

A case study on the COVID-19 discourse in politicians' speeches: Investigations into the speeches of former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's thirty speeches on COVID-19 delivered between February 2, 2020 and April 27, 2020. We apply Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse analysis to investigate and analyze Rouhani's rhetorical and discursive strategies in making meaning of COVID-19. Findings showed that COVID-19 discourse in Rouhani's speeches has mainly revolved around three nodal points: "the country", "the enemy", and "the state of exception". Thus, the structural articulation of COVID-19 discourse resembles the hegemonic discourse in Iran. Our results also explain how Rouhani used COVID-19 as an empty signifier to reinforce the hegemonic discourse in Iran while trying to redefine his relations with the state-leaning organizations. Furthermore, we analyzed the rhetorical practices that Rouhani employed to articulate the COVID-19 discourse. This paper contributes to a growing body of literature into discursive aspects and implications of a global pandemic by providing empirical evidence from an understudied context: Iran.

Keywords

COVID-19, Iran, discourse analysis, coronavirus

1 Introduction: A discursive approach to COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic placed the world in a state of concern and shutdown unprecedented since the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic (Kachanoff, Yochanan, Kapsaskis, & Gray, 2020). Medical attention to the virus has been considerable. A growing body of research on this pandemic in the social sciences ranges from the study of communicative practices (Everett, Colombatto, Chituc, Brady, & Crockett, 2020) to assessment of conspiracy theories (Frischlich, 2020), digital inequalities (Khilmani, Schulz, & Robinson, 2020) and the spread of misinformation (Xie et al., 2020). A line of study examines how people, particularly political leaders, impose meanings on the coronavirus as an empty signifier. Indeed, from a linguistic and discursive perspective, there is a struggle over the meaning of COVID-19.

However, the majority of research on this issue is Western-centric and focused on 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. Some studies examine the factors that contribute to politicians' success in persuading people to follow health regulations. For example, Sergent and Stajkovic (2020) show that U.S. residents may have responded more positively to early orders from female governors to stay home. Another line of study has addressed how political actors construct or redefine enduring social concepts under these unfamiliar and unprecedented circumstances. Andreouli and Brice (2022) found that the discourse of the British government seems to challenge the dominant model of the neoliberal citizen. In another study, Berrocal et al. (2021) examine discursive constructions of solidarity and nationalism in the initial statements of lead-



ing politicians in 29 countries. Several studies focused on redefinitions of identity in politicians' speeches, such as Haslam, Steffens, Reicher, and Bentley (2021) who demonstrated the importance of leaders cultivating a shared sense of identity and mitigating group divisions during the pandemic.

A number of studies on framing and agenda-building strategies in politicians' speeches seek to understand how politicians communicate rhetorically with the public, define the new situation, and announce and legitimize actions taken to mitigate risk. After analyzing speeches of leaders from five countries with the highest (nominal) GDP, Krishnatray and Shrivastava (2021) discuss four dominant frames developed by political leaders to appropriate the situation: "prevention-protection," "the Other," "solidarity," and "hope and comfort." Similar findings are offered by researchers comparing the political rhetoric of national leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic in larger samples (Dada, Ashworth, Bewa, & Dhatt, 2021; Montiel, Uyheng, & Dela Paz, 2021). From a different perspective, Crayne and Medeiros (2021) focus on leadership styles during the pandemic. They argue that charismatic leaders aim for a "brighter future" and people-centered solutions, while ideological leaders focus on the past and "going back to normal," and pragmatic leaders focus on the present to deal with situations as they arise.

Furthermore, recent research suggests that many officials adopted a military-style posture when discussing the potential spread of the virus. Benziman (2020), Molnár et al. (2020), and Chapman and Miller (2020) note that many politicians refer to the pandemic as a "battle," thus normalizing high casualty rates, harsh policies, and the relinquishment of personal agency. Finally, Spector (2020) describes how the speeches of heads of state can strategically deploy the meaning of crises to advance political interests. By combining objective descriptions of existing problems with subjective attributions of urgency, certain goals are legitimized over others.

While there is also a growing body of literature on how politicians in non-democratic societies shape discourses during the pandemic (Musolf, Breeze, Kondo, & Vilarluch, 2022), more research has to be done

if we are to better understand how political leaders communicate the crisis in non-Western societies. To this end, we examine Rouhani's speeches. Iran was among the countries that suffered from COVID-19 early and on a large scale. Despite controversial arguments claiming that the actual numbers of victims were much higher, the Iranian Ministry of Health (Official Statistics of COVID-19 in Iran, 2023) reported 146 230 deaths and 7 611 138 cases till May 29, 2023. Because of the seriousness of COVID-19, Rouhani mentioned it in most of his speeches in the early months of the crisis. Therefore, Rouhani's speeches provide a corpus of speeches that can be analyzed to determine how politicians in authoritarian countries, such as Iran, construct discourses on COVID-19 and in how far they may differ from those in democratic countries.

2 Language and discourse of politicians' speeches

Poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers have documented the importance of language in giving meaning to human actions and practices through discourses (Foucault, 2010; Willig, 2014; Young, 1981). Politicians in any society hold a privileged position and their speeches legitimize institutional power. They deliberately and strategically choose their words and compose them. As Randour, Perez, and Reuchamps (2020) explain, most articles (64 %) analyzing political discourse in the last 20 years focused on discourse of political elites. Among the different types of political actors, members of the executive branch (president, prime minister, ministers) and candidates for office have received most attention (57 %, 54 % respectively).

Based on van Dijk's (1997) definition of political discourse, the main body of the existing literature is devoted to politicians' speeches at official events or socio-political events. For example, a binary discourse of good and evil emerged in the speeches of U.S. presidents (Daghri, 2013; Hughes, 2019). In addition to studies of democratic societies (Allen, Bara, & Bartle, 2013; Chung & Park, 2010), the speech of political actors in authoritarian states may inject the

ruling ideology to order, justify and legalize their policies rather than attempt to capture people's hearts (Carreon & Svetanant, 2017, p. 640). Previous studies focused mainly on Iranian presidents' speeches delivered at official functions (e.g., presidential elections and United Nations General Assembly), and they generally reinforce the hegemonic discourse in Iran that emphasizes national pride and empowerment and is based on hostility toward the U.S. (Alemi, Tajeddin, & Rajabi Kondlaji, 2018; Jahangiry & Fattahi, 2012). This study contributes to our understanding of how discourse works in non-democratic contexts (Carreon & Svetanant, 2017; Sullivan & Sapor, 2012; Takal, 2018).

3 Fixing the web of meanings: Laclau and Mouffe on discourse theory

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) provide a valuable conceptual framework for analyzing discourse, including nodal points. A nodal point is "a privileged signifier that fixes the meaning of a signifying chain" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 112). Signs whose meanings are not yet (even partially) fixed and are open to different attributions of meaning are floating signifiers. Floating signifiers can become moments through the process of articulation. Articulation is "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified due to the articulatory practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105). Moments or key signifiers, in Rear and Jones' (2013) sense, are fixed signs that do not have central positions within the discourse as nodal points. In other words, discursive positions (elements) are transformed into meaningful moments through the process of articulation. Finally, the empty signifier acquires meaning only through its positioning in relation to other signs (Rear & Jones, 2013). Later, Laclau adopted the concept of rhetoric to point to the depth of the contingent structure of language (Bush, 2012) such that the meaning "of the world is not discovered, but constructed, through rhetorical practices" (DeLuca, 1999, p. 338).

Laclau (2014) pointed to the role metaphors and metonymies in chains of equivalences/differences. Equivalence describes

the extent to which signifiers are connected in intertextual chains to produce more or less stable discourses (Rear & Jones, 2013). Thus, each moment in the equivalence chain can be replaced by the others because they all equally face a common enemy (Thomassen, 2016). However, "the discursive turn expands the possibilities and importance of rhetoric" (DeLuca, 1999, p. 344). We will examine what other rhetorical practices work to articulate the COVID-19 discourse. We ask:

- › RQ 1: How did Rouhani articulate COVID-19 as an empty signifier?
- › RQ 2: Which rhetorical practices were used by Rouhani to articulate the COVID-19 discourse?

4 Method

We began with Rouhani's first public speech after the official announcement of the virus and continued to examine subsequent speeches. The selected speeches were published by Rouhani's cabinet or the "National Organization for Controlling COVID-19" (NOCC) on the official website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran (President.ir).¹ According to official reports, COVID-19 entered Iran from Qom, a holy city in Iran, on February 19, 2020, and killed 2 people on the first day. On February 23, four days later, Rouhani gave his first speech about COVID-19. In total, we analyzed 30 speeches by Rouhani from February 2, 2020, to April 27, 2020. All speeches went through several rounds of close reading and discursive interpretations. Following the rationale of Laclau and Mouffe's DT, we investigated the texts discursively to identify and analyze the nodal points and key signifiers (moments) as a convenient way of analyzing discourse.

¹ Research materials are no longer retrievable from this website but are available upon request by the author.

5 Findings: The discursive articulation of COVID-19 in Rouhani’s speeches

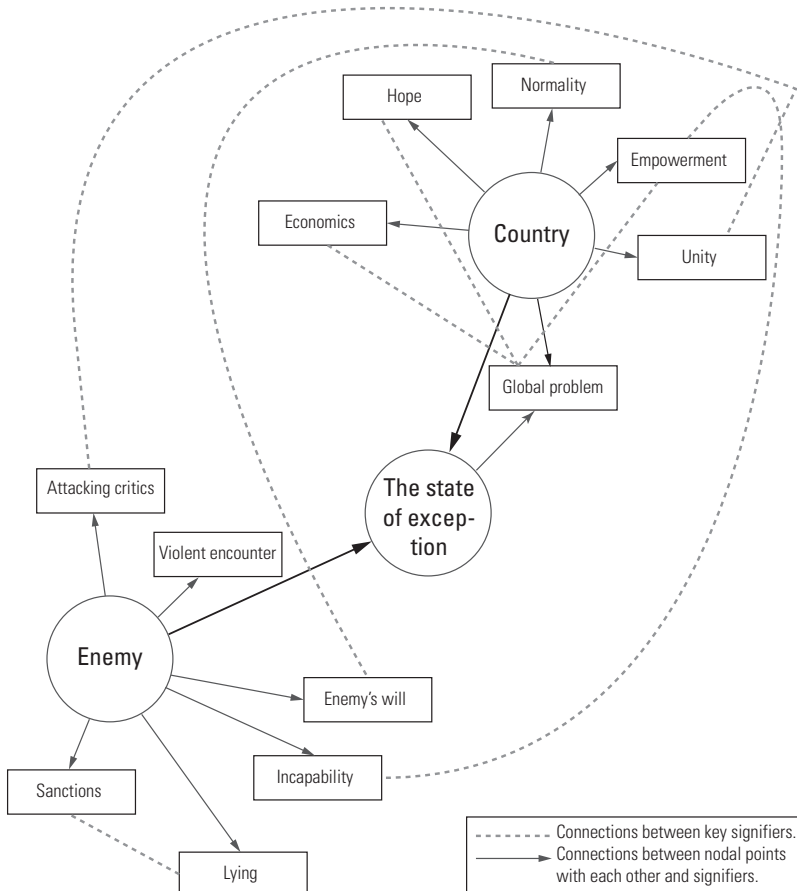
We focus on the nodal points and key signifiers (moments) (Rear & Jones, 2013). The most central nodal point, which logically connects all other signifiers, is COVID-19. In the beginning, COVID-19 was an empty signifier, but it was repeated again and again in Rouhani’s speeches and gradually filled with preferred meanings. This section examines how Rouhani imposed meaning on the empty signifier of COVID-19 and turned it into a nodal point.

COVID-19 has connections to three nodal points at the first level: “the country,” “the enemy,” and “the state of exception.” COVID-19 also has connections to other

non-central signifiers at the next levels. In fact, Rouhani constructed the meaning of the three nodal points by connecting them with other signifiers. Here, “the country,” “the enemy,” and “the state of exception” as the central nodal points form a bridge between the other signifiers and COVID-19 giving the latter its meaning. We show, first, how the three main nodal points were connected to the other signifiers and, second, how they were connected to COVID-19. This is illustrated by the web of signifiers in Figure 1 in what follows, we attempt to capture the nuances and complexities of his remarks.

Rouhani’s speeches portrayed the country and the enemy as two antagonistic signifiers connected by “the state of exception.” Antagonistic signifiers are used to divide

Figure 1: The discursive map of Rouhani’s speeches



Source: Own illustration.

signifiers and prevent them from being able to be fully themselves (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The conflict and competition between signifiers constantly threaten to destabilize each other's positions in the web of meanings as they seek to displace each other's legitimacy. The antagonistic interpretive framework is anchored in the dichotomy of "us-them" and has a long history in political theory. Carl Schmitt discussed the opposition between "friend" and "enemy" in his characterization of the political (Mehring, 2017). In Foucault's terminology, such an antagonistic divide could be understood as discursive practices of exclusion (Foucault, 1965; Peters & Besley, 2014).

However, in Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) sense, the country can be understood as discursive "us," and the enemy can be understood as "them." As Laclau argues (2008), all social elements locate their identities around dichotomized social space around these two poles. Thus, Rouhani's semantic choices reinforced the cultural discourse of Othering the enemy, where Iran and its culture are associated with positive connotations and the enemy is associated with negative signifiers. The dichotomy of "country" and "enemy" is also crucial for the hegemonic discourse in Iran (KhosraviNik, 2015; Masoudi, 2019). The hegemonic discourse of the Iranian state is essentially an antagonistic discourse (Golkar, 2012; Karimi, 2018). In this sense, the COVID-19 discourse in Rouhani's speeches resembles, to some extent, the hegemonic discourse in Iran.

Nevertheless, "the country" and "the enemy" are connected by another nodal point in this discourse: "the state of exception." It has its roots in the works of Schmitt (Goupy, 2018) and was developed by Agamben (2005, p. 1) beyond legal issues and its relationship to dictatorship to mean the "suspension of the law." Although we follow Agamben in elaborating on "the state of exception," the use of this term in Rouhani's speeches is not strictly limited to Agamben's conceptualization.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that Rouhani did not always mention such exact terms, i. e., signifiers. We take the liberty to sum up similar signifiers in Rouhani's speeches under some umbrella terms which

can capture their shared meaning to a great extent. It is most obvious in the case of "the state of exception." While Rouhani mentioned this term several times, he used other synonyms like "extraordinary time." We then classified all such alike signifiers in a big family as a nodal point or an element. A nodal point, in this sense, is not a single signifier. It is a signifying theme that covers several similar terms which were used interchangeably in Rouhani's speeches. For the purpose of this study, such terms invoked the nodal point which we used, to a great extent. We will come back to this point in the remaining parts of this article.

5.1 The country: The discursive "us" in Rouhani's speeches

Articulating "the country" with COVID-19, Rouhani also connected this nodal point to the other signifiers to construct the discursive meaning of it: "unity," "empowerment," "normality," "hope," and "the economy." Each of these signifiers has a positive meaning, and each represents positive connotations. "Unity" means that the government is unanimous in its approach to this crisis. Rouhani denied any internal discord, publicly stating, "Look at the great divide that Covid has caused in the U.S.; on the contrary, in Iran, we are all more united than in the past" (Cabinet, April 26, 2020).² Here, unity is associated with some floating signifiers such as mobilization, collaboration, and victory over COVID-19.

Also, Rouhani stressed the importance of working with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)³ and the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) in controlling COVID-19. Although Rouhani acknowledged the role of other organizations (e. g., other branches of the government and municipalities), his emphasis on the IRGC has important discursive significance. They have been condemned by democratic forces

2 In this paper, we give the place and time of the speech from which the mentioned excerpts from Rouhani's speeches are taken.

3 The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is a branch of the Iranian Armed Forces designed to protect the Islamic Republic's political system. However, the United States has considered the IRGC a terrorist organization since April 15, 2019.

inside and outside Iran for their role in suppressing democratic movements in Iran and interfering in the affairs of other countries. During the 2017 presidential campaign, President Rouhani publicly attacked the IRGC (Rouhani lambasts IRGC's role in the economy, 2017). However, Rouhani praised the IRGC on several occasions for its cooperation in suppressing the COVID-19 insurrection. This turn of events can be explained in two ways. First, Rouhani may have wanted to clear the IRGC of the above-mentioned accusations. Second, he may have wanted to show that all sectors of Iranian society were united during this period of crisis. If the government and the IRGC are cooperating, it's probably safe to assume that other adversaries will do the same during this tumultuous period of time.

The same logic could be applied to understand Rouhani's positive encounter with IRIB. During his presidential campaigns, Rouhani repeatedly criticized IRIB. However, when he spoke about COVID-19, he emphasized how IRIB had played an important and constructive role. It appeared that Rouhani had used the opportunity provided by COVID-19 to redefine his relationship with pro-regime forces. This could have been a consequence of the power of these organizations and their ability to threaten Rouhani's presidency. Discussing IRIB, Rouhani highlighted its role in honest informing (HI). Honest informing, then, turned to a signifier chiefly linked but not restricted to IRIB.

The next key signifier was "empowerment," which Rouhani emphatically reiterated in his statements. As part of this signifier, he also emphasized that Iran is a strong country both in providing people with necessary materials, health care, and medical supplies. In line with reaffirming the country's unity and strength, Rouhani tried to show that everything was normal. "Normality" is a key signifier in his discourse on COVID-19. The first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran collided with Nowruz, the Iranian New Year. Rouhani, as a result, stated,

Some people have asked me to cancel the New Year vacation. I don't think it is useful or necessary because the New Year is a time for happiness and being with family, and there is no reason to

deprive people of this opportunity. We are in the process of controlling the virus. Indeed, there is no reason for concern. (Cabinet, March 11, 2020)

The cancellation of the Nowruz vacation could have been interpreted as a sign of weakness, which could have taken Rouhani's government to task. Continuing the vacation sent a message it was business as usual, not a time of panic or desperation.

"Hope" is the next key signifier that accompanies the theme of the country. By portraying Iran ("the country") as a united and strong country with normal conditions, facilitated messages of hope and optimism. Controlling the pandemic with the least casualties is one of three signifiers that identify the position of hope in the meaning. Another is providing people with necessary materials, health care, and medical supplies. Indeed, Rouhani argued that the country is strong enough to control the virus with little loss of life. He said,

We are able to control the virus today. We are not worried, and all medical organizations are prepared. Our medical staff and the Ministry of Health have been working hard, and I am sure we will be able to manage this crisis with as few casualties as possible. (Cabinet, April 8, 2020)

The next signifier, quick return to "normality" make COVID-19 appear less dangerous than claimed. So, Rouhani promised that people's lives would soon return to normal. Again, such elements or signifiers were not necessarily used by Rouhani all the time. He used different terms to invoke them, however. We classified all similar terms under umbrella themes.

"Past the peak" is another signifying phrase in the discourse of hope. Rouhani inserted statistics into his speeches to claim that the infection rate was declining. He often spoke of medical personnel a referent and signifier of unity when addressing Iranians. Rouhani thanked the medical personnel in general, urged that their vital needs be met, and finally emphasized their sacrifices. Meeting people's urgent needs is also closely related to providing them with necessary materials, health care, and medical supplies. "Sacrifice" is the signifier that connects the

medical personnel to unity more concretely. Rouhani interpreted the sacrifices made by medical personnel as demonstrating solidarity with other Iranians to support the regime, which he connected to Iran's "unity."

There are other signifiers between unity, empowerment, and hope: "the leadership," "the government," and "the people." All three signifiers have firm and decisive positions in the hegemonic discourse in Iran, but their meanings were rearticulated in the COVID-19 discourse. These signifiers are polysemous and move between the three nodal points. Rouhani used COVID-19 as a sign to redefine these nodal points – as signifiers with fixed meanings in the hegemonic discourse – in his attempt to make this discourse more stable.

"Leadership" (in Farsi: *عزيمت*) is a nodal point in Iran's hegemonic discourse. Here it is actually a metonymic signifier referring to "Valiy-e-Faghih" which is an underlying principle in Iran's Islamist discourse. At the time of Rouhani's speeches, the Valiy-e-Faghih was Ayatollah Khamenei. Thus, the signifier referred to him. While "leadership," i. e., Khamenei, has a central position in the state's discourse, Rouhani treated it as an element in articulating a new discourse around COVID-19. He repeatedly distances "leadership" from its position in the Iran's hegemonic discourse and then articulates it within a new web of signifiers.

There are probably two explanations for this. First, Rouhani might have taken the leader's importance for granted in relation to his position in the hegemonic discourse. Second, some Iran analysts said that Rouhani and Khamenei disagreed on how to handle the crisis. By not dealing directly with Khamenei, Rouhani could be showing that his government is strong enough to deal with the crisis without Khamenei's help. Rouhani insisted on following the leader's instructions only once, while emphasizing several times that the leader supported the government's decisions. In this sense, Rouhani resorted to the theme of the leader to determine the government's position and nothing more. He multiple times mentioned the leader's support of his decision without expressing his obedience to Khamenei, as is usual for many

Iranian politicians. This shows a clear departure from the hegemonic discourse.

Associating the leader's support with the government, Rouhani defined its meaning in four main ways. First, he talked about the willingness of his government to sacrifice. He repeated this over and over in his speeches. Accordingly, Rouhani stated several times that he and his ministers would not go on Nowruz vacation to deal with the crisis. The sacrifice of the government united the cabinet and the rest of the population. Next, Rouhani defended all of the government's measures. He argued that everything his government did and decided was right. His arguments had two dimensions. On the one hand, he defended the executive branch's activities. On the other hand, he defended the honesty of the government. In this excerpt from a speech responding to the accusation that his government manipulated the statistics, the President said, "We will never increase or decrease the existing statistics. There will be no exaggeration or understatement. We report everything that has happened to our great nation since the emergence of this virus" (Cabinet, February 26, 2020).

Rouhani also emphasized that the government and the people are one entity. He argued that there is no distance between them. Finally, he mentioned the government's support for businesses, particularly those that had suffered during the economic crisis. "The government is responsible for people's health, so it must also be responsible for their businesses," (NOCC, March 24, 2020) he said. He repeatedly mentioned that controlling COVID-19 required the cooperation of all people and that it was their social responsibility. After the first outbreak, President Rouhani made an impassioned plea for the Iranian people to tighten their restrictions. He said,

The responsibility lies with the people themselves. They are the ones who should try to control the crisis. They should observe health regulations. They should not go on trips. They should stay at home and help others. If people do not cooperate, we cannot do much. (Cabinet, April 26, 2020)

Acknowledging the role of people in addressing the crisis, Rouhani stressed that following medical orders takes priority over carrying out religious orders or rituals. He especially emphasized this when he spoke of closing holy shrines and mosques. Hardline clerics and senior clerics from Qom and Mashhad⁴ criticized the government's decisions to close religious sites. They particularly opposed the shutdown of the Masoomeh shrine in Qom, where COVID-19 entered Iran. Nevertheless, Rouhani reasoned with them, stressing the importance of health regulations in combating the virus. He also tried to defuse the situation by saying, “[i]t is a wrong idea to separate people's health, their vital needs, the world, the other world, science, and religion. They are inseparable, and we in the government try to respond to all the needs and requirements of the people” (NOCC, April 5, 2020). The signifier, “medical orders” is related to Rouhani's downright defending his government's action and claiming a state of exception as we will discuss in the next section.

Finally, the “economy” features prominently in Rouhani's discourse. He focused relatively heavily on the importance of economic activities. The economy is as important to Rouhani as religion. Religion as a nodal point in Iran's hegemonic discourse connected to economy. Rouhani said, “[o]ne of our hands should be raised to heaven to receive the grace of God, and the other hand should work for both the health of society and livelihood” (Cabinet, April 22, 2020). Economic activities, then, are as important to Rouhani as praying. The economy is also a node that binds the most important signifiers within the nodal point of the country and connects them to other nodal points. For example, the economy is associated with “normality” when Rouhani emphasized the continuation of economic activities. This is probably why Rouhani refers to the economic difficulties in the early days of the pandemic. In doing so, he links the economic difficulties to the government by focusing on struggling businesses. In fact, he implied that the government had everything under control, so all is normal.

He emphasized the government's support for struggling businesses as an example to show his administration could bring everything to normal and there was no crisis.

5.2 The state of exception: Where the “country” and the “enemy” meet

Although “the state of exception” in Rouhani's discourse does not fully coincide with Agamben's conceptualization, we use this term to explore another interesting aspect of this discourse. Also, Rouhani employed a family of similar signifiers to refer to “the state of exception,” all of which to emphasize that the situation was critical and abnormal, including “extraordinary situation” and a term common in Iranian politicians' jargon, “the current sensitive situation” (in Farsi: *یونونک ساسح طیارش*). Nevertheless, all these phrases denote a similar signifier.

“The state of exception” as a main discursive theme in Rouhani's speeches, connects the “country” and the “enemy” because it is associated with important signifiers in both domains. In the COVID-19 discourse, “the state of exception” has a paradoxical character because it seems to be the opposite of “normality.” In Rouhani's speeches, however, both are articulated. The way Rouhani resolves this paradox is interesting. Whenever Rouhani wanted to point to the great work of his government and defend its activities and decisions, he referred to the situation as “the state of exception,” that is, the link between “the state of exception” and the staunch defense of his government's actions. Rouhani used this phrase for example when he defended the closure of holy sites by saying that people should follow medical instructions. He justified these measures by reminding his opponents that these were extraordinary times. However, he also stated that the situation was normal. When the situation was extraordinary, at the same time the government was tactful enough and the country strong enough to deal with it keeping everything “normal.” Here, “the state of exception” is associated with “normality” and government “empowerment” at the same time.

With the formulation of “the state of exception,” another key signifier emerged, namely “global problems.” Rouhani strongly emphasized that COVID-19 was not a prob-

4 The holy cities in Iran where the shrines of Imam Reza (the 8th Imam of the Shia) and Masoomeh (his sister) are located.

lem that Iran was experiencing alone. He made clear the situation was truly a global crisis and other nations were not prepared to deal with it. Here, “the state of exception” is associated with the “enemy.” Similarly, “the state of exception” again is associated with “empowerment” through global problems. Rouhani repeatedly pointed out that other countries had difficulties dealing with the crisis, but Iran was very powerful and successful. Rouhani said the situation was critical in many countries, but everything was under control in Iran. In this way, Rouhani managed to reconcile “the state of exception” with “normality.” The use of “the state of exception” can be interpreted in two ways: First, it justified the government’s decisions and solidified its legitimacy; second, it showed that other countries were weakened in light of Iran’s “commendable performance” in the face of the pandemic.

5.3 The “enemy”: From the U.S. to local critics

The “enemy” is directly and indirectly connected to the “country” as mediated by “the state of exception.” While not as complex as the “country,” the “enemy” derives its significance from being distinguished from and compared to the “country.” In this respect, the “enemy” plays a crucial role in the structure of the COVID-19 discourse. The previous sections explained that the “enemy” references used in COVID-19 represent Iran’s power in the fight against the pandemic. Then another signifier appeared: sanctions, which emphasized Iran’s strength and made the “enemy’s” actions clearer. Rouhani argued that despite the severity of the sanctions and an exceptional situation, the country is very capable, and its government is resilient enough to handle it. “The enemies did not expect that Iran, under heavy sanctions for two years, would be able to deal with the COVID-19 crisis better and stronger than them” (Cabinet, March 11, 2020). Here, Rouhani more clearly linked the “enemy” to the sanctions and empowerment through the medium of “the state of exception.”

Rouhani also used the “will of the enemy” as a key signifier, using it to justify his government’s decisions. For example, he argued that it was the “enemy’s” will to stop

economic activities and that his government would not allow it. He even went so far as to claim that stopping economic activity was a conspiracy of the “enemy” and, therefore, could not happen.

In an earlier discussion, we noted that Rouhani associated the “enemy” with “unity” when he described how COVID-19 had torn many countries apart and Iran had solidified its “unity” in the fight against this virus. In this context, Rouhani repeatedly named the U.S. as the “enemy,” but he did not limit his image of the “enemy” to that country. He also referred to the lies spread by the “enemy” and linked them to the sanctions. He said that those who deprived people of food and medicine by imposing sanctions were only pretending to want to help Iran. “If you’re honest, at least lift the drug sanctions” (Cabinet, March 4, 2020) he added. In the COVID-19 discourse, Rouhani constructed the “enemy” as a weak and torn liar while portraying Iran as strong, honest, and united. He thus reproduced elements of the hegemonic populist discourse in Iran.

In Rouhani’s discourse, the “enemy” is not limited to the U.S. Anyone who disagrees with the government’s decisions and criticizes its actions is considered an “enemy.” Attacking critics were framed as an important signifier. Rouhani linked them with “unity,” underscoring his claim that his opponents are motivated by foreign influence, or the influence of foreign ties, to oppose his regime: “Look how easily we are united today, of course, we have always been united, but sometimes some people threaten and weaken this unity” (NOCC, March 28, 2020). Rouhani again attacked his critics, saying they are liars and are controlled by foreign nations who provide false information about the country to undermine its hope and power.

Our great nation has given a sharp answer to all chatterers who proclaim in their media, foreign media, satellite TV channels, and cyberspace that the Iranian nation has become tired and is no longer fresh and that the Iranian government and state are no longer functioning. (Cabinet, April 1, 2020)

In his attacks, Rouhani referred to the media and the Internet as the center of spreading

misinformation. He repeatedly mentioned IRIB as his preferred source of information.

5.4 Rhetorical practices: The “enemy,” COVID-19, and the U.S.

In the previous discussion, we elaborated on another signifier central to the structure of the COVID-19 discourse: the “enemy.” Here we explore the rhetorical strategies that Rouhani employed to create a cognitive bridge between seemingly disparate concepts, thereby allowing his message to resonate with the Iranian context. Rouhani used them mainly to frame the “country” and the “enemy” as antagonistic signifiers. In doing so, he paid significant attention to some binary oppositions such as strong/weak, honest/liar, united/scattered, and kind/cruel. For example, he said, “Thank God we are not one of those countries whose patients are left alone on the floor of hospitals. We are strong enough to serve all patients and admit them to our hospitals despite the rumors spread by our enemies. Unlike the Western countries, we have the best equipment for treating the infected” (NOCC, March 28, 2020). In this case, he excluded “us” from “them” by contrasting Iran’s power with other countries’ inability.

Rouhani also used various military metaphors in the chain of equivalences metaphors to describe this phase. First, he saw the crisis management phase as a battlefield. He called it “front line,” “health soldiers,” “martyrdom,” “command,” “victory,” “spirit of resistance,” and “jihad.”⁵ Using the language of war made it seem like the country was pitted against an external enemy. Rouhani also used metaphors to win the rhetorical battle with the “enemy.” Rhetorically, he addressed COVID-19 as a weapon of the “enemy.” Rouhani linked the “enemy’s will” to continuous economic activity in this battle. He argued that the “enemy,” primarily the U.S. and other Western countries, aimed to use COVID-19 as a weapon against the country and force it to seal off the country, stop economic activities and weaken Iran. In this sense, COVID-19 is a conspiracy by the “enemy” to threaten the “normality” and power of the country.

Rouhani did not stop at this point but rhetorically compared COVID-19 to the “enemy,” namely the U.S. and other international superpowers, during his speeches. The rhetorical comparisons help to make his arguments more effective. Rouhani referred to the U.S. and other Western countries as “enemies” in order to legitimize Iran’s foreign policy against them. This process took place in three steps. First, he referred to the U.S. and Western countries as “enemies,” as had been the case since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran’s hegemonic discourse. Next, he defined the COVID-19 pandemic as the “enemy” that the country should fight. The use of warfare metaphors to portray COVID-19 as the “enemy” was prevalent in the first wave of the pandemic. Finally, Rouhani concluded that the U.S. is the virus (as both are “enemies”) and even more dangerous than a virus:

We are dealing today not only with COVID-19 but with one even more dangerous and damaging than the virus: the U.S. and other superpowers. If the damage they have done to our nation is no greater than the damage done by COVID-19, it is certainly no less. (Cabinet, March 11, 2020)

Thus, he legitimized the hostility toward the U.S. Just as the country should eliminate COVID-19 as a dangerous virus, it should also neutralize the U.S., as they are both harmful viruses. In Rouhani’s speeches, the U.S. (as well as other Western countries and even domestic critics) and COVID-19 are one and the same: the “enemy.” Therefore, the fight against one justifies the fight against the other.

Rouhani also addressed his local critics with sarcasm, calling them “wise individuals who are trying to catch us in the act by focusing on shortcomings” (Cabinet, February 26, 2020). Since the national stage is a conflict zone and COVID-19 and its “enemies” have joined forces to harm Iran, the critics have no excuse to vent their frustration; yet Rouhani sarcastically challenged them to find a cure for their deep-rooted idiocy, suggesting that they have no justification to do so. Similarly, he suggested sarcastic proverbs such as “prescribing cures for the country” to prop up this argument. He also questioned the validity of compassion as a viable basis for helping oth-

5 In the terminology of Islam, jihad is a war for God.

ers, claiming that this was just a ruse to disguise the critics' true intentions.

As we have already seen with jihad, Rouhani frequently used religious jargon in conjunction with these practices. In this way, he sought to legalize his ideas and arguments by portraying Iran as a religious country. He referred not only to Quranic verses but also to the three common religious terms of *Wajib* (obligatory religious acts), *Mustahab* (recommended yet not obligatory duties), and *Makrooh* (disliked yet not forbidden duties) to give his arguments more religious weight. For example, he argued that continuing economic activities was *wajib*. He also referred to giving health instructions as *hagh-o-alnas* (people's right). This term indicates that failure to perform an act would be punished by God in the hereafter. In addition, he referred to COVID-19 as God's test. Scholars of Islamic jurisprudence traditionally emphasize being patient in the face of inevitable calamity rather than lamenting one's situation, and placing one's hopes in God, who is the ultimate source of strength and succor. One way Muslim leaders traditionally fulfilled this religious obligation is by using prayer formulas such as "In shā' Allāh" (If God wills) and "Alḥamdulillāhi" (God be praised). In addition, Muslims should avoid committing sins (*taghva*) as a form of self-purification in order to attain physical and spiritual health. Rouhani employed this term to assert following health instructions and to legitimize the decisions of his government. He stated in a speech, "How should we avoid this virus? The solution is *taghva*" (Cabinet, April 26, 2020). Just as Islam recommends that we avoid sins in order to strengthen ourselves spiritually, here, we must avoid anything that might infect us, Rouhani implied.

Metaphor is a rhetorical device mainly used in political communication to simplify complicated events and concepts (Edelman, 1971). Here, Rouhani used religious metaphors to translate the unknown and worrying situation of the COVID-19 crisis into a less concerning one. He employed familiar religious terms in order to assure people that the future would be better and the crisis would be over:

In shā' Allāh, 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, 2020)

Furthermore, Iran is known as a religious society in which most people obey Islamic rules. Rouhani used religious metaphors to connect health instructions with religious rules in an attempt to persuade people to follow them. As we have seen with *taghva*, he implied that trying not to be infected by the COVID-19 virus is somehow a religious principle. Thus, all people should comply with them. This finding reveals how politicians in religious societies use religious metaphors to justify their health and even political decisions. Rouhani relied on pre-filled and rich religious concepts to make the empty signifiers in the middle of crisis meaningful in the ways that serve his interests.

Another case could explain this tactic more clearly. Religious figures in Iran, such as Friday prayers, were angry with Rouhani as his government tried to close holy shrines. Holy shrines are the places where many people gather together to pray and visit the tombs of Shiiti's Imams. Since there are many people in closed spaces, holy shrines are places where many people could be infected easily. Therefore, Rouhani aimed to close them. However, this decision was not welcomed among religious figures. They denied this policy, mentioning that Islamic norms are above all, and people would not be infected in these places. For instance, Mohammad Saiedi, the Friday prayer of Qom, a holy city in Iran, said on February 27, 2020:

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.

On the contrary, Rouhani used their own religious language to fight back against them. Unlike Western politicians, Rouhani could not refer to liberal values such as human rights or even to WHO (World Health Organization) statements to defend his decisions in front of high-profile clergies. Therefore, he

used religious metaphors and jargon cleverly. He mentioned an excerpt from prophet Mohammad: “Hygiene is part of faith” (Cabinet, March 23, 2022) which can be roughly translated as “cleanliness is next to godliness.” In addition, we discussed how he poached the meaning of *taghva* to emphasize that not going to holy shrines not only does not contradict the Islamic norms but is also in line with them. He described visiting shrines as *Mustahab*, while he asserted that avoiding disease and illness is *Wajib*. Thus, Rouhani used religious metaphors both to persuade people to follow health instructions as well as counter religious figures’ critics.

Finally, Rouhani frequently employed auxiliary verbs that indicate a strong will, such as “must” and “have.” He wanted to convey that the government was capable of handling the crisis. He commanded, “People must trust the government. We are all working hard to manage the crisis and provide the people with all the necessary materials. So, our dear people should believe in their government and not listen to others” (NOCC, February 25, 2020). He also highlighted violent encounter in this language, like imprisoning journalists. He called on law enforcement agencies and security forces to put a stop to those who propagated rumors and waged war against the economy. Rouhani viewed the stage as a battlefield. He used rhetorical devices as such and combined them with religious and imperative language, as befits wartime. In this regard, he reinforced the COVID-19 discourse as an antagonistic discourse in which the country fights the “enemy,” whether it is the U.S. or COVID-19.

6 Conclusion

We have applied Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory to our study of Rouhani’s antagonistic and populist political discourse on COVID-19. Previous research has focused mainly on political speech during socio-political events. However, the COVID-19 outbreak provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to analyze political discourse during a pandemic. Our analysis of the COVID-19 outbreak shows that Rouhani’s discourse is generally antagonistic. We also contributed

to the existing literature on the discourse of Iranian presidents. Although much of the research has analyzed the discourse of Iranian presidents in general, our study offers nuanced understanding of Rouhani’s key signifiers, nodal points, and rhetorical practices. This work examined the COVID-19 pandemic and provided a deeper understanding of the Iranian President’s discursive practices.

Based on the structural articulation of the “country,” the “enemy,” and “the state of exception,” the results show that the COVID-19 discourse is similar to the hegemonic discourse in Iran, which is a populist discourse (Holliday, 2016). Populist discourse, as Panizza (2005) asserts, is the creation of an internal boundary to separate two types of groups and enforce a binary relationship between the politically constructed “self” and the “other.” The existing literature shows how politicians around the globe legitimize their political agenda with populist discourse (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benítez-Castro, 2021; Laclau, 2007). Populist discourse exists independently of the political context. It is found in both authoritarian and democratic regimes, as Nørgaard Kristensen and Mortensen (2021) argue. The discursive distinction between “us” and “them” that forms the backbone of populist discourse can exist as a mindset in liberal democracies such as the U.S. (Lacatus, 2019). Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s insights, this paper contributes to the existing literature by examining former Iranian President Rouhani’s populist discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this study does not establish a causal relationship, it does show that populist discourse is not dependent on specific events. As Spector (2020) has shown, this study also illustrated that politics remains of great concern even during a pandemic. As a rich theoretical approach to analyzing populist discourse, discourse theory provides us with an appropriate conceptual lens and analytical tool to examine how populist discourse in Iran was shaped and functioned during the pandemic.

At the heart of populist discourse in Iran is hostility toward the U.S. and other Western democracies (Mohd Don & May, 2013; Sheikholeslami, 2000). Traditionally, the U.S. is seen as a bogeyman in Iranian culture,

which unifies the country in domestic conflicts (KhosraviNik, 2015). This research confirms that Rouhani's discourse also embraces and solidifies this antagonistic discursive theme. Following the process of constructing an antagonistic discourse that began since the 1979 revolution (Jahanbakhsh, 2003; Shahibzadeh, 2015), Rouhani portrayed the U.S., other Western countries, and even local critics as "enemies" during the pandemic in order to legitimize the state's policies. To make this tactic as effective as possible, Rouhani used war and religious metaphors to rhetorically articulate new signifiers (essentially health-related phenomena such as COVID-19) in an antagonistic political discourse.

War metaphors play an important role in unifying actions and holding society together (Flusberg, Matlock, & Thibodeau, 2018; Gibbs Jr, 2018; Lakoff & Johnson, 1990). The use of war metaphors in political communication about health crises has been documented and analyzed in the context of the epidemics of the early 2000s (Molnár, Takács, & Jakusné Harnos, 2020). War metaphors are based on common historical experiences of a community, and their use reflects cultural peculiarities. Although conceptual in nature, they are perceived as realistic due to the frequent occurrence of wars and even serve as a source area for discourse metaphors describing seemingly unrelated events (Molnár, Takács, & Jakusné Harnos, 2020). This study shows that the use of war language was also a tactic available to Rouhani to control the crisis and impose his politically desired meanings on new signifiers.

Also, this study shows how Rouhani employed religious metaphors during a biological event to legitimize his government decisions and policies. Furthermore, this study contributes to the academic literature on the political use of war metaphors. The analysis of Rouhani's rhetoric shows how the president employed anti-Western and anti-American discursive strategies to construct COVID-19 as both an "enemy" and a weapon of the West. We extracted strategic themes from Rouhani's speech and examined how the state portrayed the U.S., other "enemies," and COVID-19 to feed Iranians' anti-Western sentiments.

This research also contributes to a better understanding of how leaders of authoritarian regimes used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to redefine their relationships with some powerful state organizations, in this case, the IRGC and the IRIB. The nature of the pandemic called for an unprecedented level of collaboration among political, health, social, and military forces to mitigate the severity of the impending crisis (Dada et al., 2021). Thus, the pandemic allowed Rouhani to create a rapprochement with organizations that had once hindered his political career (Mirzaei, Eslami, & Safari, 2017; Rouhani lambasts IRGC's role in the economy, 2017). This is significant when we consider how Rouhani had previously challenged these organizations. It appears that he was trying to align himself with those organizations that would be most beneficial and influential in society while maintaining a reputation that would reflect well on him. This can be seen through his utilization of the key signifier of "unity."

This study also extends the literature to the political realm in authoritarian regimes such as Iran. The results show that Rouhani's COVID-19 discourse distances itself from the hegemonic discourse somehow. Adherence to medical instructions can often be seen as a signifier where the struggle is between competing discourses: the hegemonic discourse and the COVID-19 discourses. Of course, Rouhani's COVID-19 discourse was not strong enough to destabilize the hegemonic discourse and constitute a new hegemon (Holliday, 2016; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Although high-profile clerics focused on religious orders, Rouhani emphasized the need for health regulations. Thus, the closure of holy sites is of great importance. Rouhani emphasized "the state of exception" to defend his decisions against religious opponents. As Agamben (2005) states, autocratic regimes make "the state of exception" a permanent situation to control society. This phenomenon has been referred to as "the current sensitive conditions" (*Sharay-et-e hassas-e konooni*) in the Iranian political context (Jahanbakhsh, 2003; Holliday, 2011). Rouhani resorted to this discursive construction to continue the legacy of defining the situation in Iran as exceptional, which has

been common in the jargon of Iranian politicians since the establishment of the revolutionary regime. Nevertheless, he used this rhetorical strategy to oppose senior religious figures, while Iranian politicians traditionally used this tactic to suppress dissidents and critics. Therefore, this study contributes to our knowledge of how pre-existing repressive discursive metaphors can work against radicals during a pandemic.

This study examined how a politician in an authoritarian state developed a discourse about a pandemic. We examined how COVID-19 is used as an empty signifier to reproduce existing meanings and produce new ones. We also closely examined how COVID-19 became a nodal point, what signifiers were used to give it meaning, and how COVID-19 was articulated in a web of meanings. Further research in similar contexts is needed to transfer these findings. This study emphasizes the need for more research on whether other politicians have articulated the same or different discourses. Such a study could improve our understanding of political discourse during a pandemic – the type of thing that might be useful if there was ever another pandemic.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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