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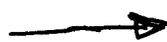
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## EMERGING CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAN

*Hooshang Amirahmadi*

In recent years the issue of civil society has taken on new salience among students of international affairs. The emergence of civil society as a vehicle for democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America has led to increasing scholarly attention to the role of non-state actors in promoting political and economic reform. Research on Iran, however, still suffers from a narrow state-centered approach that neglects the growing importance of societal actors in recent years. This article attempts to fill this gap by providing an analysis of the emerging civil society in Iran. After defining civil society and explaining why this topic is so important, it discusses the various nascent discourses in Iranian civil society. It demonstrates, first, that a civil society is indeed in the process of formation in Iran, and second, that its endurance and cohesion will depend on achieving a balance between government and non-government sectors. The essay argues that development and popular sovereignty in Iran hinge on the growth of civil society alongside political reform.

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*Defining Civil Society*

Civil society can be defined in at least three different ways. First, in the classical economics paradigm, the term signifies transition to bourgeois society. In this context, “civility” means respect for liberty and personal property. Economists use the concept to refer to non-state actors that contribute to economic and social development. Second, the term is employed in relation to political reform and the transition to a modern social order. This definition of civil society originated in grassroots movements in the former communist bloc and is often applied to contemporary Islamic societies. In this second definition, civil society refers particularly to non-state actors seeking access to political power. Finally, the term civil society is sometimes used to capture the role and importance of non-power oriented societal actors such as charity organizations, religious foundations, and pro-welfare groups.

These three definitions of civil society are not mutually exclusive. They share a focus on the role of citizens and the nature of the state-society relationship. Civil society thus can be defined as the sphere of social discourses, trends, and autonomous social movements that attempt to regulate society. The goal of such activities is to bolster citizens’ capabilities and protect them from the arbitrary exercise of power by the state or any other organized group. While civil society is a political concept, it must be distinguished from the political sphere where actors are preoccupied with access to, or the exercise of, power.

The above definition is better suited to Iran today than more conventional definitions because it allows for a dynamic conception of contemporary Iranian civil society. In countries where civil society is in its incipient stages, a static conception of civil society will not be useful in deciphering these phenomena. To understand contemporary Iranian civil society, we need a comprehensive conception of civil society that includes emerging political, ideological, and philosophical trends in the country—as well as the role of opinion leaders, the power elite, and the leading dissident intellectuals. The proposed definition also contains social movements, professional associations, economic organizations and cultural institutions.

*The Need for a Civil Society Discourse*

Research on Iran since the 1979 revolution has primarily focused on two issues. At first, scholars focused on the causes of the revolution, with an emphasis on Islam as the new state ideology. In the mid-1980s, attention shifted to the goals and future of theocratic rule. During both periods and continuing into the present, studies of Iran have been held captive by a “state trap,” that is, an almost exclusive focus on the ruling clerical elite.

One of the principal reasons for this narrow focus on the state is the West’s profound disapproval of the Iranian regime. The government’s policies in the early years of the revolution, especially its efforts to export Islamic militancy, fundamentally antagonized the West. The resulting preoccupation with the regime’s international behavior inevitably bred inattention to the internal dynamics of the Islamic Republic. Political repression, economic failures, and the war with Iraq further contributed to focusing experts’ attention primarily on the state. The time has come to look at developments in Iran through a new prism. While the need to scrutinize the Iranian government’s policies and ideology has not subsided, it is imperative to broaden our focus to include the emerging civil society for several reasons:

First, the state-centered approach has prevented scholars from developing an adequate understanding of the current trends and dynamics within Iranian society. For example, we have only scant knowledge of the Iranian authority network, the complex patronage system, or the limitations of governmental authority.

Second, the “state trap” has prevented both the ruling clerics’ supporters and their opponents from developing a realistic assessment of the possibilities for the necessary political and economic reforms. Some analysts, both inside and outside Iran, prescribe the immediate overthrow of the clerical regime. My research shows that not only is such a development improbable in the foreseeable future, but that the vast majority of Iranians consider this outcome undesirable as well. They prefer gradual change with predictable results. Top-down political reform also seems a

remote possibility at best. As the experiences of China and the former Soviet Union suggest, first-generation revolutionary leaders are inherently incapable of effecting significant reforms. Conversely, advocates of reform from below ignore the state's crucial role in the process of democratization. Thus, what is needed is a synthesis of these two approaches to political and economic reform that directs attention to the interaction between state and civil society in Iran.

Third, as the experience of industrialized nations indicates, the creation of a new political-economic culture that fosters development, democracy, science, and productive inclinations depends on the growth of civil society and its balanced relationship with the state. Recent experiences in Taiwan and South Korea suggest that an invigorated civil society can assist the state in achieving the goals of its development policy. Empowering civil society will create a balance of power between the state and non-state sector that may help to avert the periodic revolutionary crises that characterized Iranian politics in the past.

### *Critical Discourses in Iranian Civil Society*

Contemporary Iran bears a tenuous air of openness. Until very recently, public debate of social and political issues was suppressed. Today, however, these restrictions have lost their stranglehold on the world of ideas and once-forbidden issues are in the spotlight of public discourse. Some examples may illustrate the regime's new openness:

In spring 1995, the *Payam-e-Emrooz* magazine dedicated a special issue to US-Iran relations. The January 1996 issue of the *Jame-e Salem* magazine published a roundtable discussion on the same topic with four out of five participants advocating a re-establishment of relations with the United States. Numerous recent issues of *Kiyan* magazine contained articles critical of the clergy's political role. Criticisms of the government's economic policy and political orientation can be found in the *Asr-e-Ma* and *Iran-e-Farda* magazines. Perhaps most significantly, the Iranian media widely report the embezzlement scandals involving high-ranking government officials. Even the government's policy on women has increasingly become

an object of public criticism. Although freedom of expression is still limited, the above examples clearly demonstrate the regime's readiness to allow criticism of government policies on an almost routine basis.

The current political-philosophical discourse in Iran centers around three main themes: the relationship between religion and state, the relationship between state and civil society, and Iran's future identity.

### *The Relationship Between Religion and State*

After two decades of concerted political activism, the clergy finally succeeded in gaining political power in 1979. This event affected their self-concept. Before the revolution, the clergy constituted an integral part of civil society. After the revolution, however, the clergy almost instantly split into two camps: the political clergy rapidly occupied positions of power within the state, whereas the apolitical clergy, including many high-ranking clerics, tried to remain at the periphery of political life and continue to serve as a vanguard of civil society. While the apolitical clergy managed to maintain its unity, the political clergy rapidly disintegrated into leftist, rightist, traditionalist, modernist, and pragmatist factions.

Apolitical clerics were also able to preserve the traditional structure and hierarchy of the clerical establishment. The government often finds it impossible to ignore the prescriptions of senior clerics in Qum, lest it loses legitimacy. On the whole, however, these clerics feel increasingly alienated from their counterparts within the government apparatus and worry about their decreasing autonomy from the state. Moreover, as many young clerics receive their education at universities that offer a mix of religious and secular programs, the traditional clergy fear that Howzeh-e Elmi-ye, the religious school in Qum, might gradually lose its influence. Ironically, many of these universities were established by high ranking clergy after the revolution.

In the coming decade, the transformation of the clergy and their relationship to the state will become the most important issue in Iran. This is why the discourse on the relationship between religion and the state is of such crucial importance. In recent years, an intense debate has developed between religious intellectuals and parts of the clergy over the

role of religion in the state. A key figure in this controversy is Abdul-Karim Soroush. He argues that while Islam's fundamentals, as manifest in the Quran and other scriptures, are not subject to revision, human interpretation of them is. This implies that there is no objective interpretation of divine law, independent of the historical, geographical, and socio-cultural context. Soroush thus mounts a rationalist challenge to any absolute and irreversible interpretation of Islam. While Soroush does not oppose Islamic government, he opposes transforming religion into a state ideology and believes that rationalism must replace rigid Islamic orthodoxy.

Supporting Soroush to varying degrees, many clerics, religious intellectuals, and officials have criticized the government's record on human rights, social justice, and various other issues subject to divine law. A number of senior clergy in Qum have gone further in expressing their reservations about the politicization of the clergy and their involvement in government altogether.

Yet there are also societal actors advocating a tight theocratic rule. A particularly vocal group is the so-called "Islamic New Left." The New Left, consisting of intellectual Hezbollahis and a small number of sometimes militant pressure groups, attacks the government for its conservatism and conciliatory moves toward its opponents. These are the same people who in recent months have physically attacked Soroush, burned down a bookstore, and destroyed a cinema in Tehran.

### *The Relationship Between State and Civil Society*

Post-revolutionary Iran has witnessed an intense controversy over the roots of economic underdevelopment. In recent years, the issue of political reform has figured more prominently in this debate, shifting attention to the relationship between economic development and political-cultural reform. As a result, the dynamic relationship between state and civil society has become a core issue in the current public discourse on economic development.

In the contemporary debate, development is regarded as proceeding in three stages: growth, transition, and sustainable development. In the

growth period, society is led by a strong state that fosters pro-development forces and thus lays the foundation for economic development. To stimulate development and economic growth, however, the state must strengthen private (societal) actors and institutions, thus promoting the emergence of a civil society. Eventually, societal actors will begin to challenge the authority of the state. At this point, society enters the second, transitional stage characterized by political friction and potential revolutionary turmoil. To enter the sustainable development phase, state and civil society must reach a relative balance of power resting upon the existence of popular and public institutions, both in the state and civil sector.

In light of the above debate, three issues are receiving increasing attention: the deficiencies and potential of the private sector, government structure and opportunities for political reform, and possible developments in Iranian political culture. The common perception is that the current political culture is inherently hostile to economic development; that the fragmented and yet exclusionary state is incapable of promoting sustainable development; and that some parts of the private sector are unproductive and thus opposed to economic liberalization.

The private sector has historically focused on trade and real estate and is characterized by an unscientific and pre-industrial business culture. There is a strong reluctance to invest in research and development or to make commitments to long-term investment projects. Until very recently, critics have tended to blame the private sector alone for Iran's economic ills, ignoring the fact that the state has played a central role in the creation of the private sector's regressive and parasitic attitude. This view, however, currently is undergoing a reassessment and the parasitic tendencies within the state apparatus are increasingly becoming an object of criticism.

As for the relationship between the state and civil society, many Iranian intellectuals argue that the desire for political and economic reform must first develop within the state and then permeate civil society. This, in turn, means that we need to take a closer look at the structure of state power and of the elites' outlook on various domestic and international issues.

Basically, the structure of the Iranian government is not hierarchical, but comprised of multiple autonomous and often only loosely connected

“rings of power.” While these rings of power themselves are of a hierarchical structure, there is only a minimum vertical relationship between them. This decentralized, quasi-feudal power structure, which also extends into the economic realm, is inherited from the past and usually takes the form of a coalition among like-minded individuals or groups.

This quasi-feudal system is characterized by personal and patrimonial modes of patronage. Senior posts exclusively go to immediate relatives of those in power, who in turn appoint their own relatives and friends for sensitive positions. Even the government often finds itself at the mercy of such networks, which are formed in and outside of the formal government structure. Another distinctive feature of the Iranian political system is that often prominent individuals are more influential than their formal positions indicate. To understand the dynamics of this system, we thus must focus on bonds of patronage and loyalty among individuals rather than on ideological, formal, or bureaucratic distinctions.

Today, the most powerful decision-making body—the system’s nerve center—consists of a group of influential clergymen. Collectively, these patriarchs not only control the specific ring of power established around them but the system as a whole. The next ring of power is comprised of senior officials or managers. Outside this ring are forces with varying capabilities, managing different sectors of the system. Among these are revolutionary foundations, religious security forces, and members of the establishment media and communication networks. Together they form the system’s power base and propagate its ideology. A final, only loosely organized ring of power consists of individuals who used to play a major role in the system in the past. Although still very influential, these former elites now operate at the fringes of the system—on the borderline between state and civil society. In the March 1996 elections, members of this group entered the race as “independents,” the “Islamic left,” or various other political factions. Their considerable success in the elections demonstrates that this group is increasingly gaining political ground in Iran.

Because of the main role the second ring of power plays in the Islamic Republic, it is essential to understanding the political dynamics within this group. This second ring of power is split into two camps: pro-Western

technocrats and religious traditionalists (the Heyatiis). These two groups differ radically in terms of their political and economic world view. Indeed, since Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the political fault lines have fundamentally shifted: the real battle today is between technocrats rallying behind Rafsanjani and religious traditionalists led by Nateq Nouri, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament and presidential hopeful.

The traditionalist Heyatiis generally downplay the importance of modern management techniques or technical and scientific expertise. This does not mean that they have no educated members in their ranks or that they do not use the expertise of the educated. However, for them, education and professional competence are of only secondary importance compared to traditional values and practices. Traditionalists also believe that the religious leader's authority transcends both the law and popular will. Business transactions among the Heyatiis proceed on the basis of personal trust and membership in traditional networks, and not necessarily on the basis of legally guarded contracts. Heyatiis primarily represent the interests of merchant capital, agricultural producers, and owners of real estate; groups that greatly benefit from the inefficiencies of the current economic system.

The Islamic system generally sympathizes with the Heyatiis, since it can identify itself with them. Yet it should be noted that the Heyatiis themselves are gradually changing their position, and that many of them are currently reassessing their traditional values, a transformation that is likely to speed up as traditional forces begin to lose their former dominance in Iranian society. With regard to Iran's relations to the West, the Heyatiis are split. Some explicitly reject Westernization and modernity and support Iran's political isolation. Others advocate modernization, particularly the use of advanced Western technology and a conditional integration into the international community.

For technocrats, some of whom are graduates of Western universities, the well-being of the state takes precedence over Islamic orthodoxy. Technocrats tend to be more pragmatic in their approach and more internationalist in outlook than their traditionalist rivals. Their conceptions of loyalty and effective group work also differ significantly from those of

the Heyatiis. The technocrats generally focus more on written laws and regard knowledge, science, and education as core prerequisites for economic and political progress.

As they are much less attuned to the workings of the traditional system than the Heyatiis, technocrats have not been able to consolidate their position within Iran's decentralized power networks. In addition, members of the core ring of power oppose technocrats out of parochial, power-political considerations. This failure and the government's insensitivity to their concerns have demoralized many of them. As a result, a considerable number of technocrats have quit civil service and entered the private sector. Others have left the country under the pretense of wanting to pursue their education or research abroad.

To a large extent, it is the technocrats' failure that is responsible for the current concentration of political power in the hands of a few. The government's attempt to monopolize power thus can be seen as a consequence of its inability to create a new responsible, effective, and trustworthy elite. The problem here is a structural one: in democratic societies, future leaders are produced through the competition of political parties. However, because Iran lacks genuine political competition, the government has to recruit the new elite from outside the political system, from universities, and loyal groups. A second reason for the system's incapacity to produce a capable technocratic elite is the lack of civil institutions within Iranian society. The government has tried to train a group of religious technocrats, but this attempt has suffered from the inherent contradictions between traditional religious values and the imperatives of scientific and technological progress. To overcome the system's structural inability to produce or attract alternative thinkers and able technocrats, a strengthening of civil society and a liberalization of the political system are essential.

Ironically, the government's attempts at monopolizing political power are a chief cause of the growth of civil society. The continuous weakening of the state could have perilous consequences: in the absence of a flexible political culture and mediating institutions, a revolutionary situation might develop if the balance of power between government and civil society shifts

in favor of the latter. Hence, Iran's future crucially depends on the kind of relationship that will be forged between the state and civil society. The nature of this relationship, in turn, depends on the interplay between power structure, private sector developments, and political culture.

Unfortunately, the relationship between state and society is a highly imbalanced one, and Iran's political culture is hostile to political and economic reform. Political authority in Iran has never been based on the idea of popular sovereignty. Nor has Iran ever possessed a scientific, progressive economic vision. Iran has a long-standing tradition of autocratic rule and accordingly suffers from an inflexible political system and the lack of mediating social institutions. In recent decades, the problem has been exacerbated by the rentier mentality the Iranian state has developed—that is, its excessive reliance on oil exports rather than productivity-based economic growth for raising national income.

To transform Iran's political and economic system it is thus necessary to find solutions that decrease the state's dependence on oil income. This, in turn, would make the state more dependent on society-wide productive endeavors and strengthen the role of civil society. As a result, the government would have to develop greater internal discipline, promote technological and scientific progress, and undertake democratic reforms. As the experience of developed nations indicates, industrialization is the best way to trigger political reform.

### *Iran's Future Identity*

The third discourse in Iranian civil society concerns the differing conceptions of Iran's future ideological orientation and identity. Currently, three main perspectives are competing with each other: First, the global, or Western, perspective. This vision so far has been articulated only vaguely and is not yet popular among the masses. Its supporters can largely be found in the educated upper strata of society and parts of the upper middle class. The global perspective is also supported by right-leaning modernists within the government, some technocrats, and the financially and professionally well-established.

The second perspective is an Islam-centric vision. Proponents of this view regard Islam as the main basis of the Iranian state and hence advocate a consolidation of clerical rule. While this position enjoys considerable support among various organizations within civil society, it is relatively weak among intellectuals and the upper class. Hezbollahis, the new Islamic left, and parts of the traditional right within the government, such as the Resalat and Hojjatiyeh groups, embrace this perspective.

The third and most popular vision is a nationalist, Iran-centric perspective. Currently, the nationalist movement lacks a well-articulated ideology and effective organization. However, its potential far exceeds that of its aforementioned rivals, and nationalism is likely to become the strongest source of orientation and identity for the Iranian masses in the medium and long term. The nationalist perspective is characterized by a belief in balanced and gradual political reform based on the notion of popular sovereignty. Nationalists want to consolidate Iranian national identity, create internal stability for productive investment, and promote the rule of law. With regard to foreign policy, advocates of the nationalist vision reject isolationism and give priority to Iran's national interest rather than pan-Islamic aspirations.

Nationalism has always been a powerful force in Iran. Iranian nationalists claim that Iran has historically been on the receiving end of Islam. Since Islam was imported to Iran, it is not as central to Iranian identity as it is to that of the Arab people. Five centuries ago, the Safavid shahs developed Shi'ism as Iran's official religion, largely to distinguish themselves from the Ottoman Turks and Arabs. Shi'ism is Iranian or Iranianized Islam; its very existence demonstrates the power of Iranian nationalism.

The 1979 Islamic revolution seemed to mark a sharp break with this historical pattern. Upon consolidating their rule, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers propagated a pan-Islamist ideology that shunned Iranian nationalism and Shi'ism in favor of pan-Islamism. Textbooks were rewritten to downplay Iran's pre-Islamic achievements. Some hard-liners even proposed to demolish Persepolis, the chief symbol of ancient Persia's civilization. During this period, the ruling clerics denied the very existence of an Iranian identity independent from Islam.

Right from the beginning, however, the government's excessive pan-Islamic rhetoric, primarily designed to unite Iran with the Islamic world and sideline nationalists competing with the clergy for power, lacked genuine support among the non-political clergy and the majority of the Iranian people. Contrary to common perceptions, Iran's "Islamic" revolution was a continuation of the nationalist, anti-colonial, and pro-democracy movement that had been dammed up for more than a century. Islamism appealed to the masses mainly because of Khomeini's promise that equality, the rule of law and freedom from foreign domination would be protected under an Islamic republic. Iranians did not intend to revive Islam for its own sake. Rather, they felt that religion and Khomeini's charisma were the only forces capable of uniting the country and achieving their nationalist ideals.

However, the government soon had to gradually shift its position in favor of nationalism. The 1980 Iraqi invasion forced Iranian leaders to harness nationalist sentiment in the war effort. The Iran-Iraq war thus led to a consolidation of Iranian national identity rather than to an expansion of Islamism. Growing domestic opposition caused by the government's failure to deliver on the revolution's promises also compelled the clergy to revise their pan-Islamist ideology. During this phase, the government began to recognize Iranian identity as distinct from Islam while still favoring Islamism over Shi'ism and regarding Iranian nationalism as secondary to religious identity. After Khomeini's death in 1989, this process has accelerated.

Secular nationalism is gaining ground, even among devout Muslims. To prevent its legitimacy from declining further, the Islamic Republic has no choice but to allow secular nationalism to play an increasing role in political life. More than their conservative rivals, the moderate clerics led by Rafsanjani, have shown a willingness to do so. In early 1995, the government ordered the establishment of a newspaper called *Iran*. Large advertisements for the newspaper—comprised of the Iranian flag without Islamic logos—covered Tehran's walls and billboards. It is indicative of the current reassessment that the first issues of *Iran* reached the stands at the same time the government banned *Jahan-e-Islam* (*The World of Islam*), a leading pan-Islamist newspaper. Parents increasingly choose

non-Islamic, Persian names for their children and college students are not only eager to learn about Iran's pre-Islamic history, but routinely perform nationalist anthems.

Iran is now hosting a lively debate about the appropriateness of Islam as a political ideology and the relationship between religion and state. Opinion leaders criticize the clergy for using religion for political purposes and demand a separation of church and state. Finally, a growing number of Iranians, particularly the youth, regard religious rule as being ill-suited to the demands of modern statecraft. If the influence and power of moderates continues to grow, nationalism might soon dominate the political scene.

The new nationalism is neither anti-Islamist nor anti-Western; rather it is an attempt to reconcile the contradictions between Iran and Islam, modernity and tradition, globalism and political isolation. In this context, too, the strengthening of civil society is crucial. The nationalist movement is in need of political leadership and ideological consolidation. Yet both factors can only emerge from the heart of civil society. Conversely, if nationalists want to succeed, they must not underestimate the importance of the state in this process and the power resources Islamists still command. Moreover, they must consider the possibility of hostile reaction to their goals and policies from abroad. Thus, it is imperative for the new nationalists to strike a balance between Iranianism, Islamism, and globalism.

### *New Trends, Institutions, and Movements Within Civil Society*

Despite the country's political isolation, Western values and business practices are gaining clout in Iran. This increasing westernization is evidenced by several new trends and developments that, in the long run, could produce revolutionary changes in the country's economic, political, and social structure. In the economic field, capitalism and free markets are gradually gaining acceptance in Iran. The number of private firms is expanding, many of them providing consulting services to the government as well as to foreign corporations. Although economic activity is still heavily concentrated in trade and commerce, an industrial culture is emerging, with the food industry, petrochemicals, metal works, and technological services

as the most promising candidates for future growth. As Iran's per capita oil income is declining, the government is forced to consider industrialization more seriously than ever before.

In trade and commerce, perhaps the most important transition concerns *the role of the bazaar*. Traditionally the center of commercial activity in Iran, the bazaar's importance has dramatically decreased in recent years. After the revolution, a great number of high-level government posts went to influential merchants, which not only produced an unhealthy link between commercial and political interests, but also led to a marginalization of the bazaar. This trend has been accelerated through the creation of so-called "trade units" within several ministries. The introduction of new technologies, goods, and markets have also contributed to the erosion of the bazaar's once central role. Chain stores are expanding rapidly, a new generation of goods (TVs, computers, etc.) is being demanded, and more and more merchants conduct their business outside the bazaar, in modern office buildings. Finally, the formation of professional associations also has reduced the bazaar's importance in Iran's economic life. In sum, Western business practices are increasingly gaining ground, suggesting that a fundamental transition of the Iranian economy may be underway.

Favorable changes in Iran's *political culture* are also taking place. Political radicalism, cults of personality, idol worship, hyperbole, and the culture of political revenge are losing acceptance. At the same time, reformist, pluralist thinking is gaining ground in Iran. Rational discourse and political competition are replacing more violent modes of challenging government authority. Politics is no longer considered a zero-sum game, in which cooperation with political opponents is tantamount to treason. Coalition-building and concerted action for the common good are increasingly supplanting political factionalism and narrow parochial concerns. With regard to Iran's foreign relations, conspiracy theories and isolationism are beginning to give way to increased self-esteem and a more worldly outlook. Apparently, both the government and actors within society understand the importance of institution-building. In the past, most of the institutions that were formed were apolitical in nature, either economic or professional. Today, however, there is an increasing trend toward creating

explicitly political organizations as well. Most recently, President Rafsanjani, the Parliament Speaker Nateq-e-Nouri, and other senior officials have emphasized the need for the creation of political parties. Various former Majlis (the Iranian parliament) deputies have declared their intention to form political parties after the 1996 elections. There is also speculation that President Rafsanjani may decide to revive the defunct Islamic Republican Party or form a new political party.

While the Iranian party system is still in its infancy, *the print media* is already strongly developed. In the absence of political parties, newspapers and magazines often play highly political roles and propagate specific viewpoints. Currently, over 400 newspapers and magazines are published in Iran. Some of them are specialized, technical or scientific publications. The majority of them, however, deal with issues such as economics, politics, cultural affairs, social problems, and literature. Newspapers have steadily increased their readership and there is a pluralism of opinion, including criticism of government policies.

*Professional associations*, too, are growing in number and importance. A few examples include: the Association for Iranian Economics Graduates, the Filmmakers Association, the Physicians' Association, the Islamic Society of Engineers, Islamic Association of Architects, the Association of Writers, and the Association of Iranian Sociologists. The goal of professional organizations is to create discipline and uniformity among their members and to represent members' rights before the government. Other professional organizations pursue economic motives as well. Some of these associations are large and well-organized. The Association of Engineers, for example, has more than 8,300 members in Tehran alone. Its executive board is elected by the association's members and includes some ministers and Majlis deputies.

*Educational organizations* are expanding as well. There are over 50 colleges and universities in Iran today and the Free Islamic University now has branches in many large and small cities. The number of non-profit learning and research centers has also multiplied. Some of them even have established links with industry, an unprecedented development in Iran. Although free education is provided by the government, the private sector

has become increasingly active in this field, establishing educational institutions at every level, from kindergarten to university.

*Economic and private welfare institutions* are also growing in number. There are more than 200 cooperatives in Iran today. Together with other public economic institutions, they act primarily as development-oriented organizations. Some economic associations, such as the Islamic Economic Organization, one of the most powerful private economic institutions in the country, are also involved in politics. Welfare-oriented Islamic charities also play an important economic role. Among other private and welfare-oriented institutions, the environmentalist Green Group and the Khorasan Aid Society, a group of writers, poets, and musicians active in providing effective education, also deserve mentioning.

The most important semi-governmental institutions in contemporary Iran, however, are *revolutionary foundations*. These tax-exempt organizations largely focus on business, production, banking, and social services and can be divided into three main categories: public, private, and charity. While all foundations claim that they are welfare-oriented, non-profit groups, some of them make huge profits and offer their services to the wealthy. Some of these foundations are involved in political propaganda and repression of regime opponents. During the post-revolutionary period, revolutionary foundations have grown quite powerful and still use their power to support the state. It remains to be seen, however, whether these organizations will maintain their loyalty to the government in the future as well. Given their populist tradition and their resistance to full co-option by the state, it is conceivable that they might use their increased resources to bolster civil society and thus challenge the state.

*Popular movements* are another type of institutions in-the-making. A considerable number of these movements have developed in post-revolutionary Iran. Urban revolts in Islamshahr, Qazvin, Mashhad, and other cities, illustrate the explosive potential of social tensions. At the same time, reformist movements are gaining clout. The growing number of opposition movements is testimony of this trend. These groups frequently express their discontent with the current political situation in Iran through open letters to the government. Popular movements can claim some, albeit still limited,

successes in their quest for political reform. Newspaper journalists, for example, successfully resisted the imposition of stricter media regulations, and environmentalists now are producing an independent television program called "Nature." While political activity in universities thus far has been very limited, the numerous workers' strikes and the protests of civil servants have helped to strengthen the non-state sector.

*Women* are also beginning to organize their interests. Despite all remaining restrictions, women are more active in society today than ever before and have managed to reverse parts of the reactionary legislation passed during the early phase of the Islamic revolution, particularly restrictions on higher education, employment, social services, and divorce. Until the end of the last decade, women's organizations were practically non-existent in Iran. Visits of human rights groups to Iran encouraged female intellectuals to create women's organizations. Pressure from these groups forced the government to establish a Women's Affairs Office. The government's attention to the role of women in Iranian society increased further when Faeze Rafsanjani, the President's daughter, was put in charge of the Women's Athletics Organization. The government also created women's affairs divisions within various ministries and sent a number of women active in these organizations as delegates to the Beijing conference on women's rights. While some women working for these organizations are critical of the Islamic system, there still is no women's organization in Iran that is truly independent from the government. The few small non-governmental women's organizations represented at the Beijing conference are still under the influence of the state apparatus. However, individual women's rights activists have developed a considerable degree of independence and visibility in their activity. Women are increasingly represented in films, literature, and the arts in general. Finally, the 1996 parliamentary election marked a turning point in female political representation. In a number of large cities, female candidates defeated their sometimes prominent male rivals. The newly elected parliament will have the largest number of female deputies ever in Iranian history.

Finally, the *attitudes of the youth* are changing. Growing numbers of young Iranians are attracted by Western ideals and lifestyle. This new

generation rejects the traditional religious and cultural values and embraces Western concepts such as liberalism, individualism, and materialism. As in modern, industrialized societies, young Iranians tend to be apolitical and career-oriented. Despite a government ban on their products, Western pop and rock stars are the youth's greatest idols. Resistance to early marriage is growing, and premarital sex has almost become commonplace among segments of the youth. While at first glance, this increasing discontent with the government's tight theocratic rule seems to strengthen the growth of civil society in Iran, the consequences could be much less benign. The regime is not only increasingly out of touch with the youth's feelings and ideals, it is also unable to provide a sufficient number of jobs. A growing number of young Iranians see the solution to their problems in the emergence of a strong, autocratic, ultranationalist leader.

#### *Prospects for the Development of Civil Society in Iran*

Despite all encouraging developments, Iranian civil society remains vulnerable. Its growth is hampered by economic and political pressures. The latter are all the easier to justify as Iran is a crisis-ridden society facing a hostile international environment. In such a situation, tight autocratic rule and the restriction of civil liberties appears legitimate. This, in turn, means that unless the state improves its economic record, provides internal stability, and moderates its foreign policy, civil society will remain weak. The danger, here, is that with the non-state sector still weak and the government lacking a clear agenda, those opposed to reform might consolidate their power before civil society has a chance to mature. On the other hand, a premature attempt by the civil sector to challenge the authority of the state may result in political turmoil and even tighter autocratic rule.

A second impediment to the growth of civil society is that the Iranian state is economically independent from society since only a minor portion of its revenue consists of tax revenue. As a result, the government does not feel responsible for its policies before the people. To make the government more responsive to societal needs, industrialization is

imperative. If income is primarily generated by a broad industrial base rather than oil exports, this might lead to a more organic relationship between the state and civil society. As economic development still lacks momentum, however, the non-state sector remains in a relatively weak position.

A third countervailing force is Iranian political culture. The country's age-old culture of revenge leads to the ruling elite's fear that if they lose power, they also will lose their lives. Consequently, the government proves extremely reluctant to cede power. This, all the more so, because power in Iran is intimately connected with the possession of wealth, giving the ruling elite an additional incentive to remain in power. As long as these unfortunate features of Iranian political culture persist, steps toward political pluralism and establishing mechanisms ensuring a peaceful transition of power are highly unlikely.

However, there are also trends that suggest that the growth of civil society will continue. First, the multitude of power centers within Iran's quasi-feudal political structure allows the existence of pro-democratic forces in and outside the government. Moreover, the fact that the three branches of government now are much more balanced in power than during the pre-revolutionary period reduces the state's pressure on civil society. The institution of the spiritual leader, separate from and in addition to the president, also has led to a greater decentralization of power.

Second, the state regards civil society as a forum where opposition is being neutralized rather than as a serious threat to its authority. For the Islamic regime, civil society is seen primarily as a cultural phenomenon, not a political challenge. Only genuine political action and organized movements are perceived as threatening, not ideological opposition or professional associations. In addition, Iran's social contradictions are increasingly reflected in the government apparatus itself and undermine the elite's ability to project an ideologically united front; a fact that to some extent allowed critics to persist in their activities.

Third, many of the organizations the government has created to consolidate its power, such as the "House of Labor," have turned into critics of the regime. This development is accompanied by a retreat of the state. Recognizing its inability to solve Iran's economic problems, the

government is allowing the private sector to take on increasing responsibilities. In this context, it should be noted that, as the continued publication of the Salam newspaper and several critical periodicals demonstrate, civil society has always been able to provide a niche for critics of the regime. Meanwhile, the state has always tried to concentrate power in its own hands.

A final trend strengthening civil society is that, as the inner circles of the regime consolidate their power, a growing number of people are leaving these circles and joining civil society. This suggests that while the growth of civil society primarily reflects increased economic and political activity by non-state actors, the importance of intra-governmental dynamics should not be underestimated. To some extent, these internal dynamics and the government's policies are also affected by external pressure. Here, the West's policies have had contradictory results: while they put pressure on the government to ease its grip on civil society, they also reduced the influence of moderate, reformist forces within the government itself.

The future growth of civil society in Iran, as has been argued throughout this essay, depends on achieving a balance between state and non-state actors. First and foremost, this requires providing internal stability, developing a pluralist political culture, and improving Iran's foreign relations. However, in the last analysis, the future of Iran will be determined by a grassroots movement aiming at political reform, economic development, and national reconciliation. Iran's emerging civil society will be a major driving force behind these imperative reforms.

