectrum of

independent elites. This condition has rendered discursive competition fragile, unstable, and often dependent on temporary political agencies. The persistence of discourses has largely remained at the symbolic level and has lacked deeply institutionalized structural foundations.

9) The concept of the other, which plays a central role in identity formation in Laclau and Mouffe's theory, can be examined at three distinct yet interconnected levels:

(A) The external other or foreign enemy: Both discourses, especially Principlism, invoke the west, and more specifically the United States and global arrogance, as a common enemy and external other. This construction fosters internal cohesion and mobilization by generating a shared sense of threat. In reformist discourse, although this antagonism is less pronounced, it is generally reframed as resistance to imposition rather than total confrontation.

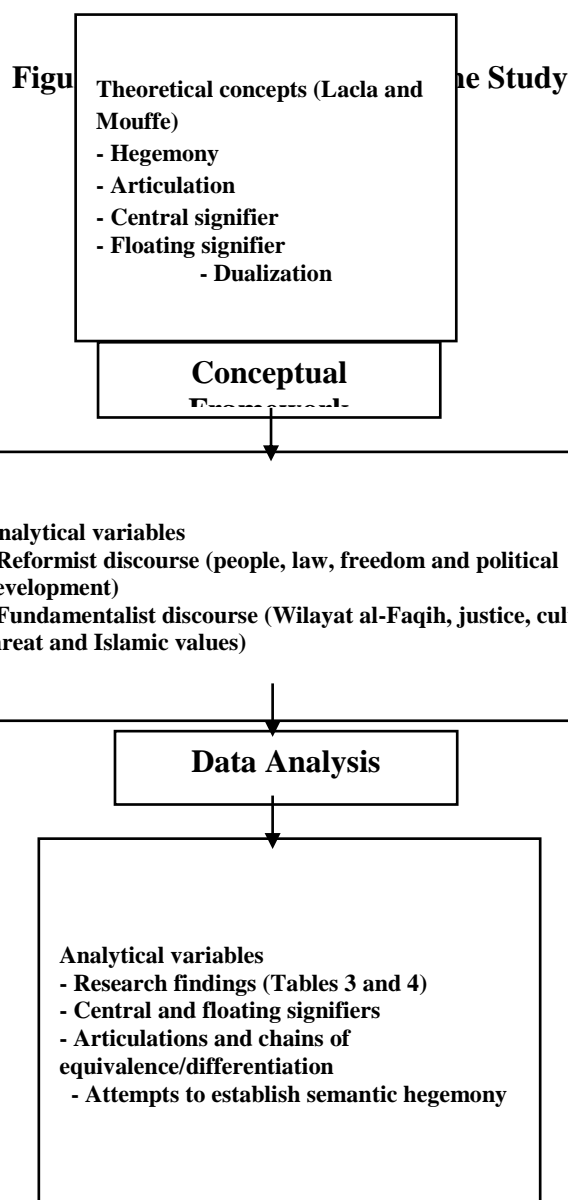
(B) The internal Other or political opponent; this level refers to groups and movements that fall outside the dominant discursive framework of the system and are excluded as anti-system or subversive (such as monarchists and armed opposition groups). This form of otherness making delineates political red lines.

(C) The discursive other or intra-system rival: The most significant level in the present analysis is the mutual positioning of these two discourses as each other's discursive other. Principlist discourse marginalizes reformists with labels such as westernized, weak-willed, and deviant, while reformist discourse portrays Principlists as authoritarian, monopolistic, and traditional. This level of otherness making constitutes the core of the struggle for hegemony within the political field of the Islamic Republic, where each discourse seeks to legitimize itself as the authentic representative of both Islamicity and republicanism by excluding the other. An examination of this dimension reveals how the identity of each discourse is contingent upon the definition and rejection of its rival.

#### **10. Analytical conclusion and overall interpretation**

Overall, discursive competition in the Islamic Republic of Iran during this period manifested primarily as a struggle over meaning within the field of political power, a struggle that, although articulated through different concepts, consistently aimed at semantic domination and political hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework provides an effective analytical tool for understanding this competition, moving beyond purely structural or normative analyses and rendering the dynamic nature of this field intelligible.

## 7. Conceptual Model of the Study



The conceptual model of the present research illustrates how the foundational concepts of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, namely hegemony, articulation, central signifier, floating signifier, and binary opposition, serve as the theoretical framework for analyzing the field of political competition in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These concepts are operationalized as analytical variables and applied to two main discourses: "Reformism (centered on signifiers such as people, law, freedom, and political development) and Principlism (centered on Velayat-e Faqih, justice, cultural threat, and Islamic values). Subsequently, the research findings, presented in tabular form, elucidate the relationships between central and floating

signifiers, articulations, chains of equivalence and difference, and each discourse's efforts to stabilize semantic hegemony. In this way, the conceptual model delineates the logical trajectory of the research from theory to data and ultimately to findings, thereby ensuring the analytical coherence of the article."

## Conclusion

The conclusions of this study are derived from a field-based and theory-driven discourse analysis of the period 1997–2013 in the Islamic Republic of Iran, a period during which the country's political field became the site of overt and complex competition between two official discourses: reformism and Principlism. During this time, both discourses sought to stabilize their hegemonic positions within the political and cultural domains by articulating central and floating signifiers. Grounded in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and focused on concepts such as hegemony, articulation, floating signifiers, and semantic closure, this analysis provides a structural understanding of the formation, persistence, confrontation, and decline of these discourses.

First, the study demonstrates that the political field of the Islamic Republic is characterized by a dual structure arising from the combination of Islamicity and Republicanism. Each discourse has attempted to interpret and absorb these two components into its central signifier. Reformists, centered on the signifier people and chains such as rule of law, freedom, civil society, and political development, sought to strengthen the republican dimension. Principlists, by contrast, centered their discourse on Velayat and articulated elements such as "Justice, cultural threat, resistance, and service provision" in an effort to consolidate the Islamic dimension of the system and reinforce their semantic hegemony.

The findings indicate that neither discourse succeeded in achieving complete semantic closure or stable hegemonic fixation during the period under review. Reformism entered the political field during the Khatami administration with novel concepts, yet its hegemony remained fragile due to resistance from formal power structures and the empowerment of rival currents. Conversely, Principlism supported institutionally during the Ahmadinejad administration, expanded its signifiers, but operational challenges, internal fragmentation, and declining social capital prevented it from fully stabilizing its hegemony.

Notably, the competition between these discourses unfolded both at the level of macro-concepts; such as people, law, Velayat, and justice; and at the level of instruments and structures. Reformists relied on free media, intellectuals, and civil dialogue, whereas

Principlists mobilized official institutions, religious rituals, and the symbolic capital of the Revolution. This asymmetry in discursive instruments produced unequal access to the field of meaning and politics, temporarily shifting the balance of power in favor of Principlism.

From a theoretical perspective, applying Laclau and Mouffe's framework to the analysis of official discourses in the Islamic Republic enables a nuanced understanding of meaning production, the construction of the other, and the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion within the arena of power. Within this framework, meaning is not fixed or essentialist but rather a contingent outcome of articulation and hegemonic power. This semantic contingency explains why discourses in Iran have remained fluid, unstable, and perpetually competitive rather than achieving total dominance.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that discourses in the Islamic Republic are not merely intellectual narratives but political projects aimed at organizing and stabilizing specific meanings. These projects reach their peak during moments of crisis or elections, when floating signifiers such as law, people, Velayat, and freedom become the primary terrain of discursive struggle, and each current seeks to impose its interpretation at the societal level.

At the same time, weaknesses in long-term institutionalization, the absence of coherent theoretical networks, and heavy dependence on political agents have rendered these discursive competitions fragile and shallow. This condition is particularly evident in the reformist discourse, which; despite its greater conceptual capacity for reconstructing republicanism and democracy; failed to achieve hegemonic consolidation due to structural blockages and its inability to generate sustainable support organizations.

In conclusion, the discursive field of the Islamic Republic of Iran, despite the persistence of the reformist, Principlist binary, remains continuously opens to redefinition and semantic shifts. Neither discourse has been able to impose a final meaning; rather, an ongoing struggle over meaning production and the representation of political legitimacy persists. While this condition may foster political dynamism, it simultaneously carries the risks of social capital erosion, blockage of public participation, and declining trust in competitive political processes. Accordingly, future research should move toward hybrid, multi-discursive, and participatory models in order to provide deeper and more comprehensive analyses of Iran's political field.

### Research Recommendations

The present study opens new horizons for future research. First, it is recommended that the temporal scope be extended to subsequent periods in order to examine discursive transformations after 2013 and the role of social media in redefining discursive competition. Second, greater attention to subsidiary and emerging discourses, such as student justice-seeking movements, social movements, and socio-cultural currents, can offer a more pluralistic portrayal of Iran's political field. Third, combining qualitative and quantitative methods (such as network analysis or quantitative content analysis) may enhance analytical rigor and objectivity. Fourth, comparative studies between Iran and other countries (e.g., Turkey or Egypt) could help identify the distinctive features of the Iranian model. Finally, future research should devote greater attention to online discourse and social media, which have emerged in recent years as one of the most significant arenas of discursive competition.

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