

# Islamic State and Civil Society in Iran

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by Ali Banuazizi

Why is the topic of civil society in Iran of such great interest to many of us? Perhaps because it allows us to shift our attention from a consideration of the state, which has dominated the analyses of Iranian politics for the past twenty years, to a discussion of society. It was society that produced the “Khatami phenomenon,” and no one, inside or outside Iran, predicted such a major shift in Iranian politics before it happened in May 1997.

Aside from this important shift of attention, there is also the fact that civil society, more than any other topic, is the subject of intense debate and contention in Iran today. As you well know, the idea of civil society was reintroduced into the lexicon of political scientists in the West about a decade ago, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of democratic movements in Eastern Europe. And it has become more than a slogan in Iran’s fractious politics. Recently, we have witnessed the formation of political parties (e.g. *Hezb-e Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami* [Islamic Iran’s Participation Party]), which are attempting to institutionalize President Khatami’s promises of “the rule of law,” civil society, and tolerance.

To the casual observer, this debate on civil society may sound like a barren intellectual exercise with little or no relevance to the harsh realities of political life. Indeed, some even argue that Iran’s repressive regime has offered up this debate as a palliative in order to soften the image of the Islamic Republic. These critics argue that the very idea of civil society, an unmistakably Western and liberal concept, is incompatible with an Islamic polity, and is a contradiction in terms. And yet the idea of civil society has moved to the center-stage of political discourse in Iran today, thanks mostly to President Khatami’s rhetoric during and after his election victory in

**Ali Banuazizi** is Professor of Social Psychology and Modern Iranian History at Boston College. He delivered the Seventeenth Annual Joseph (Buddy) Strelitz Lecture on 18 April 1999.

May 1997. (In Persian, the term is *jame' e-ye madani*, which has connotations close to those of the German *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*.)

Before proceeding further, let me put forward my main argument. Two decades after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, I believe, “Islamism” as a legitimizing state ideology has all but run its course in Iran. By this I do not mean to suggest that Islam as a religion, as a moral foundation for society, or even as a basis for political organization and mobilization, has lost its appeal to Iranians. But Islamism, as a political doctrine that subordinates popular sovereignty to the divine law or shari‘a, as interpreted and enforced by an Islamic government—this Islamism is being rejected by an expanding majority of the population, including many high-ranking members of the clergy.

That makes Islamism a spent ideology, no longer capable of providing legitimation for the rule of the jurist (*velayat-e faqih*). With the erosion of such religious legitimacy, the clerics’ monopoly on power is certain to be challenged from within, unless serious political reforms are undertaken to broaden political participation and to limit the stifling role of the state in the many spheres of public and private life.

These are precisely the kinds of reforms that have been sought by President Khatami and his pro-reform coalition under the rubric of civil society, the rule of law and decentralization. Given the unusually high level of political support that he enjoys, particularly among the urban middle class, women and the younger intelligentsia, his conservative opponents’ strategies of intimidation and coercion are unlikely to succeed beyond the short term.

### ***The Faltering Legitimacy***

Let us place this development in the context of an historical process. At the most fundamental level, challenges to the legitimacy of clerical rule in Iran date back to the immediate aftermath of the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. In November 1979, an intense debate related to the very idea of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the supreme jurist) within the Assembly of Experts, which was in charge of drafting a new constitution, coincided with the removal of Mehdi Bazargan as prime minister and the taking of the

American hostages. At that time, there was a clear division between those, including Ayatollah Khomeini, who wanted to establish a theocratic republic predicated upon *velayat-e faqih*, and Bazargan and others who were opposed to the notion.

The Assembly of Experts sided with Ayatollah Khomeini and granted him—as the Islamic Republic’s first *faqih*—such broad supervisory powers as the appointment of the heads of the judiciary, the armed forces, the security organization, and the broadcast media. He was also given controlling influence over a significant segment of the economy represented by such mammoth organizations as the Foundation for the Oppressed or the Martyrs’ Foundation. It is this provision that makes the Islamic Republic a theocratic, or a quasi-theocratic, republic. Otherwise the Iranian constitution reads very much like most modern constitutions, containing only a few provisions that can be considered to be strictly Islamic.

This unprecedented power and authority of the *faqih* was a *de jure* recognition of the unusual stature of Ayatollah Khomeini. At the time, he was the *marja’-e taqlid*, the “source of emulation” for the Shi‘ites (the highest position that a cleric can attain), the leader of the revolution, and the founder of the Republic.

By the time of Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, less than a decade later, however, it had become clear to the ruling clerics that no possible successor could be found who would simultaneously possess the religious qualifications of a *marja’* and the ability to lead politically. Hence, in the final months of Khomeini’s life, and at his own behest, an amendment to the constitution, separating these two positions, was drafted. Shortly after Khomeini’s death, the eighty-member Assembly of Experts acted with remarkable alacrity and chose the then-President Khamene’i as the supreme jurist, or *faqih*, despite the latter’s relatively low rank within the clerical hierarchy. The amendment was ratified later that year in a plebiscite, thus confirming Khamene’i’s appointment as the nation’s spiritual guide, though he could not be elevated to the position of the *marja’*.

Khamene’i’s subsequent efforts to achieve the status of the *marja’* were rebuffed by some of the highest-ranking clerics in Qom and elsewhere, leading him to abandon the idea altogether. Thus, in spite of his extraordinary political powers, Khamene’i has never enjoyed the status of the highest religious authority in the country.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Clerical Performance***

Beyond the issue of Khamene'i's qualifications to serve as the *faqih*, other factors have seriously undermined the Islamic regime's legitimacy in the eyes of the people over the past two decades. As might be expected, the clergy's direct involvement in the day-to-day affairs of the state has made them the natural targets of criticism and disdain for the many failings of the huge state bureaucracy. This is entirely natural. If you rely on the sanitation department to pick up your trash, and if it fails to do so, whom are you going to blame? If the head of the department happens to be a cleric, he and his cohorts will eventually become the targets of your blame. More generally, the clerics' abuses of power, their mismanagement of the economy, their suffocating control over the cultural life of the country, and involvement by some among them in massive corruption schemes, have severely undermined their once-considerable moral authority as the pious men of sacred knowledge. As the Islamic Republic's first prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, remarked in an interview shortly before his death in 1993, the greatest threat to Islam in Iran since the revolution has been the experience of living under the Islamic Republic!

### ***Variants of Political Islam***

Unlike other great revolutions, the Iranian Revolution never produced a coherent and consolidated ideology. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of the rule of ayatollahs in Iran has been the degree to which this relatively small group of men, in spite of many similarities in their social origins and intellectual background, have disagreed among themselves about some of the most fundamental issues concerning the nature of society and government. Such differences have led to the formation of shifting alliances and counter-alliances based on ideological affinities or political expediencies.

The origins of this factionalism may be traced back to the diverse ideological interpretations of Islam within the grand alliance that led to the 1979 revolution. Thus, even leaving aside the many varieties of secular and leftist ideologies that were represented within the revolutionary movement, we could identify at least four types of

*Islamic* political orientations within the Iranian revolution of 1977-79.

Two significant variants were the “radical Islam” advocated by Ali Shariati and the “militant Islam” expounded by Ayatollah Khomeini. There were striking differences between them. Both men had made bold innovations in the interpretation of Shi‘ite doctrines, particularly as these applied to the relationship between religion and politics. Both supported the use of violence to transform society into an Islamic utopia. Shariati’s version of utopia was an Islamic state ruled by enlightened thinkers, with no room for the *ulama*, while Khomeini’s was an Islamic state ruled by the *ulama* as representatives of the hidden Imam. Shariati’s ideology was a blueprint for a radical transformation of the social order, while Khomeini’s was primarily a design for the political and cultural transformation of the existing order. The agenda for Shariati was a social revolution; for Khomeini it was a political revolution aimed at the establishment of a theocracy.

These different ideas appealed to different constituencies. The followers of Shariati’s ideas were almost exclusively the young intelligentsia, many of whom found their organizational base in Mojahedin-e Khalq; Khomeini’s militant Islam appealed to some of the same social elements plus a segment of the clergy, several thousand theology students, and many of the bazaar merchants.

But there were still two other orientations within the Islamic spectrum. A third variant was liberal Islam, whose adherents sought political power through non-violent means and favored an accommodation of Islam to the modern world. The modern bourgeoisie, some merchants, the modern middle class, a small segment of the clergy and some students and teachers embraced this liberal orientation, which took its organizational form in Bazargan’s Iran Freedom Movement.

For the first two or three years after the revolution, one of the worst insults that could be hurled at opponents of the regime was the label of “liberal.” The word “liberal” acquired in Iran exactly the same connotation that it had in Stalinist Russia. Not surprisingly, it was the Iranian Communist Party (the Tudeh) that denounced Bazargan and those around him as “liberals” who would ultimately sell out to the United States. The clerics simply appropriated the terminology, to denounce the very same political tendencies.

The fourth type of Islamic ideology was the “traditionalist Islam,” which appealed to the overwhelming majority of the clergy and the old bazaar classes. These groups yearned for a past in which the dictates of their faith were carried out strictly and when, as a group, they had enjoyed greater respect and wielded more power in the community.

After the clerical leadership liquidated the liberal and secular leftist groups, these four variants coalesced into two major ideological camps: the conservatives and the radicals. Yet convenient as this dichotomy may seem, these factions were never perfectly defined. Politics operated on three separate planes: foreign policy, culture, and economics. One might be an economic liberal and a cultural conservative; one might be an economic conservative and a foreign policy radical. Various factions formed and re-formed around these issues.

Factionalism at the top of the political hierarchy allowed the rest of the society to find spaces to engage in politics. People who were not part of the leadership—young people, university students, intellectuals and others—could delve into politics precisely because politics at the top were so openly fractious. The tumult in the parliament, and the daily battles among those running the country, emboldened people to criticize and even resist the authorities. Had there been a solid consolidation of power and ideological coherence at the top, such spaces would not have been opened and such resistance would not have been possible.

By the early 1990s, a more moderate faction had emerged under the leadership of the then-speaker of the parliament, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. For the most part, members of this faction—the so-called “pragmatists”—tended to be less doctrinaire in their approach to policy issues, often opting for compromise positions between the other two camps. They drew their support primarily from the modern middle classes, including government employees, technocrats and professionals, as well as some elements in the business community.

Khatami’s come-from-nowhere election as president in May 1997 should be seen in the context of this shift towards a more pragmatic politics. In his campaigning, he talked about “the rule of law,” and everyone understood what that meant: protection against the arbitrary powers of the religious authorities and the impositions of the state. He talked about “civil society,” a society of dialogue and tol-

eration for different viewpoints. And he talked about normalization of Iran's relationship with the West. We should try to understand and study the West, he argued, neither with love nor with hatred, but with an open mind. What is praiseworthy in my view is that, in spite of the formidable powers of his conservative opponents, he has not waivered in his advocacy of these principles. At every opportunity he has reiterated his past statements and, inasmuch as possible, he has followed what he championed as a candidate.<sup>2</sup>

### *From Slogan to Practice?*

In the first two years of the presidency of Khatami, the promise of a civil society, however elusive in practice, has been the focus of countless seminars, conferences, and publications. The idea of civil society has also penetrated the day-to-day politics of the country, in the slogans of candidates for various offices.

Three principal positions have emerged in the civil society debate now raging in Iran. First, there are those who regard the whole concept as antithetical to the basic values and ideals of an Islamic society and state. These are the hard-line conservatives, who occupy the most powerful positions within Iran's political establishment. They control all the means of violence in Iranian society (the Revolutionary Guards, the security services), and they hold much of the economic power as well.

Second, there are those who want to Islamicize the idea of civil society, to make it compatible with the existing norms and values of the present order. They advocate an "Islamic civil society" that would be clearly distinguishable from its secular, Western counterparts.

Third, there are those who view the concept as ideologically neutral in terms of the ultimate goals and values of society, but useful as a basis for structuring state-society relations, protecting the relative autonomy and freedom of citizens and their associations, and promoting a more tolerant, pluralistic and democratic order. For the most part, these were the aspirations that inspired the supporters of Khatami's so-called "May 3rd [1997] Movement." Their overwhelming victory in that presidential election, and in all subsequent polls since, has shown them to command a clear majority among the electorate.

The battle lines are drawn. The powerful opponents of Khatami and civil society, with their monopoly over all means of violence and with full control of the judiciary, are engaged in all kinds of mischief: assassinations of writers; vigilante attacks on cabinet members, politicians, and political meetings; intimidation by the “revolutionary courts.” So far, Khatami’s supporters have refrained from using violent tactics in their counter-attacks. Like Khatami himself, they have extolled the virtues of political toleration, the compatibility between Islam and democracy, the normalization of the country’s foreign policy, and above all, the vital importance of the rule of law.

On the whole, the changes wrought by Khatami bode fairly well for the prospects of a more democratic polity in Iran in the years to come. But I could be wrong; the forces of reaction may yet prevail. But such a reversal, I believe, is certain to provoke widespread resistance and plunge the country into a protracted turmoil.

#### NOTES

1. On the issue of Khamene’i’s standing, see Shaul Bakhash, “Iran: The Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Middle Eastern Lectures*, no. 1 (1995): 99-188. Ed.
2. On the factors that facilitated Khatami’s election, see Farhad Kazemi and Olivier Roy, “Why Iran Chose Khatami,” *Middle Eastern Lectures*, no. 3 (1999): 9-22. Ed.

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