

## Rethinking Structure and Agency in Democratization: Iranian Lessons

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### Abstract

This paper examines the complex and dialectical interactions between structural and agential factors and how they help or hinder democratization in contemporary Iran. The paper provides an operational definition of structure and agency by subdividing each into three levels of analysis. The structural factors are measured by the nature of the Iranian state (political level), Iran's uneven development (socio-economic level), and the global structure of power (international level). The agential factors, both in the reform and the counter-reform movement, are examined in terms of the leadership capability (individual level), the organizational arrangements (institutional level), and the intellectual discourse (cultural-ideological level). The findings suggest that Iran's future prospects for democratization equally depend on the structural "causes" and the socio-political "causers". Iran's process of democratization is surrounded by a number of international and domestic obstacles. These include Washington's policy of regime change and the global war on terror, Iran's oil-centered rentier state, and the lack of strong leadership, well-organized institutions, and an inclusive and engaging political discourse on the part of the reformists.

### Introduction

In 1979 Islamic Revolution human agency triumphed over structural constraints to overthrow the Shah's autocratic regime. But such a triumph was full of contradictions. The Revolution brought a new regime with a new constitution founded on the politics, personality, and perspectives of Ayatollah Khomeini. He institutionalized a complex and distinctive polity with a constitution that simultaneously sought its legitimacy in religious-clerical ideas and secular-republican institutions. This Janus-faced quality of the Islamic Republic provided key ingredients for democratization, since it opened up the space for the elite's factional politics and a degree of civil society participation.

The post-revolutionary Iranian polity remains more than simply a totalitarian rule resistant to democratic transition. Iran is the only country in the Muslim Middle East that has enjoyed regular elections in the past three decades; however, Iran has yet to achieve the "rule of law" (*hokomat-e qanun*) rested upon people. Under this polity the rule of law is bound by the office of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of jurist) and the office rules above the law rested upon people. The struggle within the Islamic Republic in Khatami's reformist government (1997-2005) represented the efforts of the reformists to bind the office of *velayat-e faqih* by the rule of law. But the reformists failed and the conservative-hardliners consolidated their rule in June 2005. Paradoxically, the 2005 turning point was coincided with the centennial anniversary of the 1905 Constitutional Revolution, a revolution that marked Iran's first major attempt to establish the 'rule of law' (*hokomat-e qanun*) and replace arbitrary despotic rule. This paradoxical coincidence suggests Iran, after a century of revolution and reform, still remains in an indefinite democratic transition. This coincidence also raises a series of significant questions as to whether contemporary Iran will complete its transition to democracy. What are the major problems and prospects of democratization in Iran? What social and political factors make the hardliners strong

and Iran's democratic forces weak? Is democratization from *within* possible?

The chicken-or-egg controversies in science are constant. In social science one of these controversies has taken place over the issue of agency and structure, political voluntarism and structuralism, short-termism and long-term socio-historical determinism. This paper keeps an equal distance from vulgar voluntarism and structural determinism to examine Iran's interrupted democratization. This synthetic and dialectical approach combines elements of voluntarism and structuralism. It provides us with a useful theoretical tool in understanding the complex picture of conflict between political voluntarism in favor of democracy, and structural constraints resistant to democratization in Iran. This study offers an operational definition of structure and agency. The structural factors will be measured by three power structures of *state*, *class*, and *transnational power*: the nature of the Iranian state (political level), the extent of societal development (socio-economic level), and the global structure of power (international level). The agential factors will be examined in terms of the leadership capability (individual level), the organizational arrangements (institutional level), and the intellectual discourse (cultural/ideological level).

## Part I

### Dialectics of Structure and Agency in Democratization

Rueschemeyer, Stephen, and Stephen (1992:60-70) introduce a "three power structures" model in which the interaction between *state*, *class*, and *transnational power* structures shape the societal and political outcomes. On this view, the state structure is of great significance in promoting or preventing change toward democracy; there is a correlation between the paths towards democratization of the state and the type of regime. There is also a correlation between democratization and the socio-economic structure; the success or the failure of democratization depends largely on the extent to which social groups/classes have equal and sufficient access to the state resources. Finally the structure of international politics contributes to the politics of democratization/de-democratization.

This theoretical approach, in spite of all its limitations, has successfully synthesized three structural theories of social change: modernization theories, dependency/world system theories, and Barrington Moore's structural-historical approach. It provides us with a wide-ranging structural argument that takes into account the interaction of internal and external structures, and social (class) and political (state) factors. Rueschemeyer, Stephen, Stephan reject either optimism of modernization theories (linear-universalism) or pessimism of dependency/world system theories (negative correlations between dependency on the one hand and development and democracy on the other). They follow Barrington Moore's particularistic tradition in which a positive correlation exists between capitalist development and democracy *only* under particular class structure. They advance Moore's historical-structural tradition by including two more structural factors: state and transnational power. Yet, like most structural accounts, they pay less attention to the role of political agency in social change and regime transformation. This brings us to the new generation of democratization theories: the voluntarist theories.

The practice of post-1970s democratic transitions led to the rise of a new generation of democratization theories and shifted the focus from structuralism to voluntarism. This theoretical turn was due to the new practice of contemporary democratization in which democracy evolved in countries without the presence of all structural conditions required for democratic transition. The new generation of democratization theorists argued that political agency can make a significant difference, given the absence of required level of development and the immaturity of capitalism, the ineffective task of class coalitions and the effective acts of individual elites in recent democratic transitions. The actor-centered school, Adam Przeworski (1992) argues, was a reaction to the mechanistic approach of the early modernization theories in which individual roles

remained unnoticed. The school was a strong calling for the role of wise politicians to by pass all structural obstacles in transition to democracy. These theorists, identified as the transitologists, give more credit to the individual agency, the leadership skills, and the choice and strategies of political elites in democratic transition. The transition period, they argue, is a momentum of political uncertainty in which countries can escape their past and transform the present into an uncertain future. Democratic transition is a political game. All is needed is a group of wised political elites who know *what*, *when*, and *how* to act (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991; Rustow 1999; Karl 1991; Palma 1990). Democracy, Doh Shin (1994) argued, "is no longer treated as a particularly rare and delicate plant that cannot be transplanted in alien soil; it is treated as a product that can be manufactured wherever there is democratic craftsmanship and the proper zeitgeist." Transition to democracy is bound by the "structuralist indeterminacy" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986) and the elite's strategic choice would determine the outcomes.

Voluntarism of the transitologists is a reductionist approach for two reasons: first, it "does not explain adequately why outcomes are different, except by presuming inadequate leadership styles or the adoption of incorrect policies." In other words, "when democratizations go wrong it is, by implication, because individuals 'get it wrong'" (Jean Grugel 2002:61). This approach reduces the success or failure of democratic transition to some psychological factors and sends structures to holidays. Second, it underestimates the role of civil society. Strong and active civil society, transitologists argue, may or may not serve democratization. The transitologists admit that the Solidarity Movement in Poland, the student movement in South Korea, and mass mobilization or the "resurrection of civil society" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986) in the Philippine, Argentina, and Chile were conducive in the politics of democratization. But civil society movement is helpful as long as long as it is controlled by the elites. Strong and independent civil society could hinder a successful democratic transition since the acts of civil society are not consistently predictable. The regime hardliners are likely to jeopardize the process of democratization if the demands of civil society exceed the capability of the regime softliners (Karl 1991). To the transitologists, the primary actors are individual elites and civil society is of secondary importance. This reductionist assumption ignores that the success of democratic transition depends on the interaction between social movements (civil society actors) and the elite reformists (John Markoff 1996). The pressure from below (civil society) provides invaluable soft power to be used in the negotiation from above (the negotiation of reformists with hardliners). Last but not least, in non-democratic countries where democratic institutions are weak, civil society organizations could serve as multifunctional organs. They could educate and also aggregate the citizens' interests where the party politics is weak. Iran's democratic movement, as will be discussed in this paper, provides evidence regarding the significance of civil society forces.

The third generation of democratization literature represents an integrative approach in which elements of structuralism and voluntarism, or structure and human agency are synthesized (James Mahoney and Richard Snyder 1999:1). In this approach, democratization is, at once, a class-based project and a political-strategic process in which class structure, elites, and institutions work together (Ruth Berins Collier 1999). Similarly, attempts have been made to make a bridge between the historical and structural "causes" and the "causers"—actors and agencies—of democracy (Huntington 1991). Others suggest that a society's structural characteristics "constitute a series of opportunities and constrains for the social and political actors;" and yet, "those actors have certain choices that can increase or decrease the probability of the persistence and stability of a regime" (Juan L. Linz and Alfred Stepan 1978:4). From this integrative perspective, Mahoney and Snyder (1999:13) argue

structures both enable and limit human agency...[they] operate as environments that delimit the range of possible actions without determining action...people act through structures, rather than structures acting through people...actors can choose how to use structural resources and potentially improve these resources.

On this view, social conditions are not the ultimate causal factor. Human choices and the very concept of leadership suggest that individual/political agents can make a significant difference in democratic transition. On this synthetic and dialectical view, individuals, ideas, and “cultural values do not descend from heaven to influence the course of history” (Moore 1966: 486). They are rooted in and influenced by social structures. Yet, “if you ever doubted the importance of the individual in history,” writes Timothy Garton Ash (2005), “consider the story of Ayatollah Khomeini”: An old man who invented a new and modern political system founded on an old and apolitical concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of jurist). This paper subscribes to such an integrative and synthetic approach to examine the complexity and difficulties of democratization in Iran.

## Part II

### Structural factors: *Nature of the State*

The Islamic Republic of Iran hardly fits the current categories of states given its distinctive character of institutional arrangements and intellectual foundations. I shall first define what the Islamic Republic of Iran is not and then turn to what the Iranian state stands for. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the post-revolutionary Iranian state is not a traditional theocratic/Islamic state for a number of reasons: first, it is conceptually an oxymoron. There is no such thing as an Islamic state because Islam never introduced a model for state. Islamic state, as it is claimed to be, is a modern phenomenon invented by contemporary Islamists, not congruent with historical Islam. As such, the essentialist position of both some Islamists and Western Orientalists is neither conceptually nor historically legitimate. Ayatollah Khomeini’s doctrine of the *velayat-e faqih* was a major departure from historical Shiite Islam. Secondly, Ayatollah Khomeini’s doctrine of Islamic state proved to be “Islamic in its personnel” at best since the institutional forms of the Iranian state have no “particularly Islamic features” (Zubaida 1997:118). Not only does the Islamic *sharia* “constitute only one element among many,” but Ayatollah Khomeini favoured a relatively dynamic interpretation of the *sharia* in the socio-economic policies of the Republic. More importantly, the survival of the state, the interests of the state and of the statesmen trumped the rulings of the Islamic *sharia*. In 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly argued that the state ruled by the *vali-ye faqih*, if necessary, can stop the implementation of the *sharia* and dismiss the founding pillars of Islam in order to protect the general interests of the state.

As such, the state founded by Ayatollah Khomeini is by no means a revival of tradition, or a reassertion of traditional Islamic values. The concept of theocracy is not helpful in pointing out the nature of the Iranian state because “God does not exercise His sovereignty directly,” it is “a group of men rule in His name” who “act in their own interests.” Moreover, given the separation of political and religious leadership in post-Khomeini era, “Iran is not ruled by clergy but by a politicized section of it” (Chehabi 2000:51-52).

Likewise, the Iranian state, in spite of its initial attempts, failed to establish a totalitarian state because it has failed to maintain an “official ideology,” given the growing pragmatic tendencies in domestic and foreign policies of the state (Chehabi 2000:56). The Iranian state is short of another hallmark of totalitarianism, i.e., a modern single-mass centralized political party. The Islamic Republican Party clearly failed to fulfill such role and was dissolved in the mid-1980s. The decentralization of Islamic faith and openness to diverse interpretations together with

the elite factional politics contributed to the development of limited pluralism in the Iranian state and overruled the success of totalitarian tendencies (Chehabi 2000:59). By the same token, a relative diversity of opinion in the press, and the existence of independent-private sector in economy suggest that the state does not hold two other features of totalitarianism. The last hallmark of a totalitarian state is terror and yet “terror is not specific to totalitarian regimes and can also appear in authoritarian ones” (Chehabi 2000:59-60). In sum, if the intentions were realized, the Islamic Republic might have been a totalitarian system; however, “such an outcome was prevented by the organizational and ideological peculiarities’ of the post-revolutionary state (Chehabi 2000:69). Iran’s totalitarianism was “stillborn” (Chehabi 2000:54).

Iran’s post-revolutionary state “is unique in its institutional arrangements and distribution of power,” because it is “multilayered and institutionally diffused” (Moslem 2002: 35). The “dissonant institutionalization”(Brumberg 2001) of the state combines Ayatollah’s Khomeini’s theory of *velayat-e faqih* with the republican institutions inherited from the 1905 Iran’s Constitution and adapted from the constitution of French Fifth Republic. Given its republican institutions, the Islamic Republic, at surface, shares more features with the contemporary modern Western states than with theocracy. In substance, however, the republican institutions are subordinated to the rule of the *vali-ye faqih*. Unlike parliamentary democracies, the parliament in the Iranian state must share its legislative authority with the Guardian Council whose jurist members are appointed by the *vali-ye faqih*. According to Schirazi (1997: 73-75), “the constitution clearly states that without the existence of the Guardian Council, the *Majles* [parliament] is devoid of sovereignty.” The *Majles* must also share its legislative authority with the Expediency Council whose chair and most members are appointed by the *vali-ye faqih*. Similarly, unlike presidential democracies, the president in the Islamic Republic is ranked next to the *vali-ye faqih*. Article 113 of the Constitution suggests that “after the leader, the president is the highest official in the country.” Furthermore, the *vali-ye faqih* holds many institutional “extended arms,” ranging from the powerful Revolutionary Foundations to the parallel institutions accountable, not to the republican institutions, but to the *vali-ye faqih*.

Islamic Republic of Iran is not a totalitarian state; the Iranian state, however, maintains a mixture of ‘post-totalitarian’ and ‘authoritarian’ features; a polity, to use Juan Linz’s definition of authoritarian regimes,

with limited, non-responsible political pluralism; without an elaborated and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities; without neither extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader, or, occasionally, a small group, exercise power from within formally ill-defined, but actually quite predictable, limits.<sup>1</sup>

Iran’s limited political pluralism is best represented in the two-tier electoral system in which “candidates are screened, genuine opposition candidates are prevented from running and political parties are discouraged” (Chehabi 2000:65). Citizens are implicitly divided into two groups of insiders (*khodi*) and outsiders (*gheir-e khodi*), excluding the latter from a meaningful political participation. Furthermore, the relative decline of intensive political mobilization and a weakened ideological mentality of the elites in post-Khomeini era indicate that the state remains less totalitarian and more authoritarian. Last but not least, the elite’s factionalism and the inner contradictions in the constitution contribute to the limited leadership diversity in the Islamic Republic.

Like the Pahlavi regime, the Islamic Republic remains a rentier state and drives its major financial power, not from citizen’s tax, but *mainly* from oil resources. The power of oil and petro-dollars remain central in shaping the state’s relations with civil society. The Islamic Republic of Iran has used this power, making the state a domain dominated by particular rent-seeking interests and imposing certain policies and importing certain goods to buy loyalty and

organize anti-democratic groups. Iran's autocratic rentier state has subsidized and supported all Revolutionary Foundations (*Bonyads*), supervised and controlled by the *vali-ye faqih*, with gross annual income of almost half that of the state budget (Amuzegar 1994:100). The rentier-state has produced a new class whose interests and survival rest on the status quo. Most of the counter-reform forces belong to this state-sponsored class. Iran is likely to remain an oil-centered rentier economy for years to come. The oil-centered economy and the political and economic domination of the *mullah-merchant-military* remain the most significant factor determining the nature of the state, and how to meet obstacles in the path of democratization.

Islamic Republic of Iran, in sum, is not a traditional theocracy. This implies that whether Islam remains in favor of democratization or otherwise depends on political actors and social factors outside the religion. Religion *per se* is not an obstacle to democratization. The Iranian state is not a totalitarian one, given the elites factional politics, limited pluralism, and the semi-republican institutions embedded in the state. The implication is that civil society is alive; it is not absent. The nature of the state, however, remains an "early post-totalitarian state", which lacks *sufficient* diversity and autonomy within the ruling elites and prevented the rise of a strong and independent democratic opposition. The unique structure of the state both enables and limits democratization.

### **Structural factors: Uneven Development**

The International Monetary Fund (IMF 2003)—hardly a friend of the Islamic Republic—gave Khatami's reformist government high marks in 2002 for its economic growth and fiscal reforms.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the complete picture of Iran's socio-economic development in Khatami's era remains more complicated. Because the Islamic Republic is a rentier state, Khatami and his reformist team truly believed that economic development in the absence of political development is unsustainable. They understood a sustainable economic development required political development to establish a transparent and accountable political system. They believed that "for the economy to grow, it had to be freed, not only from government restrictions (as the conservatives demanded) but from the vagaries of the mercantile bourgeoisie (a reality they obviously rejected)" (Ansari 2000:169).

A meaningful economic reform would indeed challenge the financial power of the hardliners and was resisted. Facing these obstacles, the reformists, in spite of their original agenda, gradually left the economy to the conservatives and placed more emphasis on political development. In the end, the reformists lost both economic and political grounds.

Khatami's government pursued a mild version of the *neo-liberal* economic policy of the President Rafsanjani, a policy which had brought down his government in 1997. The reformists tolerated the economic corruption, underestimated the impacts of socio-economic injustice, and overlooked several important urban riots among the urban poor and the veterans of the Iran-Iraq War. By year 2000, 20-23 percent of the urban and rural households lived under the absolute poverty line (Nili 1379/2000). By year 2001, more than 4 million Iranians remained unemployed. Each year more than 750,000 individual entered a labor market while the economy could offer only 300,000 new jobs annually.<sup>3</sup>

The reformist economic policy failed to stop the worsening class divisions. As an oil-centered rentier state, the Iranian economy was, and still remains, deeply dependent on oil economy. "Every time the rial was devalued, the cost of living for most Iranians rose just as dramatically as it fell for those with foreign bank accounts" (Ansari 2000: 168). The gap between poor, living by rials, and rich, living by dollars/euro, emerged in the Rafsanjani's government during and after the Iran-Iraq war. The "*agha-zadeh*" (clerical noble-born) became a common name attributed to the Ayatollah's sons and/or close relatives who are blessed by patrimonial politics and privileged by the rents received from formal and informal sources. This *New Class*,

to use Milovan Djilas's classic concept, continued to enjoy its privileged position in the Khatami era.

The socio-economic structure in the reformist government remained uneven and unfavorable to a sustainable and successful democratic transition. This shortcoming was due to the following reasons: first, the rural poverty and unemployment were, and still remain, a source of ever growing rural migration to the urban areas, increasing the number of the urban poor. These urban poor have constituted the major part of the *Basiji* militia, which is organized by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and controlled by the conservative-hardliners. Because the reformists failed to communicate with this group, they remained, and still are, a source of organized counter-reform activities. Petro-dollars and the rents/revenues produced by the *Bonyads* assisted the counter-reform forces to buy loyalty of a group of the urban poor.

Secondly, as James Mahoney (2003:165) argues, the history and practice of democratization suggest that "working-class strength is positively associated with democracy," but its strength depends on its organizational ability to form coalitions with other class actors. Although significant in number and subject to economic hardship, Iran's more than 4 million wage workers, excluding the salaried middle class (Moghissi and Rahnema 2004:280-81), has remained relatively ineffective in recent democratization. The strict control by state over all the labor organizations, and the reformists' inability to communicate with the working class or help them create independent organizations, contributed to the growing gap between the working class and the reformist government. Iran's working class, as Garton Ash (2005) put it, could have hardly performed what "Poland's did in the Solidarity Movement twenty-five years ago."

Thirdly, the rich and modern businessmen have remained critical of the Islamic Republic in private, but dependent on it for their businesses and formed commercial partnerships with the ruling *mullah*-merchant coalition. Like in other societies, Iran's upper class prefers its economic interest first. Because the economy is mainly controlled by a tiny group of the bazaar-merchants, many businessmen have chosen to remain a junior partner of the bazaar rivals with some economic benefits rather than a junior partner of pro-democratic forces. This class supported the 1997 reform movement and remained supportive during the first phase of the reform (1997-2000), given the boost in economy with higher prices for Iran's oil exports and growing foreign investment. But when the reformists failed to bring about political stability required for sustainable economic activities they soon turned their back. Even worse, some segments of the private sector established links with the conservatives to maximize their economic interests. "In the words of reformist strategist Said Hajjarian, the private sector is now part of the problem facing democracy in Iran" (Nasr 2005: 13). This class hardly constituted a social backbone for the recent democratization.

Fourthly, Iran's urban middle class remains the most complicated case. The middle class, as Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) argue, has shown its inconsistency over democratization. The interest of any class needs to be understood within a particular socio-political and historical context. In post-revolutionary Iran the traditional middle class with ties to the clerical authority have remained on the whole the most unfavorable social force to democratization. The merchants and the *mullahs* have historically been allies since the past century and worked together against the political establishment. The politics of the Islamic Republic has divided the two groups into forces for and against change. But like Iran's upper class the pro-reform bazaaris have often picked their immediate economic interests rather than long term comprehensive interests. They have worked with the state-sponsored bazaaris to maximize their economic interests. The modern urban-middle class has remained critical of the Islamic Republic, but dependent on it for its daily economic life.

Last but not least, the reform movement was largely depended on the youth and women. One major social support of the reformists was the young people. With almost two-third of its seventy million population under the thirty years age, Iran, an old country with thousands years history, "is also a remarkably young country" (Ash 2005).<sup>4</sup> It is estimated there is a million men

and a million women attending universities. Post-secondary education, internet and satellite televisions have made Iranian youth well-informed about national and global issues. The youth population has remained most vulnerable to unemployment, inflation, and economic instability. As a result, the reformist government gradually lost the support of a significant segment of youth.

The 2005 ninth presidential election results partly represented the failure of the reformists in dealing with the uneven socio-economic structure of the Republic. The election results, which brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into power suggest the following lessons: first, the centre in Iran's political spectrum remains "ideologically to the right and economically to the left" (Nasr 2005:16), contrary to where the reformists thought it was. Secondly, some segments of the poor cast their vote for the moderate-reformist Mehdi Karrubi, and the radical populist candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who spoke about economic inequality and social justice. Some segments of the middle class turned out to vote for the reformist Moin, the pragmatists Rafsanjani and Qalibaf. Yet, the overwhelming majority of the twenty million who did not cast their vote belonged to the poor and the middle class. The lesson here is class as a variable alone cannot expose entirely the dynamics of reform and counter-reform activities. Iran is a divided society where some social classes identify closely with the establishment, while others have lost faith in the system. Thirdly, like other late-industrializing countries, in Iran *social* elements of democracy remains an essential part of democratization. Economic privatization without social justice brings about economic inequality, which results in support for populist agenda at the polls.

### **Structural factors: *International Politics***

During the 1997 presidential-election-campaign and shortly after his election, Mohammad Khatami made it clear he would pursue a policy of *détente*. Khatami's idea of "Dialogue between Civilizations" gained recognition by the United Nations, declaring the year 2001 the official year of Dialogue between Civilizations. Khatami's UN speech "raised hopes for a *détente*" with the U.S. (Abrahamian 2004:93). Washington's response to Khatami's initiatives was initially positive by toning down the anti-Iranian rhetoric and taking some small positive steps. The administration of President George W. Bush did not alter the Clinton administration's opening relations to Iran. In post- September 11 2001, Iran was instrumental in removing the Taliban government and establishing a pro-American regime in Afghanistan: not only did Iran support the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance but, as Americans admitted, Iran was, "extremely helpful in getting Karzai in as the president" (Sick 2002). But President Bush's "axis of evil" speech in 2002 raised much speculation about the U.S. plan for regime change in Iran. The speech proved to be counterproductive and was instrumental in launching an anti-American united front, which brought together all factions of the state. The conservative hardliners were quick to cite national security when attacking the reform institutions and the reformers. The speech shocked the reformists and contributed to the consolidation of conservatives' power in a number of ways. According to Ervand Abrahamian (2004:94), the speech "created a mood of the past, especially of the 1953 coup," forces the hardliners to raise the flag of national security, persuaded some reformers "to put their hopes on the back burner waiting for better days," and energized "Pahlavi royalists – who dread reform and hope that ultraconservative obstinacy will bring about a revolution."

Likewise, the structure of international power has profoundly contributed to the revival of Iran's nuclear plan in a number of ways:<sup>5</sup> First, Iran is a major regional power and seeks to be on the cutting edge of science, meaning nuclear technology. Nuclear issue is about *national prestige*. Second, Iran is the home to the world third largest oil reserve and the second largest gas reserve. Yet, thanks to the targeted economic sanctions by the West, the oil and gas industry has not developed so Iran is currently importing a great deal of refined oil. Iran sees nuclear power as an *alternative source of energy*. Third, according to Abrahamian, like Japan, Iran is interested in a "full nuclear cycle," not for making bombs but for the "option of having it." Iran is not the only

country to pursue this right; there are about 30 countries in the world that hold to the ‘Japanese option.’ The goal is to protect *national security* and the rationale is *deterrence* (Barsamian et al 2007). Three major factors contribute to Iran’s national-security concern: first, there is the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), started by Iraq and orchestrated by a number of Western and neighbouring countries. Since war and peace were imposed on the Iranian state, the authorities planned to ensure the very survival of the state, pushing for the revival of the nuclear program. Second, Iran is surrounded by a number of nuclear powers including Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and Israel, not to mention the United States itself, given the existence of American bases in many neighbouring countries. Third, Bush’s ‘axis of evil’ speech in 2002, the policy of regime change, the quick American invasion of non-nuclear Iraq, and the hesitancy to invade a nuclear North Korea contributed to the radicalization of Iran’s nuclear position. This offered a pretext to justify Iran’s immediate military concerns and prioritize security over democracy. Another key development was the Bush administration’s rejection of a proposal by President Khatami in May 2003 for a comprehensive compromise with the U.S. The neoconservatives believed that they were winning the war in Iraq and that Iran would be the next target. The Bush administration declined the proposal and even the State Department reprimand the Swiss ambassador for conveying the Iranian proposal!

Iran under Khatami continued to talk to Britain, France, and Germany (the EU3) and suspended its nuclear enrichment for two years from 2003-05. But the effort never met Iran’s expectation that the U.S. would abandon its regime-change policy and lift economic sanctions. Only in December 2007 did the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) suggest that Iran suspended its nuclear weapons-program in 2003. But a new Iranian president, Mahmood Ahmadinejad, has already seized the moment to radicalize nuclear policy in 2005. American neoconservatives, unlike their fellow conventional conservatives and liberals, make no difference between factions inside the Iranian politics, and are determined to undo the American loss of 1979 revolution. Similarly, the Iranian authorities, in spite of their common concern on the very survival of the state, are divided on how to pursue this goal. For the reformists, the American policy of regime change in general, and the American policy against Iran’s nuclear program in particular, have no military solution and must be confronted, at once, with democracy at home and diplomacy in abroad. Security and democracy are interconnected, and democratization will ensure the security and survival of the state. They considered Europe, Russia and Japan to undo the U.S. efforts to isolate Iran, slowed down military programs in return for good relations with Europe, and allowed more inspections and signed an additional protocol to ensure the United Nations that Iran’s nuclear program is peaceful. For the conservative-hardliners, by contrast, Khatami’s liberalization and reform provided Americans with the best opportunity to overthrow the Islamic Republic. Not all the reformists have been strong enough to encounter conservatives and continue to fight for both democracy and national security.

The international politics, in sum, continues to play a significant role in the future success or failure of Iran’s democratization. On the one hand, the main casualty in the American collision with Iran could be Iran’s democratic movement and it would be, ironically, only the United States, which brings the state popular support among social forces inside Iran. The Iranian youth are disenchanted with socio-cultural policies and dissatisfied with the economic situation. Yet they sought for an *Iranian solution* to such Iranian problems. As Garton Ash (2005) observes, the U.S. ‘‘would be making a huge mistake if it concluded that these young Iranians are automatic allies of the West.’’ On the other hand, a real challenge for a legitimate democratic opposition is to balance national interests with international opportunities by learning how to fight for democracy and national sovereignty while working within boundaries imposed by the international politics. In the early 1950s Mohammad Mosaddeq tried but failed whereas in the late 1970s Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded to lead a national revolution while taking advantage of

opportunities provided by international politics. Under a favorable condition, the power of agency can transform structural obstacles into opportunities, pushing forward the democratization.

### Part III

#### Agential Factors: *Leadership*

“A democratic regime is installed not by trends but by people. Democracies are created not by causes but by causers” (Huntington 1991:108); these causers are political leaders and social groups who intentionally or unintentionally promote democratization. For Juan Linz (1978:100), however, the role of the leadership comes only next to the structural factors: “Leadership is a residual variable that ultimately cannot be ignored; but it should not be introduced before the explanatory power of other [i.e., structural] variables have been exhausted.” Whether a primary or a secondary factor, the fact, however, is that political liberalization, as Adam Przeworski (1992) observes, is unstable if the regime’s softliners are weak; under such fragile conditions democratic reforms might provoke a backlash from the hardliners. A strong leadership could transform structural obstacles into opportunities. The reform movement, in spite of all structural constraints, has suffered most from the leadership style and the strategic decisions made and/or unmade by the reformists. The reform movement suffered largely from an ineffective presidency. And yet, Khatami’s presidency effectively contributed to the transformation of Iran’s political culture both in the political establishment and in civil society. Mohammad Khatami contributed to the spread of democratic discourse, openness and transparency of the dominant political discourse in the clerical establishment. His presidency was also instrumental in greater diffusion of democratic discourse in civil society. Mohammad Khatami was neither a mere extension of the will of the political establishment nor an opposition in the establishment. He belonged to the establishment and yet was determined to reform it without harming its very existence. Khatami did not want to repeat what Gorbachev did in the former Soviet Union; his goal was to reform the system without destabilizing it. As a result, he remained in an extremely difficult and paradoxical position. According to Daniel Brumberg (2001:232), “Khatami strove to sustain *and* transform Khomeini’s dissonant legacy.” This legacy has “been cleverly used by elites to enhance their legitimacy and at the same time hinder a transition from political liberalization to full democratization” (249).

Khatami strove to rationalize the office of the *velayat-e faqih*, which, in his view, would bring Iran one step forward in democratic transition. This, however, turned out to be wishful thinking. Given the structure of the Iranian state, the conservative-hardliners occupied much of the hard power. Nonetheless, the popular president retained invaluable amount of soft power, i.e. the people. The reluctant president, however, failed to transfer his soft power into hard power. As a result, Khatami in effect became a marginal man for both the state and the reform movement. For the state, Khatami played a role of the “office coordinator” or, as Khatami himself put it, *tadarokatchi*, given the uneven balance between the power and responsibilities vested in the president. His approach in dealing with his own twin bills, described by Khatami as the reform’s minimum demand, is revealing. The Guardian Council vetoed Khatami’s twin bills—one for expanding the president’s power vis-à-vis the *vali-ye faqih*, and the other limiting the electoral power of the Guardian Council—and yet he chose not to mobilize the electorates, but to continue compromising with the ruling elites. For the reform movement, too, he played the role of a footman, because he was unable or unwilling to lead the democratic movement. Khatami failed to transform its electoral soft-power into an organized and forceful force to promote democracy. It is legitimate to suggest that the reform’s leadership remained behind the public. By 2003, 94 percent of the people wanted major reforms and 71 percent wanted a nationwide referendum to expand the reformers’ power and to limit the power of counter-reform.<sup>6</sup> In June 2003, even some of the in-system reformists openly demanded a referendum. In their open letter to the *vali-ye faqih*, 127 Majles’ deputies argued that “given the current situation, we can conceive of only two alternatives: either a fall into a dictatorship; or a rise into the democracy

intended by the constitution....We cannot claim that the Iraqi people should have the right to hold a referendum yet deny the same right for our own Iranian people” (Abrahamian 2004: 132).

The reformist leadership, in sum, was and still remains short of powerful character and an active approach to mobilize civil society. Mohammad Khatami, a charismatic politician, was a reluctant president and remains a hesitant reformist leader. The reformist leadership suffers from too much elitism, fails to mobilize the people for a democratic cause, and remains unsuccessful to turn a huge wave of popular discontent into a sustained democratic system. The leadership has chosen to mobilize the people *only* on election-days; it often relies on negotiations from above and distances itself from the grassroots. The lack of clear strategy and the absence of the strong leadership led to the reformists’ inability to agree on either a boycott or a single candidate in the 2005 ninth presidential elections. Likewise, they have failed to bring in a united front in the parliamentary elections in the last few years. In the end, ironically, the new generation of conservatives led by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad turned the reformists into scapegoats for the regime’s crises over the past three decades.

### **Agential Factors: *Institutional Arrangement***

According to Iris Marion Young (1999:152), “the critical and oppositional functions of the public spheres of civil society perform irreplaceable functions for democracy.” the reformists excluded themselves from the irreplaceable power of civil society, which, in effect, made Khatami’s proposal for the promotion of civil society an empty slogan. The reformist regime failed to mobilize civil society forces because it suffered from weak political institutionalization. The reformist leadership repeatedly insisted on the rights of the people and the empowerment of civil society. However, it hardly succeeded to provide a sustained institutional legal order to protect the independent political institutions and civil society actors. More importantly, the leadership in effect failed to establish a grassroots political party and to institutionalize the reform movement.

The most significant reformist party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front, was established in December 1998 and remained a party of the *in-system-reformist elites*, not a grassroots political party inclusive of all Iranian democrats. More importantly, the democratic opposition—even the most peaceful and loyal opposition, that is Iran’s Liberation Movement—was excluded from party politics, given the lack of legal protection for the free political activities. Moreover, Khatami himself was unable, or unwilling, to form a political party of his own. As a result, the people who voted for change, “having no means to keep themselves engaged,” remained inactive and looked for “their president to bring about the changes for which they voted” (Bakhash 2003:122-123).

Iran’s reformist political parties remained really active *only* for the elections; after elections they left their constituencies to their own ways with no effective efforts to establish grassroots organizations. The reformists downplayed the significance and the urgency of organized grassroots and inclusive political parties and social organizations to keep their constituencies in the front and the conservatives at bay. The first evidence appeared in the 2002 second municipal elections where the unorganized and unsatisfied people turned way from the ballots.<sup>7</sup> This was followed by two major defeats in the 2004 parliamentary elections and the 2005 presidential elections.

The reformist institutional/organizational strategy suffered from a number of shortcomings: first, the reformist parties remained parties of the elites. They lacked strong, grassroots, and inclusive organizations required for a successful public mobilization. The parties consisted of extremely diverse, but limited, circles and constituencies.<sup>8</sup> They all, in spite of their diversities, remained elitists political organizations incapable of public mobilization. The reformists’ central motto, i.e., ‘Iran for all Iranians,’ in effect, did very little to establish a political party for all Iranians. Secondly, the reformists failed to communicate with different social

constituencies and limited their efforts to attract segments of the middle class. They either ignored or downplayed the significant role of the lower classes in general and the working class in particular. They did a little to mobilize the people in the mosques and other religious centers. As Iran's modern history suggests the modern intellectuals and elites have had difficulties in communication with the average people. Because they are urbanized and educated, their immediate concerns remain much relevant to their immediate social class/force and less to the grassroots society. On the eve of the June 2005 presidential elections, the progressive-reformist candidate, Mostafa Moin called for a United Front for Democracy and Human Rights. It turned out that Moin's political discourse did not mean much to the lower classes of the urban poor or the rural class. Hence his political slogans of 'All political prisoners must be freed,' with repeated words of democracy and human rights remained marginal. The reformists failed to transform these subjective, abstract words into an objective, tangible reality of the people's daily life. The 2005 presidential elections proved that democratic ideals alone are powerless unless they are expressed in a language accessible to all forces of civil society and address *immediate* concerns of the public. To reach this goal democratic forces need strong and grassroots organization to appeal to the people and mobilize their support. Thirdly, the politicization of social demands could have mobilized the lower classes and the lower-middle class for the reform movement. The reformists, however, failed to encourage and help various social classes to transform their social demands into political platforms. The coalition of the in-system reformists were united on the need for change and yet remained divided on the nature and the scale of change. For some of the reformists, an extensive public mobilization of the people and grassroots socio-political institutions could have undermined the foundation of the Republic. For this reason, some of the reformists preferred to hold a limited constituency rather than a public mobilization with an unintended consequence of the collapse of the whole regime.

The hardliner-conservatives, by contrast, successfully used their institutional strength to dismantle the reform agenda and discourage the reform's social base. Three factors, in particular, contributed to their organizational success. First, throughout its entire life, the conservative camp has suffered from the crisis of legitimacy, never exceeded 25 percent of the votes, and was elected when the other forces boycotted, or were excluded from elections. In the 2005 ninth presidential elections, Iran's hardliners, to use Mohammad-Reza Khatami's metaphor, were blessed and backed by the "*hezb-e padegani*," a barrack-based party and used millions of Basiji militia as "electoral foot soldiers." According to three leading presidential candidates—Moin, Karrubi, and Rafsanjani—the campaign of the hardliner candidate, Ahmadinejad, was well funded. Moreover, Ahmadinejad adopted a *populist* platform directed at the urban and rural poor. His focus on "bread-and-butter issues" and his promise to put more of the country's oil wealth on the people's table, to bring in social justice, and to fight the corrupt economic class disarmed the reformists. Ahmadinejad, a loyal but *invisible* man of the establishment, complained about the past performance and raised the flag of social justice, representing himself as a man of the people. Ironically, the main beneficiaries of the coalition of the *mullah*-merchants-military partly succeeded in mobilization of the poor who had suffered most from the socio-economic status quo.

### **Agential factor: *Intellectual Discourse***

In this section I shall discuss the extent to which *ideas* themselves contributed to the crisis of the reform and the return of the conservative hardliners. Preoccupied with the revolutionary slogans and the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, the post-revolutionary dominant discourse hardly engaged with the democratic demands of modern urban class. But the war and its aftermath, the absence of charismatic leader, explosive demographic changes in society, economic hardship, the regime's international crisis, and the crisis of legitimacy inside, the rise of a non-violent and new democratic-Islamic discourses in civil society, and the rise of elites' factional politics in post-Khomeini era set the stage for the development of the Islamic

reformism/constitutionalism in the 1990s. Three themes remained central to this new discourse: the “rule of law” and constitutionalism (*qanun-gera'i*), promoting “civil society” (*jame'e-ye madani*), and establishing an “Islamic democracy” (*mardom-salari-e dini*). By 2005, however, it became evident that the reformists hardly succeeded to deliver the discourse of Islamic reformism.

#### The rule of law/constitutionalism

Democracy, Charles Tilly (2004:125) argues, is all about a general and reliable rule of law, which implies that the law is universal and no person/office stand beyond the rule of law. Under Islamic Republic, however, the rule of law is not universal since the office of *velayat-e faqih* operates beyond the law. Khatami's concept of “Islamic constitutionalism” aimed at binding the office of *velayat-e faqih* by the law/constitution. The problem, however, was that Islamic constitutionalism was trapped by the lasting legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini. It sought to reform the political institutions of the Republic without questioning the intellectual foundation of Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *velayat-e faqih*. Hence, the difficulty was to establish the rule of law while the *vali-ye faqih* rules absolutely; it attempted to revive constitutionalism while the rulings of the *vali-ye faqih* remained beyond the constitution. Islamic constitutionalism, in sum, lived in the same universe of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic discourse and failed to reform a political system which is *relatively* rich in constitution yet poor in constitutionalism.

#### Promoting civil society

President Khatami announced development of civil society institutions as the second pillar of his reformist discourse. If intellectuals such as Soroush, among others, “injected the idea of civil society into debates among the intelligentsia, Khatami introduced this concept to a much wider public, turning it into a subject for discussion among the political class and the public at large” (Bakhash 2003:120). The civil society discourse, in spite of its public currency, remained far from a complete success. Two factors, one theoretical and one practical, contributed to this setback. First, like the rule of law, the reformists' discourse of civil society contained conceptual confusion leading to political problem. According to Farzin Vahdat (2002: 213-214), “the ontological foundation of the political philosophy and institutions of the Islamic Republic [constitutes the] vacillation between allowing and denying citizenship rights.” This political philosophy offers “limited and indirect empowerment of the social universal, [yet] affects the people as a collectivity and not as individual citizens” (166-167). This political practice is based on an epistemology, which, simultaneously, concurs to, and conflict with, the philosophical foundations of modernity.<sup>9</sup>

A closer look at the epistemology the Islamic Republic of Iran suggests that the notion of human subjectivity is embedded in a universality of the divine and the collectivity of believers/faithful; a phenomenon, to use Vahdat's conceptual term, defined as “mediated subjectivity.” In this scheme, argues Vahdat (2002: 134), “although human subjectivity is not denied, it is never independent of God's subjectivity and, in this sense, it is ‘mediated’....This situation [creates] constant, schizophrenic vacillation between affirmation and negation of human subjectivity, on the one hand, and between individual subjectivity and collectivity, on the other.”

Owing to the contradictory nature of “mediated subjectivity,” the reformist discourse of Islamic civil society constitutes the vacillation between allowing and denying universal citizenship rights. According to Khatami, Islamic civil society “is the *natural* outcome of our religious principles and learnings....The historical and theoretical *essence* of [Islamic] civil society is rooted in the esteemed Prophet's Medina.”<sup>10</sup> The truth, however, is that modern understanding of people's rights, citizenship, democracy and civil society are not *natural* outcomes of religious principles, Islam or otherwise. Like other modern concepts, it has resulted from complex dialectical relations between culture, economy, and politics throughout the history.

Moreover, because religious outcomes vary—from fanaticism to progressive/democratic versions—religions hold neither *natural* outcomes nor a *uniform essence*. Cultural essentialism is ahistorical, because outcomes are bound by history; they are all historical. Furthermore, Khatami offers neither a substantive theory nor an empirical fact, which outlines *fundamental* differences between the ‘western’ and the ‘Islamic’ versions of civil society. He simply essentializes a neutral concept, substituting a modern notion of civil society with the ‘Prophetic society’ (*Madina Al-Nabi*). Contrary to Khatami’s original intention, not only this essentialism remains ahistorical but implies a dangerous political outcome: it replaces citizens with believers. It produces first-class and second-class citizens. For all these reasons, it is more plausible to speak of a ‘Muslim’ than an ‘Islamic’ civil society where people, not divine ideas, define and determine the nature of civil society. Civil society, like other socio-political concepts has no uniform religious essence; rather, it remains a synthetic entity composed of socio-historical, cultural and political elements.

Furthermore, Khatami reduced Iran’s multiple collective identity to Islam: “Islamic thought and culture are the pivots of the civil society we have in mind.”<sup>11</sup> Or, our Islamic civil society “obeys the words of the Holy Koran and considers it as an obligation to provide all the requirements and necessities for material, economic and technological progress.” However, the truth is that the triple Iranian identity composed elements of pre-Islamic culture, various versions of Islam, and modern western ideas/civilizations. Furthermore, there is a potential political danger to the concept of ‘collective.’ If Islam constitutes the sole or even the major portion of our identity and if our identity remains a collective entity, the implication is that our civil society organizations are mainly an extension of dominant Islamic politics. This ignores the very definition of civil society organizations. Civil society organizations are, by definition, independent entities, which may or may not correspond to the dominant politics. They may or may not remain committed to Islam or other elements of dominant politics. Hence, the notion of collectivity might preclude the individual autonomy intrinsic to all civil society organizations.

The second factor contributing to the malfunction of the reformists’ civil society discourse was practical in nature. The discourse, in effect, became more a subject of abstract intellectual debates and less an object of public political practice. The reformists have done little to empower civic associations, to encourage social movements, and to establish grassroots organizations. Once in power they put down the strategy of the “pressure from below.” Given their weakness at the top of the political pyramid, they could have used the soft-power provided by civil society. In post-Khatami era they still undermine or underestimate the valuable power of civil society. Lessons were not learned. In sum, the reformists’ intellectual confusion together with their political strategy on empowering civil society remains problematic.

### Islamic democracy

According to Karl Mannheim (1960:135), “in a realm in which everything is in the process of becoming, the only adequate synthesis would be a dynamic one.” In post-revolutionary Iran, both Islam and democracy have been in the process of becoming. The question is whether the synthetic concept of “Islamic democracy,” the third pillar of reformist discourse, remained a successful synthesis. To what extent did Khatami’s concept of Islamic Democracy contribute to Iran’s long and painful march for democracy?

The reformists’ concept of Islamic democracy, in spite of all great intellectual strivings and good political intentions lacks a solid theoretical base and a plausible political solution. It has brought some mixed results. From a theoretical perspective, the concept of Islamic democracy, like Islamic civil society, concurs with the internal dynamism of “mediated subjectivity.” From a political point of view, it simultaneously enables and disables the forces of democratization. On the one hand, it offers an “enormous potential for universalizing inchoate subjectivity to the whole of society,” mobilizing the public for a greater political participation. It also provides a potential opportunity “for transformation from *within*, a tendency that springs from its contradictory nature.” More specifically, argues Vahdat (2002:214), “this contradictory

nature has shown that monotheism and modernity—God and Juggernaut—are not totally antithetical entities, indeed, that monotheism may be reincarnated in modern forms.”

On the other hand, the Islamic-democracy discourse, and the conceptual confusion intrinsic to it, laid the foundation for a few political problems. First, the Islamic principles were utilized to create a sense of limited and inchoate subjectivity among the social universal. Hence, the people, by participating in demonstrations and elections, earned the right to participate in the affairs of their own country. Such participation, however, remained largely limited to endorsing the dominant discourse. On this view, the “mediated subjectivity” set the solid epistemological ground for legitimizing a *mediated agency* in socio-political contexts. For the conservative, and even some reformists, if human subjectivity is contingent on God’s subjectivity, then people are contingent on God’s representatives’ on earth: the *vali-ye faqih*. But in contingent relationships between human and divine subjectivity, people’s subjectivity in political participation is not denied; yet it is never independent of the divine ruler on earth, the *vali-ye faqih*.

Secondly, Islamic-democracy discourse revealed the intellectual crisis of Islamic Republic, a great conflict that give rise to the constant shifting of ground between a confirmation and negation of human subjectivity and a constant oscillation between free individual subjectivity and a collective notion of subjectivity embodied in the notion of people as believers. It was within this context that some reformist parties committed to the dichotomy of insider-outsider, implicitly placed the Iranian citizens into a first-class and a second-class citizen and made “Iran for all Iranians” an empty slogan. Thirdly, Islamic-democracy discourse contributed also to the intellectual confusion about the nature, scope, and meaning of modern democracy. Such confusion provided the conservative hardliners with a pretext to negate the very definition of democracy. The fact however, is that a democratic interpretation of Islam, as Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari (Aftab 2001) put it, may concur with democracy yet it never built democracy on the principles of Islam. Muslims can be democrats; they can also come up with a democratic reading of Islam. Such democratic version of Islam, however, does not make their state an *Islamic* democracy. Muslims ruling democratically become democrats; they do not make the state Islamic. For this reason, “Muslim democracy” is a more appropriate term than Islamic democracy. Democracy is about power and power remains a worldly political concept. Islam, like other religions, recognizes this same secular, not sacred, power on earth. Political authority has no religious essence, Islamic or otherwise. More precisely, as Abdulkarim Soroush in thinking about democratic Islam observes,

we do not have religious and non-religious water or religious and non-religious wine. The same is true for justice, government, science, and philosophy. Even the subjects were to have an essence then their Islamization would be rather meaningless. As such, we can not have a science of sociology that is essentially religious or a philosophy that is essentially Islamic or Christian, the same way we can not have a system of government that is essentially religious.<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion: Iranian Lessons**

The Iranian case retested the findings of the current literature that democratization equally depends on the structural *causes* and the socio-political *causers*. It is, at once, a class-based project and a political-strategic process in which class structure, elites, and institutions work together (Collier 2000; Huntington 1991). The Iranian case retested a theoretical approach that *structures* both enable and limit human agency, and *actors* can choose how to use structural resources. Structural factors, Linz and Stepan (1978:4) argue, “constitute a series of opportunities and constraints for the social and political actors... [yet,] those actors have certain choices that can increase or decrease the probability of the persistence and stability of a regime.” The failure of the reformists and the success of the (new) conservatives in Iran were not inevitable; the agency of the reform and the counter-reform have played a significant part in its fall.

The Iranian lesson retests the argument that ideas are powerless unless they are fused with material forces. Ideas are connected to their social settings, institutions and social groups. This can be explained in three ways: First, progressive ideas are easily defeated by populist slogans when the latter are blessed by powerful institutions, a strong leadership, and favorable structural/material conditions. Abstract democratic ideas are powerless. Second, substantive democracy is about *societal* empowerment, strengthening civil society and establishing democratic procedures based on engagement, dialogue and deliberation of civil society. The dominant neo-liberal discourse of democratization is heavily market-based and does not actually empower civil society; state is the guardian of market-society, not in the service of civil society. *Social* elements of democracy remain an essential part of democratization in Iran. Social equality gives meaning and substance to political democracy; it makes the value of democratic ideas tangible to the public. Social inequality results in a gradual decline of democratic aspirations in civil society; it gives rise to populist-authoritarian trends and pushes democratic ideas and institutions at bay. Neo-liberal economic privatization without social justice brings about economic inequality, which results in support for populist agenda at the polls. Third, Iranian lessons on democratization nullifies the *Orientalist* theory of Muslim Exceptionalism, which suggests that Muslims are exceptionally and *essentially* immune to democracy and the Islamic culture remains the main barrier to democratization. Islam and democracy are not mutually exclusive; different Islams have played different roles in democratization because different Muslims are exposed to different social, cultural and political contexts. Cultural essentialism is wrong and dangerous. Religious ideas in abstract are neutral; what we need to examine is socio-political trends outside the religious domain.

The Iranian lesson retests the argument that the quest for a grand theory of socio-political change has given way to more specific theories based on particular context. Iran's distinctive historical and socio-political legacies will shape its path in the transition to a democratic society. This legacy both helps and hinders democratization. It is here where human agency can make a difference by making strategic choices conducive to democratization. Iran is privileged by a number of structural factors with positive contribution to democratization. As a nation Iran shares the value of political independence and national unity. In social terms Iran has a high rate of literacy rate of over 80 per cent, and a high level of urbanization and communication. In historical terms Iran enjoys a long and rich history of reform and revolution in pursuit of the rule of law and democracy. The fall of the reformist government is not the failure of the social movement for reform and democracy in Iran. In other words, the political question is not whether reform from *within* is feasible. The fundamental principle of "democracy from within" is irreplaceable; Empire will not bring in democracy to Iran as the post-September 11 2001 international politics has profoundly weakened Iran's democratic forces. The political question remains whether the existing reformists' leadership, institutions and discourse are capable of transforming the existing domestic and international obstacles into opportunities. Iran's pro-democracy forces need to rethink about alternative strategies in order to materialize their rich and strong potential for democratization.

In the final analysis democratization and democracy are about people, and how they come together in shaping their destiny. This paper has shown that human agency remains the critical instrument in rearranging social structures to meet human needs in the realm of politics and economy. Realizing democracy has proven to be difficult. But it remains the desired goal for most Iranians. Iranians, Abdolkarim Soroush (2000: 156) writes, "are the inheritors and the carries of three cultures at once." These triple cultural heritages "are of national, religious, and Western origins. While steeped in an ancient national culture, we are also immersed in our religious culture, and we are at the same time awash in successive waves coming from the Western shores. Whatever solutions that we decide for our problems must come from this mixed heritage."<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Chehabi, H. E. "The Political Regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Comparative Perspective." *Government and Opposition* 36 (winter 2000): 48-70.

<sup>2</sup> International Monetary Fund, *Staff Report on Iran*. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2003; quoted in Ervand Abrahamian (2004) p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> Iran Statistic Centre, November 2001.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s, the authorities "encouraged a baby boom, denouncing the decadent Western practice of birth control and calling for mass procreation to replace the country's million martyrs in the Iran-Iraq war." Ironically, the authorities called these children "soldiers of the hidden imam." See Garton Ash (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Iran's nuclear program began under the Shah's regime in the early 1970, was interrupted by the revolution and the war, and was revived since the early 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> *Economist*, January 16, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> President Khatami held the first local and municipal elections in 1999, the first one in post-revolutionary Iran, which contributed to the greater participation of people, stronger civil society, and decentralization of power. More than 23.6 million or 64.5 percent of the eligible voters cast their ballots. The reformists won 71 percent and the hard-liner conservatives received 14.5 percent of the seats. In the 2002 second municipal elections, however, the reformists lost in major cities and the conservatives won with an extremely low turnout. *Hamshahri*, March 15, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> they included the reformist clerics organized in the *Majma-e Rouhanioun-e mobarez* (the Militant Clerics Society), an extremely closed circle of the former populist-revolutionaries organized in the *Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Enghelab-e Islami* (the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization), a loose coalition of the state's bureaucrats and pragmatist-politicians organized in the *Kargozaran-e Sazandagi-ye Iran* (the Iran's Servants of the Construction), and a small number of the progressive reformists organized in the *Jebhe-ye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami* (the Islamic Iran Participation Front).

<sup>9</sup> I do not support a western-centric universal account of modernity. I believe in *multiple modernities*, which would urge for contextualizing /historicizing modernity in the specific social context. With this in mind, I agree with the *core* argument of Vahdat on the limits of the post-revolutionary discourse. According to Vahdat (2002:1-2), two pillars of modernity, to use Hegelian and Habermasian approach, are 'subjectivity and universality.' Subjectivity is defined as 'the property characterizing the autonomous, self-willing, self-defining, and self-conscious individual agent.' Subjectivity is not limited to individual freedom. Individual freedom 'refers to a lack of restraint,' while "'subjectivity' refers to positive action on the world.' The second pillar of modernity, universality, is defined as 'the mutual recognition among the plurality of subjects of each other's subjectivity.' More precisely, it 'refers to elimination of restrictions based on privilege, status or other substantive considerations.' It means 'a formal equality before the law.' For Hegel, civil society is a short form of two central pillars of modernity: subjectivity and universality. According to Hegel, civil society is 'an association of members as self-sufficient individuals in a universality which because of their self-sufficiency is only formal.' For further discussion, see Hegel (1967) and Habermas (1987:16).

<sup>10</sup> *Iranian TV*, 9 Dec. 1997. Mohammad Khatami's speech at the Islamic Conference Organization in December 1997, quoted in Ali Ansari (2000), pp. 145-147.

<sup>11</sup> BBC SWB ME/3099S/14-9, 11 Dec. 1997; Mohammad Khatami's speech quoted in Ali Ansari (2000), pp. 145-147.

<sup>12</sup> quoted in Mehrzad Boroujerdi. 2004. "Subduing Globalization: The Challenge of the Indigenization of Movement," in Schaebler, B. and L. Stenborg eds. *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion, and Modernity*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

<sup>13</sup> A. Soroush, 'The Three Cultures,' in A. Soroush, Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam, M. Sadri and A. Sadri, trans. and eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 156.

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