Populist discourse and the resulting discontent in hybrid regimes: an examination of Rouhani’s rhetoric in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT
This work is an attempt to fill the academic gap that neglects the close reading of speeches of political leaders in non-democratic societies during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, this research focuses on the rhetoric of Hassan Rouhani, the former president of Iran, during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. Using the two main rhetorical devices of identification and metaphor, this work analyzes all of Rouhani’s speeches from February 2, 2020, to April 27, 2020. In addition, all speeches by three most powerful clerics in Iran, namely Khamenei, Saeidi, and Alamolhoda, and a sample of tweets by Iranian users (1644 in total) were analyzed to understand the extent to which Rouhani’s rhetoric was successful. The results show that Rouhani articulated a populist discourse during the pandemic. In an attempt to break away from hegemonic discourse, he sought to identify his government, rather than the state, with the people to construct a discursive us. Nevertheless, his rhetoric did not go down well with Iranian Twitter users. This study also analyzes Rouhani’s deft juggling act to woo both the populace and the conservative power centers to satisfy them while trying to distance himself from the latter.

Introduction
The outbreak of the coronavirus in 2020 created a ‘rhetorical situation’ (Bitzer 1968) in which political leaders in almost every country in the world felt compelled to speak to their people-to command, to provide information, to praise, or to blame-in order to respond appropriately to the situation (Montiel, Uyheng, and Dela Paz 2021). Since it was the first time after the proliferation of mass media that all political leaders started talking about the same issue at the same time (Krishnatray and Shrivastava 2021), this crisis provided an appropriate context to examine framing strategies and rhetorical and discursive practices in political leaders’ speeches individually or comparatively. To date, the existing literature has investigated the discursive practices through which political elites frame the crisis, construct social reality, and develop new understandings of long-standing social phenomena such as identity and
citizenship. Nevertheless, the extant research focuses on Western and democratic contexts to a significant extent. Thus, the share of studies looking into the rhetoric of politicians in non-democratic, particularly hybrid regimes, is limited. Hybrid regimes are different from the democratic political systems to a great extent, and we will go back to it later. Thus, such an investigation can enhance our understanding of the rhetorical discourses articulated during the pandemic around the globe. To address this gap, this study focuses on the rhetorical discourse that Hassan Rouhani, the ex-president of Iran, shaped during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. Using the two main rhetorical devices of identification and metaphor, this investigation attempts to answer How and to what extent Rouhani used these rhetorical devices to articulate his discourse during the first wave of the pandemic?

This paper is structured as follows. First, the existing literature on political leaders’ rhetorical and framing practices during the pandemic is reviewed to signpost the existing gap in this field. Then, we discuss populist discourse literature and the Iranian context in which a populist discourse based on political Islam turned into the hegemonic discourse after the Islamic revolution. Explaining the situation in which Iran met the COVID-19 crisis, this investigation draws on the rhetorical devices of identification and metaphor. Next, we outline the methodology of this research to investigate the rhetorical discourse developed by Rouhani and the extent to which Rouhani’s rhetoric was successful in Iranian society. It includes analyzing 30 speeches by Rouhani on the first wave of the pandemic in Iran, delivered from February 2, 2020, to April 27, 2020. To analyze the effects of his rhetorical discourse, two additional samples are also analyzed. These samples include all the speeches of three high-ranking clerics in Iran and a sample dataset of 1644 Persian tweets sent under the keyword or hashtag ‘Rouhani’ at the time of this study by ordinary citizens. Finally, we will discuss how our findings contribute to the growing body of literature on political speech during the COVID-19 crisis worldwide by shedding light on the framing and rhetorical strategies employed by moderate politicians in hybrid regimes.

Literature review: politicians and discourses of COVID-19 in hybrid regimes

Given the profound impacts that the COVID-19 crisis has on human life, social scientists have relatively studied the speeches of political elites to understand how they framed the crisis and developed rhetorical discourses to communicate with citizens. A line of study has addressed how political actors construct or redefine enduring social concepts like solidarity and nationalism under these unfamiliar and unprecedented circumstances (Andreouli and Brice 2021; Berrocal et al. 2021). Also, Haslam et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of leaders cultivating a shared sense of identity and mitigating group divisions during the pandemic. There are also a number of studies on framing and agenda-building strategies in politicians’ speeches. This group of scholars seeks to understand how politicians communicate rhetorically with the public, define the new situation, and announce and legitimize actions taken to mitigate risk (Dada et al. 2021; Krishnatray and Shrivastava 2021). Furthermore, the ways that officials have adopted a military-style posture when discussing the potential spread of the virus have been examined (Benziman 2020).
Although the body of scholarship that analyzes political speeches regarding COVID-19 is primarily focused on Western countries, the non-Western world has also been considered. Despite this attention to non-Western regimes, researchers have not examined them independently and have included them in comparative studies. Such comparative studies have been mainly conducted using computational text analysis. Automated text analysis, despite its potential to enable the analysis of large corpora in a short time and with minimal effort, has been criticized for its inability to understand the deeper levels and nuances of meaning in human texts (Barberá et al. 2021). As a result, the existing literature seems to have remained at a descriptive level, largely examining salient frames in politicians’ speeches and how political elites address crises and communicate with people in liberal societies. Thus, it has not explored how such frames function beyond that as discursive packages that shape new discursive understandings and connect discursive identities and narratives in antagonistic political spaces.

Indeed, in the wake of the COVID-19 virus, there are not many works that closely read politicians’ speeches in non-Western countries, to shed more light on the complexities and paradoxes that political elites in hybrid regimes have faced framing the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike Western democracies, hybrid regimes, which are neither strictly liberal democratic nor authoritarian but combine some features of both, create a more complicated political environment for politicians who address the public (Ozen and Dogu 2020). Political leaders, especially those belonging to moderate parties, must contend with antagonistic and competing forces that seek to dominate their will. In this sense, a mere analysis of politicians’ speeches in an attempt to explore how they frame or construct social understandings of the crisis, without considering how they rhetorically and discursively attempt to secure their positions threatened by ultra-radical figures and popular demands, could probably not deepen our understanding of framing COVID-19 in semi-authoritarian regimes. As a country whose political system features elements of both democracy and authoritarianism, Iran provides an appropriate context to fill this academic gap. Despite its unique sociopolitical characteristics, Iran is an understudied context. There is also not yet much work analyzing the speeches of Iranian politicians during the pandemic.

**Populism and the populist discourse in the Iranian context**

The hegemonic discourse in Iran is arguably a populist one. Since this paper investigates the rhetorical discourse that Rouhani articulated around COVID-19, it is necessary to understand the discursive context in which Rouhani performed his rhetorical practices. A brief discussion on populism then could be of interest. Although there is a considerable share of research on populism today, it is not easy to provide a well-elaborated and exact definition of this phenomenon (Hidalgo Tenorio, Benitez-Castro, and De Cesare 2019). Several studies note the contested nature of the concept of populism and the exceptional vagueness of the term (Holliday 2016).

From a broad perspective, Laclau understands populism as a way of building the political (Laclau 2007). Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) suggest three angles to better define the term: populism as a strategy, as an ideology, and as a discourse. While the first two have been used in some research and proved to be helpful to some extent, this paper draws upon the latter. From a discursive perspective, populism is a rhetorical system
used to revert the people’s subjection to the oligarchy, whichever this may be; thus, the identity of antisystem people-structures is construed communicatively (Hidalgo Tenorio, Benitez-Castro, and De Cesare 2019). In line with this understanding, Canovan (1999) offers that a populist discourse is comprised of the following: (1) the use of straightforward, democratic language; (2) the constant reference to the people; (3) the adjustment to the media logics; (4) the identification of a shared enemy; and (5) a charismatic, redemptive figure embodying provocation and antagonism. Within this line of research, the discursive distinction between us and them plays a critical role in articulating a populist discourse (Panizza 2005; Hidalgo Tenorio, Benitez-Castro, and De Cesare 2019). Laclau argues that elements, such as the people, i.e. the discursive us, only exist in so far as they are constructed as such through the articulation of discourse (Laclau 2007). He insists that it is ‘the people’ reflects populism or the articulation of populist discourse. Other scholars, particularly those who build upon his discursive approach to populism, argue that populism simplifies the political space by separating the ‘People’ from the ‘Others.’ (Panizza 2005; Kaltwasser et al. 2017)

The hegemonic discourse in Iran resembles much of these attributes, particularly the antagonistic distinction between us and them. The populist discourse in Iran is arguably derived from political Islam (Jahanbakhsh 2003; Mirzaei, Eslami, and Safari 2017). This ideological discourse is essentially characterized by the centrality of the guardianship of the jurist (Velayat-e-Faghih) and Islamic values and rules (Holliday 2016; Selvik 2018). In this sense, anti-Western ideas also play a pivotal role in articulating the hegemonic discourse in Iran (Sheikholeslami 2000). All political elites in Iran, especially presidents, have to deal with this discourse and embed it to varying degrees. Selvik (2018) has shown how the leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei, the most powerful political actor in Iran, constructs an insider-outsider discursive theme to legitimize this ideological discourse. Other studies have also shown how Iranian presidents and political actors submitted to this discourse after the consolidation of the new regime in 1979 (Jahanbakhsh 2003; Mohd Don and May 2013; Shahibzadeh 2015; Najarzadegan, Dabaghi, and Eslami-Rasekh 2017). However, the government of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) was considered a minor deviation from this norm as he repeatedly invoked Western and liberal thoughts such as freedom of speech, human rights, and dialogue with other countries. Despite the hope that this new discourse would culminate in Iran becoming a more democratic country, it did not lead to a pragmatic and fundamental change in the political system in Iran (Holliday 2010). Moreover, Khatami’s legacy largely ended when conservatives came to power with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and 2009 (Alemi, Tajeddin, and Rajabi Kondlaji 2018). Ahmadinezhad’s presidency can be seen as a reversal of all reformist ideas and trends that had flourished during the reform movement (Holliday 2010). Ahmadinejad espoused a populist discourse based on radical and anti-Western views as well as revolutionary and Islamic values (Jahangiry and Fattahi 2010).

Hassan Rouhani, successor to a reformist president (Khatami) and a revolutionary president (Ahmadinejad), won the 2013 elections on a platform of forming a government of prudence and hope. He presented himself as a moderate politician who would seek constructive diplomacy, put an end to the suppression of civil rights, and reduce Iran’s isolation. Had he not taken a stance in his election campaign aimed at international recognition of Iran’s rights, such as emphasizing the need for a nuclear agreement,
reducing sanctions, and negotiating with major countries, and had he not been one of the main negotiators of the 2003 nuclear agreement under reformist President Khatami, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for him to win many votes. Although some reformist figures like Khatami supported his candidacy, others doubt that Rouhani can be considered a reformist or even consider him part of the establishment (Holliday 2016).

Moreover, Holliday (2016) argues that Rouhani’s presidency was a strategy by Khamenei to restore the Islamic Republic’s populist credibility and its legacy of subalternity, which had been deeply wounded after the disputed 2009 elections and the regime’s subsequent repression and violence. In this sense, Holliday claims that Rouhani maintained a populist discourse based on a discursive division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that is the backbone of revolutionary ideology. Holliday also argues that Rouhani is supported by Khamenei as a president who will uphold the regime’s legitimacy and restore its authority. While this argument could be seen as plausible in 2013, when Rouhani won the election, it has been challenged by subsequent events. First, Khamenei’s confirmation shortly after the announcement of the election results has become a matter of formality where the head of state confirms the president-elect. Khamenei has done this for all presidents, whether they are close to him or not. More importantly, Iran’s president, Hassan Rouhani, came into conflict with powerful elements in the political system, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the state broadcast media (IRIB). The hardline news media criticized Rouhani’s efforts to open Iran to the West. In particular, they criticized his support for the 2015 nuclear agreement and his efforts to reach out with the U.S. Khamenei at times sharply and openly criticized his government.

On the one hand, Rouhani was expected to pacify his citizens who had elected him in the hope of creating a more democratic society. Yet they were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their president’s performance, who had failed to deliver on his campaign promises. They felt betrayed by Rouhani, who had failed to defend civil liberties and grant more freedom to independent organizations and the press. The growing discontent with economic mismanagement and corruption of the administration of President Hassan Rouhani reached a peak during the nationwide protests in November 2019, when the Rouhani government drastically increased the price of gasoline. The protests soon developed into a crisis of legitimacy for the regime, as several thousand opponents of the regime protested in all major cities. The protests were brutally put down by the regime’s security forces. According to unofficial sources, 1500 people were killed and many more arrested during the protests (Reuters 2019). This crisis called into question the legitimacy of the regime. Moreover, the populist discourse that Khamenei and Rouhani had developed to construct ‘the people’ as ‘the state’ faltered to a significant degree. It seemed that Rouhani had lost his position both in the state and among the people. Not only was he not supported by the leadership and conservative groups, but he also did not find acceptance among dissident citizens. A series of other negative events caused Rouhani to lose popularity. On January 3, 2020, the first incident occurred when the U.S. assassinated Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad. This led to increased tension between Iran and the U.S. The second incident occurred on January 8, 2020, when Iranian forces shot down a Ukrainian civilian plane that had just departed from an airport in Tehran, the capital. The country went into shock after this, and it suffered a complete embarrassment three days later when the IRGC took responsibility for the missile attacks.
Amid this tense, anxious, and disturbing atmosphere, the country encountered the coronavirus in February 2020. The nature of this health crisis, which raised many fears and required a high level of cooperation and understanding among different sectors of society, provided Rouhani with an unprecedented opportunity to improve his relations with the population and restore his position in the political system. Moreover, it was an opportunity to restore the regime’s legitimacy, which had been severely damaged after the November protests. Against this background, this paper seeks to understand how Rouhani rhetorically articulated a discourse to satisfy the will of dissidents while countering the concerns of ultra-radicals who accused him of being a threat to revolutionary discourse.

**Rhetoric of the pandemic: COVID-19 crisis as a rhetorical situation**

This study draws on the seminal work of Bitzer (1968) to understand the first wave of the pandemic as a rhetorical situation. Bitzer defines rhetorical situation as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relationships that constitute an actual or potential exigency that can be eliminated in whole or in part if a discourse introduced into the situation can constrain human decision or action in such a way as to effect a significant change in exigency (6). An exigency, according to Bitzer, is a deficiency characterized by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done. Based on this definition, the first wave of COVID-19 could be seen as a rhetorical situation that brought a lot of anxiety, uncertainty and incompleteness where people did not know what was happening. This vague and murky atmosphere formed the basis for articulating rhetorical discourse.

Rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by creating a discourse that changes reality through the mediation of thoughts and actions (Burke 1941; Bitzer 1968). Therefore, rhetorical discourse is an attempt to create new meanings, negotiate old ones, and alter public perceptions of events. By developing rhetorical discourse during times of crisis, political actors attempt to set in motion an integrative process through which people’s cognitions are generated, reinforced, or altered. Political actors employ rhetorical devices and strategies to constitute rhetorical discourses. DeLuca (1999) argues that the meaning of the world is not discovered but constructed through rhetorical practices. This study focuses on the two main rhetorical devices of identification and metaphor to explore Rouhani’s rhetoric during the pandemic.

Burke (1969) believes that interactions in our contemporary world are, in some ways, ‘more complicated’ than can be understood by viewing persuasion, as the focal point of traditional rhetoric theory, solely as the explicit, intentional acts which a rhetor directs to a specific, known audience. As an alternative, he suggests that rhetoric is about identification, finding common ground between people, places, things, and normally different ideas. Iser (1974) asserts that identification ‘is not an end in itself, but a strategem by which the author stimulates attitudes in the reader.’ Burke, too, explains identification in the context of division: ‘Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division’ (Burke 1969, 22).

Identification overlaps with metaphor in many ways (Burke 1941). Lakoff and Johnson (1990) hold that metaphor is primarily a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of
another and that its primary function is understanding. They advance metaphor analysis by reminding us that metaphors are not just a matter of language but that human thought processes are largely metaphorical. Metaphors are part of our conceptual system and present in our everyday language, even if we are unaware of them (Musolff 2012). Metaphors are hidden in words, and ideas are hidden by metaphors. Thus, we can use metaphorical linguistic expressions to study the nature of metaphorical concepts and to gain an understanding of the metaphorical nature of our activities.

Metaphor is a rhetoric device to simplify and make sense of complex and confusing observations that cause concern (Edelman 1971). Political events and trends tend to be complex and ambiguous, and they become focal points of concern. Rhetors, therefore, try to translate them into simpler language to achieve their goals by using these devices. In this sense, metaphors play an important role in legitimizing political decisions by accessing the underlying social and cultural value system (Charteris-Black 2005).

Killingsworth (2005) notes that we think of metaphors not as comparisons that leave something out, but as identification, as a way of bringing together seemingly disparate things. In this sense, metaphor is a strong identification, while simile and analogy are more cautious attempts to connect disparate things. In this way, Killingsworth argues that metaphor is not merely one technique among many but a crucial mode of thinking, an attempt to bridge conceptual gaps, and a mental activity that is at the heart of rhetoric.

Drawing on the literature on rhetoric analysis, this study attempts to answer the following question:

How and to what extent did Rouhani use rhetorical devices (e.g. metaphors, identification) to articulate his discourse during the first wave of the pandemic?

Rhetoricians claim that rhetoric does not occur in isolation. On the contrary, it is a collaborative practice. Therefore, any rhetorical inquiry should also consider the context in which it is couched and the audience at whom it is aimed (Bitzer 1968; Martin 2015). This study would not be limited to Rouhani’s speeches following this basic idea. We have provided some background so far, particularly in the introduction to this study, on the political context in Iran in which Rouhani played an important role. It is also important to consider the context in which Rouhani delivered his speeches during the pandemic to better understand his rhetorical discourse. There were two main groups of audiences that Rouhani tried to communicate with: high-level and ultra-conservative authorities and the hapless citizens. The relevant text corpora are presented and discussed in more detail in the next section.

Data and method

This study relies on three textual datasets: Speeches by Rouhani, speeches by ultraconservative figures, and tweets by ordinary citizens. Rouhani’s speeches were collected from the Iranian presidential website (www.president.ir). We also used the official websites of the Iranian leader and the websites of the Friday prayers of Qom and Mashahad to collect the speeches of three high-ranking clerics. Since this research focuses on the first wave of the pandemic, we collected the speeches delivered by these individuals from February 2, 2020, to April 27, 2020. A total of 30 speeches by Rouhani, 5 by Khameinei, 4 by Alamolhoda, and 6 by Saeidi were recorded. The next section elaborates on the
context in which these speeches were delivered. In addition, we collected all Persian tweets ($n = 16,446$) sent during this period that included ‘Rouhani’ as a hashtag or keyword. We rely on this dataset to better understand how ordinary citizens perceived the crisis and reacted to Rouhani’s claims and statements. To this end, we analyze a random sample of 1% of tweets, for a total of 1644 tweets.

Nevertheless, the ability of social media data to understand human behaviour and opinions has been questioned. Social media data could be biased in known and even unknown ways (boyd and Crawford 2012). As a result, it is not clear to what extent such data is representative or reliable (Mahrt and Scharkow 2013). Despite all these reservations, social media data is useful because, in certain circumstances and contexts, they are the only way to probe people’s thoughts and ideas (Barbera and Steinert-Threlkeld 2020). This is especially evident in authoritarian regimes where people are not free to express their opinions openly. From another perspective, the problem of representativeness becomes even worse in non-democratic regimes. Twitter was blocked a few days before the 2009 presidential election in Iran. As a result, many people were denied access to the platform. Others used Twitter constantly through proxies and VPNs. Therefore, the limitations of Twitter data for understanding Iranian society should be acknowledged. Twitter data is not representative of Iranian society or even Iranian Twitter users. However, existing literature highlights that Twitter provides us with a plausible way to measure public opinion in non-democratic societies (McCormick et al. 2017). Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach and based on existing research on rhetorical analysis, we closely read all texts several times. In doing so, we examined how Rouhani used identification and metaphor to articulate a discourse about the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we examined the framing and rhetorical practices in the speeches of the three senior clerics as well as in the Twitter dataset. In order to better understand the political interests and attitudes of users, we also referred to their profiles and other tweets. We randomly read several tweets of each user and took notes on their political affiliations. This information is used here and there in the next section. We employed MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software 2021) to do rhetoric and discursive interpretations. The following section presents and discusses the findings.

**Findings and discussion**

While discussing Rouhani’s rhetoric in the first wave of the pandemic, it is important to remember the context in which he emerged as president of Iran. In the introduction, we explained his position in Iran’s political sphere and his role in shaping and sustaining a populist discourse. Also, it is important to consider the context in which the first wave of COVID-19 hit the country.

**Context**

The first cases of COVID-19 in Iran were reported on February 19, 2020. The origin of the outbreak in Iran could not be more telling and controversial than Qom, the site of Shiite seminaries led by powerful ayatollahs and home to a holy shrine that attracts millions of pilgrims each year from Iran and throughout the Muslim world. In any other city, the government could have imposed a quarantine to contain the outbreak, but not in Qom, a city
that has been touted for decades as a place where people seek cures for their illnesses. No wonder any closure of the shrine, let alone the entire city, would be a slap in the face to the regime’s religious teachings. In this context, the origin of COVID-19 from Qom was of great importance. On the one hand, clerics argued that the COVID-19 rumour was the product of a smear campaign by the enemies of Islam and clerics to undermine Qom’s clerical and spiritual power (Ghiabi 2021). However, opponents argued that the regime had hidden the facts about COVID-19 and had announced the virus’ entry into Iran too late. They gave two reasons for this. First, the regime did not want to announce Qom as the place of origin of the virus, as this would compromise the city’s tranquil theological image, which is fundamental to the regime’s claim to legitimacy. In this sense, the regime also knows Qom as a symbol of its power and legitimacy and seeks to secure its position as such. Second, the outbreak of the coronavirus in Iran also coincided with two important milestones: the 41st anniversary of the revolution on February 11 and the parliamentary elections on February 21. Any admission of the outbreak would have affected voter turnout for both events, which was reason enough for the regime to hide the outbreak from the public until it could not anymore. This reasoning seemed plausible, as maximum voter turnout (Mosharekat-e-hadeaksary) was central in Khamenei’s and other authorities’ statements about the elections. Moreover, some tweets from users loyal to the regime confirmed this argument. For example, AmirHossein Sabeti (@sabeti_twt), an IRIB host and radical figure, wrote in a tweet that he later deleted on February 20, ‘They [the opposition] lie that COVID-19 has entered Iran. If it becomes contagious, there will be hundreds of deaths. So, do not go out and vote to be safe.’

The spread of the COVID-19 virus was also marked by controversy. There is strong anti-China sentiment among some segments of the Iranian population. They believe that China exploits the country’s resources and violates its sovereignty. On these grounds, the regime is accused of opening the country’s doors to China and Russia as it seeks powerful allies against the U.S. As a repressive state, it is argued, China is helping Iran repress the nation by providing it with surveillance and control technologies. As a result, many Iranians are harshly critical of the regime’s foreign policy toward China. In contrast, users loyal to the regime defended the intensification of relations with China while questioning the Rouhani government’s foreign policy that revived Iran’s nuclear agreement with Western countries, particularly the U.S. However, how the virus entered Iran increased anti-China sentiment and criticism of Iran–China relations. Several sources referred to Chinese Muslim scholars (trained at a regime-funded Islamic centre in Qom) returning from Wuhan or Chinese labourers working on infrastructure projects; others spoke of Iranian merchants trading with China (Ghiabi 2021). Therefore, it was assumed that the entry of COVID-19 resulted from the state’s relations with China. In this sense, the Iranian regime and China were accused of endangering the health and lives of Iranians.

Two days after the official announcement of positive cases in Qom, Rouhani gave his first speech on the new crisis in this atmosphere on February 21, 2020. He delivered this speech at the beginning of the Cabinet meeting. On February 22, the National Organization for Controlling COVID-19 (NOCC) was established after Khamenei approved the Supreme Council for National Security decree. During the first wave of COVID-19, Rouhani delivered his speeches mainly at the Cabinet and at the NOCC. The one exception is his annual speech at the beginning of the Iranian New Year (Nowruz). This is a customary
speech that every president delivers annually, and it is broadcast shortly after the New Year’s speech by the supreme leader. Apart from this routine speech, Rouhani did not address the people directly. His audience consisted of government officials and agencies. At the NOCC, however, a larger group of audience members was present, including the president of the IRIB, a member of the Guardian Council, and the attorney general. Nevertheless, all of these speeches were reported in the official press, especially in the IRIB. Rouhani was thus aware that the population and other state figures could watch his speeches. His audience was not limited to the people who were present at these meetings. In fact, he tried to address other groups in his speeches, especially the people and other high-ranking personalities. Based on this, we analyzed the speeches of three high-ranking clerics and the tweets of ordinary citizens to examine how Rouhani’s speeches were perceived and responded to among these groups.

What follows is a discussion of how Rouhani employed rhetorical devices to articulate a discourse of COVID-19.

**Between state and people: when identification strategies fail**

Drawing on historical populist discourse in Iran, Rouhani constructed the people as the discursive us within the broad frame of solidarity. He discursively placed the people in a historical context to strengthen this construction. On February 27, 2020, Rouhani said at the beginning of the Cabinet meeting,

> I would like to say to our beloved people, like all the events that our country has experienced from time to time, and the government and the people have gone through them hand in hand and cooperatively, we will also go through the COVID-19 crisis together.⁵

He later clarified that by these events he meant the Iran-Iraq war and sanctions in particular. In later sections, we will discuss how Rouhani used war metaphors in the context of these events to legitimize his government policies.

Referring to the people as us is routine rhetoric in Iran’s hegemonic discourse, as it is in other populist discourses of authoritarian regimes. Yet the way Rouhani referred to the people as us differs from what was common for Iranian politicians in the past. Traditionally, Iranian politicians, particularly Khamenei, identified the regime with the people (Holiday 2016). Rouhani, however, identified his government with the people to emphasize his government’s distance from the regime. On April 22, he emphasized: *Others should not assume that it is the government’s achievement if we overcome the COVID-19 crisis. No! That is why, some people are worried. It is primarily the people’s work, and if we emerge triumphant against this virus, it will be the victory of the nation. Yes, the government employees are also part of the nation; they are not separate from the people. We, all of us, have worked hand in hand, and this is a national achievement (NOCC).*

This excerpt shows that Rouhani was not concerned with restoring the regime’s legitimacy. His primary concern was the legitimacy of his government, which he knew had suffered significantly in the wake of events such as the November 2019 protests and the shooting down of the passenger plane. He referred to his government as the people who needed to restore the damaged ties between his government and dissident citizens. He did not use the term Iranian politicians often evoked in reference to the Islamic state: Nizam (the regime). In Iranian political discourse, nizam means the totality
of the regime as a unified whole. It is a keyword in the speeches of Khamenei and other high-ranking politicians. Rouhani refrained from linking his governance to the nizam. He reiterated that any likely success against the virus should be attributed to the work of the people and the government. Of course, he said, his government was part of the nizam, but he wanted to show that they were two different systems. By pointing out the gap between the nizam and the government, Rouhani sought to blame the nizam for activities that made people unhappy and to exonerate his government from any shortcomings in this regard. Moreover, Rouhani constructed government policies and activities as a dominant frame to reassure people that the government, which cannot be separated from them, was working hard to manage the crisis. In this way, he tried to restore popular trust in the government, which had been lost after the violent suppression of the nationwide protests. He emphasized his government’s willingness to make sacrifices when he said his government would not go on Nowruz vacation: Other people will take their New Year vacations, but government agencies, ministers, members of the NOCC and other officials will stay at work and not go on vacation (Cabinet, March 18). The New Year vacation is of great importance to Iranians. There are many traditions and rituals to celebrate the New Year. Rouhani wanted to show how far he and his men were willing to go in the service of the people.

He went even further, using a metaphor of slavery: our people must trust their valets, their servants. We are all here to serve them, and we do all we can to make their lives easier (NOCC, March 28). This servile discourse is deeply rooted in the populist discourse of politicians in Iran and is used in an attempt to manipulate the masses and win over the hearts of the electorate. Metaphors of servitude are used to empower people and make them feel that the authorities are not above them. This makes them feel that they have a higher status than those who are trying to control them. Using these terms, Rouhani emphasized the regime’s legacy of subalternity to show Khamenei and other high-ranking clerics that he is part of the system, and they cannot deny this. He tried to use the meaning of the word servant in a way that served his political interests, not necessarily in favour of the regime. His claim that the government is the people’s servant means that his government would not harm the people, who are the masters of the government (Vali Nemat). It was his strategy to distance himself and the government from the events of November.

Twitter users, however, had not warmed to his efforts. They still distrusted the government; indeed, they seemed to distrust it more than ever. They expressed concern about the government’s ability to manage the crisis and its honesty. Rouhani was attacked on Twitter by both conservative and opposition users. Conservative users took the opportunity to continue their hostility toward Rouhani, which had continued since his 2013 election victory. Although they offered no criticism of the regime, they sarcastically claimed that Rouhani was a more dangerous virus than COVID-19. For them, the crisis gave them ammunition to attack Rouhani’s abilities as president. The main goal was to criticize Rouhani, no matter what else was happening. @EbneHava_, an elite user loyal to the regime, tweeted on April 10: If we defeat Rouhani’s government, COVID-19 will be defeated subsequently.

On the one hand, radical anti-regime users identified Rouhani with the regime. Therefore, criticizing him was a strategy to question the entire political system. The moderate opponents of the regime, on the other hand, focused on the government’s activities and
questioned the effectiveness of the control measures. Nevertheless, all of these users agreed that they did not believe in Rouhani’s ability to control the crisis. They also doubted the government’s honesty in reporting cases and facts about the crisis. Rouhani, of course, tried to respond to them arguing: I can assure all our dear people that this government is above manipulating figures. We report everything that happens honestly and without manipulation (Cabinet, February 27). However, users’ response was sarcastic and incredulous: Rouhani said that the number of cases in Iran was lower than in other countries where COVID-19 had been seen. Ok, if you put breathing problems as the cause of death in the death license, that’s what happens (kurosh_tehranii, March 28).

Not only did Rouhani pursue the goal of constructing the people as us through the above practices, but he also deliberately avoided mentioning anything that could harm this process. In particular, he did not mention the November protests even once. There is no direct or indirect reference to the nationwide bloodshed in his speeches. Yet Twitter users seized on one of his phrases to revive memories of the protests and blame Rouhani for both suppressing citizens in November and managing the COVID-19 crisis. Rouhani said on February 26 at the first NOCC meeting: From Saturday on, everything will go back to normal. This sentence evoked another sentence Rouhani said a few days after the November protests began. The November protests began with protests against the rising price of petrol. The decision to raise the price was announced in the early hours of Friday, November 15, 2019. A few days later, Rouhani said in a strange speech, later mocked by many citizens, that he was also informed of the decision on Friday morning. A user who linked these two events tweeted on March 3: Rouhani remains silent about the COVID-19 crisis as if it is not Friday morning yet so that he learns that the virus has spread throughout the country. Users criticized Rouhani’s tactic of showing himself as unaware of these incidents. Moreover, they used this phrase repeatedly to show how empty and unreliable Rouhani’s promises are. A week later, an Iranian journalist shared her article in London Keyhan, an Iranian website abroad, writing: Remember Rouhani said a week ago that everything will be back to normal starting Saturday? Read this article to see if that’s true! A month later, a user tweeted: One month ago, Rouhani said that everything would be normal from Saturday, do not worry! Today he said no one can predict the end of the coronavirus. In the next two days, he will surely say, COVID-19 like us, akhonds, is a permanent thing and will not go away. Accept it! The term akhond is a derogatory colloquial term, typically used to criticize Islamic clerics. Akhonds are seen as uneducated and ignorant, typically by non-clerics and Westerners. In this tweet, the use of the term akhond was meant to show that the president was dishonest and the regime was false.

The above interpretations show that Rouhani found it difficult to identify his government with the people. At the very least, Twitter users did not accept that they were the masters and the government was their servant. Another ill-advised statement by Rouhani deepened the rift between his government and the people. In the context of government activities, Rouhani emphasized continuing economic activities rather than sealing off cities. Iran was under the strict sanctions imposed by the U.S. The economic situation had deteriorated, and the inflation rate was high. It appeared that the government did not have enough resources to adequately manage the country. Under these circumstances, Rouhani was reluctant to halt industrial and economic activities, knowing that it would worsen the situation. He also rejected the proposal to quarantine Tehran and
other major cities, believing that this would exacerbate social discontent. At the April 9 NOCC meeting, he said: *Even if even 2 to 2.5 million people die from COVID-19, we cannot afford to shut down the country because of the economic situation.* He went on to say: *If we shut down businesses and economic activities, a little later, 30 million hungry people will take to the streets in protest.*

Nevertheless, he was aware that this decision was not in the people’s best interests. Therefore, he tried to legitimize his government’s policy in three ways. First, he used a rhetorical tactic similar to that used by authoritarian politicians: conspiracy theory (Edelman 1971). He repeatedly argued that the cessation of activities and the quarantine of the country were the enemy’s plans to harm the country: *It is the conspiracy of the anti-revolutionary people to stop economic activities. That is their plan. We should not allow them to do that by continuing the activities as usual (NOCC, March 24).*

He also emphasized the government’s responsibility for the people’s livelihood: *We are responsible not only for people’s health and safety but also for their livelihood. We should meet their needs and help them finance their lives (Cabinet, March 29).* Finally, he resorted to religious metaphors to persuade some of his audience, especially to satisfy religious figures and authorities. By placing economic activities in a religious context, he said: *One of our hands should ascend to heaven to receive the mercy of God, and the other hand should be at work, both for the health and sustenance of society (Cabinet, April 22).* He tried to arouse people’s humanitarian feelings and religious beliefs to justify his decisions in the latter two ways.

However, the discursive analyses show that he failed to convince users who believed that government policies put their lives in danger. They demanded the closure of offices, schools, roads, etc. and financial support to stay at home. @aboozar_g, a local Iranian journalist, tweeted on March 24: *With government offices now open, responsibility for any infection or death by COVID-19 lies directly with Rouhani and those who could have stopped him but did not.* This user directly addressed Rouhani and Saeed Namaki, the minister of health, by mentioning their Twitter handles. In addition, users claimed that Rouhani intentionally mismanaged the crisis to gain political advantage. @SadriniaAli, an ultraconservative user, tweeted: *The words of Abbas Abdi are really significant. He said that Rouhani does not take serious and strict decisions to control COVID-19 because he thinks this crisis is an excellent opportunity to start negotiations with the U.S.* Opponents of the regime, on the other hand, accused Rouhani of using COVID-19 to solicit money from international organizations and to portray Iran as a country oppressed because of sanctions. In their opinion, this was a tactic to force the U.S. to lift the sanctions. The reactions of users on Twitter show that Rouhani not only failed to win the trust of dissidents but also failed to win over conservative and religious users. Even the use of religious phrases did not go down well with the people.

Nonetheless, Rouhani’s emphasis on economic activity echoed Khamenei’s discourse rhetorically. Khamenei had been emphasizing the ‘resistance economy’ for years in response to U.S. sanctions. Although Rouhani tried to distance himself from Khamenei, the country’s critical situation forced him to side with him on this issue, even at the cost of increasing his distance from the people.

While Rouhani primarily sought to identify with the people rather than the regime, his speeches also made minor attempts to identify his government with it. In the context of solidarity, he thanked powerful state organizations such as the IRGC from time to time for
their role in dealing with the crisis and emphasized that all parts of the state were working together to do so. Rouhani could not completely separate himself from the establishment as president of the Islamic Republic. He had to offer something to his powerful opponents in the state to prevent their attacks and defuse their critics. Nevertheless, he discursively tried to develop a rhetoric that showed he was not really serious about thanking them. Rouhani spoke mainly of the ‘armed forces’ when discussing their role in the crisis. Only rarely did he mention the name of the IRGC to thank them. Moreover, he refers to their role only in general and vague sentences, without further details and, for example, mentioning their names to show that he actually believes these organizations are helping the government.

Whenever he wanted to give details about his activities, he talked about his government and not what the government was doing in cooperation with the armed forces or the IRGC. Rouhani thus focused on building his relations with the people at nodal points but mentioned the state organizations in other parts of his speeches only to silence them. This was a rhetorical tactic to identify the government with the people while he avoided clearly distancing himself from state organizations. Moreover, COVID-19 was a crisis that required all of the country’s resources to address. In recent years, Rouhani had repeatedly accused the IRGC and other conservative figures and organizations of interfering in the government’s work. Therefore, he did not want them to do so in this crisis as well. Therefore, he decided not to continue the fight with them when his government was involved in another crisis. However, discursive analyses have shown that Rouhani cleverly marginalized his opponents, including the IRGC and other conservatives, without mentioning them directly (more on this later).

Rouhani also pursued the same strategy toward Khamenei. While he had some implicit or explicit disagreements with Khamenei in previous years, he did not distance himself from the supreme leader during the pandemic. Again, he did not want a conflict with the powerful supreme leader, who could cause many problems for his government amid the crisis. However, he also avoided identifying himself directly with the leader. Rouhani mainly referred to Khamenei to legitimize his government decisions and convince regime supporters. In his speeches, Rouhani did not attempt to establish a discursive us with the leader, the IRGC, or other state organizations. While he acknowledged their role and support, it was half-hearted at best. For example, he did not mention Khamenei or his proposed resistance economy when highlighting economic activities.

This exemplifies Rouhani’s deft juggling act to woo both the populace and the power centres to support his government at this delicate time. In order to govern without upsetting the balance among the ruling groups, he tried to identify his administration with the ordinary people while not making the leader or prominent military and religious figures unhappy. The following sections delve into this issue by examining the othering strategies in Rouhani’s speeches using war and religious metaphors.

**The language of war**

The use of war language and metaphors in crises is common, especially in authoritarian regimes (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018; Gibbs 2018). Rouhani used war language for two main purposes: othering the U.S and other Western countries and
legitimizing Iran’s hostile foreign policy toward them, and othering local opponents and critics.

While Rouhani’s construction of us somewhat deviated from the hegemonic discourse in Iran, his discursive articulation of them conformed with the populist discourse in Iran. In fact, Rouhani used war metaphors to reinforce the position of the U.S. as an enemy of the regime. He used war metaphors to portray COVID-19 as an enemy, and then likened COVID-19 to the U.S. In particular, he used a metaphor to cast COVID-19 as a war, a loaded term in Islam and hegemonic discourse that roughly corresponds to jihad. Jihad is the war of Muslims against kuffar, enemies. So, it is a holy war, and all people should be ready to sacrifice their lives.

Putting the pandemic in a historical context, he referred to the COVID-19 crisis as the third war the Islamic Republic has experienced in its history to justify this narrative: The first war was with Iraq; at the time of the holy defense, all people needed to cooperate and work to make the country successful in this war. The second was the sanctions. In both wars, we also fought with the U.S., and other major powers. Now the COVID-19 crisis could be understood as the third war we should fight (NOCC, March 31). In this excerpt, Rouhani also set the stage to cast COVID-19 as the U.S. Later, he stated that COVID-19 was an enemy like the U.S. There is no difference between them, he said, and since the country must fight against COVID-19, it must also fight against the U.S. because it is also a virus. By personifying COVID-19, he stated: Superpowers are as insolent as COVID-19; if you lose your spirit against them, they will become more insolent, but if you stand against them, they will flee (NOCC, April 26).

Rouhani rhetorically portrayed the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic as a jihad against the U.S. and other Western enemies. He used this metaphor to simplify the regime’s hostility against them. He no longer needed to explain this hostile policy’s historical context or international background; the U.S is an enemy because it is a virus. Nothing more needed to be added to that.

The Western world is often viewed with suspicion and a great deal of hostility in Iran, and Rouhani used the COVID-19 case to buttress this narrative. Moreover, he sought to prove to Khamenei and other hardliners that he is on their side in the country’s international politics despite the problems he has with them domestically. So, while he sided with the people on domestic issues, he sided with Khamenei on foreign policy, trying to satisfy both sides. Khamenei and other ultraconservative figures also stressed their hostility toward the U.S. Like Rouhani, they portrayed the COVID-19 crisis as a biological war planned by the U.S. to harm Iran. Yet, they did not refer to each other explicitly when constructing COVID-19 as the enemy’s weapon, using the same conspiracy language without crediting each other.

In response to conservative and high-ranking officials criticizing him for his efforts to negotiate with the U.S., Rouhani’s metaphorical war against the U.S. was a way of signaling to them that he was a revolutionary, not someone who would ally himself with the United States. In contrast, users on Twitter loyal to the regime dismissed these efforts as attempts to appease the West, with some sarcastically claiming that Rouhani loved the West and dreamt of relations with it. @aliakbarbsj tweeted on April 12: Rouhani is trying to exploit the COVID-19 crisis to justify negotiations with the West. The Westernized virus of our officials is much worse than any other virus. Another conservative user embedded a metaphor in his tweet to suggest Rouhani’s captivation with the U.S.
Sharing a video of the arrival of medical materials to Imam Khomeini Airport, Tehran, from China, he tweeted: The arrival of a sanitary cargo from China, …., p.s: the kadkhoda-parast Rouhani (@ajVcBfLrcxnVo7, March 17). First, this user implicitly responded to criticisms of China by pointing out the health materials China had sent to Iran. Then he sarcastically criticized Rouhani’s policy of negotiating with the U.S. and not relying on China. *Kadkhoda parast* means the one who worships the village master. Hassan Rouhani used this metaphor during the negotiations when he said that it makes more sense to negotiate with the village master (the U.S) than to talk to other (European) countries to justify his government’s talks with the U.S.

As noted earlier, Rouhani created metaphorical contexts in which he depicted the U.S. as a virus. On the other hand, he then used military-style metaphors to produce a narrative to reinforce this tactic: Medical personnel are the defenders of society’s health, fighting on the front lines against the virus, the enemy. Rouhani also described the medical personnel who died from the coronavirus as martyrs in duty. This narrative was also strengthened by other ideological apparatuses in Iran, such as TV and the billboards of cities (Gölz 2020). The metaphor of the defenders of health was also associated with another metaphor that referred to the people who fought in Syria: the defenders of the Haram, which is the holy shrine of the Shiite imams. This metaphor says that the holy shrines of the Shiite Imams are in danger and that those fighting in Syria are trying to protect these holy places. Therefore, they should be respected and honoured. Metaphors are tools to see something in relation to something else (Burke 1941). In this case, Rouhani was talking about dealing with the virus. But this metaphorical language was about fighting the U.S. Since the U.S. is a virus, the defenders of the Haram are actually the defenders of the health of society. The U.S. is a virus that threatens the health and security of society. So those who fight it are defending society. Metaphor is a trope to simplify complex relationships and concepts in the real world. Rouhani used it to justify Iran’s foreign policy based on hostility to and fighting against the U.S., for example, in Syria. Rouhani’s othering strategies were not limited to foreign countries. He also used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to attack his local opponents and critics. The enemy in his rhetoric was anyone who did not believe in his government’s actions and policies. Anyone who showed the slightest bit of skepticism was his enemy and was labelled an opponent of the revolution. It is a holy war, and Rouhani is even willing to collaborate with his opponents like the IRGC, leaving no room for criticism. Anyone who raises his voice to protest is an agent of foreign countries trying to jeopardize the country’s stability and unity.

Rouhani explicitly named several enemies in his speeches: satellite broadcasters, the Internet, and social media. Nevertheless, he attacked some imaginary unknown enemies by dressing his statements in ambiguous terms and unclear metaphors. Since he clearly referred to the Western countries, the U.S., the Iranian diaspora, and their media as enemies, they could not have been among his imaginary enemies. First, he separated imaginary enemies from the people to prevent his efforts to rebuild relations with the people from being damaged: *COVID-19 has some merits despite all the problems it has caused. It has united us again; of course, we have always been united, but sometimes some have tried to threaten our solidarity* (Cabinet, February 26). Then he attacked them with sarcastic metaphors: *Everyone wants to be a wise man in these conditions. We have many fazels, wise men, but our reference is the Ministry of Health, and we have no second reference.*
We ask these people to tell the people the truth. They should not prescribe anything for the country (NOCC, March 28). He was probably attacking his conservative opponents and hardline figures in this way. Not wanting to confront his opponents directly, he thanked them half-heartedly but countered their claims with subtle and indirect metaphors. With a shield of rhetoric, he was careful not to give them anything they could use against him or his government. One metaphor in Rouhani’s speeches makes this argument even more viable. Rouhani referred to critics as COVID-19’s tradesmen (Kaseban-e-Corona). During the first round of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5 + 1 in March and April 2015, Iranian President Rouhani likened his critics to merchants who condemned the nuclear agreement only to make a living. In his view, these critics, most of whom were from the conservative camp and opposed the nuclear agreement, had a vested interest in prolonging sanctions against Iran. Similarly, Rouhani linked those who criticized him in the COVID-19 crisis to the critics of the negotiations, who were mainly conservatives. He implied that the COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity to them and that they were trying to gain their own benefits at the expense of the lives of people and the country’s health.

**Religious metaphors**

The chief cause of the dispute that sprang up between Rouhani and religious figures was the closure of holy sites. Already angered by Rouhani’s willingness to cooperate with Western nations, religious leaders were particularly incensed by the ordered closure of certain religious sites. Saeidi, the Qom’s Friday prayer leader, said on February 27: *We consider this holy shrine a place of healing. This means that people should come here to be healed from spiritual and physical diseases. Therefore, this place should be kept open so that people can come and heal their pain.* He resorted to conspiracy theories, claiming that the closure of the Masoomeh shrine was the U.S. and Trump’s plan to discredit Qom: *Trump wants to hurt the prestige of Qom, and he wants to take revenge on Qom for all his defeats. We should not allow the enemies to portray Qom as an unsafe city.*

Rouhani did not identify with these ultraconservative clerics. Although he was a cleric himself, he wanted to distance himself from the hardliners in order to solidify his reputation for moderation. He also recognized that closing public places was necessary to contain the virus, and he understood that it would be difficult to justify closing other places if sacred sites were exempt. Moreover, he could not contradict the powerful clerics, so he used their own smart-sounding language, rich in religious jargon, to confront their positions. Being a cleric himself, he knew that the religious figures were familiar with religious short-hand and catch-phrases. With his rhetorical confrontation, he used their own language against them. First, he emphasized that good health was a religious duty and that visiting holy sites was a voluntary act (Cabinet, March 23). He backed up this argument by quoting the Prophet Mohammad: *Hygiene is part of faith* (Cabinet, March 23), which can be roughly translated as ‘cleanliness is next to godliness.’

In another excerpt, he said: How can we avoid this virus? The solution is Taghva. As Taghva is a way to stay away from some sins in Islam, here, we should avoid everything that can infect us (NOCC, April 27). Taghva means that a Muslim should avoid sins because he knows God. With this metaphor, Rouhani implicitly justifies refraining from going to public places as a form of taghva. As places where people could be infected, even
religious sites should be avoided; not only is it not against Islamic rules, but also it is in line with them.

Rouhani also referred to Khamenei to legitimize his controversial measures and silence his religious critics. As the supreme leader, Khamenei holds a high position to which all other forces in society, especially religious forces, are subordinated. This is the reason why Rouhani, despite his problems with the leader, decided to rely on him in this case. He knew that he could not stand alone against high-ranking religious opponents. This also explains why he did not continue his previous confrontations with the leader and other powerful conservative figures and organizations. While he did not express his governmental obedience to the leader, he emphasized that the leader supported him. Every year, some Rahiyan-e-nour tours organized by the IRGC take place in Iran, where students travel to the regions where Iran fought against Iraq to be reminded of the holy defense. These tours took place in late March, a few days before the new year. Rouhani decided to cancel Rahiyan-e-nour. He clearly referred to Khamenei to silence his powerful critics: *It is decided in the NOCC to cancel Rahiyan-e-nour this year. … from a religious point of view, it should be followed, since the supreme leader has confirmed it and said that everyone should abide by it (NOCC, February 25).* Even though Rouhani did not aim to render obedience to Khamenei, he skillfully referred to him, again and again, to justify his decisions, especially when tensions with religious figures were likely to arise.

The discursive analyses show that Rouhani was successful with his strategy. Saeidi confirmed a month after his initial angry reaction that the holy shrine of Masoomeh would be closed to contain the disease. Both Saeidi and Alamolhoda invoked Khamenei to justify their remarks. While they acknowledged the authorities’ work in dealing with the crisis, they did not mention Rouhani with a single word. They made only general and vague comments. As noted earlier, Rouhani did not mention them either. Rouhani and his powerful clerical opponents invoked Khamenei without explicitly praising or supporting each other.

Rouhani then developed a frame of hope and optimism, using religious metaphors to reassure clerics and religious people who were unhappy because they were prevented from freely going to holy sites: *We will again go to our holy places and pray for our GOD. These days are bitter and hard for all of us, but they will be over, and we can again find peace and comfort under the roofs of the merciful Imams (Cabinet, March 11).*

**Conclusion**

Uncertain and destabilizing events such as the first wave of the pandemic create situations in which rhetorical discourse can be produced and developed. This paper examines how Rouhani managed to produce a rhetorical discourse while COVID-19 posed a significant challenge to Iran as a hybrid regime. It also studies the extent to which this rhetorical discourse was perceived and responded to by ultra-conservative figures in Iran and by Twitter users. Henceforth, this study improves our understanding of Iranian political discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic and of crisis rhetoric around the world.

This study confirms the existing literature that identifies key discursive frames in political speeches during the pandemic. Rouhani, like other politicians in democratic or non-democratic countries (Dada et al. 2021; Krishnatray and Shrivastava 2021; Montiel, Uyheng, and Dela Paz 2021), developed frames of solidarity, hope and optimism,
enemy and the Other, protection and prevention, and government activities and control measures. In this sense, he responded to the crisis in a way that is normal for a political leader. However, to understand the complexity and nuances of his rhetoric in the Iranian political context, we focused on identification and metaphor as two important rhetorical devices. This paper attempts to fill the existing gap in political communication scholarship by identifying and analyzing such devices in speeches given by leaders in non-democratic societies.

As previous research on political discourse in Iran shows, Rouhani developed a populist discourse during the pandemic. Following the historical hegemonic populist discourse in Iran, he constructed this discourse based on the distinction and hostility between us and them. Within the hegemonic discourse, us refers to the state and them refers to the U.S., Western countries, and all other countries that do not recognize the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. However, this discourse analysis shows that Rouhani’s rhetoric differs in some ways from the hegemonic discourse in Iran. In fact, he identified his government, not the regime, with the people. Moreover, he did not make a special effort to restore the regime’s legitimacy. Rouhani did not identify his government with the supreme leader, the IRGC, or other state forces and institutions. Instead, he metaphorically referred to his government as the people’s servant. However, discursive analysis of Iranian users’ tweets shows that he has failed to forge such a relationship. Whether they were anti-regime or pro-regime, Iranian users did not endorse such identification. On the contrary, they emphasized the division between them and the government. Several critical moments, such as the time when Rouhani advocated continued economic activity despite the threat of the coronavirus, reinforced this ever-widening chasm.

Two reasons justify Rouhani’s attempt to identify his government with the people. First, he followed a logic that any other political leader would use in times of crisis. They try to reduce the level of confrontation and strengthen solidarity within society. Second, he sought to rebuild and restore the damaged relationship with the people after the November 2019 protests and the shooting down of the Ukrainian airliner. The significant discursive deviation from hegemonic discourse here is his emphasis on the government instead of the state. In democratic countries, there is no such distinction between state and government. Thus, politicians are not confronted with such a dichotomy, where they have to choose between government and state in order to identify with the people.

Although Rouhani tried to identify his government with the people and stay away from the state, he was inevitably part of the political establishment. Rouhani was also in the midst of a serious crisis in government. This crisis was so severe that he was unable to separate the legitimacy of his government from that of the Supreme Leader. Rouhani ended up modifying his previous tactics and ended his attacks on the IRGC and other revolutionary factions, which he had done in previous years. Instead, Rouhani distanced himself rhetorically and tried not to antagonize the senior clerics and ultraconservative figures. Initially, he built his rhetoric as it had been articulated in hegemonic discourse since the victory of the 1979 revolution. He equated COVID-19 with the U.S. and other Western countries to portray them as enemies. It was also an attempt to address conservatives’ concerns about his efforts in negotiating the Iranian nuclear agreement with the U.S. Conservative users, however, rejected his efforts, believing Rouhani to be a politician sympathetic to the West. Powerful clerics also disagreed that he was one of them because
of his previous benevolent stance toward the U.S. Second, he thanked the leader, the IRGC, and other state figures and organizations in a symbolic gesture of solidarity to convey that all parts of the political system were indeed working together in this crisis. However, his actions and behaviour suggested otherwise. He did so as a courtesy to avoid any conflict with powerful figures and organizations because his government needed the help of all the country’s forces and all its resources to overcome the crisis. The main authority lies with the leader and in the hands of the IRGC, and therefore he had no choice but to thank them for their role in overcoming the crisis.

Nevertheless, he used rhetorical devices to show that these were disingenuous tactics and that the old hostilities persisted. He othered his local critics and opponents by using war language and metaphors. While he did not attack his conservative opponents directly, he did use metaphors such as Kaseban-e-Corona, Coronavirus merchants, a metaphor echoing the one he had used to criticize his conservative opponents during the nuclear negotiations. He also clearly referred to the U.S., Iranian-language media abroad, and social media as enemies on several occasions. Likewise, he did not hesitate to denounce local critics who were independent or not part of his camp. Thus, his metaphorical attacks were largely directed against conservative figures.

In addition, Rouhani used religious metaphors to push back against clerics who questioned his decisions to close holy sites. Again, he knew that the population wanted these sites closed to prevent the spread of the virus. However, he did not want a war with such powerful clerics. Therefore, he used their language to fight back with them. He used religious metaphors to justify his government policies and silence his religious opponents. Moreover, he tactically invoked Khamenei to use his prestige and power to overcome his religious critics. He did not express sincere obedience to Khamenei, nor did he pay tribute to him, even when he spoke about his highly publicized resistance economy. He merely invoked Khamenei’s support and endorsement of government decisions to prevent other ultraconservative clerics from accusing him of closing holy sites. This is yet another reason that confirms that he was not serious when he thanked Khamenei in his speeches.

In this paper, we examined Rouhani’s rhetorical response to the pandemic in Iran, which had a devastating impact on the country. We analyzed the content of his speeches and found that his discourse did not fully match the prevailing discourse in the Islamic Republic at the time. It is true that Rouhani’s discourse was grounded in a populist logic in which the dichotomy of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is reinforced. But the way he articulated these discursive constructs is anything but straightforward and simple. In this sense, this study contributes to our understanding of how rhetorical discourses are developed and articulated during the pandemic in hybrid regimes.

This investigation also provides a direction for further research that can examine the rhetoric of politicians in democratic and non-democratic societies to deepen our knowledge of the dynamics of rhetorical discourse in different political contexts. Moreover, a thorough examination of the rhetoric of some politicians such as Khamenei and Rouhani in hybrid regimes in the next waves of the pandemic could enrich the findings of this study. Further research could be done on how hegemonic discourses were entrenched or faltered in the early days of the discovery of a COVID-19 vaccine. For instance, the importation of the COVID-19 vaccine led to a significant discursive struggle in Iran, particularly between the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President
Hassan Rouhani. The impact of this struggle on the divided Iranian society could be further explored.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, the terms pandemic or COVID-19 crisis and similar terms refer to the first wave of the coronavirus crisis.
2. Hybrid regimes are widely seen as a recent phenomenon emerging after the Cold War and becoming increasingly widespread within the last decade (Levitsky and Way 2010). Morlino (2021, 144) believes that the distinguishing aspect of what we call hybrid regimes is the coexistence of different tenets and empirical features, often opposite features, where there are past and present, that is, the legacy and the innovation at the same time. Following this rationale, he explains why this term is preferred on others like ‘illiberal democracies’ (Zakaria 1997), ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Levitsky and Way 2010), ‘semiauthoritarianism’ (Ottaway 2003). Finer (1970) also defines this particular type of political system as regimes that are characterized by institutions that are recurrent in a democracy, such as a constitutional charter and elections, but where the constitutional rules are not effectively implemented and have only a symbolic role, and the elections are only partially competitive and free, but not fair. In this way, hybrid regimes are different from other political establishments such as democracy, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and traditional or personalistic regimes. For instance, they provide more limited margins of liberties and pose higher costs for protesters than liberal democracies. Yet, unlike authoritarian regimes, where the opportunity for open and public movements is simply absent, the politics of hybrid regimes does not entail the total closure of the political space for protests and movements. In summary, Mufti (2018) believes that hybrid regimes are the systems that occupied the ‘grey zone’ between liberal democracies on the one hand and closed authoritarian regimes on the other (p. 112). While there is an ongoing debate on hybrid regimes, this discussion is satisfying to the purpose of this research.
3. The commander of the Quds Force, an IRGC division primarily responsible for extraterritorial and clandestine military operations.
4. Vatz (1973) criticizes Bitzer’s idea of the rhetorical situation. He noted that Bitzer’s position is that meaning resides in situations and that rhetoric is consequently situational (p. 155). In contrast, Vatz argues that meaning is not discovered in situations but is created by rhetors (p. 157). Thus, there is no situation that is rhetorical by itself; it is the rhetors and the way they use language that make a situation rhetorical. Vatz emphasizes that rhetorical discourse does not receive its character as rhetorical from the situation that produces it but that it is situations that receive their character from the rhetoric that surrounds or produces them (p. 159). Despite this scholarly dispute, and although we are more sympathetic to Vatz, we still believe that Bitzer’s concept can serve as an appropriate conceptual foundation for the purpose of this study.
5. In the reminder of the paper, if the place and date of the speech from which each excerpt is taken are not given in the text, they are provided at the end of the sentence.
6. A reformist figure
7. Rouhani interchangeably referred to the U.S and the West as enemies. We also use these terms interchangeably in this paper.

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Glossary

| Acronym   | Description                                      |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|
| IRGC      | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps                |
| IRIB      | Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting            |
| Velayat-e-Faghih | The guardianship of the jurist          |
| Mosharekat-e-hadeaksary | Maximum voter turnout                  |
| Nizam     | The regime                                       |
| Vali nemat | Master                                           |
| Koffar    | Enemies                                          |
| Jihad     | Muslim’s war against enemies                     |
| Akhond    | clergy                                           |

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