

Draft: Prospects for Democratization in Iran

Unpredictability:

If the title of this get-together was composed as a question, its answer would have been 'unknown'. I have to confess outright that I am not sure at all about the prospects for the democratization of Iran (or those of the neighboring countries of the region, for that matter). Over the past couple of years too many unpredictable domestic and international factors have been added to the complicated stew that is the Iranian political scene to make any certainty as to where the country is headed possible. For much of the past two and a half decades since the 1979 Revolution Iran has given the appearance of a society trapped under a forbidding and anachronistic radical religious regime, only for combinations of popular pressures and schisms among the political elites to undermine this simplistic image of a 'totalitarian theocracy'.

The rise of the reformist movement, inaugurated by Khatami's election to presidency in 1997, followed by the sweeps of local councils and the national parliament in the following years, seemed to signal the beginning of the end of 'religious despotism' in Iran. Yet the complete reversal of these democratic gains after the more recent elections, when conservatives recaptured these elected institutions, seems to signal the end of that beginning. The hostile targeting of the country by the US only has added to this sense of uncertainty. Yet in spite of the grim outlook of militarized international encirclement, and of rising domestic repression and insecurity, Iran seems more like a society still in throes of transition; but a transition to what? What remains unclear is the direction and result of this transition, as none of the existing political and social forces in Iran have managed to impose their agenda on the society as a whole, either through repression and coercive force, or through a combination of consensus and a social contract. In the absence of the clear hegemony of a social project, or the ability of a faction to impose its domination over others, Iranian politics will continue to be in a deadlock despite the present ascendancy of repressive conservative forces.

In the rest of my talk I will try to discuss briefly the social and historical context of the current political scene in Iran. I will conclude by arguing that there are at least three different political scenarios that can be envisaged about the politics of transition in Iran, only one of which can be termed 'democratic'.

The historical context

The conservative takeover of the parliament after the February 2004 parliamentary elections has prompted widespread dismissive comments about the accomplishments of the reformist project as a whole, both inside Iran as well as outside. The most vocal dismissals have come from the sworn opponents of the Islamic Republic who always viewed the 2 Khordad Movement as a regime ploy to delay its inevitable collapse; and by erstwhile enthusiastic supporters who have been disillusioned by the inability of their representatives to deliver on their promises and their willingness to compromise and capitulate against the conservative forces.

In spite of these polemical views, seven years of reformist politics have irreversibly transformed Iranian society. Furthermore, it is equally important to acknowledge the fact that the reformist movement was a byproduct of the 1979 revolution, and not simply a tactical ploy to ward off a systemic crisis. Much of the commentary about post-revolution Iran has focused on the 'Islamic' and ideological nature of the new regime, its supposed anti-modernism, and the prominent role of the senior *Ulema* in this 'theocracy'. What tends to be overlooked is the social aspect of the rebellion that brought down the monarchy.

The 1979 revolution was a social revolution, which transformed the relations of power throughout society, by integrating significant segments of society within the power structure, while stripping former elites and privileged classes of much of their power and wealth. The charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and the organized network of his followers assured the prominence of men of religion within the new regime; but the social identity of the post-revolution political elite was equally shaped by their provincial backgrounds, their more humble social origins, and their more traditional cultural capital (education, etc.). In a sociological sense, the 1979 revolution can be labeled as much as a 'provincial' and a 'local' event as an 'Islamic' one¹.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Monarchy, a series of increasingly violent events led to the exclusion or the elimination of all political rivals from the new state, including secular as well as religious nationalists, ethnic nationalists, socialists, democrats, and liberals. The holding of a non-competitive referendum for establishing an 'Islamic Republic' in lieu of a monarchy, the occupation of the American embassy, the Iraqi invasion and the 8 year Iran-Iraq war, the bloody civil war of 1980-82, the so called 'cultural revolution' which purged universities and cultural institutions, and the confiscation of the wealth and resources of former elites and the etatization of the economy, consolidated the monopoly of the new regime.

The charismatic popularity of Khomeini, and the humble social origins of the new political elite, assured the mass appeal of the Islamic Republic: The war against Iraq was fought by relying on massive popular support (a support which increasingly began to wane after 1982, when Iraq was expelled from Iranian territory); and regularly held elections with high rates of voter participation served as the indicators of the populist legitimacy of the new regime.

The fate of the State under the Islamic Republic was another factor in shaping the post-revolution polity. Instead of 'smashing' the old monarchist State, the new regime purged but maintained its institutions, while creating parallel institutions duplicating most critical and strategic tasks: The Revolutionary Guards duplicated the army, the Construction Jihad the task of rural development in rivalry with the Ministry of Agriculture, the Committees competed with the police, local prayer leaders checked and controlled local governors, and the appointed Guardian Council (GC) was set up to check the legislations of the elected Parliament (Majles).

This 'Dual State' structure directly reflected the multi-layered nature of political power under the Islamic Republic. The old State was used but not trusted. It was purged and weakened, but continued to be utilized as the main instrument of governance. Meanwhile, new revolutionary institutions were used in an increasingly state-controlled economy, as both the avenue of upward mobility and access to political power, policy making, and economic resources for the activists and supporters of the new order. As a result, the size and bulk of the bureaucracy and the public sector increased significantly, while new para-statal institutions

¹ I have discussed this issue at some length in *"Change and Continuity in Central-Local Power Structures in Contemporary Iran"*, Workshop on Uses and Abuses of Civil Society in Iran; Woodrow Wilson Center, Fall 2002

which fell outside the purview of the formal government formed another significant sector absorbing recruits from the followers of the new order.

Once rival political forces had been eliminated the deep differences within the new and highly heterogeneous political elite became more pronounced. Factionalism became an integral feature of the Islamic Republic, and its main mechanism for maintaining a working unity. This factionalism is built into the very legal and administrative structures of the Islamic Republic, where all manners of power are divided among multiple competing centers. Numerous centers of authority control legal, military, economic, and political resources without falling under a common administrative and regulatory framework. The only overarching authority is the position of the *Vali-e Faqih*, a constitutional position which was created and fit the unique personality of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Khomeini had the unique combination of religious, personal, political, and legal authority to impose his will at the numerous junctures when factional contentions reached explosive levels during a turbulent decade. While he was alive the continued populist appeal of the revolution and his personal status maintained the system's unity. But as his health began to decline in 1988, and as the war with Iraq turned ever more difficult to continue under international embargo, the necessity of 'unifying' the fractured structures of power became more evident. In a sense, the current project of the conservative forces in Iran to expel their factional rivals and to 'unify' the political State dates to the late 1980's. Within a year after the armistice with Iraq was signed a constitutional reform package was passed shortly before Khomeini passed away. Rafsanjani was elected to occupy a stronger presidency, and Khamenei was appointed to the position of the *Leader of the Revolution*, as a replacement for Ayatollah Khomeini. The project of 'unifying the power structure' became the cornerstone of Rafsanjani's post-war 'Reconstruction Era'.

Rafsanjani's project was to unify dual state structures by administratively integrating duplicate institutions. His first administration tried to reduce international tensions (by maintaining a neutral line toward the US war against Iraq in 1990) and to integrate Iran's isolated economy into the world market by adopting (partially) the IMF's structural readjustment recommendations, and by obtaining international loans for the first time after the revolution. He explicitly referred to a (post-Tiananmen Square) 'Chinese model' for the unification and development of post-war Iran; by which he meant a combination of moderate cultural opening, pursuing a strategy of high economic growth, and little to no tolerance for any political deviance.

Rafsanjani's eight year at the helm accomplished much economically, although at a high cost. If the first decade after the revolution gave a voice and brought the rural and lower middle classes into the mainstream of history and of national life, the period of Rafsanjani's presidency revived and in part created a new urban middle class with rising expectations and increasingly vocal frustration at the material and political deprivations they had suffered since 1979².

² I have discussed at some length the first decade of the revolution and this process of national integration in "Islam, Modernity, and National Identity", *Middle East Insight*, 1995. An indicator of the rise of this new middle class is the accelerated production of a new professional class through the expanded university system. For example, the total number of university students prior to the revolution (in 1977) was 154,000. By 1997 the number had reached 1.25 million. Total literacy rate in 1976 was 53%, by 1996 it was 80%. The total number of institutions of higher learning and research in 1976 was 192. As a result of the 'Cultural Revolution' this number dwindled to 85 by 1986, but by 1996 it had risen to 885. The number of press publications (quarterlies, dailies, professional and trade journals, etc.) also increased from 82 in 1976 to 835 in 1996. For these figures see Ali Rabi'i, *Negahi beh Jjameé Shenasi-eTahavolat-e Arzeshi*, Tehran 1997, pp. 134-49

While Rafsanjani's *second republic* was successful in reviving a war torn economy and exhausted society, his larger program of unifying the power structure and ending the paradoxes of the Dual State did not fare as well and only succeeded in heightening certain important integral tensions at the heart of the Islamic Republic. At an administrative level, the project of consolidating duplicate bureaucratic/revolutionary institutions barely made any headway, as most revolutionary institutions resisted losing their autonomy and privileges. At the same time, following the 'Chinese Model', and as compensation for their state budget reduction under structural adjustment, many of these revolutionary institutions became involved in lucrative economic projects, under the rubric of aiding the national reconstruction. By 1993, for example, a significant segment of the Revolutionary Guards were involved in (non-competitive) biddings for major civilian economic projects, ranging from railroads to highways, dams, irrigation projects, airports, marine ports, etc.³ Other state institutions followed suite by trying to shore up their operational and developmental budgets outside their allocated state budget⁴.

In the absence of transparency, competitive bidding, and democratic accountability this trend formed the basis of a rising shadow sector, operating outside formal regulatory frameworks, with powerful political connections and vested economic interests. With Clinton's election in 1992, and his administration's policy of 'Dual Containment' of 'Rogue States,' any hope of breaking Iran's isolation from capital markets was dashed. Rafsanjani's second administration was far more under the sway of conservative forces bent on protecting their economic interests and rigid ideological positions⁵.

Therefore, by the late 1990's Iranian society under the Islamic Republic had to contend with a political elite which came from popular classes, but which has lost much of its revolutionary zeal and legitimacy. After the revolution the political sphere had expanded to absorb strong adherents of the revolution, which competed to define their loyalty by declaring themselves true followers of Khomeini's leadership, or the *Imam's Line*. But increasingly after the first years of the revolution, the boundaries of this nomenclature had ossified, and political citizenship came to be defined increasingly in terms of political loyalty and religiosity⁶. The public sphere of the media, mass communications, formal political parties, etc. had been colonized by the political society. The same was the case for civil society as well as for physical public space, which were coercively Islamized and rigidly policed. The state dominated economy of the post-revolution period reduced the ability of economic classes to mobilize any significant autonomy from the State⁷. The State, on the other hand, distributed benefits and prompted clientelist networks and links which maintained various civic institutions and economic actors, in exchange for their compliance. This mechanism of domination through

³ See Middle East Economic Digest, 10/8/1993: Five brigades and 20 battalions are working on reconstruction projects

⁴ For the case of Tehran Municipality during this period see my "Municipal Matters; the Political-Economic Transformation of Tehran", *Middle East Report*, 212, Fall 1999. The case of the Foundations has been discussed in several articles in the special issue of *Goft-o-Gu*, #39, Winter 2004

⁵ I have discussed the period of Rafsanjani's presidency in some detail in 'Tilt but don't Spill: Iran's Development and Reconstruction Dilemma', *MER*, 24:6, 1994, pp.16-21

⁶ A study of senior political and socio-cultural office holders in post-revolution Iran conducted in Tokyo has shown that the political elite of the Islamic Republic numbers approximately 4000, with the same individuals rotating between different positions within the system, without being permanently eliminated, or any significant new recruits joining their ranks. Interview with Mojtaba Sadria, July 2000, Tehran.

⁷ Since Arang Keshavarzian's dissertation on the Tehran bazaar.

inclusion reproduced an atomized society which only managed to find some consensus and a sense of empowerment through its participation in the presidential elections of 1997.

What has the Reformist Movement achieved?

The reformist social movement which elected Khatami in 1997 was composed of a wide range of social actors and forces. The young generation, women, and intellectuals have been singled out as the backbone of Do-e Khordad. But other equally important social actors joined in with their agenda hoping to find voice in a collective and heterogeneous movement. The highest rate of participation and vote for Khatami came from border provinces, populated by ethnic and religious minorities, with the western Kurdish provinces showing the highest rate of participation. Even 70% of the armed forces, including the Revolutionary Guards, voted for Khatami's election.

The rates of electoral participation in post-revolution Iran have always been high, even though there is no coercion or legal obligation to vote. Prior to Khatami's election the highest turnout for an election had been in 1979 and in 1981. In the first case, 75% of the electorate, or 15 million voted to chose the Islamic Republic as the political system to replace the monarchy. On 1981, 75% of the electorate, or 17 million people, voted to elect Ali Khamenei as the third president, after the previous president had been assassinated in a terrorist attack by the MKO. Participation in elections after that date stayed at around 55% of the electorate. In the 1997 elections an unprecedented 85% of the electorate, or 29 million people participated, and 85% of which voted for Khatami. What Khatami's candidacy managed to do was to attract at least an additional 30% of an (growing) electorate which had always shunned the elections of the Islamic Republic.

It was clear from the outset that this movement (if it can be identified as such) had little in common aside from its support of Khatami, as a perceived agent of social change and system reform. Khatami's most attractive slogans were his insistence on the rule of law (as versus an arbitrary and unaccountable exercise of power), the revival of 'civil society', and the reduction of international tensions by calling for a 'dialogue among civilizations' as a response to Samuel Huntington's belligerent formula of 'war of civilizations'.

This is not the place to evaluate the success or failures of the regime reformers, led by Khatami. But against the critics who dismiss the accomplishments of the 7 years of reformist politics within the Iranian regime it is important to clarify the manner in which the Do-e Khordad project succeeded in transforming the Iranian political scene. Perhaps the most important accomplishment of Khatami and his administration has been his consistent position to reject violence and coercion as a political tool, and to stay relatively true to its commitment to respect the rules of the political game. Of course, actual political realities in Iran may make mirth of this stance, as dissidents continue to be persecuted, citizens' rights are violated, and the public sphere is mired in censorship. Nevertheless, in the spheres where the elected government has been in charge a degree of accountability and respect for the rules of the political game have been established which is unprecedented in any period of Iranian history.

The most notable example of this trend was displayed during the local council elections of 2003, where the reformist front lost all its seats in the councils of the large cities, including the capital. Contrary to national elections, which are constitutionally under the supervision of the conservative Guardian Council (GC), local elections are managed by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Majles. The 2003 elections were the most open elections held in Iran since 1979.

Few if any candidates were disqualified because of their views and political allegiances, and the range of candidates participating was unprecedented. As things stood, despite this openness, only 12% of the electorate participated in Tehran, and the conservatives swept all the seats. Regardless of the reasons behind the popular apathy, the fact that the MoI announced the results the next day, and the reformers accepted their defeat without rancor, was unprecedented in Iranian politics and showed that despite all their shortcomings, the reformers were at least committed to their pledge to respect the rules of the political game, even when they had the power to manipulate the results or to vet the candidates, or when they were about to lose the powerful positions they controlled.

The sixth Majles (2000-2004), dominated by the reformists, also set a remarkable record in terms of the progressive legislation it tried to pass. Although a full third of the laws proposed by the parliament were vetoed by the GC, nevertheless, the reformist deputies showed their commitment to pass laws aimed at opening up the political and the economic system of the country. These laws included legislation regarding the liberalization of the press, prohibition of torture, limiting the scope of what can be considered as political crime, the right of the accused to have access to a jury, equality of women (as well as religious minorities) in matters of inheritance and custody, the limiting of the scope of economic monopolies, the privatization of state controlled assets, etc.

Even in the economic domain the record of Khatami's administrations is not negligible, especially with the currency stabilization and the reduction of the budget deficit taking high priority, as well as sequestering the oil revenue surpluses into a special account to prevent high inflation and the dangers of high inflationary pressures which undermined the Shah's regime in the 1970's.

But even more important in the long-term is the impact of the 7 years of reformist politics on the nature of political expectations and on the discursive public sphere. Until this past February Iranian politics had been deadlocked in a tug of war which took the outward appearance of a power struggle between the reformist and the conservative factions of the regime. However, the nature of the new wave of popular participation in the electoral process, and the changed content and symbolic meanings of the elections have also introduced public opinion as a new and critical factor into the political sphere. After a series of six elections since 1997 the degree of public support, and hence the relative legitimacy, of different political factions has become evident. For example, it has become clear that the conservative forces enjoy the steady popular support of 8-16% of the electorate, which is still a significant number. Meanwhile, it has also become evident that the popular base of the reformist coalition is far more unsteady, vacillating from a high of 75%, to below 10%. Rather than assuming that popular support for reforming the system is weak or volatile, this result shows that support for the reformist project is performance-based and that, contrary to the supporters of the conservative coalition, the public which comes out to cast a vote for reformist candidates is not ideologically committed to their platform, nor unconditionally beholden to individual leaders or political organizations. This is a politically mature public, which chooses to use its voting participation only if it can reasonably expect that it can gain from it. The change from mass politics of the Khomeini era could not be more different, when the Imam's charismatic authority was sufficient to pull millions into the streets.

From mid 1990's until 2002, when several politically prominent reformists were arrested and jailed, public opinion surveys came to play an increasingly important tactical role in

reformist politics. What has been equally important is that these opinion surveys have been used to shape reformist and national policy, rather than doctored to justify a certain course of action.

But perhaps the most important contribution of the reformist project has been to the manner in which political discourse has been shaped irreversibly. The blockage of the reformist project by the conservatives has expanded the scope and extension of debate over fundamental political issues which, prior to this, had been considered taboo under the Islamic Republic. Issues such as the secular content of a democratic republic, the place of religion in national political life, the paradoxes of the constitution of the Islamic Republic, and the meaning of the Guardianship of the Leader and the ulema have become subjects of open (if often costly) debates. As a result, there are few red lines that have not been crossed in public debate, and the net result is that the Islamist reformist project in Iran has succeeded in what 6 decades of coercive modernization failed under the monarchy; namely to de-facto secularize political Islam⁸, without abdicating the role that Islamic intellectuals and Islamic political actors wish to play in political and social life.

Although continuously (and perhaps justly) derided for their tactical political ineptitude, the government reformers have succeeded to institute a number of important (if fragile) ground rules in the political sphere which, in the long run, are essential if the democratic project is to make any headway:

1] By continuously sticking to the letter of the law (deficient as the Constitution is) and the primacy of the formal political game (elections), the Law and the Constitution itself have become the focus of the political debate. Every time the Leader has stepped in to issue a decree, clearly violating and opposing public opinion, his office and his position has suffered a significant loss of legitimacy. The two most important instances were in 2000, when the newly elected reformist Majles's first proposed law to liberalize the press was struck down by the explicit order of the Leader. The second instance came in February of this year, when the Leader ordered the controversial 7th Majles elections to proceed despite the massive disqualifications of half of the candidates, including nearly 90 sitting deputies, by the GC. As a result the focus of political debate in Iran has shifted to the need for fundamental Constitutional reform, as demanded by those who are convinced the project of reform within the existing Constitution has reached its limits, versus the argument that a democratic interpretation of the existing Constitution is still an option. But the point is that, contrary to many authoritarian states in the region, the Constitution in Iran is a relevant document within the political field, and not just a formal piece of paper. Even the conservatives find themselves obliged to justify their actions by referring to the law, or to sell themselves to the public as the faction which acts according to the existing rules.

2] The more than 300 items of legislation the 6th Majles tried to pass, and the scope of parliamentary deliberations and public investigations, have opened the way for public scrutiny and debate over a tremendous range of social, economic, cultural, and political issues. These debates range from the role and shape of privatization of state enterprises and monopolies, to environmental issues, to economic subsidies, women's rights, minority rights, etc. The very existence of these public debates is the critical pre-condition for building a democratic movement in the long run. The relatively independent (but highly censored) press and the lively (if economically hard pressed) publishing industry have played a critical role in expanding this ongoing debate.

⁸ See Farhad Khosrokhavar: *Anthropologie de la Révolution Iranienne*, Paris, 1997

3] The role of political Islam and of Islam itself in political life has been opened to debate. Many of the senior government reformers were members of the radical faction which governed the Islamic during the first decade of the revolution. Others are war veterans, or worked in the cultural field, the security and counter-intelligence apparatus, or the Revolutionary Guards and the Bassij Militia during the same period. Their radical and Islamist credentials are impeccable, and without these credentials they would not have had the opportunity to run for office in the first place. They were instrumental in establishing the first revolutionary Islamist state in the region. As such, they have been in a unique position to open the discursive debate over the place of religion in politics, and the re-interpretation of political Islam. Despite some inconsistencies the Islamist reformers in Iran have been at the forefront of opening the debate over the relation of political religion and democracy. The reformist project in Iran (perhaps along with Turkey's Justice and Development Party) offers the key alternative to the 'Talibanist' interpretations of political religion in the region. Furthermore, the success of democratization through peaceful and gradual reform in Iran will serve as a model that shows how a radical Islamist movement that brought down a major state has evolved toward an inclusive and de-facto secular polity.

4] The ongoing debate over democratic strategies and the relation between religion and politics has also engaged secular democratic forces in an unprecedented manner. The historical cleavage between secular and religious forces which opened during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 has not closed exactly. But for the first time both sides recognize the primacy of institutionalizing democracy as their common priority. Most secular political forces in Iran have asserted that religion is a regressive and 'traditional' social force, and a barrier to 'modernity'. Maintaining such a reductive dichotomy has become increasingly difficult in the wake of the wide range of debates initiated by Islamic intellectuals and activists who are themselves disillusioned with the violent history of the revolution, but do want to maintain and advocate a religious identity within the political sphere. As Hakan Yavuz argues in the case of Turkey, it has become evident that it is not possible to maintain a rigid separation between religion and politics in Iran, Turkey, or elsewhere, for that matter⁹. The key question is whether the State should be defined and controlled by organized religion, or whether religiously defined political forces have a place in democratic and competitive political arena.

The 2004 parliamentary elections and the current situation:

Some reformist commentators have interpreted the radical intervention of the GC in the February elections as a parliamentary coup-d'état against the elected institutions of the republic. The GC initially disqualified half of the 8000 candidates running for office, including more than 80 sitting deputies. This precipitated a crisis, which led to half of the Majlis deputies conducting an unprecedented protest sit-in. Most of the national governors converged on the capital and threatened to resign, as did hundreds of deputy ministers and many members of the cabinet. President Khatami tried to make a deal or at least postpone the elections, but eventually capitulated as the GC refused to budge and the Leader decreed for the elections to proceed. The turnout was a record low of 51%, but still higher than the 40% reformers who had boycotted the elections had hoped. By gaining the Majles in an uncompetitive election the conservatives have lost more legitimacy, but they have gained the legislative ability to legalize their social, international, and political agenda. Their hope is that by deploying the same tactics for gaining

⁹ Hakan Yavuz: 'The Case of Turkey', *Daedalus*, Summer 2003, On Secularism and Religion

the presidency next year, after Khatami steps down, the long eluding agenda of unifying the multi-centered structures of governance will be finally accomplished. Although possible, such an outcome is doubtful given a combination of the damage caused by the 7 year long obstruction of reforming the system, and the hostile international situation.

On the international scene, there is little indication that pressure on Iran will be reduced, no matter what the outcome of US elections. Appearances aside, men of power in the Islamic Republic have always been pragmatic realists when it has come down to recognizing the limits of their international reach, and the seriousness of threats confronting them. There has been little display of fanatical suicidal urge similar to the Taliban or Saddam Hussein, in spite of often similar rhetoric. In 1988 Ayatollah Khomeini accepted a disadvantageous peace with Iraq; in Summer 2002, Ayatollah Khamenei announced that Iran would accept whatever choice the Palestinians would make, de facto hinting his willingness to accept the existence of Israel. Iran's pursuit of nuclear power is a deterrent strategy, and there is little doubt in my mind that Iranian rulers think of this program as little more than a bargaining chip in dealing with a US bent on regime change and re-shaping the map of the Middle East.

However, while the wiliness of the Iranian rulers cannot be denied, there is little chance of any US administration normalizing relations with Iran in the foreseeable future. Iranian conservatives have shown their ability to seriously damage US interests by pulling strings in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the US trapped in Iraq for the foreseeable future, and arguably unable to mount a full scale military confrontation, the best the Iranian conservatives can hope for is the continuation of a milder version of the current status quo, with a steady pressure to limit their nuclear ambitions and continued limits imposed on their access to international capital.

In the domestic front, the damage caused by the manner in which elections were carried out is more significant. Although the GC succeeded in effectively ejecting the reformers from the legislative, the conservatives ended up paying a hefty price for this victory:

1] On the positive side, the manner of disqualification of the reformers, and their willingness to take a stance on the inclusion of all the disqualified candidates and not just their own colleagues, regained some of their damaged credibility. The fact that many find themselves outside the power structure has freed them to contemplate articulating positions which were difficult to express while they were within the government. Any democratic transition will require political leaders with the credibility, experience, and the record which would allow them to mobilize and focus the population. One of Iran's historical tragedies has been the elimination of popular political elites from the political scene, resulting in discontinuities and political vacuums once transitions have taken place. The fact that many reformers have managed to survive the defeat of the reformist project, and maintain some of their credibility, is a critically important factor whose significance will become more evident in the long run.

2] Although the radical intervention of the GC in the Majles elections was not a coup d'état nevertheless, to use the expression of my colleague Morad Saghafi, it was a *coup de force*; a body blow not just to a rival political faction, but to the body of the State itself. As mentioned above, most national governors and senior ministerial functionaries wanted to resign in outrage over the blatant circumvention of the political process. They stayed on only at Khatami's urging. Since the inauguration of the 7th Majles, the trend toward constraining and undermining the Executive State, the bureaucracy and technocracy of the government, has only intensified, with significant consequences.

It is important to emphasize that since Rafsanjani's first term (1989-93) to Executive State has come to play the central role in the governance and management of the country.

Although Rafsanjani failed to integrate the revolutionary duplicate institutions within the Executive State, nevertheless, he succeeded in reviving the badly demoralized bureaucratic/technocratic administration, and used it as the instrument of governance during the 'reconstruction era'. The center piece of this strategy was the revival of the five year planning strategy (5YP). Khatami's administrations pursued the same approach, and used the same personnel and state cadres as Rafsanjani.

One of the first acts of the 7th Majles was to challenge the legislation for the 4th 5YP, the most complex and elaborate medium-term development plan devised in post-revolution Iran. By questioning and modifying the 4th 5YP the conservative Majles has managed to further alienate the thousands of local and central bureaucrats and administrators who have been working on this project for the past few years. The drama of the closure of Tehran's new international Airport by the Guards, and the second operator for a cellular phone network on the charges that the Turkish subcontractors for these projects pose a national security threat; have demoralized the State and its functionaries. Other plans to privatize segments of the public sector and to attract foreign investment have been challenged by the Majles.

Given the disarray and lack of credibility of opposition forces, and the undeniable weakness of ideological forces such as nationalism, political Islam, or socialism, to mobilize a disillusioned and skeptical population, the importance of the State as the only institution capable of maintaining national coherence at this historical juncture becomes evident. Given the state of Iran's neighboring countries, from the Caucasus to Iraq and Afghanistan, the vital importance of the survival of the State becomes all too evident.

3] The blockage of the reform agenda and the manner of disqualification of candidates in the elections has also unleashed perilous centrifugal forces in Iran. The rise of ethnic discontent is an indication and minority nationalism is an example. This trend was already evident at the 2003 local elections of 2003. For example, local councils in the cities of Abadan, Khoramshahr, Hoveyzeh, Shadegan, Khorramshar, and Ahvaz, in the southwest province of Khuzestan all fell to candidates who self-identified as ethnic Arabs and displayed clear signs of Arab nationalist tendencies. During the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, several public demonstrations were held in these cities in support of Saddam Hussein, at a time when the government policy was a de-facto support of the invasion.

This trend has not been surprising as ethnic minorities, like the rest of the population, stand to lose ground under a less representative political arrangement. The example of the province of Kurdistan is instructive in that regard: The rate of participation and electoral support for reformists in the Kurdish provinces of the west of the country had been consistently high since 1997. But with the GC disqualifying some 75% of the candidates in the province of Kurdistan, the rate of participation in the parliament elections fell from 70% in 2000 to 32% in 2004¹⁰. This fall in the rate of participation and the rise of ethnic and localist political identifications has undermined the positive trend of the past 7 years, which saw the beginnings of a trend toward the recognition of the importance of dealing with the critical question of the relations between the center and provincial periphery in Iran.

Another indication of the worrisome rise of centrifugal forces can be seen in the rising incidence of explosive local riots. While these local riots are not a new phenomenon in post-revolution Iran, over the past 7 years there had been a distinct fall in the rate of their occurrence, as popular discontent had found new political and civic avenues to express its expectations and grievances. Just in the past few months there has been a series of increasingly violent riots, each

¹⁰ See *Sharq* 1/13/2004; and the website of the Mol at www.moi.ir

occurring due to seemingly inconsequential reasons, all of which have received widespread press coverage¹¹.

Thus, under the appearance of a quietly passive and demoralized society the most banal occurrences lead to blind and violent explosions. In turn, this incites a vicious cycle of repression. Since encouraging local riots and ethnic discontent has been an explicitly cited part of the US neo-conservative strategy for destabilizing the Iranian regime, every such occurrence has the potential to be viewed with suspicion and as a potential national security threat. The increasing paranoia of the conservative forces which see any dissent and criticism as sign of a fifth column and a conspiracy only serves to further restrain the public sphere and increase discontent.

Prospects for future political development in Iran

The aftermath of the elections and the increasing international pressure have made the political situation in Iran more unpredictable. Debates by reformers associated to the main political parties have focused on selecting a candidate to run for next year's presidential elections, and on revitalizing the popular base of the reformist movement by concentrating on activism within the 'civil society'. This popular base, however, seems to be highly disillusioned with the government reformers. Several factions within the student movement, for example, began to call for a popular referendum to be held over the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, a position which amounts to directly challenging the position of the unelected conservative forces, including Ayatollah Khamenei. Under the present circumstances it seems unlikely that selecting a popular candidate for the presidency will mobilize any significant support during the next elections.

The same disarray seems to bedevil the secular reformers within Iran as well as the democratic republican opposition abroad. Clearly this is a period of regrouping for the array of the coalition of secular, religious, governmental, and civilian forces which supported the reformist project during the past 7 years. However, I would like to propose several points for discussion and suggest that there are at least three conceivable scenarios about Iran's political future:

There is a tendency in much of the present debates to propose a combination of 'state centered' and "society-centered' strategies to break out of the current impasse. The argument is that the only way to check the state power is by strengthening and rejuvenating existing civil institutions. At the same time, proposing appropriate candidates for office will ensure that at least the important Executive State, with all the resources at its command, does not fall into the hands of conservative and anti-democratic forces.

While recognizing that any democratic strategy must combine grassroots effort with high politics, I find that the main problem in this argument is that it fails in the key task of

¹¹ The city of Isfahan witnessed a series of violent riots against two local Islamic savings and loans (Sanduq-e Qarzolhassaneh) which failed to reimburse their members. In August the southern port of Ganaveh was the scene of violent riots against government offices (IRNA 8/25/1960). In Septmeber the city of Yazd was the scene of a ten hour riot after several motorbikes were stopped for air pollution and a crowd of more than 300 attacked the police setting fire to their vehicles (Baztab 9/18/2004). In Miandoab, in Azarbaijan, a group of villagers belonging to the mystic Aliallahi sect mounted an attack on the local military garrison after an officer had ordered a foot soldier belonging to the sect to shave his long moustache, considered sacred by the sect (BBC 10/12/2004)

scrutinizing the nature of political power in Iran. Take the argument for privileging 'civil society' as the arena to mobilize support for the next round of efforts at reforming the system: The history of civil society in Iran is laced with exclusions, particularisms, and dependency. This has been true across the board, as in the case of secular left-leaning intellectual associations, such as the 'Writers Association', or the liberal leaning 'Lawyers Association' and Physicians Association; as with more business oriented or professional associations, such as the 'Society of Accountants', 'of the 'Guild of Bazaar Merchants', or the Chamber of Commerce.

In other words, a democratic project will require a critique of the way civil society institutions have been shaped and operated in Iran, before insisting that the existing civil institutions can form the basis of mobilizing a democratic power to curtail the abuses of the State. In other words, the question must be asked as to how the institutions of civil society have exercised power within their ranks, and the manner in which they have mobilized resources from the State, or checked the power of the State¹². The weakness and fragility of civil society institutions in Iran, in part, has been due to the undemocratic exercise of power within these institutions. Unless the manner of the exercise of power within civil institutions is not itself politicized and opened to debate it will be difficult to imagine how activism through such institutions can be used as a strategy to further the democratic cause in Iran.

The same criticism can be made of the state-centered argument. As I will argue below, the State is essential to any political strategy in Iran. The State controls nearly 80% of the economy, directly and indirectly. Cultural, educational, public, civic institutions are highly dependent on the State. As we discussed above, the Islamic Republic took over the monarchist state, but failed to change it in any fundamental way. The focus of competition over the political future of Iran continues to be the capture of this State, by changing, maintaining, or reforming the political regime controlling it. As an institution, the Iranian State has enjoyed tremendous continuity since the 1920's, in spite of major political crises. What needs to take place, again before the State becomes the focus of political strategies is a critical analysis of how the state penetrates society, how it rules, fragments resistance, and exercises power.

In other words, after the experience of these past 7 years, democratic forces in Iran need to seriously consider how power is exercised throughout this society. Rather than a strategy to capture the State, or mobilize civil society institutions, it is necessary to think of strategies to democratize these institutions (not to mention that other key institution, the family) by politicizing the way power is organized and exercised within and through these institutions¹³. Without such a critique it is hard to conceive how the democratic project can proceed in Iran.

Conclusion

I think three possible scenarios are conceivable for the future shape of the State in Iran.

1] The Predatory State¹⁴: The conservative project of unifying the power structure by capturing all elected as well as non-elected institutions at best will turn Iran into a typical authoritarian and

¹² See for example Morad Saghafi: 'Half a century old effort: An assessment of the record of the Writers' Associations in Iran', *Goft-o-Gu* 7, Spring 1995; Ahmad Meidari: 'Civil Associations and the State', *Goft-o-Gu* 40, 2005 (forthcoming); Habib Ladjevardi: *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 1985, Syracuse

¹³ See Mahmoud Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 1996, Princeton

¹⁴ See Peter Evans: 'Predatory, developmental, and other apparatuses; a comparative political economy perspective on the third world State', *Sociological Forum*, 4:4, December 1989, pp.561-88

repressive Middle Eastern state, like Egypt or Syria. Despite its undeniable repressiveness the multi-centered power structure of the Islamic republic has at least modified some of its worst Stalinist tendencies. The emergence of the reform movement at the societal level was a result of this fragmentary power structure. Its coercive unification will mean greater repressiveness. In such a case scenario it is likely that the conservatives will be able to muster enough force to subjugate the population, but that is all they will manage to accomplish¹⁵. In order to govern the complex economy and society of a vast country they will need the expertise and managerial ability of the Executive State, which they have alienated. At the same time, as we discussed above, since the late 1980's many of these conservative forces have moved into shadow economic spheres which fall out of the regulatory gaze of the parliament or the government¹⁶. In fact, a significant segment of the political system, including the military, have effectively turned into a quasi mafias, which for this reason will be unable to behave like a bureaucracy capable and willing to impose rules and order. Using Peter Evans' terminology (although subverting it) a state monopolized by these forces can only be labeled as a Predatory State, 'as it will be unconstrained by any set organized social interests and in this sense very autonomous'¹⁷.

The victory of the neo-conservatives in US elections and their continued pressure, jointly with Israel, toward militaristic confrontation with Iran will help the consolidation of such a scenario, under the rubric of defending national interests and the Islamic Revolution. In such a case, it is conceivable that Iran will turn increasingly into a patrimonial and Sultanistic State, with little dissent allowed, and a highly repressive domestic politics. So long as oil revenues stay high such a state can maintain itself, without resorting to attempts to carry out economic reforms. It will be highly fragile, and should it fall apart the pent up social frustration is likely to precipitate a political implosion, which will make Iraq pale by comparison.

2] The Bureaucratic and Developmental State

What the bureaucracy and technocracy of the Executive State will opt for, if the critique of the power structure we discussed above is not carried out. The gist of the argument here is for the able and capable bureaucracy to be given leeway to carry out its planned rationalization of the economy. Khatami's second administration (as well as Rafsanjani's first), has had such an agenda, which also has deep historical roots in modern Iranian political culture¹⁸. A rather restrictive political arrangement, coupled with cultural liberalization, and détente with international community over nuclear programs and Iran's position toward Islamic and regional politics, an increasing accommodation with international capital, as well as the Iranian expatriate community is a likely scenario¹⁹. The John Kerry and the European scenario of a grand bargain with Iran, and a resumption of economic ties and increasingly normal relations if Iran were to

¹⁵ See Morad Saghafi: 'The new landscape of Iranian politics', *Middle East Report*, Fall 2004, forthcoming

¹⁶ According to Mohsen Armin, a senior Deputy from Tehran, nearly 40% of state budget and revenues fall outside the regulation and control of the state (www.emrooz.com, 12/29/2002). According to other Deputies there are some 40-60 marine ports on the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, which fall outside the control of the customs or any section of the government. These ports are operated under the supervision of the Guards, and most of the country's extra-legal commerce and contraband passes through them (www.iran-emrooz.de, 5/18/2004). On the Foundations see the special issue of *Goft-o-Gu*, 39, Winter 2004

¹⁷ Peter Evans, op.cit., p.571

¹⁸ For example, Homa Katouzian's theory is that cycles of chaos and authoritarianism push the Iranian political classes toward such tendencies. See for example his *State and Society in Iran*, London, 2002, I B Tauris

¹⁹ See Morad Saghafi, *The new landscape of Iranian politics*, op.cit

give up its nuclear and regional ambitions will help this scenario, as human rights and political freedoms will be compromised in such a grand bargain²⁰.

3] Democratizing the State²¹

I have to confess I find this the most difficult and unlikely scenario to succeed. As I have stated above, a critique of the modes of rule and the exercise of power, as well as the institutions of power throughout society, are the conceptual and discursive pre-requisites for a democratic project to have any chance of success. The 'prospect of democracy in Iran' will have to pass through the project of democratizing the State itself, as well as the institutions of civil society.

At another level, closing the historic animosity and mistrust between secular and religious democratic forces is essential. This can take place through a project of national reconciliation. Secular democrats must recognize that the conceptual normative dichotomy of modernity/tradition, with religion personifying the forces of obscurantism and backwardness, is itself an ideological and historical construction. On the other hand, religious forces that have supported and been part of the Islamic Republic need to recognize the burden of the violent past which has relegated their secular fellow democrats into the position of third class citizens²². As discussed before, the upper layers of Islamic Republic operate very much like a nomenclature²³, and it is the rest of society which feels justifiably second class and excluded from any political and economic privilege²⁴. Reformists have adopted as their electoral slogan 'Iran for all Iranians', shorthand for challenging the system of political privilege enjoyed by those loyal to the Revolution and part of its cadres. But despite some significant display of fairness and principled positions, even at a cost to themselves, they have taken few steps to practically challenge this apartheid system in any significant way²⁵

²⁰ The French car maker Renault has already signed a major contract to produce a world car in Iran. Japan signed a multi billion dollar contract to develop oil fields, and China just signed a 20 year contract to develop and export natural gas for 20 years, at a staggering value of \$120 billion.

²¹ I have borrowed the expression from Mahmood Mamdani's excellent work, previously cited, *Citizen and Subject*

²² I say 'third class' because reformnists, even those who have high positions within the state, routinely consider themselves to be second class citizens

²³ An anecdote can demonstrate this two tiered system of inclusion and exclusion: Recently, in September, Iran's worst case of serial killings and child abuse came to light. Two young workers in the working class town of Pakdasht, had abducted, raped, and killed 22 young boys during a two year spree. The victims were mostly Afghans, and provincial in origin. The country has been horrified at the extent of the crime, and the TV reporter claimed that Pakdasht had been populated by predatory jackals who had preyed on the young and innocent. The next day, the conservative deputy from Pakdasht took great exception to this insult. Rather than empathizing with the victims he used the Majles pulpit to announce that similar crimes were happening everywhere in the country, and the TV had insulted the good people of Pakdasht by calling them jackals. He went on to say "In Pakdasht we have good muslims, devout and observant. People who live here are revolutionaries who follow the Imam's line and the Leader's guidance...we have a mother who has offered 4 martyr sons to the revolution, another mother has given three martyrs and injured sons, many families who have given two martyrs, and altogether 450 martyrs, and war wounded. We have three brothers of martyrs who serve in the Expediency Council, other relatives of martyrs who work in the Office of the Leader. Other members of the respected families of martyrs work in the high ranks of the Guards, in the trenches of the Majles, and as provincial and district governors, university professors, and physicians". This is a clear list of who 'belongs' and is part of the closed circle of the nomenclature, and the rest who fall outside *Sharq*, 9/27/2004

²⁴ See for example, Paul Klebnikov: 'Millionaire Mullahs', *Forbes Magazine*, 7/21/2003: "A nuclear threat to the rest of the world, Iran is robbing its own people of prosperity, but the men at the top are getting extremely rich"

²⁵ In my opinion, the most moving public position adopted by the reformers came in the editorial of the last issue of the daily *Mosharekat*, the newspaper of the largest political party of the country, which had just won the largest block of seats in the parliament in 2000. A number of prominent lay and secular intellectuals were under serious

At one level, the expulsion of the reformers from positions of governance after the Majles elections will allow many of them to consider such a rapprochement. As one secular activist has stated "we do not have the same history, but now we do share the same fate"²⁶. The reformers, like the conservatives, or the secular reformers and opposition for that matter, are not a homogeneous force. At present there are several strands of argument circulating within reformist parties and the press. The critical fact is that 'democracy', and the obstacles to institutionalizing it, have become the focal point of the heated debates of the more progressive segments of the reformist forces²⁷. The largest reformist parties, The Participation Front and the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution have adopted the strategy of continuing to work within the confines of the existing constitution. This strategy has been labeled 'the democratic interpretation of the Constitution', by which they mean a combination of popular and organized pressure should be applied to the Leader in order to compel him to bring the appointed institutions of the Islamic Republic in line with the elected ones. In other words, the composition of the GC, the Assembly of Experts, the Judiciary, the State Television, etc. should correspond to the balance of elected representatives of the Majles. Given the current political realities, and the experience of the last elections, this seems like a naïve strategy, to say the least, and more of a temporary rhetorical ploy to avoid making some hard strategic choices.

A far more interesting set of debates has emerged around the 98th anniversary of the Constitutional Revolution. The word for 'Constitution' in Persian means 'conditional', which was the aim of the 1906 revolution, to limit the despotic power of the Shah, and subject him to a fundamental law, passed by an elected parliament. The 1906 revolution involved lay and religious figures on both sides. A senior cleric, Ayatollah Fazlollah Nuri, was executed (by rival Ayatollahs, among others) for opposing the revolution due to its secular nature, and calling for a shari'a based law (currently a major highway in Tehran is named after Ayatollah Nuri). The clerical establishment has always stayed ambiguous about the Constitutional Revolution. After the rise of the radically secular Pahlavi dynasty, it has come to see the Constitutional Revolution and democracy itself as a vital threat to itself, and as a conspiracy to exclude it from power and any say in political and social matters. The recent barrage of public debates about the Constitutional Revolution has been all the more fascinating as reformers, including clerics like President Khatami, have begun to refer to the Constitutional Revolution as the focal origin of Iranian modernity and the reference point for the start of the struggle for democracy against arbitrary despotism. The significance of this debate lies in the fact that the official, sacred, date zero of the Islamic Republic is May 4th 1963, the day Ayatollah Khomeini made a public speech against the Shah's White Revolution, which sent him to exile after bloody repression of demonstrations by his supporters in the shrine city of Qom.

attack for having participated in a joint conference organized by the Green Party in Berlin. The arch-conservative daily *Kayhan* published an editorial reminding the reformers that despite their differences they were all brothers in arms, who had used machine guns against these same seculars, in defense of the resolution, and that it was now time to renew their oaths and do the same again. Abbas Abdi, a senior member of the PF, wrote in the editorial that despite their fealty to the ideals of the revolution they would not point any guns toward fellow citizens fro having expressed their dissent freely and peacefully, and that if this meant they had become counter-revolutionary, so be it. The newspaper was closed the next day, together with a dozen other reformist papers

²⁶ Amir Gandjbakhsh, www.iran-emrooz.de, 2/20/2004

²⁷ The first issue of *Ayyiin*, the new reformist theoretical/strategic journal, which has recently replaced its banned predecessor *Aftab*, is entirely dedicated to the topic of "Obstacles and resources for democracy in Iran", 1:1, July 2004

While the debate about democracy and its strategies is livelier and more substantial than ever in Iran, it is important to emphasize the fragility and vulnerability of the democratic forces active there. Like the two previous scenarios, International pressure and politics can have significant repercussions within Iran. The international position that can significantly shore up the chances of a democratic alternative in Iran is a position adopted by Europe (perhaps it is too much to hope any administration in the US to gravitate toward such a stance), that would privilege human rights above any economic or strategic considerations. If Europe would say that security, strategic, and regional political concerns can all be subject to open political negotiations, without any pre-conditions, but that all economic relations and investments would be subject to the respect for the human rights and the citizen rights of all Iranians, it is very likely that the political scene would change significantly, and rapidly in Iran.