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State Nationalism and the Reproduction of Political Authority during the First Pahlavi Era: An Analysis within the Framework of the Authoritarian Modern State

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ABSTRACT

During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941), nationalism became one of the central components of the discourse of the modern state in Iran. This article focuses on state nationalism and examines its role in the reproduction of political authority and the weakening of constitutional institutions. The principal research problem concerns how, and through which mechanisms, state nationalism during Reza Shah's rule contributed to the concentration of power and the strengthening of authoritarianism. The central question addressed is: What role did state nationalism play in legitimizing political authority and in eliminating or weakening independent institutions? The main hypothesis of the study posits that Reza Shah's state nationalism, through redefining national identity around the central state and the person of the monarch, functioned as an instrument for legitimizing power centralization and restricting political and institutional pluralism. The objective of the research is to analyze the relationship between nationalist discourse and mechanisms of political authority within the process of state-building under Reza Shah. From a theoretical perspective, the article draws upon the state nationalism approach and theories of the authoritarian state, treating nationalism not merely as a cultural phenomenon but as an active element in the construction of political power. The independent variable of the study is state nationalism, while the dependent variable consists of the reproduction of political authority and the weakening of constitutional institutions. The research adopts a qualitative–historical methodology, and its data were collected and interpreted through documentary analysis, historical texts, and authoritative scholarly works. The findings indicate that state nationalism during Reza Shah's rule, through emphasizing national unity, strengthening the authority of the central state, and highlighting the role of the monarch, created the institutional and discursive foundations necessary for establishing a modern authoritarian order. The innovation of this article lies in examining Pahlavi nationalism as an explanatory variable in the analysis of authoritarianism, thereby contributing to bridging the gap between nationalism studies and analyses of authoritarian state formation in contemporary Iran.

Keywords: *State Nationalism; Reza Shah Pahlavi; Authoritarianism; Modern State; Constitutional Institutions.*

Introduction

The process of state-building in Iran during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941) has commonly been analyzed through concepts such as modernization, centralization of power, and the formation of a modern state.



Nevertheless, one of the essential components of this process that has received comparatively limited independent analytical attention is the role of **state nationalism** in the reproduction of political authority. In this period, nationalism did not function merely as a cultural or identity-based discourse; rather, it became a political instrument through which the relationship between the state, society, and power was redefined. The central problem of the present research is therefore to examine how state nationalism during Reza Shah's rule contributed to strengthening power centralization and weakening constitutional institutions.

The significance of addressing this issue lies in the fact that a considerable portion of existing scholarship has interpreted Pahlavi nationalism either as a cultural nation-building project or as a natural consequence of state modernization. Within such interpretations, nationalism is generally treated as a historical background condition or a secondary outcome, rather than as an active factor in legitimizing political authority. However, state nationalism, through redefining national identity, emphasizing the authority of the central state, and symbolically linking political order to the figure of the monarch, played a decisive role in restricting institutional and political pluralism. From this perspective, the present study seeks to address a theoretical gap concerning the relationship between nationalism studies and analyses of authoritarianism in contemporary Iran.

A concise review of previous research demonstrates that scholars such as Abrahamian, Katouzian, and Bashiriyeh have each addressed aspects of the Reza Shah state, modernization, and power centralization; however, nationalism has generally remained peripheral within these analyses and has rarely been examined as an independent explanatory variable in understanding political authority. Consequently, the relationship between nationalist discourse and the weakening of constitutional institutions has not been systematically theorized. The present article attempts to fill this analytical gap by placing state nationalism at the center of analysis.

Accordingly, the main research question asks: How did state nationalism during the reign of Reza Shah contribute to the reproduction of political authority and the weakening of constitutional institutions? The article advances the hypothesis that state nationalism, by redefining national identity around the central state and the person of the monarch, functioned as a mechanism for legitimizing power concentration and marginalizing or eliminating independent institutions. The aim of the study is therefore to analyze the role of state nationalism in the formation and consolidation of a modern authoritarian order in Iran during the Pahlavi state-building process.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative–historical approach based on documentary and interpretive analysis of historical sources and scholarly works. The theoretical framework relies on the approach of state nationalism and theories of authoritarian states, conceptualizing nationalism not merely as a cultural phenomenon but as an active element in the construction and reproduction of political power. In this way, the article seeks to present a coherent and analytically persuasive trajectory from problem formulation to theoretical interpretation.

Research Background

The study of nationalism during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi has long constituted a central theme in research on modern Iranian political history and political sociology. A substantial body of scholarship interprets Pahlavi nationalism within a cultural and identity-based framework aimed at reconstructing national identity, reviving the ancient past, and countering foreign political and cultural influence. Within this perspective, nationalism is generally understood as a response to identity crises and the weakness of the central state in the post-constitutional era, and its role in promoting social cohesion and strengthening state authority is considered functional and historically

inevitable. Despite the analytical value of these interpretations, excessive emphasis on the cultural dimension of nationalism has often resulted in insufficient attention to its political and institutional consequences.

Ali Ashraf Nazari defines nationalism as follows:

“Nationalism is often regarded as an ideology expressed as a form of behavior that employs national self-consciousness and ethnic or linguistic identity within political activity and expression. In this sense, the nation-state emerges from the intersection of nationalist ideology and statism; on the one hand, it seeks to consolidate and stabilize state power, and on the other hand, it attempts to create a unifying identity space that directs all cultural elements under its authority toward conformity with an official dominant culture. Nationalism therefore represents a mental condition and a collective will reflecting the highest level of individual loyalty to the nation-state. It is an ideological movement aimed at attaining and preserving independence, unity, and identity for a people who believe themselves to constitute an actual or potential nation” (1).

In contrast, another group of studies adopts a state-centered approach, interpreting Pahlavi nationalism as part of an authoritarian state-building project. Within these analyses, nationalism is viewed not merely as a cultural discourse but as a political instrument for centralizing power, controlling social forces, and redefining the relationship between state and society. This perspective demonstrates that the Pahlavi state employed nationalism to legitimize the elimination or weakening of constitutional institutions, including parliament, political parties, and the press. Nevertheless, many of these studies, despite acknowledging the political function of nationalism, lack a coherent theoretical framework capable of systematically explaining the relationship between nationalism, modernization patterns, and authoritarianism.

A third strand of scholarship adopts a critical perspective, analyzing Pahlavi nationalism in relation to power relations and mechanisms of domination. These studies emphasize that the discourse of national unity effectively became a tool for excluding social and political pluralism, enabling the state to portray political opponents and independent institutions as “anti-national” or threats to public order. Despite the analytical significance of this approach, its focus has largely remained on the repressive consequences of nationalism rather than on its internal logic within the broader modernization and state-building project.

A critical evaluation of these three approaches indicates that although existing literature has clarified important dimensions of Pahlavi nationalism, a theoretical gap persists in explaining the relationship between state nationalism, authoritarian modernization, and the weakening of constitutional institutions. The present study therefore seeks to address this gap by analyzing Pahlavi nationalism not merely as a cultural ideology or a repressive instrument, but as a structural mechanism in the transition from constitutionalism toward authoritarian governance. Accordingly, the article attempts to reinterpret the relationship between nationalism, the state, and political institutions within a theoretical framework that has received limited attention in previous scholarship.

As noted earlier, studies concerning the Reza Shah state and Iran’s political transformations during the early twentieth century have been examined from diverse analytical perspectives. A significant portion of this scholarship focuses on state-building, power centralization, and institutional modernization; however, nationalism has often been treated as a cultural background condition rather than as an explanatory variable in analyses of political authority.

In Abrahamian’s analysis of the Reza Shah state, emphasis is placed on the state’s role in controlling social forces, weakening constitutional institutions, and monopolizing instruments of power. Within this framework,

nationalism appears primarily as part of the ideological apparatus of the modern state and a source of political legitimacy, yet its relationship with the reproduction of political authority is not independently theorized.

Katouzian's approach interprets the Pahlavi state within the framework of the "arbitrary state" and the absence of a strong civil society. By highlighting historical discontinuity and the weakness of intermediary institutions, this perspective emphasizes structural foundations of authoritarianism. Nevertheless, nationalism remains largely an ideological component of autocratic governance rather than an independently examined mechanism redefining national identity and reinforcing the authority of the monarch.

Fereydoun Adamiyat, focusing on constitutional discourse and its deviation during the Pahlavi period, underscores the gap between constitutional ideals and the reality of authoritarian rule. In his works, Pahlavi nationalism is primarily discussed in relation to the weakening of constitutional rationality and the marginalization of independent intellectual forces. However, Adamiyat's analysis is more concerned with intellectual and political developments than with the institutional and authority-producing mechanisms of state nationalism.

Among domestic theorists, Bashiriyeh's concept of imposed modernization and top-down modernization highlights the state's role in controlling society and exercising political domination. In this framework, nationalism is considered part of the modern state project, yet analytical attention remains focused on organizational and institutional structures rather than on the discursive function of nationalism in legitimizing political authority.

In international theoretical literature, studies on state nationalism demonstrate that authoritarian regimes frequently employ nationalism as a mechanism for social integration, suppression of political pluralism, and reinforcement of loyalty toward centralized power structures (2, 3). However, the direct and systematic application of these theoretical approaches to the Iranian experience under Reza Shah has remained limited.

Overall, the research background indicates that although various dimensions of the Reza Shah state, modernization, and authoritarianism have been widely examined, the role of state nationalism as an independent variable in the reproduction of political authority and the weakening of constitutional institutions has received insufficient theoretical and analytical attention. By concentrating on this gap, the present study seeks to develop a coherent theoretical formulation of the relationship between state nationalism and authoritarianism.

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing the role of nationalism in the reproduction of political authority requires a theoretical framework that understands nationalism not merely as a cultural or identity-based phenomenon but as an active component in the construction of political power. In the present study, the theoretical framework is grounded in the intersection between **state nationalism** and theories of the **authoritarian state**. This theoretical synthesis enables an examination of the relationship between identity discourse, political legitimacy, and mechanisms of power concentration.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to provide brief definitions of nationalism and the authoritarian state. Nationalism may be defined as a form of collective awareness involving cooperation with a political unit, consciousness of shared ancestral achievements, and recognition of their transmission to subsequent generations. Within this understanding, a shared historical past constitutes one of the fundamental elements of nationalism, while awareness and cooperation function as key concepts indicating that individuals recognize themselves as members of a specific community and consciously identify with that collective identity (1).

Nationalism also appears in diverse forms shaped by particular historical conditions and by its justificatory relationship with political power. Broadly speaking, nationalism can be divided into liberal and anti-liberal variants. Liberal nationalism emphasizes human rights, individual freedoms, and national sovereignty within the framework of the nation-state, whereas anti-liberal nationalism operates primarily as an instrument of the state, prioritizing collective obedience over individual rights, rejecting political democracy, and glorifying national dominance and external expansion (2).

Theories of the authoritarian state referenced in this article correspond to conceptualizations such as Linz and Chehabi's analyses of sultanistic regimes, as well as interpretations derived from Bashiriyeh and Sariolghalam concerning authoritarian political systems. Authoritarian regimes encompass a wide spectrum of political arrangements, ranging from institutionalized authoritarian systems to single-party and military regimes, all characterized by centralized authority and restricted political participation.

According to authoritarian political theory, rulers impose political decisions from above, limiting public participation and minimizing institutional constraints on executive power. Political legitimacy in such systems often derives from non-democratic sources, including ideological narratives, historical necessity, or charismatic leadership. Citizens are expected to demonstrate loyalty and obedience rather than exercise evaluative judgment regarding political legitimacy (3).

Mahmoud Sariolghalam's interpretation of Iranian authoritarianism highlights several recurring characteristics: the centrality of coercion, intense competition among political elites, weak attachment to national institutions, and loyalty directed more toward individuals or factions than toward institutionalized national interests. Authoritarian structures also tend to promote intellectual and ideological uniformity, encouraging societal homogenization under centralized authority (4).

Within theories of **state nationalism**, nationalism is understood as the product of deliberate state action aimed at defining, standardizing, and managing national identity. Unlike civic or social nationalism emerging from societal mobilization, state nationalism operates through a top-down process and typically serves the strategic objectives of the central government. By emphasizing selective elements of history, culture, and language, the state constructs a dominant narrative of the nation in which loyalty to national identity becomes inseparable from loyalty to political authority. Particularly in modernizing states, such nationalism may function as a mechanism for suppressing social and political pluralism (5).

From the perspective of authoritarian state theory, one of the defining characteristics of such regimes is the concentration of power within executive institutions accompanied by the weakening or marginalization of supervisory and participatory bodies. Political legitimacy is generated not through free competition or representative institutions but through mobilizing and integrative ideologies that promise order and unity. In this context, state nationalism plays a central role in producing and reproducing legitimacy by transforming the authority of the central state into a historical and identity-based necessity (1, 2).

Regarding state nationalism under the Pahlavi state, historical narratives and linguistic reforms constituted two major foundations of modern state nationalism. Official historical programs emphasized the Achaemenid past and encouraged archaeological exploration supported by European and American scholars. The establishment of national museums, the construction of public architecture inspired by ancient imperial symbolism, and the formation of national heritage associations represented institutional efforts to construct a unified national narrative. Parallel nationalist currents also emerged in Iranian music, where composers and performers produced patriotic works

celebrating national grandeur, modernization projects, and symbolic representations of Iranian unity. These cultural productions disseminated nationalist discourse among emerging urban middle classes and reinforced identification between national pride and state authority (6).

By integrating these two theoretical approaches, it can be argued that state nationalism during Reza Shah's rule extended beyond a simple nation-building project and functioned as a mechanism for consolidating political authority. The redefinition of national identity around the central state, the elevation of the monarch as the embodiment of national unity, and the portrayal of political pluralism as a threat to cohesion collectively transformed nationalism into an instrument of authority construction. Within this process, constitutional institutions and independent political forces were no longer viewed as legitimate components of the national order but rather as obstacles to unity and state power.

Accordingly, the theoretical framework of the present research conceptualizes state nationalism as the independent variable, operating through mechanisms such as identity reconstruction, legitimation of centralized authority, and reduction of institutional pluralism, thereby influencing the dependent variable—namely, the reproduction of political authority and the weakening of constitutional institutions. Intervening variables include the weakness of intermediary institutions, concentration of coercive instruments, and the historical conditions following the Constitutional Revolution.

This framework enables analysis of Pahlavi nationalism not as a purely cultural phenomenon but as an integral component of power mechanisms within the authoritarian modern state. The study therefore seeks to demonstrate how nationalist discourse, within the context of state-led modernization, could function as an instrument for limiting constitutional institutions and stabilizing political authority.

Research Method

The present research is qualitative in nature and analytical–explanatory in purpose, situated within the field of historical–political studies. Given that the research problem concerns the analysis of state nationalism's role in reproducing political authority during Reza Shah's rule, a qualitative interpretive approach provides the most suitable framework for understanding discursive and institutional mechanisms of power in this historical context.

Data collection was conducted through documentary research. The study draws upon historical texts, official documents, scholarly works, and library-based sources related to the Pahlavi state, nationalism, and authoritarianism. Classical and analytical studies on contemporary Iranian political history, together with theoretical literature on state nationalism and authoritarian governance, constitute the primary sources of analysis.

The method of data analysis is interpretive–theoretical. Historical data are interpreted within the conceptual framework of state nationalism and authoritarian state theory, allowing reconstruction of the analytical relationship between identity discourse, political legitimacy, and power concentration. The unit of analysis in this study is the structure of political power and the nationalist discourse of the state during the reign of Reza Shah.

Research validity is ensured through reliance on authoritative sources, diversity of documentary data, and coherence between the research question, theoretical framework, and historical analysis. The methodological design therefore enables qualitative testing of the research hypothesis and provides a systematic explanation of the relationship between state nationalism and political authority.

Incompatibility of State Nationalism with Constitutional Institutions

One of the fundamental consequences of state nationalism during the reign of Reza Shah was the deepening of the rupture between the project of authoritarian modernization and the institutions that emerged from the Constitutional Revolution. The nationalism promoted by the Pahlavi state was grounded in notions such as national unity, central authority, and the necessity of social discipline. Structurally, these notions conflicted with the logic of constitutional institutions, which were premised on pluralism, representation, and the limitation of political power. Within this framework, constitutional institutions were represented not as instruments of political ordering, but as obstacles to the realization of the “national interest” (2).

“The Iranian intelligentsia, inspired by various ideological programs for reconstructing modern Iran, had, since the mid-twentieth century, been divided into several rival groups. The main debate stemmed from two fundamental goals of the Constitutional Revolution: the establishment of a nation-state and the development of a civil society that could transform people from subjects into citizens by granting them participation rights in national affairs. The Pahlavi state prioritized the first goal at the expense of the second. The Pahlavi monarchs believed that modernization would pave the way for the emergence of civil society, and a large group of Iranian intellectuals accepted this view. Two prominent early examples were, first, members of the Radical Party founded by Ali-Akbar Davar, the architect of the Pahlavi state formation and national modernization; and second, a group of Western-educated Iranians who formed the Iran-e Javan Club under the leadership of Ali-Akbar Siyasi. A group of Western-trained technocrats, who dedicated themselves to the ideal of Iran’s progress and development, also became involved in the rapid economic growth and modernization drive in the 1960s, with the Plan Organization, the Central Bank, and the Ministry of Economy serving as the core of their activities. Nevertheless, the principal propaganda organs supporting ‘Achaemenid nationalism’ were the state-backed political parties—Melliyun, Iran-e Novin, Mardom, and Rastakhiz—each established between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s to strengthen the Shah’s concept of ‘positive nationalism’” (1).

By mobilizing nationalist discourse, the Reza Shah state progressively hollowed out the core functions of institutions such as the National Consultative Assembly (Majles). The Majles—conceived by constitutionalists as a supervisory institution designed to represent the public will and constrain executive power—was gradually transformed into a body subordinate to state direction. Within this process, any parliamentary opposition to state policies was interpreted not as a normal component of political life, but as an indication of national weakness or a disruption of the modernization path. In this way, state nationalism became a mechanism for delegitimizing political dissent within formal institutions (3).

Political parties likewise found no meaningful place within the Reza Shah political order. The official nationalist discourse treated party pluralism as a threat to national unity and framed organized political activity as a source of division and instability. As a result, instead of institutionalized political competition, a form of depoliticization took hold in which the state presented itself as the sole legitimate representative of the nation. This indicates that state nationalism not only failed to enhance political participation but actively contributed to dismantling its institutional mechanisms (7).

The press and the public sphere were not immune from these consequences. State nationalism permitted freedom of expression only insofar as it did not conflict with the official narrative of national identity and the objectives of the state. Any critique of government policy or alternative interpretation of national history and identity

was treated as a threat to national cohesion. Consequently, the press—one of the principal achievements of the Constitutional Revolution—was gradually subjected to strict state oversight and lost much of its critical capacity (4).

This process suggests that the weakening of constitutional institutions under Reza Shah was not merely the result of personal authoritarian preferences or international conditions, but a logical outcome of the linkage between state nationalism and authoritarian modernization. By invoking national unity, the state restricted the articulation of alternative political and institutional arrangements and portrayed power centralization as a historical and national necessity. In this way, state nationalism played an active role in the transition from a constitutionalist order to an authoritarian one (1, 2).

State Nationalism and the Redefinition of National Identity

One of the most significant functions of state nationalism during the Reza Shah era was the redefinition of national identity within the framework of the central state. In this period, the nation was conceptualized not as a plural assemblage of social forces, but as an integrated and homogeneous unit whose realization was deemed to require the authority of the central state. This redefinition elevated nationalism beyond a collective sentiment and transformed it into a political discourse that rendered the state's preferred order natural and necessary (2).

Within this framework, particular elements of Iran's past—especially the pre-modern and pre-Islamic era—were selectively emphasized and presented as foundational components of national identity. This historical narrative constructed a direct linkage between the modern Pahlavi state and Iran's ancient grandeur, thereby representing state authority as a historical necessity. As a result, political or institutional opposition was framed not simply as disagreement, but as a threat to national unity and the country's historical identity (5).

“Herzfeld's idea of Achaemenid Iran as a geopolitical concept and an ‘Empire of the Aryans,’ as well as his argument that the ‘Iranian nation’—in its political and geographical meaning—emerged during the Achaemenid period, was adopted as the official ideological framework of the Pahlavi state. These ideas provided the foundation for what Alessandro Bausani called Aryan and neo-Achaemenid nationalism. These ideas generated five historical initiatives: changing the country's name in European languages from Persia to Iran in 1935; specifying the ancient Aryan roots of the nation; the adoption by Mohammad Reza Shah of the title Aryamehr (‘Sun of the Aryans’) in 1965; the celebration of the 2,500-year anniversary of the Iranian Empire; and finally, changing the national calendar from the Islamic Hijri to an invented imperial calendar—dated from the formation of the Iranian empire under Cyrus the Great. This emphasis on 25 centuries of Iranian empire as the central pillar of Iranian identity drew upon a notion of loyalty to the Iranian monarchy, whose guardian was the Shah. In the same way, Iranian identity derived from the divine sovereignty of the monarch, the honor conferred upon him as *farr-e izadi*, and love of the homeland were all treated as love of the Iranian kingship. The well-known slogan ‘God, Shah, Homeland,’ presented by the Pahlavi dynasty as a manifestation of Iranian loyalty to the Shah, left little room for the concept of ‘popular sovereignty.’ Moreover, this conception of sovereignty was incompatible with the core principle of the Constitutional Revolution, which held that ‘monarchy is a trust entrusted by divine grace from the nation to the person of the king’ (Article 35)” (2).

Theoretically, this form of state nationalism constrained political pluralism by excluding or marginalizing competing narratives of national identity. National identity, rather than serving as a basis for political participation, was converted into an instrument of political subordination. In this way, state nationalism played a decisive role in

weakening constitutional institutions, because such institutions—as expressions of pluralism and political competition—were deemed incompatible with the official narrative of national unity (3).

State Nationalism and the Legitimation of Power Centralization

In addition to redefining national identity, state nationalism under Reza Shah played a major role in legitimizing the concentration of power. By drawing on nationalist discourse, the central state framed political centralization not as a contingent political choice but as a necessity for preserving national unity and ensuring national progress. Within this narrative, state authority was presented as the precondition for modernization, security, and cohesion (1).

Within this framework, the monarch was gradually constructed as the symbol of national unity and the embodiment of the nation's will. This personalization of authority, by linking national identity to political leadership, made loyalty to the nation effectively synonymous with loyalty to the Shah. From the standpoint of authoritarian state theory, such a linkage constitutes a core mechanism of reproducing political authority, since legitimacy is derived not from institutions but from the leader and the ideological narrative surrounding him (2, 8).

As a result, constitutional institutions—including the Majles and political parties—progressively lost their supervisory and representative functions. They were represented not as legitimate components of the national order but as barriers to the authority of the central state. By reducing politics to the imperative of unity and cohesion, state nationalism created the discursive and institutional space necessary to marginalize or weaken these institutions and to consolidate power centralization as both legitimate and necessary (3, 7).

State Nationalism, Elimination of Political Pluralism, and the Weakening of Constitutional Institutions

Another significant consequence of state nationalism during the reign of Reza Shah was the elimination or restriction of political and institutional pluralism. Within the official discourse of the state, political plurality was frequently represented as a source of instability, backwardness, and a threat to national unity. Such representations created the theoretical and discursive foundations necessary for limiting the activities of political parties, the press, and independent political actors (3).

From an analytical perspective, state nationalism reduced politics to the question of national cohesion, thereby diminishing the possibility of articulating diverse social and political demands. Under these conditions, constitutional institutions—originally founded upon principles of competition, oversight, and representation—gradually lost their substantive functions and were transformed into largely symbolic entities. This transformation was not merely the result of direct repression; rather, it emerged from the dominance of a nationalist discourse that elevated state authority above institutional norms and procedural constraints (2).

Ultimately, state nationalism operated as a component of the broader mechanism of power, stabilizing a political order in which the modern state functioned through institutional and bureaucratic forms while maintaining an authoritarian substance. Although this order appeared aligned with modern concepts such as nationhood, progress, and the national state, in practice it weakened constitutional institutions and restricted political participation (1).

Theoretical Discussion: State Nationalism and the Logic of Authoritarianism in Reza Shah's Modernization Process

The findings of this research demonstrate that state nationalism during the Reza Shah era cannot be explained merely as a cultural ideology or as a reaction to external threats; rather, it must be understood as part of the internal logic of authoritarian state-building. In this framework, nationalism was not simply a by-product of modernization but one of its principal instruments. This conclusion diverges from interpretations that portray Pahlavi nationalism solely as a cultural or identity-based project.

According to the article's theoretical framework, state nationalism functioned in conjunction with an organizational model of modernization characterized by centralized control. The Pahlavi state pursued modernization not through the expansion of participatory institutions but through power concentration, accelerated bureaucratization, and the containment of social forces. Within this model, nationalism served as an ideological intermediary, representing political centralization as a national and historical necessity and elevating it from a political choice to an existential requirement for the state (5).

From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern diverges from classical interpretations that regard nationalism as a foundation for democracy or civic solidarity. In the Iranian experience under Reza Shah, state nationalism contributed not to the strengthening of civil society but to its erosion. The nation, rather than acting as an active political agent, became a disciplined subject expected to operate within the identity framework defined by the state. This outcome illustrates that the political function of nationalism is profoundly dependent upon existing power structures and the specific model of modernization adopted (8).

The findings further indicate that the weakening of constitutional institutions was not an unintended consequence but the logical result of the interaction between state nationalism and authoritarian modernization. Institutions such as parliament, political parties, and the press were perceived as incompatible with the official narrative of national unity precisely because of their pluralistic nature. Consequently, state nationalism evolved into a mechanism of institutional delegitimization, whereby the dismantling of constitutional institutions was justified not as political repression but as the defense of national interests (2, 3).

At a broader theoretical level, the results suggest that Iran's experience during the Reza Shah period represents a case of convergence between nationalism and authoritarianism within transitional societies. This convergence challenges theoretical perspectives that inherently associate nationalism with emancipation or democratization. Instead, the present study demonstrates that nationalism—depending on institutional context and modernization strategy—can assume disciplinary and authority-producing functions (1).

State Nationalism and Authoritarian Modernization: A Brief Comparison between Reza Shah's Iran and Atatürk's Turkey

The analytical significance of examining state nationalism in Pahlavi Iran becomes clearer when considered comparatively alongside similar experiences in transitional societies. One of the most relevant comparative cases is Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, where modernization similarly emerged amid the collapse of an old political order, a crisis of national identity, and the imperative of modern state formation. Comparing these two experiences allows identification of both shared patterns and institutional differences in the operation of state nationalism within authoritarian modernization processes.

In both Iran and Turkey, state nationalism emerged as a response to crises of political authority and the weakness of pre-modern state structures. The regimes of Reza Shah and Atatürk defined modernization as a top-down project requiring centralized authority, social discipline, and the reconstruction of national identity. In this context, nationalism was not the outcome of collective societal mobilization but a state-directed project aimed at cultural and political homogenization in accordance with the objectives of the central government (5).

Nevertheless, institutional differences between the two countries produced divergent outcomes. In Turkey, Kemalist nationalism was accompanied by structural reforms in legal, educational, and administrative systems that helped establish a relatively coherent institutional order. Although authoritarian in character, this order achieved greater ideological and institutional consolidation. By contrast, in Pahlavi Iran, state nationalism became more closely tied to the authority of the state leadership itself rather than embedded within durable institutions. As a result, nationalism contributed more to short-term power centralization than to long-term institutional stabilization (4).

A common feature of both experiences was the incompatibility of state nationalism with political pluralism and participatory institutions. In both Iran and Turkey, independent parties, a free press, and representative institutions were marginalized or subjected to strict state control. By presenting national unity as an absolute value, state nationalism in both cases provided ideological justification for restricting political freedoms. The difference, however, lies in outcomes: in Iran, this process weakened the fragile constitutional experience, whereas in Turkey the new republican order was constructed from the outset upon centralized state authority (2, 3).

This comparison demonstrates that state nationalism, regardless of historical and cultural differences, tends to perform a similar function in transitional societies: transforming the state into the dominant agent of modernization while reducing society to an object of management and guidance. At the same time, institutional conditions determine whether such nationalism contributes to durable political stabilization. The Pahlavi Iranian experience thus represents a case in which state nationalism reinforced personal authority and weakened constitutional institutions rather than producing sustainable institutional consolidation.

Incorporating this comparative perspective reveals that Pahlavi nationalism was not an exceptional phenomenon but part of a broader pattern in the history of modern state formation. Such an interpretation allows the findings of the present article to extend beyond Iranian national history and contribute to broader theoretical debates on nationalism and authoritarianism in transitional societies.

Conclusion

This article sought to explain the role of state nationalism in the reproduction and consolidation of political authority during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi by examining the relationship between the modernization project, national identity discourse, and the concentration of political power. The central research question addressed how state nationalism operated within the framework of Pahlavi modernization and what role it played in weakening constitutional institutions and establishing an authoritarian political order. Based on the research hypothesis, state nationalism was not merely a consequence of modernization but constituted one of the state's principal instruments for legitimizing power centralization and controlling social forces.

The findings demonstrate that Pahlavi nationalism emerged as a top-down, state-centered project that, rather than strengthening political participation and civil institutions, served the reconstruction of political authority. Within this model, the state redefined the concepts of nationhood, history, and collective identity, producing an official narrative of national unity that portrayed political and institutional pluralism as a threat to national cohesion. This

representation created the ideological and discursive conditions necessary for weakening constitutional institutions, restricting political freedoms, and intensifying the concentration of authority in the hands of the central government.

The analysis further showed that the linkage between state nationalism and an organizational model of modernization directed Iran's modernization process away from the gradual development of democratic institutions and toward rapid bureaucratization and authoritarian governance. In this framework, nationalism assumed a disciplinary function and became a mechanism through which the state positioned itself as the dominant actor over society. Consequently, the nation was conceived not as an active political subject but as an entity to be guided, organized, and controlled within the boundaries defined by the state.

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study challenge essentialist interpretations that portray nationalism as inherently democratic or emancipatory. By emphasizing institutional context and modernization strategy, the article demonstrates that nationalism may, under specific historical conditions, function as a mechanism for consolidating political authority and weakening civil society. This conclusion contributes not only to a more nuanced understanding of modern Iranian political history but also to broader comparative debates on nationalism and state formation in transitional societies.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that state nationalism during the Reza Shah era was not a marginal variable but a central element in the transition from constitutionalism toward authoritarian rule. Recognizing this role enables a critical reassessment of the Iranian modernization experience and provides deeper insight into the complex relationship among the state, the nation, and political power.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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