



## THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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*Iran has developed a system which allows a larger degree of electoral democracy than would have seemed likely in the early years following the Islamist revolution. Popular demands for change were especially visible in the election of Muhammad Khatami as president in 1997 and the 2000 parliamentary elections. The author suggests that this situation has encouraged greater participation in politics, thus giving additional impetus to change. But Iran still faces an internal power struggle, a relatively weak civil society, and persistent economic problems that make a thoroughgoing transition far more difficult. At the same time, though, these contradictions make Iran a particularly interesting example of factors affecting democratization and the development of civil society in developing countries.*

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been experimenting with democracy for two decades now but the present state of political and civil rights in Iran is a far cry from a democratic political system. The question is whether such a system can emerge in the long run. Electoral laws remain restrictive, excluding "non-desirable" candidates from political offices. Legal and institutional mechanisms for protecting political and civil rights remain absent or underdeveloped. Thus far, seemingly unsuccessful government attempts to marry Islam with its vision of democracy and to build the foundation of an "Islamic" political and economic society, have raised doubts about democracy and its future in Iran.(1)

But the absence of a meaningful democracy (2) in Iran cannot be explained neither by the alleged incompatibility between Islam and democracy (3), nor as a byproduct of socio-economic underdevelopment (4), nor as a consequence of an indifferent and repressive state. (5) Indeed, a nascent electoral democracy has taken root in post-revolution Iran. But the future of democratization will largely be determined by a power struggle over social, economic, and political resources both within

the state leadership and between the state and society.

The ideological factionalism and polarization of politics within the government is as much, if not more, about the allocation of socio-economic and political resources as it is about whose "proper" vision of Islam can better address problems facing the country. Iran's civil society--led by intellectuals, professionals, and the media--has challenged the state's hegemony and helped expand the public space. But civil society in Iran, lacking effective organizational and institutional foundations, remains largely ineffective in challenging the state monopoly over socio-economic and political resources.

### DEMOCRACY: A QUESTION OF POWER

Democracy as a political system is attractive to many--if not most--people around the globe. It can be said that "nobody likes to be imprisoned, tortured, or killed, and that everybody tries to escape when confronted with harm." Citizens in Western countries remain fundamentally free from arbitrary and random state repression, enjoying rights not shared by people under authoritarian regimes that often do not respect even fundamental human rights. These

political and civil rights should be not understood as Western or non-Western but rather as universal rights entitling individuals to shape their own future and be protected from abusive government. (6)

The debate over democracy, its definition and fundamentals, (7) as well as its impact on governments' domestic and foreign policies, has continued for centuries. Is democracy the best political system for promoting political, civil, and economic rights? Can democracies continue to keep the average citizen involved in politics? Are democracies really more peaceful than non-democracies? (8) Above all, is democracy appropriate or desirable as a political system for non-Western societies (e.g., Middle Eastern countries)? That is, can an essentially Western ideology be applied to non-Western societies?

To answer these questions, proponents of democracy have looked to socio-economic, political, cultural, historical, and international factors that help mold forces responsible for the structure of political systems in different countries. Although this article does not address these important issues, the proposition that there are prerequisites for democracy seems to hold. (9) Without these basics in place, prospects for establishing and maintaining democracy are dim and can lead to democratic breakdown. (10)

The existence of civil society is also correlated with democracy. The expression "civil society" is used today to indicate how private clubs, organizations, and groups act as a buffer between state power and the citizen's life. But in the absence of organized and vibrant agents of civil society (e.g., labor unions, professional associations, business groups, an independent media) society remains susceptible to the authoritarian whims of the ruling elite. Therefore, the emergence and effectiveness of civil society is undermined where society itself is underdeveloped (e.g., low socio-economic development, low adult literacy rate) or where

the state, through its control of resources, remains overwhelmingly dominant. (11)

The ruling elite in such circumstances naturally resists expanding political and civil rights, especially if such a move would threaten its interests or its very survival and benefit opposition groups. A compromise resolution can usually emerge only when the cost of oppression to the state supersedes any potential benefits, and concessions offered to the opposition ultimately results in a net increase in stability and advantages for the state.

But the civil society debate on Iran, as in the rest of the Middle East, has focused on changes in formal procedures rather than substantive change in state-society relations. The emergence of state-regulated quasi-pluralism in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Iran is seen as a shift from unfettered one-party rule to some sharing of prerequisites--but not necessarily real power--and a certain amount of freedom for membership associations. (12) Today, most scholars confidently affirm that "both intermediate powers and autonomous social groups exist in the Middle East." (13)

However, recent expectations for the emergence of civil society and democracy in Iran must be viewed with caution. Specifically, the premise that Middle Eastern states are weak and societies are strong is dubious. Despite the new optimism, serious questions remain. How autonomous are socio-economic and political groups challenging the state and how can their autonomy be measured? Does autonomy necessarily imply that these groups are organized and institutionalized and can therefore be effective in counterbalancing state power? What role do international forces play in the process of democratization?

A major shortcoming of Islamic movements, for instance, is that while they are often organized and "able to identify and mobilize opposition against a common enemy or threat, once successful, internal power

struggles and problems quickly emerge in defining and implementing an Islamic system of government." The success of Islamic movements since the early 1970s in either seizing power or effectively positioning themselves as a viable organized opposition has been limited. Indeed, attempts to present an "Islamic solution" to society's ills have largely failed. "Islamic politics, like secular politics, is influenced by factionalism stemming from diverse ideological interpretations or visions of Islam, internal power struggles for leadership, and the influence of family, ethnic, tribal, or regional ties, and also like secular politics is constrained by the pragmatic demands and compromises of an interdependent global environment." (14) In short, "Islamic" politics, like all politics, is about power. (15)

Ideological and political factionalism among the state's leaders, combined with a severe economic crisis, can, however, create opportunities for the state or deepening of a nascent democracy, provided that the level of political violence remains low and there is little chance of armed intervention in politics. The state elite can take one of three paths:

--It can grant concessions to the opposition, hoping to share but not entirely surrender its control over resources.

--It can use repression to maintain the status quo.

--Or, it can pursue a combination of concessions and repression.

Elections can help the cause of democracy by facilitating popular participation in the political process, even though socio-economic prerequisites to democracy might not be fully present and civil society may be underdeveloped. As India's and Bangladesh's experiences with democracy show, elections mobilize and encourage popular participation in the political process, and also help build public confidence in the electoral process itself. Similarly, elections in the post-Marcos Philippines, in Mexico in the 1990s, in post-

Apartheid South Africa, and in post-revolution Iran have achieved this outcome.

Iran's clergy-dominated state policies must be understood in light of the above, particularly with respect to the post-Khomeini period. The first 10 years of the revolution brought a different elite to power whose attempt to build a new state apparatus was beset by internal unrest, a devastating eight-year-long war with Iraq, and international isolation. Post-Khomeini Iran has witnessed intense ideological factionalism, as well as persistent economic problems that have severely undermined the middle class. The working classes and the poor have also seen their situation worsen in the past 20 years due to inflation and unemployment. The imposition of moral codes and the use of security forces to maintain order have resulted in popular resentment toward the state, especially against the more conservative elements in the government whose paternalistic views of state-society relations are more pronounced. Those conservatives see the 'ulema, authorized by the will of Allah, as ultimately responsible for pursuing the interests of the individual and society as a whole. The conservative 'ulema's interpretation of the Shari'a (Islamic law) has stood in contrast to popular dissatisfaction with the socio-economic and political situation in Iran, as expressed through protest votes for reformist candidates such as President Muhammad Khatami.

Since President Khatami's election in May 1997, the Iranian electorates' demand for change has seemingly put the conservatives on the defensive, a situation that has helped strengthen civil society in Iran as independent associations, and labor and business organizations are better poised to organize themselves. The February 2000 parliamentary elections both demonstrated and reinforced these trends. The state has been increasingly pressured to accept criticism for its own shortcomings, including self-criticism by leading ministers and members of parliament.

Tehran's favorite excuse, blaming "foreign governments and their agents" for its own failures, does not carry much weight any more. Popular political participation (through elections, debates, and exchanges of ideas) over the past 20 years has familiarized Iranians with the norms and rules of procedural, if not substantive, democracy, a rather unprecedented event in Iran's history.

#### STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS IN IRAN

The creation of an Islamic republic was beset with difficulties from the start. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini aimed to replace a tyrannical leader with a just, popular rule under the tenets of Islam. The challenge to the Islamic republic has been how to establish popular sovereignty under clerical rule and preserve a government with a divine mission whose real secular task was to run a modern state in a Western-dominated capitalist world. (16) The ideological splits that have emerged, as well as the state's persistent economic problems, have raised doubts about the 'ulema's ability or even legitimacy to direct state affairs. Consequently, Iran has so far oscillated among democratic tendencies, autocratic control, and occasional repression.

Iran has a complex cleric-dominated but popularly driven political system. The institutional framework designed for the Shi'a Islamic Republic embraces both popular participation and a balance of power within the ruling elite circle. The supreme authority is the guide (rahbar) of the revolution, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, was appointed by the popularly elected 83-member Assembly of Experts (majlis-i khubregan) which has constitutional rights to dismiss him if it decides he abuses his authority. The guide is not expected to interfere with the daily affairs of the government, although he is commander-in-chief of the armed forces and has the power to dismiss the president and to appoint the heads

of the judiciary, the revolutionary guards, the media, and the military.

The Council of Guardians (shura-i negahban), comprised of religious lawyers appointed by the guide and of lay lawyers elected by the parliament (majlis) ensures that all legislation conforms to Islamic law. Since 1988, the Expediency Council (shura-i maslahat-i neizam) has been in charge of resolving disagreements that often arise between the Council of Guardians and the popularly elected parliament. The reshaping of the Expediency Council in the weeks prior to former president Hashimi Rafsanjani's departure from office resulted in an increase in the power and prestige of the Council, which Rafsanjani now heads. (17) In contrast to all these appointed bodies, members of the parliament and the president are popularly elected.

Iran's leadership is divided into broadly defined conservative and moderate Islamic camps. These groups, along with their media organs, have provided some debate on issues of national concern, such as the role and function of Iran's guide. (18) These issues remain explosive and have already led to arrests, newspaper closures, and public demonstrations. The central issue is over whether the guide should be popularly elected or not, given that his leadership is ordained by the Shi'a belief in the infallibility of Imams and by implication, the leader (i.e., the guide, not the president).

Iran's civil society resembles that in other developing countries, but is somewhat livelier and more vigorous. Despite tight state control of society, "there is also a sense in which society stands apart from and in opposition to the state," and some "public space exists, even if in a restricted form." (19) Over the past two decades, socio-economic modernization has created a fairly large middle class, and the intellectual and professional community has taken advantage of any possible avenue to press for Iranians' political and civil rights. Particularly since

Khatami's 1997 election, the Ministry of Culture has been more tolerant of the press, and has allowed serious debate about civil society, religion and politics, and Islamic leadership. Independent filmmakers have also enjoyed some degree of freedom, though outspoken writers, editors, and journals that have criticized the top state leadership have been punished. (20) The post-revolution generation, deprived of economic normality or basic social freedoms, and politicized by controversial events, has also come to question state policies.

However, the presence of some professional, artistic, and cultural associations does not imply that an effective civil society exists, where organized groups determine or even influence policy outcomes. Acts of defiance in Iran, though they might challenge the state, hardly represent the "way in which society, or groups within in, keep at bay the repressive instincts of the state." (21) Moreover, the state's tolerance for limited popular acts of defiance can be attributed to factionalism within its leadership and the state's inability to combat persistent economic and social problems.

Popular opposition is based on shared frustration among different sectors of the population with overwhelming economic and social problems (e.g., the youth, students, educators, artists, and women). An important agent of civil society, organized labor, is particularly weak in Iran. Powerful labor federations and confederations can use such tools as collective bargaining, strikes, and other means to compete with both the state and corporate interest groups. (22) It is in labor's interest to push for political democratization, which would improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis the state and business groups. Organized labor has the potential capability to either cripple or boost the economy (e.g., the oil workers' strike during the Iranian revolution that helped defeat the shah's government) and therefore be a formidable force checking the states'

power. (23) The labor force in Iran stands at close to 16 million (in a total population of just over 65 million) while the unofficial unemployment rate hovers around 30 percent, with 24 percent annual inflation. (24) But organized labor remains weak and dependent on the state and thus unable to translate its collective power into an effective bargaining tool.

In addition, whatever latitude has been given to debate or criticism, Iran's leadership has resisted and punished opponents. The state has often dismissed the expansion of political and civil rights as "un-Islamic" or as threatening the foundation of its political and ideological support. The state's successful use of Islam to gather legitimacy and support has been crucial to its survival, given problems with the West, including a 20-year U.S. economic boycott. In the presence of persistent economic problems, the state particularly relied in the 1980s on its institutions (e.g., Sipah-i Pasdaran, Bunyad-i Mostazafin and Janbazan, Bunyad--i Shahid, Basij) to rally popular support for its policies and to discredit its opposition. The Revolutionary Guards (Sipah-i Pasdaran) for example made the state less dependent for its national security on the regular army, whose loyalty to the new Islamic government was perceived with suspicions. The dispossessed Foundation (Bunyad-i Mostazafin and Janbazan) meanwhile through government subsidies and various charitable activities rallied support among the urban and rural poor for the new regime. The Martyr Foundation (Bunyad--i Shahid) was set up to disperse economic and social assistance to the families of the war veterans and those martyred for the revolution, while the Mobilization Corp (Basij) recruited young Islamic zealots to help control the general population, as well as in post-war reconstruction efforts.

The state's leadership was further polarized by slow economic development since the war ended with Iraq in 1988 and the

ideological gulf in the political leadership after Khomeini's death. One major confrontation between the reformist and the conservative camps has been over freedom of the press, specifically, the print media's right to question state policies or the legitimacy of the unelected guide. The state has repeatedly, and predictably, charged the pro-reform press with violating the state's Islamic precepts, and closed down several popular reformist papers. The reformists' hope to revise the very restrictive Press Law, passed by the outgoing conservative-dominated fifth parliament was, at least temporarily, dashed by Khamenei's order to the parliament to drop the debate on press reforms in August 2000. (25)

The closure of more than 20 reformist papers is no doubt a serious blow to Khatami and the reformists' position. But it seems nothing short of open, violent suppression of the general population by the security forces can stop the process of democratization. The oscillation between oppression and relative freedom cannot last indefinitely, especially since socioeconomic problems continue to be serious for the majority of the population. In other words, Iran's revolution seems to be at a crossroads. It has declared that Islamic government is the solution to all social, economic and political ills. Yet if this is true, the leaders must deliver tangible benefits, ranging from prosperity to stability. The reformists argue that this can be done, but only in connection with a more open and democratic society. The conservatives, however, associate such changes not with implementing the revolution's promises but as steps which could destroy the whole system. Some of them are now advocating economic reforms without political change, which is what they perceive China as having done successfully.

In practical terms, these factional disputes can be seen by the existence of three groups in parliament:

The Association of the Hizb Allah (majma'h-i hizballah-i majlis) consists of pro-

reform minded individuals and parliamentarians who support President Khatami's agenda for the supremacy of the rule of law and the expansion of civil society and individual freedoms within an Islamic framework. Its formation after the 1995 parliamentary election proved instrumental in supporting former president Rafsanjani, as well as Khatami after his 1997 victory. The Association is a coalition of the Combatant Clerics' Association (majma'-i ruhaniun-i mobarez), and the Administrators of Construction and their allies (kargozaran-i Sazandegi va niruha-i payruv-i khat-i Imam), also known as the Servants of Iran's Construction.

In contrast, the Hizb Allah Members of Parliament group (Hizballah-i Majlis) opposes Khatami and his supporters there. It is a coalition of the Combatant Clerics and their allies, (ruhaniat-i mubarez va guruha-i hamsu). They are generally suspicious about domestic reforms and closer relations with the West, which they see as tending to erode the supreme leader's authority and ultimately toward the secularization and subordination of Iranian society to "external powers" at the expense of Islam. They perceive the notion of individual rights as being in opposition to the Shi'a principle of guided leadership by a Faqih (leader).

The Independent Hizb Allah Members (namayandegan-i mustaqil-i hizballah) are parliamentarians who supposedly remain independent in their political and ideological orientations and whose votes in the legislator but can swing between the other factions. In addition, debates over the ideological and practical application of clerical rule, and among clerics with and without political power and without have also intensified in the past 20 years.

This rivalry among factions resembles party politics that can potentially lead to more meaningful competition among ruling clerics, but it still lacks the legitimacy needed to bring about the kind of political reform

demanding by the increasingly restless populace. The rather impressive victory by reformists in the 6th parliamentary elections in March 2000 will bring a more balanced representation of popular sentiment in the legislative branch. The reformists seem to be more in touch with the general mode of the population who hunger for more economic opportunities and more open social space for personal participation.

Conservatives in Iran generally support the "Chinese" model: combining a relatively open economic system with limits on human rights and democracy. But public allegiance to that strategy has been limited in the face of economic problems, elite factional rivalries, and the ideological exhaustion of Islam as a unifying force. The solution adopted by Ayatollah Khamene'i and his conservative colleagues is to give President Khatami expanded responsibility but not complete authority. Khatami's appeal for the rule of law and expanded political rights is tolerated but closely watched. Thus, Khatami may address social and economic problems. He will be blamed if his economic reforms fail, but the conservatives will no doubt take most of the credit should they succeed.

Khatami has serious challenges ahead. The creation of state-run foundation-conglomerates following the revolution to help consolidate state control of society has had long-term economic consequences. The Dispossessed Foundation also employs hundreds of thousands of people in the thousands of workshops, factories, hotels and other properties it inherited from their nationalization in the earlier years of the revolution. These para-statal foundations enjoy extensive economic endowments and political backing. They have become a source of wealth and political power. Some of these foundations have also grown into influential forces blocking any attempts for economic privatization and reforms and are usually exempt from taxation. Perhaps the most notable example is the Bunyad-i Mostazafin

and Janbazan (which control 60 percent of the entire national expenditure on development). They are both under the authority of the Spiritual Guide and exempt from any parliamentary investigation. (26)

The Revolutionary Guards, for example, was created to help the police and security forces to combat counter-revolutionaries, but it has developed into a powerful organization--with its own ground, naval, and air forces--to help defend the country and to maintain social order. For example, during the summer 1999 student demonstrations Revolutionary Guards' leaders threatened intervention if things were to "get out of hand." A letter signed by 24 commanding officers criticized President Khatami for failing to recognize the threat to Iran's national security from the demonstrations and suggested their own armed intervention should Khamenei deem it necessary.

The repeated devaluation of the rial in the international market and persistent inflation and unemployment have also hurt a wide majority of the people, while benefiting some state organizations and black-marketers, and helping to spread corruption and bribery in almost every sector of the economy. As a result, hard currencies such as the dollar have replaced the rial as a medium of exchange in the open market, popularizing the saying in Tehran streets: "people make their money in rials but must spend in dollars." It is quite normal to see individuals working two or three jobs. (27).

#### THE POLITICS OF ELECTIONEERING

Although Iran is not a true democracy, it is also not a totalitarian or even an authoritarian state indifferent to public opinion. Elections occur regularly and have been free of rigging and irregularities, even though the 2000 parliamentary elections raised some controversies over the final results of ballots in Tehran, especially regarding the strange circumstances for the victory of former president Hashmi

Rafsanjani there. (28) Because the line between the divinely ordained and decisions based on popular will is very fine in the cleric-controlled government, ideological infighting is common, exacerbated by jockeying over socio-economic and political resources. As a result, the "Islamic" state behaves very similarly to its secular counterparts.

Khatami's election in 1997 caught the conservatives off-guard, particularly the speaker of the parliament, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, the conservatives' candidate for the presidency. Khatami was even referred to as the accidental president by Professor Shaul Bakhash of George Mason University. (29) But the election's outcome should not have come as a surprise, given factionalism within the elite and the poor economic situation. The electorate seized the opportunity to vote for a candidate who promised the rule of law, expansion of political rights, and economic improvements. Khatami's message had broad appeal. The young, women, and the middle class handed him 70 percent of the vote, a decisive victory. Khatami's election symbolized more than just popular dissatisfaction with the Iran's socio-economic troubles; it also indicated the rise of a post-revolution young generation eager for democracy and expecting meaningful results from their political participation.

The ruling conservatives' pre-screening candidates for elections has thus far backfired, resulting in either lower voter turnout--as in the elections for the Assembly of Experts (*majlis-i khubregan*)--or conservative losses in the 1999 municipal elections for village and city Islamic Councils. The October 1998 election for the Assembly of Experts (*majlis-i khubregan*), which oversees the powerful spiritual guide, was considered a testing ground for ideological and political competition between conservatives and reform-minded clerics. In the end, conservative candidates won the majority of the Assembly's 86 seats. Over

17.5 million people took part in the election, out of 39 million eligible voters, a turnout of 46.3 percent, far lower than for Khatami's election. (30) The low turnout, despite a vigorous campaign by conservatives to rally popular participation, was a silent protest at how the Council of Guardians (*shura'-i negahban*) pre-selected conservative candidates and disqualified a large pool of qualified moderates running for the Assembly. This was a defeat for the reform-minded Khatami, but it was by no means the end of Iran's ongoing political struggle.

The February 1999 municipal elections for village and city Islamic Councils were the first of their kind, aimed at broadening popular support for the government by giving control of local councils to elected officials. The election involved about 330,000 candidates for 200,000 council positions, as well as 800,000 volunteers, the largest-ever election in Iran. (31) The state's message was that a partnership between such councils and government bureaucrats would be more responsive to people's needs. Controversy surfaced before the elections when critics accused ruling conservatives of using their parliamentary power to ensure victories for conservative candidates through a Central Oversight Committee that supervised the selection of those eligible to run. (32) The election results, however, gave a clear victory to pro-Khatami moderates. Women and young voters once again poured their support behind independent and pro-Khatami candidates, helping female candidates to capture seats in major cities throughout the country. (33) These two voting groups also continued their support of Khatami and the moderates in the March 2000 parliamentary elections.

The decision to expand political participation to city and village councils goes back to the early promises of the revolution regarding rural economic and social development. While it is too early to predict the implications of the new dispersion of

power, the impact of such a process in terms of organization and mobilization could prove positive for the future of democracy in Iran. The rural population may be conservative in its social and religious outlook but as Iran forges ahead with development, the long-term socialization and politicization of such a process will take hold and may likely improve prospects for the formation of grassroots agents of civil society.

Elections, of course, do not guarantee the translation of popular demands into state policy. But, despite their shortcomings, elections are the best measure of democratic practice in a country. The rotation of public officials as determined by elections can have a long-term positive impact on the state's behavior and are an excellent way of alerting the government to necessary reforms. Further, elections bolster a citizen's confidence in the political process.

Elections therefore:

- 1) provide for the expression of popular support or defiance toward the state;
- 2) help bring accountability to the political process;
- 3) provide the state with a warning mechanism to respond to popular concerns and expectations;
- 4) have a psychological impact on people's perceptions of the role of government in society and the place of the individual within it; and
- 5) help raise the social consciousness of citizens regarding social problems. The Iranian experience is merely one example of a developing country experimenting with democracy by holding local and national elections as an avenue to resolving the larger issue of distributing socio-economic resources and political power in the process of democratization

## CONCLUSION

Explanations focusing on Islam, tribalism, and dominant states have been offered for why the Middle East is still rife with authoritarian regimes. More recently, the absence of a vibrant civil society has been cited as the determining factor in explaining the absence of democracy in the region. (34) But Middle Eastern countries either lack the prerequisites to democracy (e.g., an adequate level of social and economic development and a vibrant civil society) are dominated by strong and domineering states, or both.

Iran's experience "has shown that fundamentalism-in-power cannot solve every problem, and actually complicates the challenge of implementing Islamic values in public life." (35) President Khatami's repeated call for the supremacy of law in politics must be understood in light of his realization that, given Iran's tremendous socio-economic problems, time is working against the Islamic Republic. The resolution of the debate over the extent of popular sovereignty remains an essential element in determining the future of Islamic movements and the traditional 'ulema themselves.

Iran's ruling clerics have come to allow increasing "civilian" participation in all branches of government, including the powerful Council of Experts which selects the leading official, the spiritual guide. Despite its proven capability for the brutal suppression of the opposition, the state has been amenable to change under pressure (from socio-economic problems as well as an ideological rift within its political leadership.) The state is bound by its ideological foundation to give--within an "Islamic" context--credence to the popular will. Furthermore, with severe socio-economic problems threatening the regime's very existence, both conservatives and moderates have contemplated relinquishing some power to rival social and economic groups. The election of Khatami as president and the

reformists' impressive victory in the 2000 has signaled to conservatives that the time and patience of the population is running out.

Iranians have participated in elections in large numbers and have become increasingly vocal in expressing their views. Defining what is "Islamic" and the role of an Islamic government remain hotly debated issues, both in Iran and elsewhere in the Islamic world. (36) But the ascendance of Khatami has prompted optimism in Iran about a less domineering government, a more open society, and a less radical and more conciliatory Iran in the international community.

At any rate, the idea of economic development without political liberalization given a continuing economic crisis and factional polarization at the top cannot last indefinitely. The situation is bound either to develop into a freer society or degenerate into political chaos and perhaps even revolutionary upheaval. The closure of more than 20 reformist papers between April and August 2000, the arrest and detention of leading journalists, and Ayatollah Khamenei's blocking moves in parliament to repeal draconian press restrictions have been among the latest moves by the conservatives to curb their continuing loss of popularity and legitimate power.

In the long run, though, conservatives and reformists alike may realize that the very survival of the Islamic government and the quest to marry Islam with republicanism and democracy requires discourse and open dialogue at the national level. In the end, the formation of independent political parties, associations, and labor unions is a likely response to inadequacies in Iran's civil society and the present status of democracy.

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*Developing Countries: 1980-1989," The Journal of Developing Areas 29 (July 1995): 507-530; "Elections Matter," Center for Iranian Research and Analysis, CIRA14 (March 1998): 30-33; "Ideological Currents in Islam" Center for Iranian Research and Analysis, CIRA, vol. 14, No. 2 (September 1998); "Civil Society, Democracy, and the Middle East," Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA), vol. 2, No. 3 (September 1998); "Islam, Islamists, and Democracy," MERIA, vol. 3, no. 1 (March 1998); "Middle East Economies: A Survey of Current Problems and Issues," MERIA, vol. 3, no. 1 (September 1999); "Huquq-i Melli, Aqaliatha va Hamgarai" (National Rights, Minorities and Integration), National Studies (Tehran, Iran), vol. 1, no. 1, 1378 (Autumn 1999): 132-153; Islam and Democracy: State Society Relations in Developing Countries, 1980-1994 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000).*

#### NOTES

1. The research for this paper was supported by a student-faculty research grant from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. The help of my students Marlin Hardinger and James Hanke in researching materials related to this article, as well as others in progress is hereby acknowledged and appreciated.
2. Democracy is referred to a political system that guarantees and observes the political rights (e.g., competitive, free and fair elections) and civil liberties (e.g., freedom of speech, expression, assembly, religion, association) of its citizens.
3. The list of studies claiming Islam as monolithic, aesthetic and incompatible with democracy includes, for example, Daniel Pipes, *Slaves, Soldiers, and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Samuel P. Huntington, "Will more Countries become Democratic," *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Summer 1994): 193-218; Samuel P.

Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

4. The relationship between the level of development and democracy has been discussed extensively. For the classical example, see Seymour M. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 69-105.

5. The state plays a central role in discussions of socio-economic and political development. See, for example, Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Understanding Political Development: An Analytical Study* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1987).

6. Giovanni Sartori, "How Far Can Free Government Travel?" *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 3 (July 1995): 101-11, p. 103.

7. Whether there are prerequisites or requisites to democracy has been debated in the literature on democracy, but need not contain us here. See Seymour M. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development."

8. On this topic see, for example, William J. Dixon, "Democracy and the Management of Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 37, 1(March 1993): 42-68.

9. The literature on democracy and its requisites is rich. For a brief discussion of qualitative and quantitative approaches to democracy and its requisites, see Rueschemeyer, Dietrich, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See, also, Ali R. Abootalebi, "Democratization in Developing Countries: 1980-1989," *Journal of Developing Areas* 29 (July 1995): 507-30. A more comprehensive list includes:

Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Robert Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward A Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970), pp. 337-63; Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); Robert Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976). On Democracy and dependency, see Edward N. Muller, "Dependent Economic Development, Aid Dependence on the United States, and Democratic Breakdown in the Third World," *International Studies Quarterly* 29 (1985): 445-69; Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley Institute of International Studies: University of California, 1973); Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967); Fernando H. Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The World Capitalist System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). On Culture and Democracy, see Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1942); Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

Press, 1963); Gerhard Lenski and Jean Lenski, *Human Societies* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974); Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie, and Jae On Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison*

. Barnes and Max Kaase, et al., *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba eds., *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980); Kenneth A. Bollen and Robert W. Jackman, "Political Democracy and the Size Distribution of Income," *American Sociological Review* 50 (August 1985): 438-57; Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Edward N. Muller and Mitchell A. Seligson, "Civic Culture and Democracy: The Question of Causal Relationships," *American Political Science Review* 88 (September 1994): 635-52.

10. Democratic breakdown in developing countries are caused by a number of sources, including foreign intervention, dependency, and military intervention in politics. See, for example, Edward Ned Muller, "Dependent Economic Development, Aid Dependence on the United States, and Democratic Breakdown in the Third World," *International Studies Quarterly* 29, 1985: 445-69.

11. I have elsewhere discussed in detail the role of organized labor, professional groups and organizations and the state-society relations in the overall determinants of the level of socio-economic and political development in the Middle East and other developing countries. See, Ali R. Abootalebi, *Islam and Democracy: State-Society Relations in Developing Countries, 1980-1994* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000).

12. Hudson, "After the Gulf War: Prospects for Democratization in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal*, 45, no. 3 (Summer

1991). See, for example, the article by Emmanuel Sivan for the Social Science Research Council project on Civil Society in the Middle East, entitled "The Islamic Resurgence: Civil Society Strikes Back," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25 (1990): 353-64. See also Michael Hudson, "After the Gulf War.," John Esposito and James Piscatori, "Democratization and Islam," *Middle East Journal*, 45, no. 3 ( Summer 1991): 427-40.

13. Yahya Sadowski, "The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate." *Middle East Report* (July-August 1993): 14-21, see p. 17.

14. John L. Esposito, *Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 207.

15. See Ali R. Abootalebi, *Islam and Democracy*.

16. It should be clear to Muslims that in the Quran and Shari'a, Allah is the ultimate sovereign, and everything on earth and heaven is under His command. Yet, there is nothing in either source to deny Muslims' freedom of action to improve their individual and communal lives, nor does Shari'a promote subservience to the state as a proof of proper Muslim behavior. On the contrary, individuals are regarded as responsible for the salvation and well being of themselves, their families, and their communities. See, *The Quran*, Surah (chapter) 10, Aya (verse) 108 (NJ. Dawood, trans., New York: Penguin, 1993). The writings of Hasan Turabi, Mehdi Bazargan, Abd al-Karim Soroush, as well as the late Ayatollah Taleqani, also discuss the sovereignty issue. Mehdi Bazargan, for example, in response to Samuel Huntington's assertion of "the clash of civilizations," commented, before his death, on the positive relationship between Islam and individual rights, peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims, economic development, freedom of action, and democracy. See Mehdi Bazargan, "Is Islam a Global Threat?" (*Aya Islam yek khatar-i Jahani Ast?*), *Rahavard* no. 36 (Tir 1373 [1994]): 48-57. For a recent discussion

of various Islamic concepts with implications for democracy (e.g., tawhid, shurah, khilafah, etc.) see, John Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

17. The decision by Ayatollah Khamene'i to reshape the expediency council has led to 13 more members being added. It has also taken jurisdiction concerning questions unrelated to constitutional matters away from the six religious lawyers of the Council of Guardians who are also members of the expediency council.

18. For an account on news media in Iran, see A.W. Samii, "The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 3, 4 (December 1999).

19. Shaul Bakhash, "Iran's Remarkable Election," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 9, No. 1 (January 1998): 80-94, 83, 84.

20. Among better-publicized cases have been the earlier closure of newspapers "Jama'ah" (Society) and "Gozaresh-i Ruz" (Daily News) in Summer 1998. Both were supporters of President Khatami. They were charged with violating rules of ethics. The harassment, detention and eventual death of activist Sa'idi Sirjani while in custody is another well-publicized case of abuse of power by factions within the government. Conservatives' crackdown on pro-reform papers between April 22-24, 2000, alone resulted in closure of 12 pro-democracy papers. See A.W.: *The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999*, *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 4, (December 1999).

21. Bakhash, "Iran's Remarkable Election," p. 84.

22. For discussions of corporatism, see Philippe C. Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?" in Frederick Pike and Thomas Stritch, eds. *The New Corporatism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974); Schmitter and Gerhard Lehmbruch, eds., *Trends Toward Corporatist Intermediation* (Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage,

1979); John H. Goldthorpe, ed. *Order and Conflict in Contemporary Capitalism*, 1985; Abootalebi, *Islam and Democracy*.

23. On labor and democracy, see Ali R. Abootalebi, *Islam and Democracy*.

24. Such economic figures on Iran are subject to debate as the official numbers are usually lower but less reflective of economic realities in Iran. The cited figures here are from, *Global Studies: The Middle East*, 8th ed. (Dushkin: Guilford, Connecticut, 2000), p. 54.

25. Following the parliamentary elections, the state closed down more than 20 newspapers including such reformist dailies as "Asr-e Azadegan," "Fath," and "Mosharekat." Leading reformist journalists like Mashallah sham al-wa'zin, Akbar Ganji, and Ahmad Zeid-Abadi found themselves in jail on charges that their newspapers had "undermined" the Islam precepts of the state and had violated the Press Law--a set of vague or undefined principles passed by the outgoing fifth Majlis that virtually made any criticism of the top leadership a serious crime, punishable with long-term jail sentences.

26. *Akhbar-e Iqtisad*, vol. 2, April 24, 2000, p. 2.

27. For Iran's post-revolution economy, see, for example, Hooshang Amirahmadi, *Revolution and Economic Transition: The Iranian Experience* (N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990); Jahangir Amuzegar, *Iran's economy under the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993); Massoud Karshenas and M. Hashem Pesaran, "Economic Reform and the Reconstruction of the Iranian Economy," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 49, No. 1, (Winter 1995): 89-111.

28. The Council of Guardians announced the final results on May 20. It said that 534 out of 3,000 ballot boxes involving more than 726,000 votes had been invalidated, contradicting its own initial approval of the ballots. In response, 3,000 students demonstrated at Tehran University on May 22 accusing the Council of tampering with the

election results. Hojatoleslam Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani announced on May 25 that he would not take a seat in the parliament because of the controversy regarding his election. He finished 29th in the initial results but was moved up to the 20th position. See Iran Report 29 May 2000, volume 3, no. 21, compiled by William Samii at <http://www.rferl.org/iran-report//2000/05/21-290500.html>.

29. Bakhsh, "Iran's Remarkable Election, p. 90.

30. Ettela'at International, No. 1084, Monday, October 26, 1998. pp. 1-2.

31. Ettela'at, No. 1093, Friday. November 6, 1998, p. 2.

32. Ettela'at, No. 1098, Friday, November 13, 1998, p. 2.

33. Ettela'at, No. 1171, Friday, March 5, 1999, pp. 1-2.

34. For a more recent discussion on Civil Society and Democracy, see Gurdun Kramer, "Islamist Notions of Democracy," Middle East Report (July-August 1993): 2-8; Augustus Richard Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995); Emmanuel Sivan, "Constraints & Opportunities in the Arab World," *Journal of Democracy*, 8, 2 (April 1997): 103-13.

35. Laith Kubba, "Recognizing Pluralism," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (April 1996): 86-89, quote from p. 88.

36. Political Islam, Islamic movements, civil society and democracy have been subjects of debate for years. See, for example, John L. Esposito, ed., *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997); Augustus Richard Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995).