



How to cite this article:

Javadi, A., Badini, H., & Nourshargh, J. (2027). A Legal Analysis of Land Reform in Iran: Historical and Socio-Legal Perspectives. *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 5(3), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrp.374>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 10 March 2026

Revision Date: 23 June 2026

Acceptance Date: 30 June 2026

First Publication Date: 13 July 2026

Final Publication Date: 01 May 2027

A Legal Analysis of Land Reform in Iran: Historical and Socio-Legal Perspectives

1. Ahmad. Javadi¹ : Department of Law, Ki.C., Islamic Azad University, Kish, Iran
2. Hassan. Badini²: Department of Private Law, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran
3. Jamshid. Nourshargh³: Department of Private Law, ST.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*corresponding author's email: hbadini@ut.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

Land reform in Iran represents one of the most significant legal and socio-social transformations in the country's modern history, because it reshaped the relationship between property, power, rural hierarchy, agricultural production, and state authority. This article analyzes Iranian land reform from a historical and socio-legal perspective, with particular attention to the legal necessity of reform, the delayed timing of its implementation, and its long-term consequences for rural society and agricultural development. The study argues that land reform was not merely a legislative program for redistributing agricultural land, but a structural response to the historical persistence of the landlord-peasant system, the concentration of rural power, and the incompatibility of traditional agrarian relations with modern legal, economic, and social requirements. The article first examines the historical foundations of land ownership in Iran and shows how various forms of landholding, customary cultivation rights, state authority, and landlord domination created an enduring pattern of rural inequality. It then evaluates the legal framework of land reform, emphasizing the tension between private property rights and public interest, and explaining how the law sought to limit ownership in favor of social justice and rural modernization. The analysis further explores the social and economic consequences of reform, including the decline of landlord power, the emergence of peasant ownership, changes in rural class relations, land fragmentation, migration, water-management problems, and the incomplete modernization of agriculture. The article concludes that although land reform was historically necessary and legally justified, its late implementation and limited institutional design prevented it from fully achieving sustainable agricultural development. Contemporary Iran therefore requires a new generation of agrarian reforms focused not on simple redistribution, but on land consolidation, legal certainty, sustainable water governance, cooperative production, technological modernization, and the protection of rural welfare.

Keywords: Land reform; Iran; property law; agrarian justice; landlord-peasant relations; rural development; agricultural modernization; socio-legal analysis.

Introduction

Land reform in Iran represents one of the most consequential legal and social transformations in the country's modern history, not merely because it altered the formal distribution of agricultural land, but because it challenged a deeply rooted structure of power, dependency, production, and rural hierarchy that had shaped Iranian society for centuries. The legal analysis of land reform cannot therefore be reduced to the examination of statutes, decrees,



regulations, and administrative measures alone. It must also be understood as a socio-legal phenomenon, because the law intervened in a historical structure in which ownership of land was simultaneously an economic asset, a political instrument, a source of social prestige, and a mechanism of domination. From this perspective, land reform in Iran was not simply a matter of transferring parcels of land from landlords to peasants; it was an attempt to reconstruct the relationship between property, authority, production, and social justice. Iranian agrarian history shows that land was rarely a neutral object of private ownership, since the holder of land frequently exercised authority over labor, access to water, village organization, local dispute resolution, and relations with state power (1). Therefore, the legal reform of agrarian ownership was bound to produce consequences far beyond the technical domain of property law.

The importance of land reform becomes clearer when the history of rural Iran is read through the interaction between legal institutions and social stratification. In traditional agrarian society, the legal form of ownership did not always correspond to modern notions of absolute private property, because landholding was shaped by custom, state grants, taxation rights, religious endowments, hereditary control, and political privilege. The vocabulary of ownership, possession, tenancy, usufruct, peasant right, and landlord control was historically complex, and such complexity is visible in the legal terminology of Iranian property relations (2). At the same time, this complexity created ambiguity in the position of cultivators, because peasants often possessed practical and customary rights in land without enjoying full legal ownership. This gap between social reality and formal law became one of the central problems that later land reform attempted to address. The legal history of agricultural land in Iran thus reveals a persistent tension between the protection of ownership and the need to regulate ownership in accordance with public interest, social welfare, and productive justice (3). The present article is based on the premise that a meaningful legal analysis of land reform must examine this tension as a historical process rather than as a single legislative event.

The problem of land ownership in Iran was intensified by the endurance of landlord-peasant relations. The landlord-peasant system was not merely an economic arrangement based on the division of agricultural produce; it functioned as a social order in which the peasant's access to livelihood was mediated by the landlord's legal and extra-legal authority. Lambton's historical analysis of landlord and peasant relations in Persia shows that agrarian ownership was embedded in long-standing forms of domination, patronage, taxation, and rural dependency (1). Such relations created a social world in which the peasant was often tied to land without being its true owner, while the landlord could benefit from agricultural production without necessarily participating directly in cultivation. This arrangement weakened incentives for agricultural innovation, reproduced rural poverty, and preserved a hierarchy in which political and social power were concentrated in the hands of landholding elites. The sociology of rural development in Iran confirms that underdevelopment in the countryside cannot be explained only by lack of technology or capital, because the structure of rural class relations itself limited development and reproduced dependency (4).

From a legal-theoretical standpoint, land reform raises the broader question of whether property rights are absolute or whether they may be limited by social necessity. Modern legal thought has increasingly rejected the idea that ownership is an unlimited and purely individual entitlement. The institution of property is protected by law, but it is also created, defined, and limited by law. Khordmandi's analysis of limitations on ownership emphasizes that property rights may be restricted where public interest, social order, or the rights of others require intervention (5). Similarly, Khalilpour Gorgani and Vanoush Bandpey argue that ownership must be interpreted in relation to

public rights, especially where individual control over property affects collective welfare (6). Land reform in Iran must therefore be understood as an exercise in redefining the social limits of ownership. It did not simply confiscate property in a political vacuum; rather, it emerged from the claim that a historically accumulated pattern of large-scale landholding had become incompatible with social justice, national development, and agricultural productivity.

The historical necessity of land reform also reflects the broader relationship between law and social change. Law does not operate outside society; it both reflects and shapes the conditions of social life. Sociology of law explains that legal norms become meaningful only when they are examined in relation to the social structures that produce them and the social effects that follow from them (7). In Iran, agrarian reform became legally necessary because the old rural order had ceased to correspond to the needs of a changing society. Modernization, population growth, expanding state administration, exposure to global economic transformation, and the increasing political consciousness of rural and urban populations placed pressure on traditional land relations. Mohseni's sociological framework helps clarify that social institutions survive only as long as they are capable of responding to the needs and values of the society in which they operate (8). By the twentieth century, the landlord-peasant order had become socially unstable and economically inefficient, while the state increasingly needed to transform rural society in order to consolidate national development.

The legal problem of land reform was also connected to the philosophical debate concerning justice, natural rights, and the legitimacy of political authority. The right to property has historically been defended as a central component of individual freedom, but the legitimacy of property becomes questionable when its exercise destroys the conditions of freedom and dignity for large segments of society. Strauss's discussion of natural right and history shows that legal institutions cannot be assessed only by their formal validity; they must also be evaluated in light of justice and the moral foundations of political life (9). In the Iranian agrarian context, the legal protection of large estates had to be weighed against the condition of peasants who lacked meaningful autonomy, security, and economic opportunity. In this sense, land reform was not merely a policy choice but a normative response to a historical contradiction between formal ownership and substantive justice. The law was required to determine whether the preservation of inherited property arrangements should prevail over the collective need to restructure rural society.

The timing of land reform is one of the most important issues in its legal and historical evaluation. The reform was implemented after decades of social and economic pressure, and many scholars have argued that it occurred later than the historical conditions required. Iranian social history suggests that the agrarian question had been visible long before the formal reform program of the 1960s, since rural poverty, landlord dominance, and inequitable access to productive resources had long shaped the country's social structure (10). The Constitutional Revolution introduced new ideas of law, citizenship, limitation of arbitrary power, and public accountability, but it did not fundamentally dismantle the agrarian foundations of rural inequality. Katouzian's broader interpretation of Iranian political economy shows that the unresolved relationship between arbitrary power, property, and social structure remained a defining problem in modern Iran (11). Therefore, one of the central arguments of this article is that land reform was historically necessary, but its delayed implementation reduced its transformative capacity and produced mixed consequences.

The economic dimension of the issue is equally significant. Iranian agriculture before land reform suffered from low productivity, unequal distribution of resources, limited investment, and weak incentives for peasants. Razaghi's analysis of the Iranian economy demonstrates that structural underdevelopment must be examined in relation to

ownership patterns, production relations, state policy, and unequal access to resources (12). Land reform was expected to increase agricultural production by giving cultivators stronger incentives, weakening absentee landlordism, and promoting rural modernization. Yet economic results were contradictory. Some studies emphasize that the reform undermined the landlord-peasant system and expanded peasant ownership, while others point to land fragmentation, inadequate credit, weak technical support, and the uneven distribution of benefits. Emami Khoei and Taghi Ziaei argue that land reform generated major economic changes in Iranian agricultural society, including the decline of traditional relations and the expansion of monetary and capitalist relations in rural areas (13). These consequences show that legal redistribution alone could not guarantee agricultural modernization unless accompanied by coherent institutional, financial, and technical reforms.

The social consequences of land reform were also complex. Sabbaghian and Khan Ramaki's study of the social and normative effects of land reform in Iran emphasizes that the reform changed rural norms, social relations, migration patterns, and the organization of rural life (14). The weakening of landlord power opened new possibilities for rural autonomy, but it also disrupted older networks of dependency without always replacing them with effective institutions of local development. Mahmoudian and Jahanbin's analysis of peasant rights in the Iranian legal system reveals that the fate of cultivators' rights remained legally and socially contested even after the major land reform measures (15). This indicates that the redistribution of ownership did not fully resolve the deeper question of how to recognize and protect the historically accumulated rights of those who worked the land. Thus, the legal analysis of land reform must examine both statutory ownership and the broader question of agrarian justice.

This article aims to analyze land reform in Iran from a historical, legal, and social perspective by examining why reform became necessary, how the legal framework attempted to transform agrarian relations, what social and economic consequences followed, and why contemporary Iranian agriculture may still require a new generation of land-related reforms. The purpose is not to treat land reform as a closed historical episode, but to understand it as a continuing legal problem connected to ownership, productivity, rural justice, environmental sustainability, and social development. The central argument is that land reform in Iran was both necessary and delayed; it dismantled important aspects of the landlord-peasant order, but it did not fully create the institutional foundations required for equitable and productive agricultural modernization.

Historical and Socio-Legal Foundations of Land Reform in Iran

The historical foundations of land reform in Iran must be traced through the long evolution of landholding, agricultural production, state authority, and rural hierarchy. The emergence of agriculture transformed human society by making settled life, surplus production, and stable territorial control possible. Eskandari's discussion of early human development emphasizes that the transition from foraging to agriculture was not merely a technical change; it altered social organization, property relations, and the possibility of surplus accumulation (16). Once agricultural land became a source of surplus, it also became a source of power. The control of land allowed rulers, military elites, religious institutions, and local authorities to command labor, collect revenue, and establish social dominance. In Iran, the geography of agriculture, especially the importance of water, irrigation, and scattered fertile zones, reinforced the connection between landholding and political authority. As a result, agrarian relations developed under conditions in which the state and landholding elites were closely intertwined. Daryaei's historical account of Iran highlights the continuity of political authority, territorial control, and agrarian organization across

different periods of Iranian history (17). This long continuity explains why land reform in the modern period had to confront not only private ownership, but also a historically entrenched relationship between property and power.

Ancient Iranian land relations were shaped by royal authority, aristocratic control, village communities, taxation, and forms of dependent labor. Diakonoff's history of ancient Iran shows that landholding patterns were connected to political hierarchy and class structure, particularly through the privileged position of ruling families, aristocrats, and administrative elites (18). Although the exact legal forms of landholding changed across periods, the broader pattern remained recognizable: agricultural producers were frequently subject to obligations imposed by those who controlled land or political authority. This did not always take the same form as European feudalism, but it created analogous relations of dependency and surplus extraction. Anderson's analysis of feudal formations in broader historical perspective helps clarify that feudalism should not be understood only as a Western European legal structure, because agrarian domination and surplus extraction could emerge in different institutional forms across pre-modern societies (19). In Iran, the combination of centralized monarchy, local magnates, tax farming, customary rights, and village organization produced a distinctive agrarian order in which peasants bore the burden of production while political and landed elites appropriated a significant share of agricultural surplus.

The concept of feudalism must therefore be applied to Iran with analytical caution. Iranian landholding did not always reproduce the precise institutional features of European feudal tenure, yet the social effects of large landholding, peasant dependence, and political domination were comparable in important ways. Lambton's classic study of landlord and peasant relations in Persia shows that the Iranian village was historically shaped by a combination of landlord ownership, peasant labor, customary obligations, and state taxation (1). The landlord was not merely a passive owner of land; he often mediated the peasant's relationship with the state, controlled access to productive resources, and influenced local administration. Peasants, for their part, were not always legally landless in an absolute sense, because some possessed customary claims, cultivation rights, or forms of practical attachment to the land. However, these rights were fragile when compared with the legal and political authority of landlords. Mahmoudian and Jahanbin's study of peasant rights later demonstrates that this ambiguity continued to affect Iranian law, because the legal system struggled to define whether the peasant's historical relationship with land should be treated as a legally protected right or merely as a factual relationship of cultivation (15).

The endurance of unequal land relations was reinforced by the structure of political power. Iranian history shows repeated changes of dynasties, invasions, state collapses, and administrative reorganizations, but these events did not necessarily abolish the fundamental dependency of cultivators. Daryaei's account of Iranian historical continuity indicates that political rupture often coexisted with institutional persistence, especially in the domain of land, taxation, and rural production (17). After conquest or dynastic change, new elites frequently replaced old elites, while the peasantry remained the main productive class. The legal names of landholding could change, but the social fact of rural subordination often remained. Nozari's social history of Iran similarly shows that the Iranian social order was repeatedly marked by unequal access to wealth and authority, with rural populations occupying a vulnerable position in the broader social hierarchy (10). This historical continuity is essential for understanding why land reform became a structural necessity. Reform was not a response to a temporary crisis; it was the delayed legal answer to a deeply rooted historical problem.

During the Islamic and post-Islamic periods, the forms of landholding became even more legally diverse. State lands, private lands, waqf lands, tax-based grants, military assignments, and customary village arrangements coexisted in complex ways. The legal vocabulary of ownership and possession became increasingly layered, and

these layers complicated later attempts at reform. Jafari Langroudi's legal terminology demonstrates that Iranian law contains multiple concepts related to ownership, possession, usufruct, tenure, and legal control over property (2). This conceptual complexity matters because land reform required the state to determine whose rights should be recognized, compensated, transferred, limited, or extinguished. Katouzian's analysis of Iranian legal and contractual order also indicates that legal stability depends on the predictability of rights and obligations, yet Iranian property relations were historically affected by arbitrary power and uneven enforcement (11). The agrarian question thus involved both social inequality and legal uncertainty. Reform required not only redistribution but also the modernization of legal categories.

The pre-modern agrarian order also generated economic stagnation. The landlord-peasant system often weakened incentives for peasants to improve productivity, because cultivators did not fully enjoy the fruits of their labor. Lambton's study makes clear that the division of produce, the obligations imposed on peasants, and the insecurity of rural life reduced the possibility of sustained agricultural improvement (1). Azkia's sociology of rural underdevelopment further explains that rural poverty in Iran cannot be separated from the historical organization of production and ownership (4). In a system where peasants lacked secure rights, access to credit, and control over resources, agricultural innovation was unlikely to develop widely. At the same time, absentee landlordism meant that many landowners extracted surplus without reinvesting adequately in land improvement, irrigation, machinery, or rural welfare. Razaghi's economic analysis of Iran confirms that underdevelopment is reproduced when productive resources are concentrated and institutional arrangements discourage broad participation in economic modernization (12). Thus, the historical foundations of land reform were not only moral and social, but also economic.

The rise of modern political thought and the expansion of state institutions intensified the contradiction between traditional landholding and modern legality. The Constitutional Revolution introduced the language of law, rights, representation, limitation of arbitrary authority, and public accountability. However, it did not fundamentally abolish the agrarian order. This gap between constitutional modernity and rural reality is crucial. A society could not fully become modern in legal form while the majority of its rural population remained subject to quasi-feudal dependency. Poulantzas's philosophy of law helps explain that law is not merely a neutral instrument; it reflects relations of power and participates in organizing social classes (20). In Iran, the formal emergence of constitutional legality did not immediately transform the material relations of rural society, because landed elites continued to exercise influence over political and administrative institutions. The law declared new principles, but the rural social order preserved old forms of domination. This contradiction made later land reform both unavoidable and politically difficult.

The necessity of land reform also reflected the development of modern conceptions of property. In classical private law, ownership is often defined as a comprehensive right to use, enjoy, and dispose of property. However, modern law increasingly recognizes that ownership is subject to limitations arising from public welfare, social justice, and the rights of others. Pilvar's philosophy of property rights emphasizes that ownership is not merely a natural fact but a legal and philosophical institution that must be justified in relation to justice and social order (3). Khordmandi's analysis of ownership limitations similarly argues that property may be restricted when unrestricted control harms collective interests (5). In the agrarian context, large-scale ownership that perpetuated rural poverty and obstructed development could no longer be defended solely by reference to formal title. The state could claim legal authority to intervene because land was not an ordinary commodity; it was the foundation of livelihood, food production, social stability, and national development.

The Iranian case also illustrates the difference between legal ownership and social legitimacy. A landlord might possess formal title, but if the ownership relation was historically associated with exploitation, absenteeism, coercive authority, and productive inefficiency, its legitimacy could be challenged. Strauss's discussion of natural right and history is relevant here because it suggests that positive law must be assessed in light of justice, not merely in terms of legality (9). Land reform emerged from the view that formal legality had to be reconciled with substantive justice. Levy-Bruhl's sociology of law reinforces this point by showing that law is meaningful only when it corresponds to social conditions and collective expectations (7). When rural society no longer accepted landlord domination as legitimate, and when the state itself needed modernization, the old agrarian legal order became unsustainable. The question was not whether the law could intervene in property, but how it should intervene without producing new forms of disorder.

Comparative perspectives also help situate the Iranian experience. Mousanejad and Khorramshad's study of land reform and land policy in socialist revolutionary states shows that agrarian reform has often been central to revolutionary and post-revolutionary state-building projects (21). Although Iran's land reform was not identical to socialist collectivization, it shared the broader historical logic that land policy becomes a decisive issue when political authority seeks to restructure society. The Iranian state did not abolish private property altogether, but it attempted to redistribute land and weaken landlord power. This placed Iran somewhere between liberal property reform and radical revolutionary agrarian transformation. The reform therefore must be analyzed as a hybrid legal project: it preserved the idea of private ownership, but reallocated ownership in the name of social necessity and state-led modernization. This hybrid nature explains both its achievements and its limitations.

The delayed timing of Iranian land reform is one of its defining features. By the time the major reform program was implemented in the early 1960s, the country had already experienced constitutionalism, state centralization, modernization efforts, urban growth, industrial expansion, and rising social tensions. Lambton's study of land reform in Iran indicates that the reform had strong social and political objectives, including the weakening of landlord power and the creation of a class of independent cultivators (22). Yet the fact that such reform became necessary much earlier suggests that Iranian law had long failed to address the agrarian foundation of inequality. Sabbaghian and Khan Ramaki emphasize that the social consequences of land reform must be understood in relation to the normative transformation of rural society (14). If the reform had occurred earlier, it might have generated more gradual institutional development and less disruptive social change. Its delay meant that reform had to operate under pressure, with limited preparation and significant administrative challenges.

The historical and socio-legal foundations of land reform therefore reveal a central paradox. On the one hand, reform was necessary because the old system had become unjust, inefficient, and socially unstable. On the other hand, the very delay in reform meant that the legal system had to transform a deeply entrenched structure in a relatively compressed period. This created contradictions that would later appear in implementation, social consequences, and economic outcomes. Land reform dismantled important aspects of landlord dominance, but it did not fully solve the problems of productivity, land fragmentation, rural institutional development, and sustainable agricultural modernization. The legal history of Iranian land reform is therefore best understood as the history of a necessary intervention whose timing and design limited its capacity to achieve all of its declared objectives.

The Legal Framework and Implementation of Land Reform in Iran

The legal framework of land reform in Iran must be understood as a gradual movement from scattered legal limitations on traditional land relations toward a more direct legislative intervention in the structure of ownership. Before the major reform measures of the 1960s, Iranian law had already experienced important transformations in constitutionalism, civil law, taxation, public administration, and the regulation of property. Yet these developments did not immediately dismantle the landlord-peasant order. The Civil Code and the broader private law tradition recognized ownership as a protected legal institution, while also situating contracts, obligations, possession, and property rights within a formal legal system. Katouzian's analysis of the general rules of contracts shows that modern Iranian private law sought to provide conceptual clarity and legal stability in relations between parties (11). However, agrarian relations could not be fully explained through ordinary contractual equality, because the relationship between landlord and peasant was marked by structural inequality, customary dependency, and unequal bargaining power. Therefore, ordinary private law was insufficient for resolving the agrarian question.

The challenge of land reform was that it required the state to intervene in property relations without entirely abandoning the legal protection of ownership. This required a theory of limited ownership. Pilvar's philosophy of property rights makes clear that ownership is not only a right of exclusion and enjoyment, but also an institution whose legitimacy depends on its relation to justice, social order, and the common good (3). Khordmandi similarly argues that ownership may be subject to limitation where unrestricted ownership conflicts with public interest or the rights of others (5). In the context of land reform, this meant that the state could legally restrict large-scale ownership, redistribute land, or redefine agrarian rights if such measures were necessary for public welfare. Khalilpour Gorgani and Vanoush Bandpey's discussion of ownership in relation to public rights is especially relevant, because land reform was justified by the argument that agricultural land had a public dimension due to its relation to food production, rural livelihood, and social stability (6). Thus, land reform was not an attack on law but a reorientation of property law toward social function.

The pre-reform legal order contained several tensions. On paper, modern law recognized formal ownership, contractual obligations, and state authority. In practice, rural land relations were influenced by custom, landlord power, peasant dependence, local enforcement, and administrative weakness. Jafari Langroudi's legal terminology shows that distinctions between ownership, possession, usufruct, tenancy, and related rights are essential for legal analysis (2). In Iranian agrarian society, these distinctions were often blurred. A peasant might cultivate land for generations and possess a socially recognized claim to continued cultivation, yet lack full ownership. A landlord might hold formal title but remain absent from direct production. This disjunction produced legal uncertainty and social injustice. Mahmoudian and Jahanbin's study of peasant rights demonstrates that the recognition of cultivators' claims remained one of the most difficult issues in the Iranian legal system (15). Land reform attempted to convert some customary and social claims into formal ownership, but it could not resolve all ambiguities surrounding peasant rights.

The legislative program of land reform was shaped by political, social, and economic goals. Lambton's study of land reform in Iran emphasizes that the reform aimed first to weaken the political and social influence of large landowners and then to create a class of independent peasants (22). These objectives show that the law was not merely concerned with agricultural productivity; it was also a political instrument for restructuring rural power. The state understood that large landowners were not only economic actors but also political intermediaries who

exercised influence over villages and local administration. By redistributing land, the state sought to undermine this intermediary power and establish a more direct relationship with rural citizens. Poulantzas's theory of law and power helps explain this function of law, because legal reform often operates as a mechanism through which the state reorganizes class relations and consolidates political authority (20). In Iran, land reform weakened the social base of the landed elite while strengthening the administrative reach of the central state.

The implementation of land reform involved the legal limitation of large estates, the transfer of land to cultivators, and the administrative management of compensation, registration, and dispute resolution. These processes required the state to identify eligible lands, classify owners, determine peasant beneficiaries, and establish mechanisms for transfer. The legal design had to distinguish between different types of land, including private estates, exempted lands, orchards, mechanized farms, waqf properties, and lands subject to special arrangements. Such distinctions created complexity and opened the door to evasion, dispute, and uneven implementation. Lambton notes that land reform produced significant changes in ownership distribution, but its application varied across regions and was affected by administrative capacity, landlord resistance, and the legal classification of land (22). The law's effectiveness therefore depended not only on statutory language but also on administrative enforcement. Sociology of law reminds us that legal norms acquire real force only when institutions are capable of implementing them in social life (7).

One of the most important features of the reform was the transformation of the peasant from a dependent cultivator into a formal owner or quasi-owner. This transformation had symbolic and practical significance. Symbolically, it recognized the cultivator as a legal subject with rights rather than merely as a subordinate participant in a customary agrarian hierarchy. Practically, it gave many peasants stronger incentives to cultivate and improve land. Lambton's analysis indicates that where peasants received land and perceived it as their own, cultivation practices often improved and rural morale changed (22). However, the transformation was incomplete because land ownership alone could not guarantee access to credit, machinery, irrigation, markets, technical knowledge, or cooperative organization. Azkia argues that the reform did not uniformly benefit all rural classes and that poorer peasants and landless rural populations often remained vulnerable (4). This reveals a major limitation of the legal framework: it treated ownership redistribution as the primary solution, while underestimating the institutional requirements of rural development.

The legal framework also reflected a tension between redistribution and modernization. On one level, the reform sought to distribute land to those who worked it. On another level, agricultural modernization required larger, more efficient units, mechanization, investment, and technical organization. These goals were not always compatible. Redistribution could empower peasants, but it could also produce fragmentation if land parcels became too small for efficient production. Emami Khoei and Taghi Ziaei argue that land reform transformed the economic structure of rural society by weakening landlord-peasant relations and expanding monetary and capitalist relations in villages (13). Yet the emergence of new market relations did not automatically produce equitable development. Razaghi's economic analysis suggests that development requires coherent coordination between ownership, investment, production systems, and state policy (12). The Iranian reform often lacked the institutional depth needed to integrate redistribution with sustainable agricultural modernization.

The question of compensation and legality is also central. Since ownership was legally protected, reform could not simply ignore the claims of landowners without raising concerns about legal legitimacy. A reform that abolishes or limits ownership must establish a legal justification for doing so and determine whether compensation is required.

The philosophical debate over property rights is relevant here. Pilvar's work indicates that ownership is legally protected but not metaphysically unlimited (3). Strauss's theory of natural right helps frame the normative question: when positive property law preserves injustice, legal reform may be justified by a higher conception of justice (9). In Iran, land reform attempted to balance formal legality and social justice by regulating the transfer of land through statutory mechanisms rather than through purely revolutionary seizure. This made the reform legally more moderate than radical collectivist programs, but it also created procedural complexity and opportunities for resistance.

The implementation of land reform after the initial stages continued through amendments, regulations, and later post-revolutionary measures. The 1979 Revolution did not end the agrarian question; rather, it reopened debates over land, social justice, Islamic legal principles, confiscation, redistribution, and rural development. Mousanejad and Khorramshad's comparative analysis of revolutionary land policies shows that revolutionary states often treat land as a central instrument of social transformation (21). Iran's post-revolutionary experience reflected this broader pattern, although it operated within its own ideological, legal, and institutional framework. The continuation of land-related disputes after the revolution demonstrates that the original reform did not fully resolve the legal status of all lands, peasant rights, or rural inequalities. Mahmoudian and Jahanbin's discussion of the continuing fate of peasant rights confirms that agrarian legal problems persisted long after the formal redistribution programs (15).

Administrative implementation also generated disputes concerning boundaries, eligibility, abandoned cultivation rights, gardens, pastures, water rights, and unresolved land reform files. These disputes reveal that land reform was not a single legal act but a long administrative process. Legal reform in property matters requires documentation, registration, surveying, adjudication, and enforcement. Where these mechanisms are weak, reform produces uncertainty. Jafari Langroudi's emphasis on precise legal concepts is relevant because unclear terminology can lead to inconsistent interpretation (2). Katouzian's analysis of contractual and legal rules likewise shows that legal certainty is essential for stable economic relations (11). In agrarian reform, uncertainty over title, boundaries, and rights can discourage investment and create long-term conflict. Therefore, one of the weaknesses of Iran's land reform framework was not simply its redistributive design but its inability to fully stabilize the legal consequences of redistribution.

Another important legal issue is the relation between land reform and water resources. In Iranian agriculture, land ownership cannot be separated from access to water. Rezazadeh and Ghaffari's study of state land reform policy in Iran highlights the connection between reform, ownership fragmentation, and water crisis (23). When land is redistributed without integrated management of water, irrigation systems, and environmental limits, legal ownership may become economically fragile. The reform transferred land but did not always create effective collective mechanisms for water management. This is particularly important in Iran's arid and semi-arid environment, where agricultural productivity depends heavily on coordinated water governance. The law of land reform therefore should have been integrated with environmental regulation and resource management. Its partial separation from water policy reduced its long-term effectiveness and contributed to contemporary agricultural challenges.

The legal framework must also be evaluated in light of social justice. From one perspective, land reform was a corrective measure that responded to centuries of inequality. From another perspective, its benefits were unevenly distributed. Sabbaghian and Khan Ramaki emphasize that land reform had major social and normative consequences, including changes in rural identity, expectations, and social organization (14). However, Azkia argues that the reform also intensified certain inequalities within rural society, particularly where better-off peasants

and larger units benefited more than poorer villagers (4). This tension shows that legal reform can eliminate one form of domination while creating or preserving other inequalities. The law weakened landlord power, but it did not automatically create egalitarian rural development. Therefore, the success of land reform must be measured not only by the amount of land transferred, but also by whether it created stable, productive, and equitable rural institutions.

A further legal limitation was the insufficient attention to cooperative and collective institutional structures. If land redistribution produces very small holdings, the law must create mechanisms that allow small owners to benefit from economies of scale. Cooperatives, joint irrigation management, rural credit institutions, technical extension services, and land consolidation programs are essential for making small ownership economically viable. Emami Khoei and Taghi Ziaei's analysis of the economic effects of reform suggests that the transition from self-consumption rural economy to monetary relations required new institutions that many villages lacked (13). Without such institutions, peasants could become owners but remain economically weak. Razaghi's approach to the Iranian economy reinforces the point that structural transformation requires coordinated policy rather than isolated legal intervention (12). The legal framework of land reform should therefore be assessed as a partial reform that succeeded in redistributing legal title but failed to fully design the institutional architecture of modern agriculture.

Despite these limitations, land reform represented a fundamental legal break with the landlord-peasant order. It signaled that ownership of agricultural land could no longer be justified solely by historical privilege, formal title, or inherited hierarchy. The state recognized that property rights must be reconciled with public welfare, social justice, and rural development. In this respect, the reform reflected the modern legal idea that ownership has a social function. Khalilpour Gorgani and Vanoush Bandpey's analysis of ownership and public rights supports this interpretation, because ownership must operate within the limits imposed by collective interests (6). The reform also transformed the legal identity of rural cultivators by recognizing them as potential owners rather than merely as dependent laborers. Lambton's assessment of the early years of reform indicates that this transformation had visible effects on rural society and the balance of power between landlords and peasants (22).

The legal framework of Iranian land reform therefore reveals both achievement and incompleteness. It was legally justified because the old agrarian structure violated social justice, obstructed development, and concentrated power. It was historically necessary because traditional rural relations could no longer support the needs of a modernizing society. It was socially transformative because it weakened landlord domination and expanded peasant ownership. Yet it was incomplete because it did not fully resolve peasant rights, land fragmentation, water governance, rural credit, agricultural industrialization, or legal certainty. The legal lesson of Iranian land reform is that redistribution is necessary where ownership becomes socially destructive, but redistribution must be accompanied by institutional design. Law can dismantle an unjust structure, but it must also construct a viable alternative.

Social and Economic Consequences of Land Reform

The social and economic consequences of land reform in Iran were profound, contradictory, and long-lasting. The reform altered rural class relations, weakened the political authority of landlords, expanded formal peasant ownership, and transformed the social imagination of rural communities. At the same time, it contributed to land fragmentation, uneven development, rural migration, administrative disputes, and new forms of economic dependency. For this reason, land reform cannot be judged by a simple binary of success or failure. It must be

understood as a historically necessary intervention that achieved some of its core social objectives while failing to fully establish the institutional conditions for sustainable agricultural modernization. Lambton's study of land reform in Iran emphasizes that one of the immediate effects of reform was the weakening of landlord domination and the emergence of a new sense of autonomy among cultivators (22). This change was socially significant because landlord power had previously shaped not only agricultural production but also local status, political influence, and rural social order.

The most visible social consequence of reform was the decline of the landlord as the central authority in village life. In the traditional system, the landlord or his agents could influence the distribution of resources, the resolution of disputes, access to land, and relations with state officials. Lambton's analysis of landlord and peasant relations demonstrates that the landlord's power was both economic and social, because ownership gave him authority over the peasant's livelihood and village position (1). Land reform disrupted this relationship by transferring land to cultivators and reducing the landlord's capacity to command labor and surplus. Sabbaghian and Khan Ramaki argue that the social and normative effects of land reform included a transformation in rural expectations and the weakening of traditional hierarchies (14). This was not merely a legal change; it altered the meaning of dignity, dependency, and citizenship in the countryside. Peasants who had once been treated as subordinate members of a rural hierarchy could now imagine themselves as owners and legal subjects.

However, the decline of landlord power did not automatically produce a fully democratic or equitable rural order. Azkia's analysis of rural development and underdevelopment in Iran shows that land reform benefited rural groups unevenly and sometimes strengthened better-positioned peasants while leaving poorer villagers and landless laborers vulnerable (4). Some peasants received land of limited size or quality, while others lacked sufficient resources to cultivate effectively. Those without recognized cultivation rights could be excluded from redistribution. The reform therefore transformed class relations but did not abolish rural stratification. Mohseni's sociological perspective helps explain why institutional change often produces new forms of inequality when it modifies one social structure without fully transforming the broader system of resources, education, capital, and authority (8). In rural Iran, legal ownership was important, but it did not equalize access to credit, water, machinery, markets, or technical knowledge.

The reform also had important psychological and normative consequences. The recognition of peasants as owners changed their relationship to land and labor. Lambton notes that in many places where cultivators received land, they worked it with greater care because they regarded it as their own (22). This change reflects the importance of legal status in shaping social behavior. Levy-Bruhl's sociology of law suggests that law is not only a system of commands but also a symbolic order that shapes social expectations and collective consciousness (7). By legally recognizing peasants' claims, land reform transformed their social identity. Nevertheless, the symbolic power of ownership could not compensate for structural weaknesses. A peasant might become the legal owner of land but remain unable to improve productivity because of insufficient capital, inadequate irrigation, poor infrastructure, and weak market access. Therefore, the social dignity generated by ownership did not always translate into economic prosperity.

The economic consequences of reform were equally mixed. Supporters of land reform emphasized that it removed the inefficiencies of absentee landlordism and gave cultivators direct incentives to increase production. Emami Khoei and Taghi Ziaei argue that land reform contributed to the decline of landlord-peasant production relations and promoted the development of monetary and capitalist relations in rural areas (13). This transition

changed the rural economy by expanding market exchange, increasing the need for cash, and linking villages more directly to national economic circuits. However, market integration also exposed peasants to new vulnerabilities. The need to pay installments, buy inputs, use improved seeds or fertilizers, and participate in commercial markets created pressures that many smallholders were not prepared to manage. Razaghi's study of the Iranian economy suggests that market transformation without equitable institutional support can deepen dependency rather than produce balanced development (12). Thus, land reform expanded economic agency but also inserted rural producers into market relations under unequal conditions.

One of the most serious economic problems was land fragmentation. Redistribution often created small and scattered holdings that were difficult to cultivate efficiently. This problem was especially damaging in a country where water scarcity, irrigation infrastructure, and mechanization require coordination. Rezazadeh and Ghaffari's study of state land reform policy in Iran highlights the relation between land fragmentation and water crisis, arguing that changes in land ownership affected the management of water resources and agricultural sustainability (23). When land parcels become smaller and ownership becomes dispersed, coordinated irrigation, mechanized production, and environmental management become more difficult. The reform weakened landlord domination, but it did not always replace large estates with efficient cooperative or consolidated production units. This created a contradiction between the social objective of redistribution and the economic objective of modernization. The law solved one problem but generated another: it democratized ownership while sometimes reducing the scale necessary for efficient production.

The problem of fragmentation also demonstrates the limits of a purely distributive theory of justice. Redistribution is necessary when ownership is unjustly concentrated, but it must be accompanied by policies that ensure productive viability. Pilvar's philosophy of property rights is relevant because property is not merely a distributional entitlement; it is also a social institution connected to use, productivity, and responsibility (3). If redistributed land cannot support sustainable livelihood, ownership becomes formally meaningful but economically weak. Khordmandi's analysis of ownership limitations further suggests that the law may need to regulate property after redistribution in order to prevent harmful fragmentation, inefficient use, or conflict with public interest (5). Contemporary agrarian policy therefore cannot stop at the historical achievement of land transfer. It must consider land consolidation, cooperative management, sustainable water governance, and technologically advanced production systems.

Land reform also affected rural-urban migration. The weakening of traditional village structures, the withdrawal of landlord investment, the limited viability of small farms, and the attraction of urban employment contributed to migration from villages to cities. Sabbaghian and Khan Ramaki identify migration and the transformation of rural norms as among the important social effects of land reform (14). This migration was not caused by land reform alone, because industrialization, urban growth, education, military service, and state modernization also played major roles. However, land reform changed the rural social order in ways that made movement more possible. Former peasants were no longer tied to landlords in the same way, and rural youth increasingly sought opportunities outside agriculture. Nozari's social history of Iran shows that modern Iranian society experienced major demographic and social transformations that reshaped the relation between village and city (10). Land reform was one of the legal catalysts of this broader transformation.

The reform also affected the state's relationship with rural society. Before reform, landlords often acted as intermediaries between the state and the village. By weakening landlords, the state created a more direct

relationship with rural populations. Lambton's account of the political objectives of land reform indicates that breaking landlord power was central to the reform's design (22). This increased the state's administrative presence in rural areas, but it also created new forms of dependence on bureaucracy. Azkia argues that in many cases the political power of landlords was not transferred to peasants but absorbed by the state (4). This is a critical point. Land reform reduced private domination but expanded state supervision. From the perspective of legal sociology, the shift from landlord authority to administrative authority was not necessarily equivalent to rural empowerment. Poulantzas's analysis of law and state power helps explain how legal reform can reorganize class relations while simultaneously strengthening state control (20).

Another major consequence was the transformation of rural legal consciousness. Peasants increasingly became aware of formal rights, administrative procedures, ownership documents, and legal claims. Mahmoudian and Jahanbin's study of peasant rights shows that the legal fate of cultivators' claims became an important issue in Iranian law (15). The recognition of peasant rights was significant, but the administrative process of determining such rights could be slow, contested, and incomplete. Disputes over boundaries, eligibility, abandoned cultivation rights, and unresolved land reform files continued to affect rural legal relations. Jafari Langroudi's terminology is relevant here because legal disputes often turned on the precise meaning of ownership, possession, right of cultivation, and related concepts (2). The reform therefore increased the juridification of rural life. Villagers who had previously operated under custom and landlord authority increasingly had to navigate formal legal and administrative institutions.

The economic performance of agriculture after reform remains debated. Some evidence suggests that peasants improved cultivation where ownership gave them stronger incentives. Lambton observed that in many villages production and cultivation practices improved after peasants received land (22). Other analyses emphasize that agricultural productivity did not increase sufficiently and that structural problems persisted. Emami Khoei and Taghi Ziaei show that the reform contributed to the growth of capitalist and monetary relations, but such transformation did not automatically produce broad rural welfare (13). Razaghi's economic framework suggests that agricultural development depends not only on ownership, but also on infrastructure, credit, markets, technology, education, and macroeconomic policy (12). Therefore, the economic outcomes of land reform were limited by the absence of a comprehensive rural development strategy. Land transfer was necessary but insufficient.

The environmental consequences of reform have become increasingly important in contemporary analysis. Agricultural land in Iran is inseparable from water scarcity, soil quality, climate conditions, and ecological limits. Rezazadeh and Ghaffari connect state land reform policy to water crisis, showing that the fragmentation of land and changes in ownership affected resource governance (23). Traditional landlord systems were unjust, but their dissolution did not automatically create sustainable environmental management. Smallholders often lacked the capacity to invest in efficient irrigation, soil conservation, or modern technologies. Where state support was insufficient, farmers relied on short-term strategies that could harm long-term sustainability. The legal lesson is that agrarian reform must integrate property law with environmental law. Ownership reform without ecological planning may produce social justice in the short term but environmental vulnerability in the long term.

The reform also had implications for gender, family structure, and generational continuity, although these issues were not always central in the original legal framework. Land ownership in rural society affects inheritance, household authority, marriage patterns, and the distribution of labor. Katouzian's legal analysis of contracts and private law helps show that property relations are deeply connected to family and inheritance structures (11). Over

time, inherited land may become increasingly fragmented among heirs, intensifying the economic problems created by the initial redistribution. This indicates that land reform should not be understood as a completed act. Its effects evolve across generations through inheritance, sale, migration, and changes in agricultural labor. Without legal mechanisms for consolidation or cooperative use, redistribution can gradually lead to smaller and less viable holdings. Thus, the long-term consequences of reform depend on the interaction between land law, inheritance law, rural demography, and agricultural policy.

From a normative perspective, the reform must be assessed in relation to justice. Strauss's discussion of natural right suggests that a legal order must be evaluated by its capacity to serve human dignity and political justice (9). The landlord-peasant system failed this test because it preserved domination and rural deprivation. Land reform improved justice by recognizing cultivators and limiting the arbitrary power of landlords. However, justice also requires sustainable livelihood, equal opportunity, and institutional support. Khalilpour Gorgani and Vanoush Bandpey's discussion of public rights indicates that ownership must be interpreted in relation to collective welfare (6). If contemporary patterns of landholding, fragmentation, water use, or agricultural decline harm public welfare, then a new generation of land-related reforms may be legally and morally justified. The historical reform addressed the injustice of concentration; contemporary reform must address the injustice of inefficiency, vulnerability, and unsustainability.

The comparison with revolutionary land policies in other contexts further clarifies Iran's experience. Mousanejad and Khorramshad show that land reform in socialist revolutionary states often involved radical restructuring of ownership, collectivization, or state control (21). Iran's reform was less radical because it preserved private ownership and redistributed land to individual cultivators rather than abolishing private property in agriculture. This moderation helped avoid some dangers of forced collectivization, but it also limited the possibility of coordinated large-scale agricultural transformation. The Iranian path created small proprietors rather than collective production units. This outcome was socially meaningful but economically problematic where small holdings lacked institutional support. Anderson's historical analysis of transitions from feudalism suggests that the decline of feudal relations does not automatically produce modern productivity; the institutional form of the transition is decisive (19). Iran's transition weakened feudal-like relations but did not fully establish a coherent modern agrarian system.

Overall, the social and economic consequences of land reform demonstrate that the reform was both transformative and incomplete. It broke the dominance of landlords, expanded peasant ownership, changed rural consciousness, and helped integrate villages into the modern state and market economy. Yet it also produced or intensified problems of fragmentation, migration, environmental pressure, administrative dispute, and uneven development. The central lesson is that land reform cannot be evaluated only by its immediate redistributive achievement. It must be assessed as part of a long socio-legal process in which property law, rural development, environmental governance, state power, and social justice interact. Iran's experience shows that the legal abolition of an unjust agrarian order is necessary, but it must be followed by continuous institutional reform if rural society is to become both equitable and productive.

Contemporary Implications and the Need for a New Generation of Agrarian Reform

The contemporary significance of Iranian land reform lies in the fact that the agrarian question has not disappeared. The historical landlord-peasant order has largely been dismantled, but the legal, social, economic, and environmental problems of agricultural land remain unresolved in new forms. The central question today is no

longer whether large landlords should continue to dominate peasants, but whether the existing structure of landholding, production, inheritance, water use, and rural labor can support sustainable agricultural development. Rezazadeh and Ghaffari's analysis of state land reform policy and water crisis demonstrates that the effects of land reform continue to shape contemporary resource governance, especially where fragmented holdings complicate the management of water and agricultural production (23). This means that land reform should not be treated as a closed legal episode of the twentieth century. It remains relevant because its consequences continue to influence agricultural productivity, rural welfare, environmental sustainability, and legal certainty.

One of the most urgent contemporary issues is fragmentation of agricultural land. The first generation of land reform redistributed ownership in response to the injustice of concentration, but subsequent inheritance, sale, subdivision, and demographic change have further reduced the size and efficiency of many agricultural units. This problem is not unique to Iran, but it is particularly serious because agricultural production in Iran often depends on coordinated irrigation, mechanization, and efficient land use. Khordmandi's analysis of limitations on ownership provides an important legal foundation for addressing this issue, because ownership may be limited or regulated when its exercise harms public interest or prevents socially necessary development (5). Land consolidation, cooperative cultivation, restrictions on excessive subdivision, and incentives for joint production can therefore be justified not as violations of ownership, but as legal mechanisms for preserving the social function of agricultural land. Khalilpour Gorgani and Vanoush Bandpey also support this reasoning by emphasizing that ownership must be interpreted in relation to public rights (6). In contemporary Iran, the public right implicated in land policy includes food security, environmental protection, rural livelihood, and sustainable use of water.

A new generation of agrarian reform must also distinguish between ownership reform and production reform. The historical reform focused primarily on who owned the land. Contemporary reform must focus also on how land is used, how production is organized, how water is managed, and how farmers are supported. Razaghi's economic analysis shows that productive development depends on the organization of resources, technology, investment, and policy coordination (12). Small ownership can be socially just but economically weak if farmers lack machinery, credit, storage facilities, market access, insurance, and technical knowledge. Emami Khoei and Taghi Ziaei's discussion of the economic effects of land reform suggests that rural Iran moved from a self-consumption economy toward wider monetary and capitalist relations (13). In contemporary conditions, this transformation requires stronger institutional support. Farmers cannot compete in modern agricultural markets merely by holding legal title. They require cooperative structures, legal protections, financial tools, and technological assistance.

The contemporary legal system must therefore move beyond the older opposition between landlord ownership and peasant ownership. The key issue is the creation of an agrarian legal order that combines secure property rights with collective efficiency. Pilvar's philosophy of property rights helps clarify that property should be understood as a structured legal institution rather than a purely individual entitlement (3). Secure ownership remains important because farmers need confidence that their investments will be protected. At the same time, ownership must be organized in a way that promotes productive and sustainable use. This requires legal tools such as land pooling, cooperative production contracts, long-term agricultural leases, restrictions on destructive land-use change, and incentives for consolidation. Katouzian's analysis of contractual rules is relevant because many contemporary reforms may depend not on compulsory redistribution but on carefully designed contractual mechanisms that allow owners to combine land use while preserving ownership rights (11). In this sense, the next stage of reform may be less redistributive and more organizational.

Another major contemporary challenge is the protection of peasant and farmer rights in a changing agricultural economy. The historical reform recognized many cultivators as owners, but unresolved legal problems concerning peasant rights, cultivation claims, abandoned lands, and rural entitlements remain significant. Mahmoudian and Jahanbin's study of peasant rights in the Iranian legal system shows that the basis and fate of these rights continue to require careful legal analysis (15). A modern agrarian legal order must clarify the status of farmers, tenants, agricultural workers, cooperative members, and holders of customary or inherited claims. Jafari Langroudi's legal terminology reminds us that precision in legal concepts is essential for resolving disputes and preventing arbitrary interpretation (2). If the law fails to define rights clearly, farmers may become vulnerable to administrative inconsistency, speculative land acquisition, or insecure production arrangements. Legal certainty is therefore a precondition for both justice and investment.

Contemporary agrarian reform must also respond to the aging of the agricultural workforce and the declining attractiveness of farming for younger generations. Rural development cannot be sustained if agriculture becomes associated with poverty, insecurity, and low social status. Mohseni's sociological analysis suggests that social institutions must adapt to changing generational expectations, educational levels, and patterns of social mobility (8). The younger generation may not be willing to remain in agriculture unless farming becomes technologically advanced, economically rewarding, and socially respected. Azkia's work on rural development and underdevelopment shows that rural problems are structural and cannot be solved by isolated policies (4). Therefore, land reform today must be integrated with rural education, agricultural entrepreneurship, digital technologies, infrastructure, and market reform. The legal system can encourage youth participation by supporting agricultural companies, cooperatives, start-ups, long-term leases, and inheritance mechanisms that prevent unproductive fragmentation.

The environmental dimension of contemporary reform is perhaps more urgent than ever. Iran's agricultural future is constrained by water scarcity, soil degradation, climate stress, and inefficient resource use. Rezazadeh and Ghaffari's analysis directly connects land reform policy to the water crisis, making clear that property arrangements affect environmental outcomes (23). Traditional land reform did not adequately integrate land redistribution with water governance. A new generation of reform must do so. Agricultural land law should be coordinated with water law, environmental regulation, land-use planning, and climate adaptation policy. Ownership rights should be linked to obligations concerning sustainable cultivation, efficient irrigation, soil protection, and prevention of destructive land conversion. The idea that ownership carries social responsibility is consistent with modern theories of limited property rights (5). It also reflects the principle that private land use may be regulated where it affects public welfare (6).

Land-use change is another contemporary legal problem. Agricultural lands near cities and villages are often exposed to pressure from construction, speculation, and non-agricultural conversion. When agricultural land becomes more valuable for urban expansion than for cultivation, farmers may be tempted or pressured to sell or change use. This process threatens food security, rural identity, and ecological balance. Razaghi's economic approach indicates that land markets cannot be left entirely to short-term profitability when broader national development is at stake (12). The legal system must therefore regulate land conversion, but regulation alone is insufficient if farming remains economically unattractive. Farmers must be given incentives to continue production. This requires a combination of legal prohibition, economic support, insurance, infrastructure, and market access. Otherwise, restrictions on land conversion may become burdensome and ineffective.

The contemporary reform agenda must also address the relationship between state power and rural autonomy. The first generation of land reform weakened landlords but often expanded state administrative control. Azkia's critique that political power was not always transferred to peasants but absorbed by the state remains important (4). A new reform should avoid replacing one form of domination with another. Rural communities need participatory institutions, local cooperatives, transparent administrative procedures, and access to judicial remedies. Levy-Bruhl's sociology of law suggests that legal reforms are more effective when they correspond to social expectations and are internalized by the affected communities (7). If contemporary reforms are imposed without farmer participation, they may fail or produce resistance. Therefore, agrarian legal modernization should be participatory, transparent, and responsive to local ecological and economic conditions.

The comparison with revolutionary land policies also provides a cautionary lesson. Mousanejad and Khorramshad's study of land policy in socialist revolutionary states shows that radical land reforms can transform property relations rapidly, but they may also generate coercion, inefficiency, or excessive state control when they ignore local realities (21). Iran's contemporary situation does not require a return to radical redistribution in the same form as the 1960s or revolutionary land seizures. Instead, it requires functional reform aimed at making existing land relations productive, sustainable, and legally secure. Anderson's historical account of the transition from antiquity to feudalism and beyond helps remind us that the transformation of agrarian structures is a long historical process rather than a single moment (19). Iran has already passed through the stage of dismantling landlord domination; it now faces the stage of building a modern agrarian economy.

Legal philosophy also supports the need for contemporary reform. Strauss's discussion of natural right and history suggests that law must remain responsive to justice across changing historical conditions (9). What justice required in the mid-twentieth century was the liberation of peasants from landlord domination and the redistribution of land. What justice requires today may be the protection of agricultural land from fragmentation, ecological destruction, speculative conversion, and unproductive use. Poulantzas's philosophy of law further indicates that legal forms participate in structuring social power (20). If contemporary land law allows powerful market actors, speculative interests, or bureaucratic discretion to undermine farmers and agricultural production, then the law will reproduce new forms of inequality. A just agrarian legal order must therefore regulate both old and new forms of domination.

The normative effects of historical reform also remain relevant. Sabbaghian and Khan Ramaki show that land reform altered social norms and rural expectations (14). Contemporary farmers and rural communities now operate within a social imagination in which ownership, dignity, citizenship, and development are linked. Any new reform must respect this historical consciousness. Policies that appear to threaten small ownership may generate anxiety unless they are framed as cooperative, participatory, and beneficial. Therefore, land consolidation should not be designed as coercive dispossession, but as voluntary or incentivized pooling of land-use rights, joint production arrangements, cooperative management, and legally protected participation. Pilvar's philosophical account of property rights supports such a balanced approach, because property law must protect individual interests while enabling social coordination (3).

In addition, contemporary reform must address agricultural knowledge and specialization. The future of farming depends on scientific cultivation, digital monitoring, efficient irrigation, climate-sensitive crop selection, and professional management. Rural underdevelopment cannot be overcome if agriculture remains trapped in low-productivity traditional methods. Azkia's work emphasizes that rural development requires structural transformation

rather than superficial policy measures (4). Mohseni's sociological approach similarly suggests that education and social organization are essential to institutional change (8). Legal reform can support this transformation by creating frameworks for agricultural training, professional cooperatives, public-private partnerships, extension services, and rural innovation institutions. Ownership alone cannot produce modernization; knowledge must be legally and institutionally connected to production.

The contemporary implications of land reform also require attention to rural welfare. Land policy should not be evaluated only in terms of output. It must also consider income stability, social services, health, education, housing, and quality of life in rural areas. Sabbaghian and Khan Ramaki's analysis of social consequences shows that land reform affected the normative fabric of rural society, including patterns of belonging and migration (14). If rural life remains economically insecure, migration will continue and agricultural land may be abandoned or misused. A new generation of reform must therefore integrate land law with rural development law. Agricultural land policy should be connected to infrastructure, insurance, social security, rural credit, and local governance. This broader approach would correct one of the weaknesses of the historical reform, which redistributed land without fully constructing a comprehensive rural welfare system.

The need for legal certainty remains central. Many land-related conflicts persist because documentation, boundaries, inheritance claims, and administrative decisions are unclear or contested. Jafari Langroudi's emphasis on legal terminology underscores the importance of conceptual precision (2). Katouzian's work on legal obligations shows that stable legal relations require predictability and enforceability (11). Contemporary reform should therefore include cadastral modernization, transparent registration, accessible dispute resolution, and clear rules for agricultural leases, cooperatives, consolidation, and land-use change. Without legal certainty, farmers cannot invest confidently, and the state cannot plan effectively. Legal ambiguity also creates opportunities for corruption, speculation, and arbitrary administrative conduct.

The central lesson from Iranian land reform is that agrarian law must be dynamic. The law cannot preserve unjust historical ownership merely because it is old, but it also cannot assume that one redistribution will solve all future problems. Land relations evolve through demographic change, inheritance, markets, environmental pressures, and technological transformation. Levy-Bruhl's sociology of law helps explain that legal systems must adapt to social change in order to remain effective (7). The first generation of reform responded to feudal and landlord domination. The second generation must respond to fragmentation, sustainability, productivity, and rural viability. This does not mean abandoning the achievements of the past. Rather, it means completing them through a more mature legal framework that treats land as a social, economic, and ecological institution.

Contemporary Iran therefore requires a renewed legal approach to agricultural land. This approach should preserve the social achievement of peasant ownership while addressing the structural weaknesses that followed redistribution. It should protect farmers but also promote efficient production. It should respect private property but regulate it in accordance with public welfare. It should encourage consolidation without coercive dispossession. It should integrate land law with water law, environmental law, rural development, and agricultural modernization. It should recognize that the agrarian question is not only historical but also future-oriented. The success of Iranian agriculture will depend on whether the legal system can move from the redistribution of land to the intelligent governance of land.

Conclusion

Land reform in Iran was one of the most important legal and social transformations of the modern period. Its significance lies not only in the redistribution of agricultural land, but also in the restructuring of a historical relationship between property, power, production, and rural society. For centuries, the ownership and control of land had shaped social hierarchy, political influence, economic opportunity, and the daily life of peasants. The landlord-peasant system created a form of dependency that limited rural autonomy, weakened incentives for production, and preserved unequal access to resources. In this context, land reform became a historical necessity. It was not merely a political program or an administrative policy, but a legal response to a deeply rooted social contradiction.

The reform was necessary because the old agrarian order had become incompatible with social justice, legal modernization, and national development. A society that sought constitutional legality, economic growth, and modern citizenship could not indefinitely preserve a rural order in which cultivators lacked secure control over the land they worked. The legal protection of ownership could not justify the continuation of property arrangements that produced mass dependency and obstructed development. Land reform therefore represented the recognition that ownership has a social function and that property rights may be limited when their historical exercise conflicts with public welfare and human dignity.

At the same time, the reform was delayed. The agrarian question had become visible long before the major reform measures of the 1960s. The Constitutional Revolution, state modernization, and the gradual expansion of industry and administration all exposed the inadequacy of the old rural order, yet agrarian relations remained substantially unchanged for decades. Because reform came late, it had to confront a deeply entrenched structure under political and social pressure. This delay reduced the capacity of the reform to proceed gradually, systematically, and institutionally. The legal intervention was powerful enough to weaken landlord domination, but not comprehensive enough to establish a fully modern, equitable, and productive agrarian system.

The achievements of land reform should not be underestimated. It weakened the power of large landlords, recognized many cultivators as owners, altered rural social consciousness, and opened the possibility of a more direct relationship between rural citizens and the state. It challenged the idea that inherited landholding could remain immune from social responsibility. It gave legal form to the claim that those who work the land should not remain permanently subordinated to those who merely own it. These achievements had major social and symbolic value, because they changed the status of peasants and disrupted a historical hierarchy that had long shaped Iranian rural life.

Yet the limitations of the reform are equally important. Redistribution alone could not solve all problems of agriculture. Many newly created holdings were small, fragmented, or economically weak. Farmers often lacked access to credit, machinery, technical knowledge, irrigation infrastructure, and stable markets. Land ownership did not automatically produce productivity, and legal title did not necessarily create sustainable livelihood. In some cases, the reform weakened older relations without building adequate new institutions. The result was a mixed legacy: greater social justice in ownership, but continuing difficulties in agricultural modernization, rural development, and environmental management.

The long-term consequences of land reform also show that agrarian law cannot be static. The original reform responded to the problem of concentrated ownership and landlord domination. Contemporary Iran faces different

but related problems: fragmented holdings, aging agricultural labor, water scarcity, land-use change, weak rural investment, and the need for technologically advanced production. These problems require a new generation of agrarian reform. Such reform should not repeat the redistributive model of the past in a mechanical way. Instead, it should focus on land consolidation, cooperative production, sustainable water governance, environmental protection, legal certainty, rural infrastructure, and the modernization of agricultural production.

A future-oriented agrarian policy must balance private property with public interest. Farmers' ownership and security must be protected, but agricultural land should also be governed as a national resource connected to food security, environmental sustainability, and rural welfare. The law should prevent destructive fragmentation and speculative conversion while creating incentives for productive use. It should support voluntary land pooling, cooperative management, modern leases, rural credit, and technological innovation. It should clarify land titles, resolve remaining disputes, and provide accessible mechanisms for rural justice. Above all, it should treat land not merely as an object of ownership, but as a foundation of social life and national development.

The Iranian experience demonstrates that law can dismantle an unjust social order, but it must also construct the institutional basis of a better one. Land reform succeeded in challenging the historical dominance of landlords, but it did not fully complete the transformation of agriculture. The unfinished task is to create a legal and institutional framework capable of supporting equitable, sustainable, and productive rural development. The future of agrarian reform in Iran therefore depends on moving beyond the question of redistribution alone and toward the broader governance of land, water, labor, technology, and rural welfare. In this sense, land reform remains not only a historical subject, but a living legal challenge.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

1. Lambton AKS. *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*. 3rd ed. Amiri M, editor. Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publishing Company; 1983.
2. Jafari Langroudi MJ. *Comprehensive Legal Terminology*. 1st ed. Tehran: Mizan; 2012.
3. Pilvar R. *Philosophy of Property Rights*. 3rd ed. Tehran: Sherkat-e Sahami Enteshar; 2014.
4. Azkia M. *Sociology of Rural Development and Underdevelopment in Iran*. 11th ed. Tehran: Ettela'at; 2017.
5. Khordmandi S. *Limitation of Ownership*. 1st ed. Tehran: Andisheh Moaser; 2014.
6. Khalilpour Gorgani M, Vanoush Bandpey M. *Limitations of Ownership in Relation to Public Rights*. 1st ed. Tehran: Ferdowsi; 2014.
7. Levy-Bruhl H. *Sociology of Law*. 6th ed. Ghazi SA, editor. Tehran: Mizan; 2005.
8. Mohseni M. *Introduction to Sociology*. 20th ed. Tehran: Doran; 2004.
9. Strauss L. *Natural Right and History*. 4th ed. Parham B, editor. Tehran: Agah; 2019.
10. Nozari E. *Social History of Iran*. 12th ed. Tehran: Khojasteh; 2022.
11. Katouzian N. *General Rules of Contracts*. 8th ed. Tehran: Sherkat-e Sahami Enteshar; 2013.
12. Razaghi E. *Introduction to the Economy of Iran*. 3rd ed. Tehran: Ney; 2001.
13. Emami Khoei M, Taghi Ziaei N. *Land Reform and Its Economic Effects on the Agricultural Society of Iran*. Meshkavieh. 2008(4).
14. Sabbaghian A, Khan Ramaki S. *Social Consequences and Normative Effects of Land Reform in Iran*. *Journal of Ethical Research*. 2024(58).
15. Mahmoudian A, Jahanbin SE. *The Suffering of Land: A Study of the Basis and Fate of Peasant Rights in the Iranian Legal System*. *Legal Research Journal*. 2024(106).
16. Eskandari I. *In the Darkness of Millennia*. 2nd ed. Tehran: Qatreh; 2001.
17. Daryaei T. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*. 3rd ed. Tehran: Nashr-e Now; 2022.
18. Diakonoff MM. *History of Ancient Iran*. 8th ed. Arbab R, editor. Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publishing Company; 2022.
19. Anderson P. *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*. 4th ed. Mortazavi H, editor. Tehran: Sales; 2009.
20. Poulantzas N. *Philosophy of Law*. 4th ed. Abbasi NA, editor. Tehran: Mizan; 2018.
21. Mousanejad MJ, Khorramshad MB. *Revolution, Land Reform, and Land Policy in Socialist Revolutionary States*. *State Studies Quarterly*. 2024(38).
22. Lambton AKS. *Land Reform in Iran*. 2nd ed. Eshaghian M, editor. Tehran: Amir Kabir; 2016.
23. Rezazadeh H, Ghaffari M. *State Policy of Land Reform in Iran*. *State Studies Quarterly*. 2023(36).