
IRAN: A REVOLUTIONARY REPUBLIC IN TRANSITION

Edited by Rouzbeh Parsi

Chaillot Papers | February 2012



128

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An aerial photograph of a city, likely Tehran, Iran. A prominent feature is a large, curved bridge with a bright red surface, possibly a pedestrian walkway or a decorative element. The bridge spans a river or a valley. In the background, there are several tall buildings and a dense urban landscape. The foreground shows green trees and a road. A large, white number '128' is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

128

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IRAN: A REVOLUTIONARY REPUBLIC IN TRANSITION

*Farideh Farhi, Azadeh Kian, Rouzbeh Parsi, Evaleila Pesaran, Paola Rivetti;
edited by Rouzbeh Parsi*

CHAILLOT PAPERS *February 2012*

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Contents

	Executive Summary	5
1	Introduction: Iran at a critical juncture	9
	<i>Rouzbeh Parsi</i>	
	History of a Republic	10
	Factionalism and networks	10
	Rewriting the revolutionary ethos	14
	The nuclear issue as foreign policy	17
	The way forward? The EU, Iran and the international community at a crossroads	20
2	Factional politics and the Islamic State	23
	<i>Farideh Farhi</i>	
	Introduction	23
	The Islamic Republic's evolving factional politics	25
	Repercussions of the 2009 presidential election	26
	Reshaping of the factional politics of the Islamic Republic?	29
	Conclusion	38
3	Challenges facing the Iranian economy	41
	<i>Evailela Pesaran</i>	
	Introduction	41
	The economic system of the Islamic Republic	42
	Post-war economic programmes	45
	Policies under Ahmadinejad	48
	Conclusion: looking to the future	58
4	Gendered citizenship and the women's movement in Iran	61
	<i>Azadeh Kian</i>	
	Introduction	61
	The legal status of women under the Shah and in the Islamic Republic	62
	Patriarchy and modernity	63
	Women's press: a forum for social activities	68
	Gender-conscious readings of Islamic laws and traditions and feminist social struggles	69
	The persistence of patriarchy	74
	Conclusion	78

Contents

5	Student movements in the Islamic Republic: shaping Iran's politics through the campus	81
	<i>Paola Rivetti</i>	
	Introduction	81
	Historical background: student politics and the revolution	82
	Universities as the site of power and factional struggle	87
	Politics from abroad? The post-2009 electoral crisis, migration and regime stability	95
	Conclusion	97
A	Annexes	101
	About the authors	101
	Abbreviations	103

Executive Summary

This *Chaillot Paper* examines recent domestic developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It presents an in-depth assessment of the profound changes that the Iranian state and Iranian society have undergone in the past three decades, with a particular focus on the last tumultuous five years. In its exploration of this theme it not only shows the growing rift between the official discourse and self-image of the ruling elite and the society they govern, but also highlights the fact that external observers have many misperceptions about Iran.

As is often the case, now that public protests and demonstrations of dissent following the controversial presidential elections in 2009 have died down, there is a perception that the ruling elite have re-established control over society. While this may be the case in the sense of the regime having a monopoly on state violence and control of the public space, there are several important ongoing trends in Iran that warrant a closer look at societal developments in the immediate and medium-term future. It is clear that in many ways Iran, as an Islamic Republic, is in a transition where many of its fundamental tenets, so laboriously elaborated over 30 years, are being called into question. These developments already affect Iran's foreign policy, in terms of posture, substance and rhetoric, as some of its domestic and external problems and issues converge and will most likely continue to do so.

The paper features contributions from five authors who are all specialists in various aspects of Iranian politics and society. They focus on distinct dimensions of Iranian society and culture that can help us understand the nuances and trends in contemporary Iran and also how the political elite controlling the state respond to these challenges.

In the **first introductory chapter** Rouzbeh Parsi explores the legacy of the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic, its impact on the relationship between the state and the religious clergy in Qom, and the country's foreign policy, with a special focus on the nuclear issue. In the Islamic Republic, the proponents of a minority theocratic view used religion and the authority they derived from their position as interpreters of Islamic teachings to take over the state. In the post-revolutionary state religion

initially provided a useful means of legitimising the authority of the new regime, but inevitably friction ensued between the mainstream clergy and those seeking to use religion as an instrument to consolidate their own political power. This has created an ongoing crisis of legitimacy in its own right and a competition over the religious idiom.

Iran's foreign policy has become much less adventurous and many of the potential gains the Iranians have made in recent years have not been due to their own achievements as much as to the failures of others (most notably, the US in Iraq). The nuclear issue is today the vexing issue that overshadows most other matters on which discussions between Iran, its neighbours and the EU and the US are urgently needed. The sanctions policy as a means of pressuring Iran to negotiate or make concessions has yet to yield results; in fact it has only increased tensions and runs the risk of making Tehran see this as an existential confrontation, something which would in turn confirm the view of hardline elements in Tehran that the country is encircled by enemies poised to attack. This would then generate the very outcome the sanctions are trying to prevent: a weaponisation of Iran's nuclear programme.

In **Chapter Two** Farideh Farhi provides an in-depth analysis of the state and the factions that constitute its ruling elite. The Islamic Republic's political system has been riddled with factions and its decision-making mechanisms hindered by systemic inertia from the very beginning. This continuous infighting reached a new level that endangered the very foundation of the system following the controversial presidential election in 2009. The major unresolved issues that have beset the Islamic Republic from its inception came to the fore in an intra-elite showdown. Today Iranian politics is still dominated by intra-institutional bickering and contestation, but the forces unleashed by the election debacle in 2009 are only contained by the ruling elite at the high price of the suspension of the decision-making capacity of state institutions. The main power struggle today is within the amorphous conservative grouping that identify themselves as 'principlists' and the upcoming elections (parliamentary elections in March 2012 and presidential elections in 2013) are the public battlegrounds in which this struggle will be played out. Thus, regardless of calls for a recalibration of factional positions and institutions, the most salient feature of the Iranian political system remains its factionalism.

In **Chapter Three** Evaleila Pesaran discusses the structural flaws and intricacies of the Iranian political economy. Iran's economy is characterised by its high dependency on oil and by the conflicting ambitions and agendas of the factionalised state elite who are responsible for the country's economic management (as enshrined in the constitution). Thus one of the many dividing lines that demarcate political factions in Iran has concerned economic policy: social justice and state control

vs. private property and free market rules. After the war against Iraq ended in 1988 this dividing line was redrawn (as were many others). A policy of greater pragmatism and reform ensued under Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, but they were unable to resolve some of the basic problems of the economic system. Under Ahmadinejad even bolder steps were attempted, including privatisation of state enterprises and subsidy reform, while the social justice theme of the early 1980s was reutilised in populist form. The results are mixed at best and, in the present volatile political climate, very difficult to assess. In addition the Iranian economy is affected by international sanctions, though it is very difficult to gauge the full extent to which the economy has been damaged on the basis of the scant data available.

In **Chapter Four** Azadeh Kian analyses the position and role of Iranian women in the Islamic Republic. The women's movement in Iran has a long history of political struggle and in the Islamic Republic women have increasingly constituted a key electoral force. The several campaigns organised by women to assert their rights and protest against injustices also prefigured the Green Movement which emerged in 2009. With increasing access to higher education and under the impact of other socio-economic trends, the attitude and aptitude of women have changed, which in turn has even further amplified the gap between the official expectation of what women's role should be at home and in society, and the actual reality of women's lives. Here differences based on class and urban/rural divides still remain: access to education inevitably leads women to reappraise their ambitions and the gendered roles they are assigned by society at large. The women's movement has over time come to understand that its demands are best met in conjunction with the general democratisation of Iran. The challenge facing the movement now is to reach beyond its urban middle-class core and connect to working-class women, as well as to women in smaller cities and the countryside.

In **Chapter Five** Paola Rivetti takes a critical look at university campuses and students as agents of change and dissent in Iran. Students played a key role in politics in Iran in the days before the revolution but came even more to the fore with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The author, however, challenges the rather simplistic notion that universities and their student populations naturally tend towards dissent and opposition, instead seeing them as part of the factional political system which is reproduced on the university campuses. In short, the dominant characteristic of student activism is the linkage to state institutions, regardless of who is at the helm of government. Thus universities are the arena for ideological mobilisation and (future) elite recruitment for all the factions in the Islamic Republic. Iranian students traditionally tended to side with the left and later with the reformists, a trend aided by the rapid increase in the number of students

in the 1990s. This alliance, tacit or open, was reversed with the rise of the conservatives and Ahmadinejad's advent to the presidency. The presence of the *Basij* has increased on campuses nationwide and the DTV, Iran's largest student organisation, has splintered, with student activists increasingly subject to state repression.

Through the in-depth discussion of some of the most crucial variables of the Iranian body politic, this *Chaillot Paper* seeks to shed light on how much Iran has changed beneath the surface and beyond the headlines. While the effects of these trends may not always be immediately recognisable, they are undeniable and indicate that the basic foundations of Iranian society are inevitably changing. The major question that remains to be answered is whether the governing system of the Islamic Republic, where a certain amount of diversity is expressed through its factions while the very same factionalism tends to paralyse decision-making, is capable of managing the profound changes underway.

While the trends, which present opportunities as well as problems, discussed in this *Chaillot Paper* are very much home-made, it is clear that Iran's dysfunctional relationship with the EU and the US is affecting the country and its ruling elite. The nuclear issue looms large in the West and clouds many other topics that need addressing as well. The predictability with which all sides tend to interpret each other's intentions in the worst possible light, and the lack of a regular mode of interaction and of a forum for negotiation does not bode well for the resolution of this brewing conflict. There is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy in both how much attention is paid to this issue and the positions it generates. What this *Chaillot Paper* indicates is that the domestic changes afoot in Iran are of greater importance for the socio-political development of the country and the position of its elite than the nuclear issue, unless the worst-case scenario comes to pass and the nuclear standoff leads to war.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Iran at a critical juncture

Rouzbeh Parsi

A better understanding of how Iran is changing behind the seemingly implacable façade of the political leadership in Tehran is imperative in order to be able to craft a more realistic and effective policy toward Iran. The purpose of this *Chaillot Paper* is to move beyond the headlines regarding Iran, and with this in mind five authors, each with expertise in different areas of matters Iranian, were invited to contribute to this volume. While not every relevant topic can be covered in a publication of this kind, the issues discussed here constitute some of the most crucial aspects of Iran's socio-political development. Following this introductory chapter, which will deal with the overarching changes affecting both the Islamic and republican elements of the polity, the topics addressed are: (i) the Iranian state and the relationship between the Leader, President and Parliament against the background of the factionalism that is such a prominent feature of the Iranian political system; (ii) the economy and its political parameters; (iii) the role and importance of women in Iranian society; and (iv) the role of universities and students in Iranian politics. The aim is to analyse Iran by looking at developments and longer-term trends at both the state/institutional level and at the level of important social segments of the population.

It is these domestic trends and developments that reveal the socio-political reality of contemporary Iran. Unless the ongoing nuclear dispute leads to war, the changes Iran will go through in the coming 5-10 years constitute a more important variable in the domestic, regional and geopolitical equation than does the nuclear programme. Regardless of one's interpretation of what the underlying purpose of the Iranian nuclear programme is, the excessive focus of the international community on this issue obscures more important and dynamic developments inside the country.

In this introductory chapter two topics will be briefly addressed; the historical evolution of the Islamic Republic as both a religious and secular project, and the foreign policy implications with special focus on the nuclear issue. The Iranian revolution shares some traits with other similar events in modern history – it is an attempt to construct a new polity, and some of its systemic flaws and recurrent crises can be traced back to its inception. The nuclear issue, in turn, currently

the prevailing ‘narrative’ about Iran, dwarfs all other matters. There are some good, and a host of bad, reasons why this is the case, yet as it dominates the foreign policy agenda between the EU and Iran it warrants special mention.

History of a Republic

As in all revolutionary polities, the leaders of the Islamic Republic began by eliminating their co-revolutionary comrades once the common enemy, the Pahlavi monarchy, had been overthrown. There was fear of a counter-revolution by royalist forces, and justifiably so considering the events in 1953, but by and large the post-revolution fighting was about achieving a common revolutionary goal. Yet the system (*nezam*) that evolved came to encompass a broad range of what we could call universal political positions, albeit all dressed up in an Islamist garb. Hence classic issues of property rights, the purview of the state, the purpose and regulation of the economy, scope of personal freedoms and so on were all there, but with some revolutionary Islamist twists and under the deforming pressure of a long and bloody war with Iraq.¹

Post-revolution Iran, in its insistence on being a republic as well as a theocracy of sorts, has regularly held elections. These have served two vital functions for the stability of the polity; they have allowed the regime to gauge the societal mood, and they have served as an arena for a kind of moderated competition between the never quite clearly crystallised factions within the ruling elite.

Factionalism and networks

In this regard the concept of *khodi/gheyre-khodi* is highly significant. This binary identification of insider/outsider delineates who belongs to the ruling elite and who does not. There is an intricate web of interlinkages among the various figures involved and their extended families. This constitutes a set of networks based on familial relationships, political positions and institutional affiliations as well as common experiences. To this must be added a generational dimension, both in a biological and political sense. The first generation shared the common experience of fomenting and directing the revolution while the second generation was primarily formed by the Iran-Iraq war. Just like in previous revolutions, people who originally belonged to the ‘insider group’ have fallen from grace, sometimes with dire personal consequences. The revolutionary narrative has thus been edited along the way, removing persons or groups from the story altogether or recasting them as villains. Some of these connections and circles have left an imprint on the factional

1. For more on this, see Evaleila Pesaran’s chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.

landscape that we know a fair bit about today, but we are still very much in the dark with regard to the dynamics and connections within and among the networks on most other levels (e.g. familial/professional/economic), i.e. those that do not immediately register on specific and (semi-)public political issues.²

The first major re-adjustment of the system came with the death of its main architect, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1989. Not only was the prime-ministerial system scrapped to the benefit of a stronger presidency, but the role and function of the Leader, the ‘philosopher-king’ as it were, changed as well. As there were no ‘heir apparents’ possessing either the qualifications or the charisma of Khomeini, both the criteria for electability to the position as well as the theological role played by the Leader altered. The new Leader, Hojjat-ol Islam Seyyed Ali Khamene’i, was promoted to Ayatollah overnight and spent the next ten years slowly acquiring the jurisprudential authority required of him, primarily by institutionally tying his, historically speaking, economically independent peers in Qom to the Leader’s Office (*Daftar-e Rahbar*) in Tehran. In order to shore up his political position he cultivated the IRGC and took care in re-shuffling and promoting their commanders to ensure their loyalty to him.

The extent to which this system under its present Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i, and the conservatives in control of the Guardian Council could accept reform and contain the elite’s main fissures within its factions was put to the test with the surprise election of the reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami in 1997. His ability to mobilise women and the younger generation was an important indication of the shifts that had taken place within the electorate and society at large. He managed to open up society to some extent, building on the more tentative forays of the previous government headed by President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), especially in the cultural and media sphere.

In 1999 the limits to the reform agenda as envisaged by the reformists, in terms of what kind of reforms would be undertaken and at what speed, became clear. As student protests in Tehran grew the hardliners and IRGC signalled that they would not tolerate much more open dissent and the student dormitories were stormed.³ The reformists backed down, to the great consternation and disappointment of some of their constituents. This added fuel to the criticism of Khatami’s cautious approach by those who had hoped for more sooner; however these same critics would later look back to this period almost nostalgically when faced with the conservative backlash of the Ahmadinejad government.

Where Khatami failed was in dealing with the economy. The economy has remained one of the greatest management failures of the Islamic Republic and the reformists did not pay sufficient attention to this issue.

2. The by now classical works on factionalism in Iran are Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?: The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1999) and Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

3. For more on this, see Paola Rivetti’s chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.

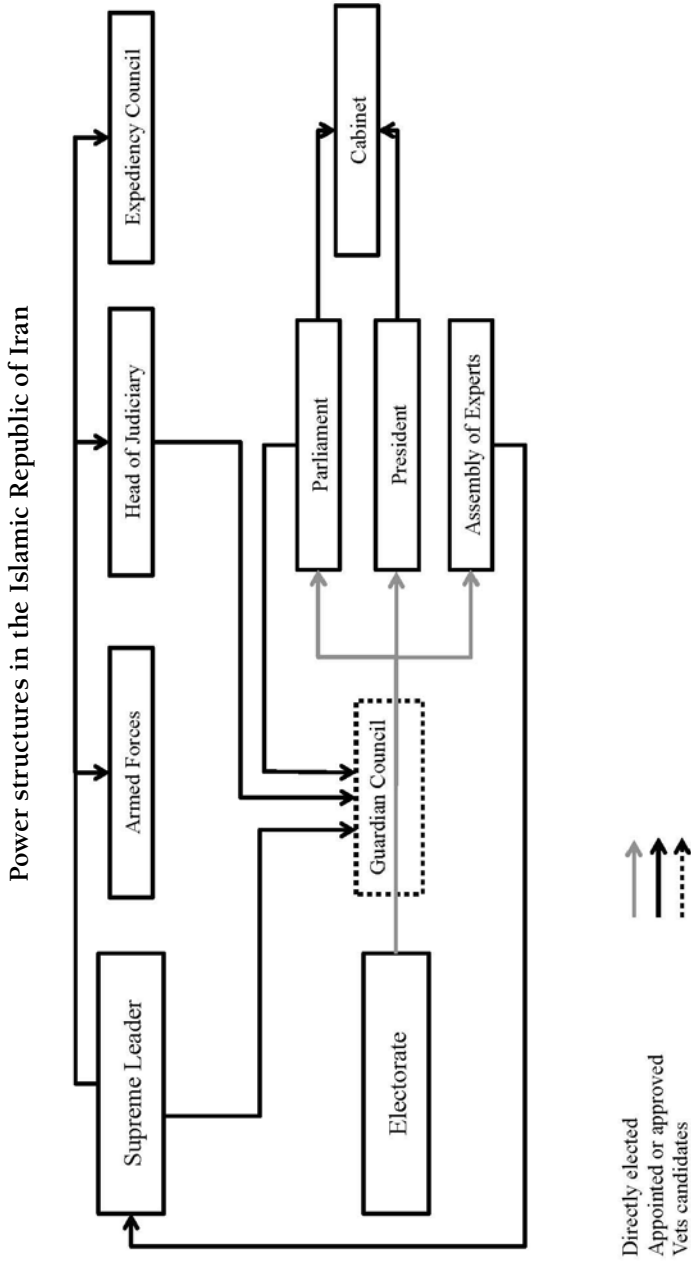
As the conservatives regrouped and rebranded themselves as ‘principlists’ (*osulgarayan*), and step-by-step stymied Khatami’s reform agenda, the economy was quite rightly seen as an area where the reformists could easily be attacked.⁴

The principlists made great gains in the elections and subsequently went about weeding out reformists and pragmatists (whose more prominent position was a legacy from Rafsanjani’s presidency). This was an attempt to revive a very specific idea of what the original revolution was about and ‘re-ideologise’ a society that had in many respects moved on.⁵ The discrepancy between the priorities and mindsets of contenders for power and large swathes of the population became very clear in 2009. Whether for reasons of privilege, ideology or political perspective, in the aftermath of the unrest and protests of 2009-10 the defenders of the system (keeping in mind that when they pledge their allegiance to the *nezam* they are in reality paying obeisance to different specific elements of this complex system for which they feel an elective affinity) will have to deal with the demands of a society that no longer fits the Islamic theocratic model as constructed in 1979, if ever indeed it did. In this sense the *khodi* group (i.e. all factions that were part of the revolutionary core pledging allegiance to Khomeini and his vision) became smaller as the reformists were ousted, for they were evidently willing to compromise more to save something of the system while the principlists believe that this can be achieved by imposing a reideologisation harking back to the early years of the revolution, from above. Thus the Iranian elite has ‘voluntarily’ narrowed its own circle, making the system less responsive to societal demands and needs, and hollowed out its own power base.⁶ It remains to be seen if the old revolutionary narrative that obviously no longer holds sway even among the *khodis* can be replaced with something else, that is more convincing, which will persuade Iran’s youth, who constitute the majority of the population, to stay true to the Islamic Republic. This would require a major reappraisal by the principlists of what constitutes the core of the *nezam* and how, if at all, the theocracy and the republic can co-exist. So far there is little indication that such truly radical self-appraisal and critique is being undertaken in Tehran.

4. For a thorough analysis of the conservatives’ resurgence in 2005, see Ali Gheissari and Kaveh-Cyrus Sanandaji, ‘New conservative politics and electoral behavior in Iran’, in Ali Gheissari (ed.), *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 275-98.

5. On how women have fared in all this but also on how their situation has progressed in Iranian society, see Azadeh Kian’s chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.

6. For a discussion of whether the revolution ended in 2009, see Said Amir Arjomand, ‘Has Iran’s Islamic Revolution Ended?’, *Radical History Review*, no. 105, 2009, pp. 132-138, and Fred Halliday, ‘Iran’s tide of history: counter-revolution and after’, *OpenDemocracy*, 17 July 2009, available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/iran-s-tide-of-history-counter-revolution-and-after>.



Adapted from BBC http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/03/iran_power/html.

Rewriting the revolutionary ethos

While the concept of a revolution suggests a wholesale change in the nature and trappings of state institutions, actual revolutions also tend to develop, in various degrees, the very traits that brought them into being. Thus, in a longer timeframe, they are revolutions in a literal sense, returning to their point of origin (which is not the same thing as continuity between the *ancien régime* and the new order, although that is also a common phenomenon). In the Iranian case this is perhaps best observed in the context of the position of the Leader.

The whole notion of the *vali-e faqi* (guardianship of the jurist) came under criticism from the very inception of the Islamic Republic. The notion of a politically active clergy was a minority view and even among its supporters there was no clear consensus on how far this activism should stretch in political and institutional terms. Thus from the outset a demarcation and silencing of dissension within the clerical ranks was necessary. The Islamists, i.e. proponents of the clergy as rulers of the state, now wielded state power to transform the collegial system where consensus could be forged but never fully imposed and slowly but steadily refashioned this loose 'system' by imposing an institutional frame. The most famous cases in point from the early phase of the republic are the public 'disciplining' of Ayatollah Taleqani in 1979, a fellow revolutionary of Khomeini, and the silencing of Grand Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari in 1982. Shariatmadari was in effect stripped of his status as Grand Ayatollah and placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life, an act without precedent in Shi'a history. In short, the construction of the Islamic Republic with explicit and direct clerical political leadership was never accepted by a majority of clerics to whom the concept was alien.

In institutional terms the Special Courts of the Clergy (*Dadgahe Vizheh-ye Ruhaniyat*), a legacy from the immediate post-revolutionary phase which was later revived, embody the state's need and ability to discipline and control the clergy. Fully institutionalised by Ali Khamenei after he became the Leader, these Courts deal with the prosecution of suspected crimes where a cleric may be involved. The primary purpose is to ensure that clerics do not voice or otherwise communicate 'deviating' interpretations or positions with regard to the founding principle of the Islamic republic (*vali-ye faqi*) or in any other way oppose the system (*nezam*).⁷

The other avenue through which ideological dominance and silence has been achieved is by appointing Friday prayer leaders (*imams*) and the weakening of the historically most important factor in the Shi'a clergy's ability to withstand state power – its economic independence.⁸

7. For a detailed discussion of the Courts see Mirjam Künkler, 'The Special Court of the Clergy (*Dadgahe Vizheh-ye Ruhaniyat*) and the Repression of Dissident Clergy in Iran', 13 May 2009. Available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1505542> or doi:10.2139/ssrn.1505542.

8. Said Amir Arjomand, 'Millennial Beliefs, Hierocratic Authority, and Revolution in Shi'ite Iran' in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), *The Political Dimensions of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp.234-236, and Houchang Chehabi, 'Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic is the Islamic Republic?' *Daedalus*, vol.120, no.3, 1991, pp.82-83.

Khomeini's initial attempt to achieve the kind of theological supremacy that Khomeini enjoyed failed. Instead he had to resort to a new interpretation of the traditional diversity of the *marja'iyat*.⁹ The usual diversity and plurality of the *maraji* and freedom to choose one as each believer saw fit would now be supplemented by a choice based on topic. Thus for a while he portrayed himself as the guide for Shi'ites in Iran on political matters while being the guide on spiritual and political matters for Shi'ites outside Iran, in short conceding that in Iran he was not the *primus inter pares*.¹⁰

Thus the *ulama* (broadly equivalent to the clergy) has gone through three phases since the mid-twentieth century. With the death of Grand Ayatollah S.H. Tabataba'i Borujerdi in 1961 there was a return to a situation where the *maraji* preserved their prestigious status and the collegial system remained intact. There were occasional clashes with the monarchical state, but as long as the *ulama's* independence was not infringed upon, a *modus vivendi* was maintained. With the advent of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini went from being a relatively new senior cleric to becoming the pre-eminent one and father of the revolution. The collegial system of the *ulama* now came under threat from a state that claimed to speak in their name and with their language.

Khomeini's heir apparent Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri fell from grace due to his protestation against the increased repression of political dissent.¹¹ Montazeri's increasingly critical appraisal of Khomeini's implementation of the theory of *velayat-e faqi* was in fact only the tip of the iceberg in terms of criticism levelled by clerics and philosophers from within the system at how this theory deals with the interrelated issues of human sovereignty, legitimacy and authority.¹² Thus when Khomeini died in 1989 there was no potential successor that was both a high-ranking cleric and a *bona fide* revolutionary. Politics again asserted its primacy and a political Leader (*Rahbar*) was chosen, rather than an all-encompassing high-ranking religious jurist (*faqih*). A certain diversity thus returned to the loose system of *marja'iyat*, but Khomeini did his utmost to maintain discipline by building on his religious credentials and enforcing the silence of the grand ayatollahs in Qom by co-optation or by forcing them to channel their tithes through his office. This trend suggests that the Leader, ostensibly the supreme religious guide, in his role as the fountainhead of the political project of 'the Islamic Republic', has undermined the fundamental parameters of the Shi'a *ulama* to which he belongs. Thus the paradox is that the Islamic Republic in its present trajectory poses the greatest challenge to the Shi'a *ulama* in Iran since they were invited by the Safavid kings in the sixteenth century to help convert the population of Iran to Shi'ism.

The way in which a revolutionary movement tends to come full circle expresses itself here both in institutional and rhetorical terms. There is

9. The highest rank in Shi'a learning and theology is the *marja-i taqlid*, a source of emulation for the believer. In the collegial system of Shi'a *ulama* this hierarchy is never absolute and is based on peer recognition.

10. See Chehabi, op. cit. in note 8, p. 85 and Mohsen Milani, 'The Transformation of the *Velayat-e Faqih* Institution: From Khomeini to Khomeini', *The Muslim World*, vol. 82, no. 3-4, 1992, pp. 185-86.

11. Montazeri was placed under house arrest on several occasions (lasting several years) and eventually became the spiritual symbol of the Green Movement. He died in December 2009. See e.g. Geneive Abdo and Ayatollah Hossein, 'Ali Montazeri, "Re-Thinking the Islamic Republic: A Conversation" with Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1, Winter, 2001, pp. 9-24.

12. For an overview of the variety of appraisals and critiques of the theory of *velayat-e faqi* see Hamid Mavani, 'Ayatullah Khomeini's Concept of Governance (*Wilayat al-faqih*) and the Classical Shi'i Doctrine of Imamate', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2011 vol. 47, no. 5, pp. 807-824. For an in-depth study of one important case, see Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran* Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform (London / New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

today a tendency to portray the Leader not only as peerless and beyond criticism but also as invested with divine qualities. In this regard, with the kind of irony that only history can furnish, the Leader's most ardent supporters now refer to him in terms that could easily be attributed to a king ruling by divine right. Ayatollah Khomeini planted the seed for this in his elaboration of the governing principle of the Islamic Republic, *velayat-e faqih*, the rule of the jurisprudent. In 1988 he enunciated what came to be called the *velayat-e motlaq-e faqih*, the *absolute* rule of the jurisprudent, in short giving precedence to *raison d'état* over religious law by allowing the Leader to temporarily suspend any Islamic rule or principle in the name of safeguarding the Islamic Republic.¹³

The importance of this particular reading of the foundations of the Islamic Republic has grown over time, especially after Khatami's election victory in 1997, and even more so after the presidential elections in 2009 when the Leader was called on to adjudicate the election results.¹⁴ This challenge greatly undermined his carefully groomed image of himself as being above the factional fray, especially as he backed Ahmadinejad, even claiming that they were closer in terms of political positions than he was with Rafsanjani. Hence the need to elevate him above the fray and ensure that his judgement and opinion was unquestionable, and here some of his most ardent supporters (or ardent supporters, at any rate, of the position that he holds) have excelled in extolling both his human and transcendent qualities.¹⁵

The election results and the ensuing unrest and repression caused a lot of friction and instability within the system. The designation of who was an insider/outsider was put into question and since then a kind of 'war of positions' has ensued, first between reformists/protestors and principlists and in 2010 and 2011 increasingly between principlists themselves. At first sight this may appear to indicate a stronger grip on power for the ruling regime, the security and military establishment and the Leader himself. The system relies increasingly on the Leader, having evolved from a situation where his position was regarded as strong and the institution central, to one where it has become vital and of paramount significance. Yet this also entails the necessity of his opinion and presence for dealing with all kinds of issues and disputes, involving politicians and factions. Thus, true to form, the systemic problems are actually not being solved through the assertion of power; instead the Office of the Leader is circumventing, second-guessing or micromanaging other institutional mechanisms that were supposed to solve such issues in the first place.¹⁶

Another interesting development within the factional game concerns the populism that any competitive electoral system might engender. Populism is a notoriously difficult concept to define. It entails anti-elitism, an idealisation and exaltation of the 'people' who are often extolled as pious and hardworking, and a simplistic presentation of complex issues,

13. Said Amir Arjomand, 'Constitutional implications of current political debates in Iran', in Ali Gheissari (ed.), *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 247.

14. *Ibid.* p. 249.

15. There are voices within the conservative camp who are resisting this trend within their own ranks, see e.g. MP Ali Motahhari, 'Putting questions to the Leader is every citizen's right', available at: <http://radiozamaneh.com/print/news/iran/2012/01/30/10592>. See also criticism of the suppression of dissent by former IRGC Commander Hossein Ala'i at: <http://www.digarban.com/node/4359>.

16. For more on the relationship between the main factions and the Office of the Leader, see Farideh Farhi's chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.

primarily in the realm of the economy. Historically speaking, the label thus has a very broad range of application: late nineteenth-century regional movements in the United States, Juan Peron and other political leaders in South America, Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* in Italy, and the Tea Party movement in the US.¹⁷

In the early days of the Iranian revolution, the populist style was primarily seen as an expression of leftist concern for the 'poor and downtrodden' – key elements of a discourse often used by Ayatollah Khomeini himself.¹⁸ Today the ability to communicate this discourse is the prerogative of President Ahmadinejad as several of the traits listed above do correspond to his own characteristic *modus operandi*. He likes to portray himself as a simple man of the people, living humbly and talking in a more common everyday form of Persian than most Iranian politicians (the opposite extreme being the Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani).¹⁹ Like many politicians in the US he has the obvious background of a political insider yet assumes the banner of righteousness, railing against the corrupt elite in the capital. His economic policies and explanations are difficult to disentangle and are primarily aimed at signalling support for the 'little guy' while obfuscating in order to evade further probing of his stance on economic issues. But there is more to his 'populism'. Conceptually it is perhaps primarily an extreme form of pragmatism, which considering some of his more fiery rhetoric might sound surprising. Yet the last couple of years have shown that just as he has certain target audiences, the electoral constituencies, he also has a somewhat opaque set of backers, investors of sorts, whose objectives and attachment to Ahmadinejad vary quite a lot – especially if forced to choose sides in a showdown between the President and other power centres.²⁰ Thus while some emphasise cultural conservatism, others seem more interested in the business side of things. Here intriguing differences in interpretations of ideology and religion in the Islamic Republic also surface. Ahmadinejad's penchant for invoking the *Mahdi* and the millenarian tradition in Shi'ism should be read in this light.²¹

The nuclear issue as foreign policy

There is a lot of speculation about the nature and pace of the Iranian nuclear programme. What little evidence exists is interpreted from very different angles and with varying motives. To some degree the highly politicised atmosphere makes analysts and politicians tend to concentrate on the technical aspects of the issue, regarded as 'safer ground'. While this may be understandable, the concentration on the purely technical aspects of the programme is actually a sign of deficiencies in the way that the issue is handled. In short, in the absence of a functioning and stable political process, everyone grasps at the straw of technical issues,

17. For a discussion of these examples and the fluidity of the concept, see Paul A. Taggart, *Populism* (Open University Press, 2000).
18. See the first two chapters in Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).
19. For a thorough description and analysis of Ahmadinejad's rise to power, see Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* (University of California Press, 2008). On his populist economic policies see Evaleila Pesaran's chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.
20. One such example would be the relationship between Ahmadinejad and the arch-conservative Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi. For a background see Naji, op. cit. in note 19, pp. 98–102. Mesbah Yazdi has very harshly condemned the notion of an 'Iranian school of Islam' (*maktab-e Irani*) as propounded by Ahmadinejad's closest confidant Esfandiyar Rahim Mashai. See interview with Mesbah Yazdi by Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), 8 October 2010: 'If someone deviates from Islam we will first give warning and then beat him with a stick. Do not think that just because someone did service for Islam and country for a few days that he is safe'. Available at: <http://isna.ir/Isna/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1590387&Lang=P>. See also the Mardomak news website's report, 'Mesbah Yazdi: Iblis be <jariyan-e enherafi> darad komak mikonad' [The devil is aiding the deviant current], available at: <http://www.mardomak.org/story/62652> on 7/6/2011.
21. On the theological, but more importantly, political and very prosaic reasons for the revival of messianism under the aegis of Ahmadinejad, see Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

hoping that basic arithmetic can escape the vortex of politicisation and mistrust. The Cold War rule of 'trust but verify' comes to mind, but the problem here is that since no trust exists and precious little has been done to create any, all that remains is verification of active centrifuges, weighing of amounts of low-enriched uranium and mathematical projections of how much Iran will have managed to manufacture in x number of months.

From 2003 onwards the EU tried to negotiate with Iran in order to ensure that its nuclear programme was for civilian purposes only. At one point, in the early stages before the nuclear issue had assumed crisis proportions, there was still hope that a Trade and Co-operation Agreement might be signed with Iran. But the nuclear issue increasingly came to overshadow all other issues and thus began a long and tortuous process characterised by conflicting objectives among the Member States, an anxiety not to be too much out of step with the US, and the mistaken belief that Khatami's successor would surely be more willing to compromise. The Iranian side obviously did not make things easier with their internal squabbles and slow decision-making. In addition, at that juncture, they felt that they were losing time with little progress in the talks with the EU, while the Europeans were quite happy as long as the freeze-for-freeze agreement held (no sanctions and no enrichment). The up-and-coming principlists put forward the harshest interpretation of the situation, castigating the Khatami government for what they considered its willingness to compromise without having much to show for it in the end. Subsequently, under the incoming Ahmadinejad administration, the Iranians' tone and style, although not really the substance of their position, changed. The precarious consensus broke down and in 2006 Iran's nuclear dossier was sent to the UN Security Council.²² Since then the dual-track strategy of sanctions and negotiations has been the official mantra in the EU and, since the advent of the Obama administration, in Washington as well.²³ The reality is that the sanctions track is the only one actively pursued and fleshed out as policy. To date it has not yielded any change in the Iranian stance with regard to the nuclear programme.²⁴

One of the basic problems is obviously that there is no diplomatic relationship between Washington and Tehran. In the poisoned atmosphere of this non-relationship, even diplomatic contacts are now cast as rewards to be earned by first making concessions rather than a basic and essential channel of communication. In the EU many Member States are exasperated with the conflicting signals from Tehran and have hence adopted a very firm line on if and how negotiations can be resumed. There are significant differences on how to proceed within the Union but the three major powers (Britain, France and Germany) that came to embody the EU effort in the earlier negotiations with Iran are still at the forefront and keep insisting on a tough and uncompromising line towards Tehran.²⁵

22. For a clear-eyed and critical assessment of the EU's performance see Tom Sauer, 'The impact of the European Union on Iran's nuclear program', in Rouzbeh Parsi, and John Rydqvist (eds.), *Iran and the West: Regional Interests and Global Controversies* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2011).
23. For a detailed account and analysis of the Obama administration's short-lived outreach to Iran, see Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).
24. See Rouzbeh Parsi, 'That Other Track, That Other Partner: The EU and Iran' in Haleh Esfandiari (ed.), *Iran: Turmoil at Home, Assertiveness Abroad?*, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Occasional Papers series, 2011. Available at: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Iran%20Turmoil%20at%20Home%2C%20Assertiveness%20Abroad%20FINAL_0.pdf.
25. For a critical assessment of High Representative Catherine Ashton's letter to Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, see Peter Jenkins, 'The Latest Offer To Iran Of Nuclear Talks: Don't Hold Your Breath', 30 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.lobelog.com/the-latest-offer-to-iran-of-nuclear-talks-dont-hold-your-breath/>

Today this negative spiral is on the verge of getting out of hand. While a lot of the talk of war can be dismissed as sabre-rattling and a ploy to exert even greater pressure on the other party, it is very dangerous and relies far too much on each side's brinksmanship abilities. Just like the nuclear issue itself, the notion of the possible necessity of war rests on a perception of Iranian irrationality. The assumption that Iran's leaders do not act rationally stems from two intertwined lines of thought. First and foremost, the Islamic Republic is viewed as the offshoot of a revolution, rejected outright by some but welcomed by many at the time as heralding the possibility of democracy being built in a central Middle East country. As such the Islamic Republic is an oxymoron, a republic welded, clumsily, to what many think of as a medieval notion of theocracy. In addition, as is prone to happen with revolutionary movements and states, the Islamic Republic of Iran early on promised to spread the new gospel to other oppressed peoples in the Middle East and thus do away with the precarious *status quo* that benefited both local strong men and their international backers, primarily the US. Thus in a profoundly cultural and geostrategic sense the Islamic Republic of Iran quickly developed into an affront to the ideals and sensibilities of the West and many peoples and governments in the region. In short, the idea of an *Islamic Republic* clashed with the very common, but nonetheless shallow and self-referential, conceptualisation of modernity as singular and universal and characterised by (a Western understanding of) rationality and secularism. Now this may be a modernity that ideologically some in the Islamic Republic of Iran in turn may (have) want(ed) to negate, but the notion and its sociological reality cannot be evaded. In fact the highly politicised interpretation of religion crafted and wielded so skilfully by Ayatollah Khomeini is itself quite modern and has no clear precedent in Shi'ism.

The more immediate need for some actors to portray Iran as an irrational actor has to do with its technological advances in the nuclear field and whether the Islamic Republic of Iran can be stopped from developing a capacity for, or actually producing, nuclear weapons (as a number of EU Member States and the US suspect to be its ultimate intention). If the strategy espoused by the EU and US fails to prevent this, can Iran be 'trusted' with having nuclear weapons and can it be deterred from ever using them? Implicit in this question is thus whether the Iranian rulers' worldview incorporates the concern with primacy of survival and cost-benefit calculations that constitute innate elements of Western governments' notion of 'rationality'. In short, would they be so mad as to use the weapon once they have it?²⁶ The less dramatic version of this interpretation of Iran's position is that the weapon constitutes the ultimate guarantee for the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran and thus will make regime change impossible and embolden Iranian foreign policy, with adverse consequences for the stability of the region and the allies of the West.²⁷

26. For a concise repudiation of the argument that the Islamic Republic is suicidal, see Andrew Grotto, 'Is Iran a Martyr State?', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2009.

27. While Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has compared Iran to Nazi Germany (i.e. an existential danger to Israel) his Defence Minister Ehud Barak has several times admitted that this is not the case. See for example: M.J. Rosenberg, 'Iranian nuclear programme not about Israel'. *Al Jazeera*, 20 November 2011.

Yet Iran's foreign policy initiatives, once the fevered phase of revolution had passed, have been rather modest and carefully calibrated. Iran avoids to the greatest extent possible a direct confrontation with the United States and its allies. It knows that it can only lose such a showdown and if it feels the need for action tends to undertake it indirectly and keep it at a relatively low level. The situation in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq reflects a mixture of this, by now, conventional Iranian approach and one that recognises the immense possibilities created by the disastrously botched US post-invasion handling of Iraq. The departure of the US from the region is a longstanding Iranian goal. In this the Islamic Republic of Iran recognises that one of the structural advantages that it enjoys, and which its neighbours acknowledge, is its permanent existence in the region. In short Iran is a neighbour that is not about to disappear anytime soon, while the American presence, like that of every other foreign power previously entangled in the Middle East, will at some point come to an end. Whether Iran has managed to efficiently capitalise on this (there are limits to its ability to do so) is a different matter and here again the cautionary principle is highly relevant; Iran is not as strong or effective a presence in its neighbourhood as is commonly believed or feared.

The way forward? The EU, Iran and the international community at a crossroads

Sanctions have become an end in themselves rather than a tool among a panoply of others designed to solve this issue. The lack of political imagination and of a concerted endeavour to rethink the tactics by first devising a realistic strategy is not only obvious but reveals a very short-sighted approach to the ongoing nuclear crisis. The echo chamber in which policy is now devised and discussed blanks out important strategies and methods which, if applied, would make it possible to at least attempt to break the stalemate. Thus the 'mainstream approach' now consists of a discussion of sanctions rather than war, which, for those who care to remember, is exactly the slippery slope that led to war in Iraq in 2003.²⁸

What is needed in order to avoid the projected end state in sight now is a sustained and patient effort at diplomacy, something that will require setting realistic strategic goals and not letting the vortex of distrust limit the options available.²⁹ As pointed out in a recent RAND report, tellingly entitled 'Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran', what we need is a normalisation of diplomatic relations, which will allow for negotiations on the substance of the issue. And here the Cold War and what was achieved under much more difficult circumstances with an enemy of

28. The drumbeat for war has quickened of late, including arguments for why war is better than containment. See debate at the website of the journal *Foreign Affairs*: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/collections/the-iran-debate-to-strike-or-not-to-strike>.

29. On the difficulties with negotiations and the patience required, see chapter 12 in Trita Parsi, *op. cit.* in note 23.

a totally different magnitude is highly relevant.³⁰ There is a full range of policy options beyond sanctions, and even containment.³¹

At this point there are no reasons for Tehran to participate in negotiations as neither the EU nor the US are offering any real incentives. The whole philosophy of the sanctions regime is to pressure Iran to negotiate and compromise, and in fact what we are now witnessing amounts to an economic war against Iran. Regardless of whether there is a rationale for why this should elicit a positive response from Iran, it has evidently not been the case. Nor is such a response likely to be forthcoming in the foreseeable future because there is no gain envisaged for Iran in this equation, and the Iranians know it. Thus the sanctions track will reach its logical end, which begs the question: what kind of policy are the EU and the United States going to pursue then? In this regard, regardless of the relative weakness of Iran in many respects when compared to the EU and the US, the latter are painting themselves into a corner every time they manage to push Iran into further retrenchment.

Unlike during the freeze-for-freeze deal, today time is on Tehran's side exactly because the nuclear enrichment is now a proven fact and no longer a matter of conjecture. The calculation in Tehran is therefore most probably that they expect to be offered something more substantial before they halt their nuclear programme, let alone give up anything. Furthermore, what the proponents of pressure and threats seem to ignore is that their actions beget exactly what they claim they want to avoid. An encircled Iran is likely to find more reason to go for a nuclear weapon than not – if attacked Iran will immediately go down the road of weaponisation with even greater haste. A look at the map and recent history will also yield the conclusion that, from the Iranian government's point of view, giving up whatever nuclear capability it has will only make it more susceptible to regime change while sticking to its guns (whatever those proverbial guns may be) will ensure its survival – a strategy that, in the eyes of the rulers in Tehran at least, sums up the difference between the fate of Libya and North Korea.³²

A positive contribution by the EU at this stage would be to use the historical experience of its own creation. Just as a positive peace between France and Germany lies at the heart of the European Union, a change of the zero-sum game metrics in the Middle East would be a huge step forward. What the region needs is a common security framework, where no one is excluded and everyone's security needs are taken into consideration. In the end, the best way to stem nuclear proliferation and an arms race is by changing the threat perceptions and diminishing the mistrust that motivates and fuels proliferation. In this endeavour the EU must take the initiative since the US has had very little experience of day-to-day exchanges with Iran over the last 30 years and any given US

30. James Dobbins, Alireza Nader, Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey, 'Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran', RAND Corporation, 2011. Available at: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1154.pdf.

31. Ibid, pp. 93-100. See also the debate in Timo Behr (ed.), *Hard Choices: The EU's Options in a Changing Middle East*, FIIA Report no. 28, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2011: 'What should the EU do? Engage it can't' by Ali Rahigh-Aghsan, and 'Towards a new relationship with Iran' by Rouzbeh Parsi. Available at http://www.fia.fi/en/publication/185/hard_choices.

32. For a concise assessment of the present stalemate, see *Foreign Affairs'* interview with Vali Nasr, 25 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/audio-video/foreign-affairs-focus-on-iran-with-vali-nasr>.

President faces considerable domestic political forces dead set against any kind of *rapprochement* with Iran.

In this Iran is but one, albeit crucial, piece of the puzzle. There are numerous issues, which the EU can discuss with Iran and many of them have been brought up. Some of them point to areas of mutual interest or concern; others are issues of contention or disagreement. What is lacking is an overall framework which gives all these piecemeal initiatives and half-hearted attempts at 'engagement' (e.g. on Afghanistan and Iraq) a sense of purpose and direction. For such endeavours to be successful there must be an internal EU common understanding of, and long-term commitment to, what the end goal is, and that goal cannot be to simply 'solve' the Iran problem and then forget Tehran. Only with a clear-eyed appraisal of the region as it is today, rather than as Western powers feel it ought to be, and an ambition to craft a long-term strategic vision does it become evident that the *status quo ante* of balancing regional powers through rewards and punishments cannot be revived. Nor can the major problems in this region be explained away by accusations of outside interference. In short, as long as Iran is the subject of discussion rather than a participant in the discussions, the Iranians' primary incentive will be to display their prowess by acting as spoilers and kingmakers (as demonstrated in Iraq), thus making it clear that they are an actor in the region that must be reckoned with.

CHAPTER 2

Factional politics and the Islamic State

Farideh Farhi

*'Last year's sedition was the result of the encounter of two different views in the sacred Islamic Republic and the enemy took advantage of this difference.'*¹

Introduction

The contested Iranian presidential election of 2009 culminated in the most serious political challenge to the Islamic Republic since the revolution, with massive street protests followed by a severe government crackdown. This raises important questions regarding the country's future political evolution.

One of the main features of the Islamic Republic has, up to now, been intense factional competition and conflict. The question now is whether the violent repression of the opposition 'Green Movement' and purge of a major segment of the post-revolutionary leadership signifies a fundamental transformation of the Iranian polity. Have the increasing role of the security establishment and augmented status of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, finally led to the monopoly of power by a single bloc or at least an irreversible trend toward a more exclusivist form of governance? And if so, have elections lost their significance as real, even if unfair, arbiters of factional competition?

At this point in time it is difficult to answer these questions as the country's highly contentious politics, albeit within an even more constrained circle, continues to coexist with increasingly restricted opportunities for political activism in society at large. The question of whether the reformist and opposition forces will eventually prevail over the conservative ruling regime is an open one.

What we do know is that an election intended to bring unity in the face of foreign pressures instead became the source of further political polarisation.² Furthermore, the increasingly acrimonious competition within the ruling principlist camp has the country wondering whether the regime plan to continue leading Iran in a hardline and exclusionary

1. Mohommad Ali Jafari, *Mehrnews*, 30 December 2010. Available at: <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1221232>.
2. The intended effect of the elections was explicitly stated by Ayatollah Khamene'i in criticising the 2009 protests. 'The great sin of those involved in the sedition of last year is making the enemy hopeful.' He elaborated: 'This immense popular presence in the election could have made the people of Iran successful in many political arenas, but by engaging in sedition and making the enemy hopeful, the seditionists harmed the Islamic revolution and people of Iran.' *Mehrnews*, 29 December 2010. Available at: <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1220624>.

direction (with or without Ahmadinejad) or if more moderate elements within the principlist camp will be able to steer the country towards a more centrist and inclusive direction. The latter scenario depends of course on such moderate elements doing well in the parliamentary elections.

The upcoming parliamentary elections, to be held in March 2012, are hence closely watched because they are the first to be conducted after the mishandled 2009 presidential election and may be quite instructive about the way elections are going to be managed in the future. But they will also be watched because, in the past, parliamentary elections held right before the president's second term is over have had additional significance in indicating the future direction the country is likely to take under the next president. When the terms of former Presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami were up in 1997 and 2005 respectively, it became clear that parliamentary elections in 1996 and 2004 had accurately foretold the rise of new forces. Today people are wondering whether the upcoming parliamentary election will reveal any clues about the most pressing question in the country: what will come after Ahmadinejad?

In the 1996 elections the sudden rise of a new political party called the Servants of Construction Party (*Hezb-e Kargozaran Sazandegi*), consisting mostly of development-oriented technocrats, reflected the desire for change and reform which led to the election of the reformist Khatami as president in 1997. In contrast, the 2004 parliamentary elections, when prominent reformist candidates were heavily vetted by the Guardian Council, signalled the rise of the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran (*E'telaf-e Abadgaran-e Iran-e Eslami*) in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had played an important organisational role.

Now, as a bruised Islamic Republic and its institutions and factions get ready for yet another round of successive elections, parliamentary elections in 2012 and then presidential and municipal council elections in 2013, the political stakes are high. What is at issue is not only the changing scope and depth of factional conflicts but also whether elections will play a moderating role in managing factional conflicts in Iran or, as happened in the 2009 elections, end up exacerbating them and open the way for further polarisation and redrawing of the political map.

This chapter does not intend to predict the future shape of politics in Iran. It sets out the issues and dilemmas facing various political forces in Iran as they prepare for yet another series of elections, by first drawing attention to the persistence of factional politics regardless of the political dynamics within the factions themselves. It then assesses the impact of the 2009 events on political factions as well as on institutions, raising the question of the Islamic Republic's possible transformation into a less

fractious and more consolidated political system. The last part of the chapter, in contrast, will focus on tendencies and forces that continue to resist the consolidation of power by a single institution or unified political force.

The Islamic Republic's evolving factional politics

Competing factions – or, more accurately, competing coalitions – as well as contending ideas regarding issues, policies, and the political direction of the country have always characterised the Islamic Republic. To be sure, controversies have changed in terms of substance and intensity. In the 1980s, in the words of Mehdi Moslem, the debates between the two dominant factions in the political spectrum – the left and the right – reflected the main difference among Khomeini's pupils who on economic issues were divided along either populist revolutionary or elite-conservative lines.³ At the centre of conflicts were issues related to property rights, the extent of nationalisation, and the degree to which there should be an emphasis on economic justice while the country was in the midst of war. Throughout most of the 1990s, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's more liberal policies, emphasising economic growth and reconstruction as well as a loosening of cultural restrictions, were challenged by both cultural conservatives and justice-oriented leftists and hardliners. But his policies opened the way for the assertiveness of the educated urban middle classes and the political reformism of President Mohammad Khatami. Eventually the reformists (*eslahgarayan*) were challenged by a revamped conservative front, now calling themselves principlists (*usulgarayan*), and presenting themselves as defenders of the principles, values, and revolutionary institutions of the Islamic Republic – at whose core stands the office of the Guide (*velayat-e faqih*) – against those who seek to 'undermine' them.⁴ Today, as the country prepares for the 2012 parliamentary elections, this deep political fracture in the Islamic Republic has remerged, with divisions centring on different approaches to the question of how the Islamic regime can survive in the face of external pressure that is taking its toll domestically.⁵ Should it remain internationally strident and domestically non-conciliatory or move in a more centrist direction, as publicly advocated by two former presidents? As the quotation from IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari featured at the beginning of this chapter suggests, today domestic players are keenly aware of these two conflicting visions regarding the future of Iran.

To be sure, the political system (*nezam*) has been able to quell the post-election *angst* somewhat.⁶ But the divergences within the Iranian political

3. Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 267. See also Evaleila Pesaran's chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.
4. Walter Posch, 'Prospects for Iran's 2009 Presidential Elections', Middle East Institute Policy Brief no. 24, 3 June 2009. See: <http://www.mei.edu/Portals/0/Publications/Posch2.pdf>.
5. The fact that its exact organisational shape is not clear should not be considered an anomaly. Political parties in Iran are often more like elite blocs with limited membership, formed for the purposes of particular elections. Once the election is over most have had a tendency to disappear or become less significant.
6. 'Somewhat' because, despite a heavily securitised environment, the Iranian government is unable to suppress dissent completely. This shows the government's predicament of wanting to highlight the 'seditious' nature of the reformist or opposition challenge in order to continue its political purge, while at the same time insisting that the 'sedition' is over and under control.

system in relation to different visions of the country and methods to be used to suppress political dissent continue to be reproduced both within the system and among the ranks of the principlists whose various wings have been in control of all branches of the government since 2005. This reality is even implicitly acknowledged by Ayatollah Khamene'i who, worried about public perception, has repeatedly called upon bickering conservatives not to conduct their quarrels so publicly so as not to fuel the 'rejoicing of the enemies.'⁷

Repercussions of the 2009 presidential election

Despite the persistence of some old patterns and practices, the 2009 presidential election did have important repercussions for two key aspects of the Iranian polity with significant impact on factional politics: the electoral system and office of the Leader. Both of these were designed to manage or moderate political competition, conflicts and systemic contradictions. But in the events immediately following the June 2009 elections, both failed to perform their tasks and this failure has reshaped the contours of factional politics.

The electoral system and the 2012 parliamentary elections

7. See for instance the speech delivered by Khamene'i in the Fars Province on 22 April 2011: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=12163>.

8. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Friday Sermon, 17 July 2009.

9. Large cities like Tehran generally register low voter turnout (between 30 to 40 percent) in comparison to rural areas and smaller cities. But given their large size they play a critical role in raising voter turnout when candidates with strong popular appeal are allowed to run. For a discussion of the history of parliamentary elections see Farideh Farhi, 'Iran's 2008 *Majlis* Elections: A Game of Elite Competition', *Middle East Brief* no. 29, Brandeis University's Crown Center of Middle East Studies, May 2008. See: <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB29.pdf>.

Irrespective of whether there was fraud or whether this was a matter of mere perception – as reflected in former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's allusion to the 'doubt' surrounding the conduct of the elections⁸ – electoral politics not only failed to temper conflicts, but also resulted in further exacerbating them. It is in this sense that the upcoming 2012 *Majlis* elections have acquired special significance, as a test of whether anything will be done to redress the 2009 electoral disaster. Elections have constituted an important aspect of the Islamic Republic's claim to legitimacy and the question of how to present the next election in ways that trumpet its legitimacy is an important one for those who insisted that no fraud took place in the past election. Bolstering voter participation is one way of doing this.

Voting is not mandatory and the Islamic Republic has never resorted to touting extraordinarily high participation figures to claim legitimacy. Anything above 50 percent is deemed acceptable and the participation rate in eight parliamentary elections held since the Revolution has vacillated between a low of 51 percent in 2004 and a high of 71 percent in 1996, depending on the extent of perceived competition and presence of candidates with strong appeal in the larger cities.⁹ The swings have

been even higher in presidential elections, registering turnouts as low as 51 percent in 1993 and as high as 85 percent in 2009.¹⁰ Given the high turnout in the 2009 election, the authorities may be concerned about what impression will be given if there is a dramatic drop in voter participation this time around. But right now the institutions and individuals involved in overseeing the conduct of the election – namely Ayatollah Khamene'i, the Guardian Council, the Interior Ministry, and the Intelligence Ministry – do not seem sufficiently concerned to even try to give the appearance that the coming election will be truly a competitive one, i.e. representative of at least all the political alternatives that competed in the 2009 elections. Former Presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami have been trying to make the argument that unless political prisoners are released and the political environment is opened up, even if reformist leaders ask the population to participate in the election, they will not.¹¹ They have also tried to use this argument as express concern about intensified external pressures to push for national reconciliation and a different political path for the country but so far their arguments have not prevailed. If anything, as Khatami himself acknowledged in November 2011, decisions are going in a different direction.¹² Political prisoners are treated more harshly. The Interior Ministry has banned the most prominent reformist parties – the Islamic Iran Participation Front (*Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami*) and the Organisation of the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution (*Sazeman-e Mojahedin Enqelab-e Islami*) – from running. The Guardian Council spokesperson has publicly said that anyone who took 'the wrong position' in the post-2009 events will be disqualified, and even though presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi's political party – *Etemad-e Melli* – as well as other nominally reformist parties such as *Mardomsalari* or centrist parties such as the Moderation and Development Party (*Hizb-i Ettedal va Toseh*) have not been banned, the intelligence ministry has prevented them from holding a public meeting to decide on what to do.

Without the official presence of reformists, it is not clear if even a token sense of competitive elections can be generated to attract voter participation in large cities such as Tehran. But it is also not clear whether the current leaders of Iran even care about a mediocre voter turnout. In fact, voter apathy in large cities may be their preferred choice in managing electoral challenges. After all, no competitive political system can manage the high degree of variation in voter turnout that Iran has experienced in the past twenty years without crisis. A degree of predictability and consistency in turnout, ranging from 50 to 60 percent of the electorate, may be the regime's desired outcome for the sake of managing the system even at the cost of losing legitimacy in the large cities. And this can only be achieved by keeping a large part of the urban electorate either disillusioned about the usefulness of their vote – something that has already happened at least partially given the events in 2009 – or uninterested in voting due to extensive vetting or outright banning of

10. Summary data for various elections in Iran are available at the Princeton University's Iran Portal: <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal>.

11. See: <http://www.khatami.ir/fa/news/1048.html>.

12. Ibid.

candidates who appeal to them. If this happens, then an important instrument for challenging the system since the late 1990s will have been turned into a mechanism for maintaining the system. But this is not as easy as it sounds since elections are not merely about legitimacy. So long as there is a degree of competition among candidates, so long as there are factions, there is an incentive for individual candidates or political forces to shift positions in order to attract votes – in the same way, for example, that the leftists of the 1980s did in more recent years in order to attract urban middle class voters. Given the large number of urban middle class voters, and their generally more progressive political views, at least some contenders have an incentive to pander to their preferences and attempt to increase popular participation through promises of moderation, cultural liberalisation or managerial/technocratic competence. The only intervening variable that can alter this scenario is a conscious decision that is somehow communicated to all contenders that from now on the nature of Iranian elections will change. Instead of being restricted but nevertheless contested affairs with an uncertain outcome, they will turn into ‘façade elections’ like those orchestrated in pre-Tahrir Square Egypt, Singapore or Uzbekistan.

Office of the Leader

Meanwhile, the inability of electoral politics to manage and control factional competition has also been significant in the transformation of the office of the Leader in terms of his stature and public behaviour since 2009. Ayatollah Khamene’i’s failure, first to stand above the fray in the electoral dispute and, second, to bring an immediate end to protests despite his warnings of a crackdown, has transformed his office in ways that are paradoxical in many aspects. On the one hand, both the legitimacy and effectiveness of his office as the final arbiter (*fasl ul-khetab*) of political and institutional disputes that are deemed dangerous to the Islamic Republic have been put to the test, weakening the office’s standing. On the other hand, due to the fact that his standing has been damaged in this way, the propensity of his office to intervene in the everyday running of the executive affairs of the state in a rather heavy-handed and public manner has increased. What used to be done subtly or behind-the-scenes and through other institutional intermediaries such as the Expediency Council or Guardian Council now has to be done directly, publicly and more frequently.

In short, in the post-2009 political environment, it has now become abundantly clear that the post-Khomeini attempt to depersonalise the arbitration of disputes by creating institutions and rules without constant referral to an individual final arbiter has been a failure. What was considered to be a reluctant and extra-constitutional intervention for the sake of the system’s interest (*maslehat*), practised by the founder of the revolution and made acceptable only because he was the father of

the revolution, is now accepted as not only constitutional and religiously licit but also something that must be routinely practised in the form of what is called a 'state edict' (*hokm-e hokumati*) in order for the Islamic Republic to survive.¹³

These intrusive public interventions in executive and parliamentary affairs, which now include the unprecedented intervention in the budget process,¹⁴ have highlighted and finally brought into full view the most problematic aspect of the 1989 constitutional revision: the combined strengthening of the offices of both the Leader and President at the expense of a weakened parliament. It should be noted that arguments advocating the 'absolute guidance' (*velayat-e motlaqeh*) of the Leader were also aired by conservative supporters of an all-powerful guide when the constitution was being revised. But Khamene'i's weak personal standing, the prominence of a powerful president and his chairmanship of the Expediency Council – a council designed to supersede institutional conflicts and counsel the Leader – concealed and for a while deferred the awesome powers the new amended constitution gave to the Leader. However the post-election events have finally brought the implications of the 1989 constitutional revisions into sharp relief despite the recent challenge posed to Khamene'i by Ahmadinejad over the control of the Intelligence Ministry.

In fact, Ahmadinejad's insistence on invoking executive privilege to exercise control not only over the daily affairs of the state and appointment of ministers but also over parliament has had the effect of further reinforcing Khamene'i. The repeated conflicts between the two branches and calls for Khamene'i to intervene have clearly enhanced his personal powers. He, in turn, instead of resolving the conflicts in a decisive fashion, giving power to one of the institutions, has intervened only on a case-by-case basis. His refusal to establish clear precedents has weakened the parliament by forcing it to make repeated appeals to him to rein in the presidency. It has also assured the continuation of factional competition and conflicts.

Reshaping of the factional politics of the Islamic Republic?

With the increased reliance on the Leader's 'final judgment,' the question that needs to be posed is whether factional politics still retains its central role in Iranian politics or if, with the narrowing of the field of electoral candidates, it will lose its significance at least in terms of electoral politics. This is a question that remains to be answered in the upcoming *Majlis* elections in 2012 and subsequent presidential elections in 2013.

13. In the words of Iran's Chief of Judiciary, Sadeq Amoli Larijani, 'Rebellion against the Jurisprudent is against both the Constitution and Shari'a', ISNA, 4 May 2011. In reaction to Khamene'i's intervention to prevent the dismissal of the Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi by President Ahmadinejad, Seyed Mahmoud Alavi, a member of the Assembly of Experts from Tehran, said 'the Jurisprudent's decision is not interference in the affairs of others but use of his own prerogatives'. *Farsnews*, 4 May 2011.

14. In its consideration of the budget for the 2011-12 fiscal year, Ayatollah Khamenei directly instructed the *Majlis* to increase the allocations for the judiciary and military, thus superseding both the president and *Majlis*.

History, however, indicates that the outcome will probably amount to yet another redrawing of factional faultlines rather than a decisive change of this fundamental feature of the system.

One branch of the principlist movement, which takes quite a hardline stance on both domestic and foreign policy matters, is characterised by defensiveness in the form of highly dogmatic, authoritarian and polemical views. Another principlist wing, consisting of more traditional conservatives close to business interests and a significant sector of the clerical community in Qom, is its weaker partner for opportunistic reasons, while the so-called pragmatic conservatives are currently marginalised, although not yet purged or stripped of influence. There is some evidence that the latter two wings of the principlist camp, worried about the direction in which the country is being taken as well as the danger that they themselves might be subjected to a purge, are trying to reconnect, regroup, and engage in a pushback against the hardliners' attempt to gain a monopoly of power. However, it is not yet clear whether their efforts will be successful. Meanwhile, the anxious reformists, and the opposition Green Movement they have spawned, awkwardly try to straddle between short-term tactics aimed at forestalling their complete political elimination and longer-term strategies that will allow them once more to have a say in the future governance of the country. Some elements within their ranks are also considering forging alliances with the pragmatic conservatives and even some members of the traditional conservative camp as a means to bring the country back to the centre.

The principlists

The principlist camp has always contained an assortment of people and organisations with very different points of view, particularly on economic and cultural matters. As a camp, the only point of consensus among its members – at least in public – is a defensive position manifested in the repeatedly declared and uniquely principlist commitment to the sustenance of the Islamic Republic in its current form and loyalty to its core: the office of the Supreme Leader Khamene'i. In the words of Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, the former head of the Judiciary and current leader of the Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom, 'a principlist is one who is loyal to Islam, the revolution, leadership, the law and the ruling order and who considers *velayat* the central tenet and final word and prefers the view of the Leadership to his own.'¹⁵ The principlists argue that, given the current external pressures in the form of economic sanctions, military threats and even sabotage, the survival of everyone connected to the Islamic Republic is dependent on standing firm and being ever vigilant against both internal and external enemies intent on undermining the Islamic Republic's revolutionary institutions by whatever means.

15. The 'Charter of Principlism,' which was announced in December 2010 as the joint work of two leading conservative organisations, the Society of Combatant Clergy and Society of Qom Teachers, identifies 12 criteria for principlism, including allegiance to the founding principles of the Islamic Revolution, active allegiance to the Leader and acceptance of his guidance as *the last word*. See Fars News Agency, 26 January 2011, at: <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8910261036>.

Differences abound among the principlists, however, regarding the distribution of political power, economic management and the cultural direction of the country, increased securitisation and even the treatment of the opposition and activists. Disagreements are further accentuated by personal rivalries and animosities as well as by the shifting power positions of the country's two most important status groups – the clergy and the military (or more specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – IRGC). The fortunes of both these latter groups have also become intricately intertwined with the survival of the Islamic Republic and revolutionary values.

It is difficult to categorise these disagreements in terms of the distinct ideological positions of various groups because opaque relationships and patronage networks based on shared local identity, education and military experience, personal rivalries, and the lack of a developed political party system make it virtually impossible to clearly delineate political forces in terms of ideas. For instance, in the past year, some of the most trenchant criticism of the increased securitisation of the country and brutal treatment of the opposition has come from a self-identified principlist, Ali Mottahari, who can also be considered an extremist on cultural issues. It is also problematic to align principlist factions with the rising or falling fortunes of the clergy or IRGC. It is true that with increased domestic challenges and external pressures and threats, the Iranian state has become more securitised and in the process security-oriented institutions and security-obsessed elements, for instance, within the Intelligence Ministry, IRGC, Judiciary, and Office of the Leader, have been strengthened. It is also true that the clergy as an institution increasingly dependent on state *largesse* has lost quite a bit of its independent power in influencing the state and has hence been weakened as an institution that dispenses moral and cultural guidance. But these broader trends do not mean that it is yet possible to extrapolate political or ideological allegiances from the status of any these groups. The reality is that most of the divisions that exist in the political arena are also more or less replicated among these status groups and the institutions to which they belong.

Despite these complexities, Iranian political discourse offers some clues as to divisions within the principlist camp. There are regular references to the existence of at least three groups identified respectively as extreme/hardline, traditional conservative and pragmatic, with the Leader negotiating among the three in ways that allow the continuing prominence of his office. But these divisions are complicated by another factor that is both purely political and personal, revolving around the controversial policies and appointments of President Ahmadinejad. His provocative and challenging posture towards all the institutions of the Islamic Republic – including non-elective institutions such as the office of the Leader and the Judiciary – has led to speculation regarding his

16. This rather cynical belief about Ahmadinejad's allies in general and his chief of staff Mashaei was best encapsulated by a hardline cleric and MP, Hamid Rasai. In his words, 'Mashaei believes that most people are impoverished but does not see their poverty as merely financial. He believes that the majority of people do not have a serious belief in religion, lean towards the West, are against the clergy, are badly-off and expect government help, and cannot make distinctions among political factions.' *Farsnews*, 20 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9002300004>.

17. Parliamentary elections have been less troublesome than presidential ones for the Islamic Republic as the campaigns are mostly local in terms of issues and resources. By retaining parliamentary elections only, the Islamic Republic can still proclaim its commitment to the idea of holding competitive elections.

18. Ayatollah Khamene'i has explained his support for the government of President Ahmadinejad on both ideological and political grounds. On ideological grounds, in his Friday Prayer speech immediately after the 2009 election, he conceded that his views are closer to Ahmadinejad's than to those of Hashemi Rafsanjani. But in one of his trips to Qom in 2010, he also conceded that his support for Ahmadinejad is based on the fact that he does not challenge the supremacy of the office of the Leader and does not want to create a 'rival' to it by promoting 'dual government' the way previous administrations did. See: <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/article/-e266a6390f.html>. This latter position was of course later challenged by Ahmadinejad who refused to go to work for 11 days after Khamene'i prevented him from replacing the Intelligence Minister in May 2011.

plans for maintaining power after his two terms in office have ended. While the confrontation with Khamene'i over the Intelligence Ministry has weakened him, there is nevertheless a widespread belief among the principlists in Iran that Ahmadinejad, along with a close-knit group of individuals surrounding him, has begun using the resources of the state along with both populist anti-clerical Islamic Millenarianism and Iranian nationalism to attract the support of the working and lower middle classes in order to assure their own continued control of the executive branch after the 2013 election.¹⁶ In turn, the idea mooted by the Supreme Leader of abolishing the office of the President and replacing it with an indirectly-elected Prime Minister is seen by many as an attempt by Khamene'i to curtail such future presidential challenges and further consolidate power.¹⁷ But this is a purely political feud over the control of offices and resources and does not obviate the differing points of view on matters of substance that exist among the principlists.

The first group, which is hardline both in terms of not ceding an inch to opponents as well as in promoting an aggressive foreign policy, is identified by some even inside Iran as 'extremist right' (*rast-e efrati*). Given its control of the presidency and the fact it enjoys the support of Ayatollah Khamene'i for both ideological and political reasons,¹⁸ it is currently the dominant player in the country. As a group, it propagates strident Islamism both domestically and internationally, either for political purposes or due to its beliefs and convictions, and this prevents it from acknowledging, let alone making any compromises with, the political reality of a culturally and socially diversified Iran. This attitude can be attributed to two distinct perceptions: (i) Iran needs to be radically reshaped in keeping with designated Islamic values; (ii) any loosening of the regime's grip on political power will be the first step on a slippery slope that will eventually lead to the demise of the Islamic Republic.

Its goal is the containment if not the total elimination of all political and socio-cultural 'opponents' either through an opportunistic use of value politics or because it genuinely believes that in order for Iran to be free of 'sin', political opponents need to be neutralised and power monopolised. This extremist stance is also based on a narrative of the immediate post-revolutionary war period that emphasises purity, sacrifice, austerity and moral piety. It embodies a paranoid style of politics in so far as it does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and rejects any form of compromise. This determination to defend the Islamic Republic in its present form is also sustained by the conviction that any accommodation of the demands for reform at this point will open the floodgates to further demands that will eventually overwhelm the Islamic Republic.

Against this background, and in relation to events that took place in the aftermath of the June 2009 elections, the question posed is not only what

to do with the individuals clearly identified with the Green Movement but also those principlists whose allegiance has been cast in doubt. These range from those who sided with the 'sedition current', through those who remained silent, to those 'who created doubt and questions' or those Khamene'i has repeatedly described as 'elites without vision' (*khavas-e bi basirat*).¹⁹ Clearly there will not be an all-out purge and at one level this is a question of who is a 'true believer' in the leadership of Ayatollah Khamene'i. In this regard, showing support to his reaction to the 'sedition' that took place in the aftermath of the presidential elections in 2009 constitutes a litmus test of sorts.

Yet on a deeper level this begs the question of what were the root causes of the process that culminated in the protests following the 2009 election – i.e. when did the so-called deviation from the ideals of the Islamic Republic begin? Once the answer seemed quite straightforward: 'the rot set in' during the reform period. But now key officials such as Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi as well as Ayatollah Khamene'i himself have stated clearly that the deviation began with the 'Era of Reconstruction', i.e. the onset of Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, and then further deepened during the so-called 'Era of Reform.'

The second principlist wing – the conservative right or traditional conservatives – is, however, ambivalent towards this project of rooting out all reformists. This wing is a weak partner in the ruling bloc, exerting most of its influence through the parliament, but it also aspires to political power. It includes long-standing lay organisations such as the Islamic Coalition Party as well as the clerical Society of Combatant Clergy and Society of Qom Seminary Teachers. It is ambivalent about a complete reformist purge as well as the sidelining of pragmatic conservatives in the Hashemi Rafsanjani mould for two reasons. First and foremost because it knows that without some sort of partnership with the pragmatic camp it cannot compete with the hardline camp which has shown itself to be more aggressive in its tactics as well as more endowed with economic resources due to its control of the vast apparatus of the executive branch. Secondly, even if it does not dare challenge the dominance of the hardline right and remains a weaker partner, it still worries that an extensive reformist purge and further marginalisation of the pragmatic conservatives may only be the first step in a process that would lead to its own expulsion from the ruling bloc. The traditional conservatives reckon that the creation of a unified and uncontested ruling bloc will ultimately entail either their complete subservience or political irrelevance.

Meanwhile political irrelevance is something pragmatic conservatives in general and Hashemi Rafsanjani in particular are trying to avoid. Clearly Hashemi Rafsanjani's insistence on maintaining his post-election commitment towards a more open and competitive political system, and

19. Khamene'i himself is not necessarily an extremist in his views. His position as the Leader also necessitates mediation among various principlist factions. However, he has been supportive of the description of the 2009 protests as sedition and equates support for himself with fealty towards the Islamic Republic.

a less bombastic and 'better managed' foreign policy,²⁰ challenges the dominant security-oriented outlook in the principlist camp. His refusal to characterise the protestors and reformist leaders as 'seditionists' has effectively shielded a whole array of former officials and technocrats who continue to be employed by the state or its affiliated institutions while their views are under assault for deviating from the values of the Islamic Republic. The reality is that the crystallisation of the current intra-systemic choice between radicalism and moderation, or polarisation and conciliation, puts him in the vanguard of opposition to the policy direction the country has taken under Khamene'i's leadership since 2009.

The reformists

The Islamic Republic has always had both political contenders and systemic challengers. The significance of the 2009 presidential election lies in the transformation of a segment of intra-systemic political contenders into extra-systemic challengers. The last time this happened was in the early years of the revolution with the majority of purged contenders ending up as an ineffective and bickering opposition in exile committed to regime change in Tehran. The contemporary reformists distinguish themselves by mostly remaining inside the country and by their lack of a stated desire to overthrow the Islamic Republic or push for revolution.²¹ Nonetheless some of them stand accused of 'sedition' against the Islamic Republic and some have chosen or been forced to adopt a position of outright opposition, i.e. they have become systemic challengers. Some have also left the country but they maintain their ties to reformist leaders inside the country and, despite serious limitations imposed on the latter, try to coordinate their statements and actions with them.²² Relying on the ideals of the anti-authoritarian revolution of 1979, they have turned their attention to the most egregious violations of one of the central tenets of the Islamic constitution: respect for human rights and rule of law.

Other reformists are considering their role in the narrower political arena and are trying to see if circumstances allow them to, once again, take part in institutional politics or if they will have to limit themselves to severely curtailed political activism. Former president Mohammad Khatami, in a meeting with the reformist members of the parliament, identified 'the release of all political prisoners, establishment of a free environment for the operation of all parties and groups, commitment to the constitution and its implementation, and providing the mechanisms for free and healthy elections' as the reformists' 'minimal' demands. But he also predicted that given 'the dominant trend' in the country future conditions in Iran will be 'harder, paths more closed, and restrictions more extensive.'²³ Whether the reformists can pass the Guardian Council vetting process is a different issue and at this point even the Guardian

20. Hashemi Rafsanjani has been hesitant to criticise Iran's foreign policy posture and expose himself to the charge of giving the impression of a country divided in the face of external pressures. On occasions, however, he has stated his concern that a weakly-managed foreign policy has not allowed Iran to capitalise on important events in the region. According to him, 'the Islamic Republic has great potential but is in need of strong and up-to-date management.' Interview with *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 10 February 2011.

21. As an example of this continued commitment to reform, reference can be made to the statement of the Islamic Iran Participation Front in support of the people's revolt in Egypt. Arguing that the military and security apparatus' political meddling in Iran, in contrast to Egypt, is at its 'onset', the statement unambiguously says: 'The will of our people in accepting elections and rejecting the interference of the security establishment displays a reform-minded intention towards safeguarding the system (*nezam*) against decline and collapse, and we must remain hopeful that this message has been heard by the powers that be'. See: <http://www.kaleme.com/1389/11/23/klm-47243>.

22. The Coordinating Council of the Green Path of Hope is a committee consisting of advisors to opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi which is based outside of Iran and has been coordinating protests inside the country.

23. See: <http://www.parlemannews.ir/?n=13939>.

Council does not seem to know. Its Secretary, Ahmad Jannati, has ruled this out categorically but its spokesperson, Abbasali Kadkhodai, said that Jannati's remarks on this subject consisted merely of 'ethical advice'.²⁴ It is important to note that despite the arrest of a large number of their organisers and political thinkers, the reformists have neither been fully purged from the Iranian political system nor have they remained silent. For instance, there are still approximately 30 deputies who are organised in a 'minority caucus' (*fraksion -e aqaliat*) in the 290-member parliament. Another 30 deputies who ran as Independents in the 2008 parliamentary elections have often sided with the reformists.

Thus, together, through *ad hoc* alliances with the more traditionalist and pragmatic conservatives in parliament, they have managed to counter the Ahmadinejad support bloc on some key issues.²⁵ In the 2012 *Majlis* elections, the issue for them is whether to put extra effort into maintaining their minority status in parliament despite efforts by the Guardian Council to disqualify as many reformist candidates as possible. The alternative is to attempt to delegitimise the elections by not running, without having the certainty that this will result in a lower voter turnout throughout the country. There will be some centrist reformist parties such as *Mardomsalari* who will run candidates in as many districts as possible and will not support any form of a boycott. But such a dilemma will mostly be faced by candidates running in large cities in which, due to multiple seats, lists are presented under the banner of various political orientations or organisations. In smaller cities and rural areas, where the majority of parliamentary and municipal council seats are located, many reformist or independent candidates will probably run without overt identification with any political party or tendency and then make decisions about how to caucus after their election. Given these circumstances, most reformists will be approaching the elections tactically. They will probably not run candidates in large cities where they know they will be vetted and even if not vetted may not win because of a low participation rate. By doing this they will continue to have some representation in parliament while using the potentially low participation rates in large cities as leverage in the 2013 presidential election. In the absence of appealing candidates, they will argue, urban voters will stay home and thereby reveal the lack of support for the Islamic Republic among important sectors of the society.

But this tactical calculation, even if it is successful, may not address the deeper concern shared by reformists of all colours. Despite their various differences, what all reformists articulate is their dissatisfaction with the exclusionary way political power is exercised and the overall direction of the country, currently highlighted by the heavy-handed stifling of domestic dissent and promotion of an aggressive foreign policy advocated by the principlist hardliners. While contending that the social base of the Islamic system they helped to erect has become

24. See: <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-125342.aspx>.

25. Unlike the majority caucus which identifies itself as a principlist caucus on the parliament's website, the reformists in the parliament use the term 'minority' to describe themselves. On its own website, www.parlemannews.ir which is filtered inside Iran, the caucus also uses the title of *khat-e Imam* (Line of the Imam, i.e. Ayatollah Khomeini). This caucus is nevertheless organised, and like its principlist counterpart, relies on an election process for the selection of its leader, the head of its central committee, its spokesperson and the 10 members of its central committee.

fragile and that its stability is threatened, the reformists worry about the 'extreme right's' determination to crush all dissent and turn Iran's contested political sphere into a tightly-controlled monolithic system. In short, they worry about an increasingly securitised or even potentially militarised state, intentionally narrowing its base of support in favour of internal coherence. The 2009 election itself, which some reformists go so far as to describe as a *coup*, confirmed to them the pitfalls of the Islamic Republic's power structure with Office of the Leader Khamenei at its apex. Hence, their call for what can be considered structural reform regarding the way future elections are run, the way political opponents are treated and their demand for freedom of speech and of the press.²⁶

Politics of factional convergence

In making calls for structural reform, the reformists find that they have at least one key figure still inside the state apparatus on their side – Hashemi Rafsanjani. As explained above, Rafsanjani is an important, even if currently sidelined, figure and commands support not only in the principlist camp but also within the government bureaucracy. During the immediate post-election protests, he stressed the need for political grievances to be addressed and has since refused to back down from this stance, despite repeated demands on him by various conservative forces to 'clarify' his position and distance himself as clearly as possible from the 'sedition current'.²⁷ Hashemi Rafsanjani has traditionally been identified as a pragmatic conservative or a 'moderate' figure, pilloried by both the left and the right, whose preoccupation with the economic development of the country has led him to neglect both economic justice and civil liberties. The reformists have had their quarrels with him in the past but currently perceive him as at least a tactical ally. This assessment is made in the light of accusations by some hardliners that Hashemi Rafsanjani is the mastermind behind the 'sedition'. The reformists believe that by eliminating him, and the technocratic cadres built up during his presidency, the hardliners' aim to impose consistency and uniformity within the ruling bloc. Meanwhile, Hashemi Rafsanjani has supported the idea of reform rather than regime change in no uncertain terms. Speaking on the occasion of the 32nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, he said: 'My advice to the dissident *strata* is to enter the arena. The revolution is theirs too. All should participate, even those who were not part of the revolution and did not have a share in it. We want all to participate. We have no alternative to the current situation now. We need to safeguard what we have with reforms that we must undertake.' (Interview with *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 10 February 2011).

So a convergence of interests has occurred. To be sure, the principlist coalition that has been in charge of running the country since the 2005 presidential election has not been willing or able to show any flexibility

26. For the reformists' conditions for participating in elections, see former president Khatami's 'minimal' demands previously alluded to. See link to news website at footnote 24.

27. Some diehard Ahmadinejad supporters have gone so far as to argue that Hashemi Rafsanjani is the behind-the-scenes mastermind of the 'sedition current' as well as the leader of the anti-government current.²⁷ Noteworthy for taking this position publicly is Ahmadinejad's former minister of justice and Ahmadinejad's current legal advisor Gholamhossein Elham. See ISNA, 27 January 2011 at: <http://www.isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1703662&Lang=P>.

regarding demands articulated by both Hashemi Rafsanjani and the reformists. Instead it has aligned itself with the view of the most hardline elements of the coalition that the political critics who have now turned into systemic challengers can be neutralised in the same way that the challenges of the early years of the revolution were dealt with – through the imprisonment of key operational leaders and the placing under house arrest of key political leaders. Beyond their preparations for the upcoming elections, the main task that the reformist and pragmatic conservative opposition have set for themselves is to prevent such neutralisation by maintaining some sort of organisational structure within the context of existing reformist parties such as the Islamic Iran Participation Front, the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, and National Trust Party as well as their sister clerical organisations such as the Association of Combatant Clerics and Qom-based Society of Qom Teachers and Researchers.²⁸ These parties and organisations have all been subjected to tremendous pressure: some have even been banned, their operational leaders arrested, political and religious leaders placed under effective house arrest, their newspapers closed and websites filtered inside Iran.²⁹ Yet they have so far refused to disappear despite their loss of contact with the two key leaders of the broader social movement for change, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, due to their house arrest and isolation. Some of their key demands regarding the need for a free press, the release of political prisoners, and assurances of fairness in the upcoming elections continue to be articulated by former president Mohammad Khatami who, despite his reputation for caution, has refused to denounce the other two leaders of the protest movement.³⁰

Still, as political leaders of both reform *and* opposition currents, these three leaders – particularly Khatami – are in a delicate situation since they have to make tactical compromises while not losing sight of their strategic objective of structural reform. Tactically, the possibility of complete elimination at the hands of the extreme right may require some reformists to take positions on the side of the more moderate principlist factions as a means of preventing complete consolidation of power by the extreme right.³¹ At the same time, their strategic objective requires stances that maintain their role as part of the opposition Green Movement so that they can emerge as leaders if cracks within the ruling bloc allow for yet another round of popular mobilisation such as that which occurred after the June 2009 election. In these circumstances, they see their most important tasks, in the current repressive climate, as continuing their defiant stance, using the usually more lively electoral campaign atmosphere to push their case for openness and the release of political prisoners. In this way they underline the fact that the government is still afraid of them (otherwise it would allow them to stage big demonstrations similar to the ones held immediately after the June 2009 election). They focus on maintaining some sort of political network and organisation alive, as well as a sense of hope among supporters.

28. Alireza Alavi-tabar, 'Falsafeye sabz, falsafeye omid' ['The Green Philosophy, Philosophy of Hope'], *Kaleme*, 8 August 2011.

29. The government has not yet banned Mehdi Karroubi's National Trust Party, which is allowed to continue to exist provided Karroubi resigns as its general secretary. The party has also not been allowed to meet.

30. Khatami maintains: 'If from the beginning an impartial delegation had taken responsibility to address the protests and concerns of an important sector of society the problem would have undoubtedly been solved and we would have not witnessed a crisis. But there have been and continue to be extremists who only think of monopolising power and consider not only reformists but even principlists as being outside the circle'. See: <http://www.parlemannews.ir/?n=14598>.

31. This is what the minority caucus has done in the Iranian Parliament and in the process has assured the speakership of Ali Larijani, in spite of opposition by hardline MPs supportive of President Ahmadinejad.

They must therefore carefully stake out their position before another opportunity arises for overt political manoeuvring.

Conclusion

The above discussion of current political dynamics in Iran suggests that it is too soon to offer definite answers to the questions posed at the outset of this chapter regarding the future course of factional politics in Iran. Iranian politics remain too fluid and volatile for it to be possible to predict a fundamental transformation of the Iranian regime away from factional competition and towards consolidated rule either by the office of the Leader or a single bloc.

At the same time, it may be argued that, in retrospect, the highly conflicted direction that Iran's competitive authoritarianism has taken, in a climate beset by factional politics, was inevitable. A system reliant on electoral competition to choose leaders, even among a limited range of contenders, either has to develop rules that are acceptable to all contestants or risk the possibility that some contestants, faced with unfair electoral conditions, will seek to counteract the structural bias against them. This is exactly what the reformists did in the 1997 presidential and 2000 parliamentary elections, in response to the inbuilt structural bias in the system as reflected in the vetting of candidates and a certain amount of electoral rigging. Their appeal to disaffected voters worked precisely because it was based on the promise of significant change in the direction of the Islamic Republic. The principlists' carefully orchestrated rise, in turn, was premised precisely on the failure of the attempt to introduce change. In three successive elections (two parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2008 and one presidential election in 2005), the regime managed to achieve its desired outcome through a combination of low voter turnout and polling manipulation on election day. The hope in 2009 was that an election with a 50 to 60 percent turnout could again be managed. The reformists participated in the electoral process despite the fact that they were not at all confident of their ability to increase turnout, but managed to do so by virtue of awareness among the public of the need for reform. This awareness is intense, while not necessarily widespread in all sectors of society.

The post-June 2009 political situation poses new challenges to all factions in Iran as they try to adjust to an environment in which intra-systemic political competition and extra-systemic political changes cohabitate the political space. Only future developments will tell how various factions will adjust to these unprecedented circumstances and challenges. For the structural reformers, the challenge is how to manage the gap between angry supporters who are increasingly

coalescing around the call for the downfall of the Islamic regime and those who still hope and want the reform of the existing system as they are worried about the consequences of the complete overthrow of the system. For the latter, 'pressure from below and negotiation at the top' still constitute the only viable option in spite of the fact that some of the Green Movement supporters, particularly outside of Iran, have moved beyond that scenario.

Lack of consensus on the objectives of protest will undoubtedly weaken the reformist factions in the short term. But, despite their advantages, the conservative factions cannot afford to be complacent. Moreover, the strength of the conservative coalition will be tested in the face of systemic challenges and the reality that with the persistence of competition, even if this is limited in scope, the spectre of electoral manipulation will remain a contentious issue between various factions, even at times within their own ranks.

Caught in the middle of all this is Leader Ali Khamene'i, who is increasingly faced with demands by the extremist right to destroy not only the dissenting Greens, including their leaders, but also to purge centrist or pragmatic conservative leaders like Hashemi Rafsanjani and anyone else who might challenge the authority of his office. Unless he can find a way to placate the extremists and redirect the country towards less polarisation and more reconciliation among contending factions, he can fully expect to continue to preside over a highly dysfunctional and inefficient political system.

In this scenario, this system would be plagued by intensified bickering among a smaller number of political players. In such circumstances the government would be forced to redirect resources away from economic development and towards sustaining a highly securitised state unable to come to terms with the multiplicity of demands it faces. It is a reality of Iran that a sizeable and economically significant section of the country's urban population will continue to seek representation for their aims and aspirations, whether these be economic development, political reform, better relations with the outside world, respect for cultural diversity or social justice. Unless the Islamic Republic finds a way to accommodate this demand for representation and participation in the country's future political development, it will have no choice but to become much more heavy-handed in its approach to the population and even intolerant of the factional politics which constantly highlight this lack of representation.

CHAPTER 3

Challenges facing the Iranian economy

Evaleila Pesaran

Introduction

Iran's major economic challenge remains its reliance on an oil-dependent economy vulnerable to the inherent volatilities of the global oil market. This systemic problem and its attendant symptoms are currently – but temporarily – cushioned by high oil prices. Nevertheless, the country's dependence on an uncertain source of revenue means that future economic growth is far from guaranteed, and it was with this consideration in mind that a subsidy elimination plan was introduced at the end of last year, aiming to cut government spending significantly. Public unrest in direct response to this plan has thus far been minimal, but given that many of the government's more populist economic policies risk fuelling further inflation, the potential for future economically-motivated opposition remains.

The wave of protests and uprisings that has swept the Middle East in the last twelve months has highlighted the important role that economic factors can play in the survival (or otherwise) of the region's authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. With the ranks of the youth growing alongside high levels of both unemployment and inflation, economic frustrations have combined with the desire for greater political representation in an often explosive manner, as witnessed in Yemen and Bahrain as well as in Tunisia and Egypt. In Iran, many economic concerns similar to those experienced elsewhere in the region have been brought into sharper focus by the imposition of international sanctions on the Iranian economy as well as by the government's own plan to eliminate state subsidies on many consumer goods by 2015.

The aim of this chapter is to assess the present state of the economy and map out the interplay between politics and economics in Iran, including the factional power games that are such a prominent feature of the Islamic Republic. This in turn will offer clues to what the potential for reform might be in the immediate future.

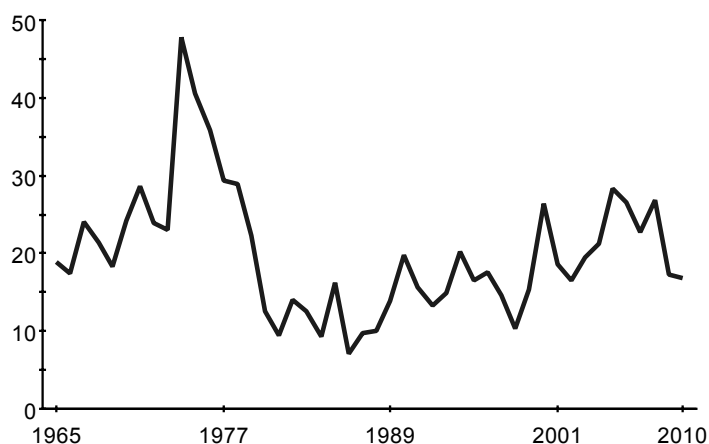
3 Challenges facing the Iranian economy

In the first section of this chapter, attention will be drawn to the tensions and ambiguities inherent to the Islamic Republic's economic system in order to highlight how economic factionalism emerged over the course of the post-revolutionary period, with rival political groups favouring a range of competing economic programmes. The broad programmes promoted by these different factions across the post-war era will then be reviewed briefly, providing some background to the situation in which Ahmadinejad's populist economic programme was introduced after 2005. The last section of the chapter will be dedicated to a close examination of the key economic policies that have been adopted during Ahmadinejad's presidency thus far, turning at the end to a consideration of what challenges may face the Iranian economy in the future.

The economic system of the Islamic Republic

Following the 1979 Revolution, there remained certain systemic continuities between the economic set-up that had prevailed during the Shah's monarchy and that of the new regime, with both relying heavily on oil revenues (see Figure 1) and both giving the state a significant role in the planning and running of national economic affairs. Nevertheless, the leaders of the Islamic Republic aimed to create new economic structures that would help to alleviate many of the grievances that had contributed to the growth of anti-Shah sentiment in the late 1970s.

Figure 1: Share of oil export revenue in GDP (in percent), 1965-2010



Source: IMF, *International Financial Statistics* (2011).

Of key concern was the goal of ending the foreign exploitation of Iranian resources, something that was believed to have been encouraged by the Shah's regime. Additionally, there were ambitions to establish a more equal and just distribution of economic wealth within the country.¹ Criticising the Shah's economic policies for having increased social inequality, the new elite argued that an Islamic Republic would be in a much better position to address the needs of Iran's poor.

The constitutional framework

These goals were consolidated in the 1979 constitution, which included an entire chapter dedicated to the economy and financial affairs (Chapter 4). At the start of this chapter, Article 43 sets out the broad aspirations for social justice in the new state's economic system, committing the Islamic Republic's leaders to: (a) providing basic necessities for all Iranians; (b) eradicating poverty and deprivation; (c) banning usury and extravagance; (d) moving towards self-sufficiency in agricultural production; and (e) preventing economic domination.

In order to achieve these goals, a vision of economic statism is invoked whereby the state is given a dominant role in directing the national economy, with Article 44 of the Constitution specifying that the state sector should include:

all large-scale and mother [i.e. 'core'] industries, foreign trade, major minerals, banking, insurance, power generation, dams, and large-scale irrigation networks, radio and television, post, telegraph and telephone services, aviation, shipping, roads, railroads and the like.²

It was believed that an Islamic state would certainly eschew any practices that favoured foreign (Western in particular) entities and enterprises over domestic counterparts. Furthermore, such a state was sure to manage the Iranian economy in accordance with Islamic moral values and revolutionary notions of social justice.

While the precise extent and nature of state participation in the national economy was not specified in the constitution itself, in practice the new state gained direct ownership of many key industries alongside the confiscations and expropriations of Pahlavi and Pahlavi-tied properties in the immediate post-revolutionary period. The exigencies of the eight-year war with Iraq (1980-1988) then further expanded the economic role of the state.³

However, the constitution also protected the right to private property, and there was no consensus within the revolutionary elite on the extent of the state's role in the economy – a divide that still exists today. Indicative of this, the same Article 44 provides for the private sector to include:

1. See Sohrab Behdad, 'The Post-Revolutionary Economic Crisis', in Saeed Rahnema and Sohrab Behdad (eds.), *Iran After the Revolution: Crisis of an Islamic State* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1996), p. 100, and Evaleila Pesaran, 'Towards an Anti-Western Stance: The Economic Discourse of Iran's 1979 Revolution', *Iranian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2008, pp. 693-718.
2. *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (24 October 1979, amended 28 July 1989); http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html.
3. Adnan Mazarei, 'The Iranian Economy under the Islamic Republic: Institutional Change and Macroeconomic Performance (1979-1990)', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 20, 1996, p. 291.

3 Challenges facing the Iranian economy

activities concerned with agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, trade, and services that supplement the economic activities of the state and cooperative sectors.⁴

Private property and other attributes of a private sector are further strengthened in Article 46: 'everyone is the owner of the fruits of his legitimate business and labour', and Article 47: 'private ownership, legitimately acquired, is to be respected.'⁵

Rival interpretations and approaches: populists and conservatives

Throughout the post-revolutionary period, the constitution's divergent visions of the national economy have allowed different political groups to hold competing interpretations of what specific economic policies should be pursued by the Iranian state. These factions should not necessarily be seen as connected to particular sectors of the Iranian economy, or as tied to specific economic interests; rather, each one is primarily reflective of a distinct view on what its members consider to be the most desirable economic approach for the survival of the Islamic Republic, and they have all held a position in the formal decision-making institutions of the Iranian state at one time or another.

Even though the membership and orientation of Iran's many rival factions have tended to fluctuate significantly with the passing of time, they can be placed into two broadly opposing camps: the populist left and the conservative right. On the left, the so-called 'populists' promote the centrality of the state's role in helping to achieve the revolutionary goals of social justice and economic equality. On the right, the 'conservatives' seek mainly to protect the position of the regime's supporters in various parts of the private sector, arguing that such actors can also contribute to the realisation of the Islamic Republic's core goals and ambitions.

The first decade after the revolution was dominated by the influence of the populist left camp, which included among its key supporters Mir-Hossein Mousavi as Prime Minister and Mehdi Karroubi as Deputy Speaker of Parliament.⁶ Adherents of this populist left camp were staunchly in favour of strengthening the economic role of the state, they worked to weaken the already small private sector that had managed to survive the upheavals of the revolutionary movement, and they supported the distributive activities of the newly-established revolutionary foundations (*bonyads*).

On the other side of the dividing line was the conservative right camp, whose vision was much less state-centric. Conservatives such as President Ali Khamene'i (who went on in 1989 to become the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, a post that he holds to this day) as well as the

4. *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

5. *Ibid.*

6. For details, see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 60-61. Having served as the Islamic Republic's final Prime Minister from 1981 until constitutional revisions abolished the position in 1989, Mir-Hossein Mousavi more recently re-entered the Iranian political arena when he ran as reformist candidate in the 2009 presidential elections. Mehdi Karroubi, who served as Speaker of Parliament from 1989 to 1992 and again from 2000 until 2004, also ran in the 2009 presidential elections. Both men are currently considered the main leaders of the opposition Green Movement.

members of the Guardian Council (a powerful body whose 12 members are appointed to review all legislation passed by the parliament and to supervise the country's presidential and parliamentary elections) worked together to limit the populist left's nationalisation programme, as they were keen to protect private property and limit taxation of the private sector.⁷

Given the deep divide between these two camps, it was often difficult to pass specific pieces of legislation. In fact, many policies would not have been approved at all had it not been for the mediating influence of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. But while his balancing act kept the factional divisions in check during much of the 1980s, it also in effect sustained them.⁸ Overall, throughout this period, the distributive policies of the populist left tended to be favoured given the exigencies of war. However, following the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and the death of Khomeini in 1989, disagreements came to the fore again. From this point onwards, there emerged greater fluctuation in the nature of Iran's economic policies.

Post-war economic programmes

Over the course of the war, all major economic activities in the country had slowed down,⁹ high rates of inflation averaging 17.7 percent had caused the living standards of most Iranians to decline, and the real GDP growth *per capita* was -4.3 percent (see Table 1). Oil export revenues were also reduced significantly and the importance of oil in the economy was less than it had been in the pre-revolutionary period (see Figure 1).

Table 1: Macroeconomic indicators (in percent), 1980-2010

Time Period	Real Oil Export Revenue Growth	Real Oil Export Revenue Growth per Capita	Inflation	Real GDP Growth	Real GDP Growth per Capita
1980-1988	-14.6	-18.5	17.7	-0.6	-4.3
1989-1996	6.9	4.9	22.3	5.9	3.6
1997-2004	4.8	3.5	14.7	4.5	3.5
2005-2010	7.0	5.7	14.1	3.3	1.5

Source: IMF, *International Financial Statistics* (2011) and OPEC, *Annual Statistical Bulletin* (2009).

7. Ibid., pp. 50-52.

8. Sohrab Behdad, 'From Populism to Economic Liberalism: The Iranian Predicament', in Parvin Alizadeh (ed.), *The Economy of Iran – Dilemmas of an Islamic State* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000), p. 104.

9. M. Hashem Pesaran, 'Economic trends and macroeconomic policies in post-revolutionary Iran', in *ibid.*, p. 64.

Already in the final years of the war, this wide-reaching impact of conflict on the Iranian economy had been felt acutely, and Khomeini himself had gradually been moving towards a more pragmatic approach to economic affairs. In light of this, following the ceasefire and the death of Khomeini, the conservative right was able to gain a much stronger position within the system. With Ali Khamene'i appointed as the new Supreme Leader and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani elected as President, the two highest offices in the Iranian state were held by individuals opposed to the leftist populist stance that had dominated the 1980s.

However, there were important differences between Hashemi Rafsanjani and many of his allies in the conservative right. While Khamene'i and influential groups such as the Society of Combatant Clergy (*Jame'eh-ye Rowhaniyat-e Mobarez*) supported mercantile interests in the economy and opposed opening up the country to the 'corrupting' influences of the outside world, Hashemi Rafsanjani himself supported some nationalisation of domestic industries as well as an increase in taxation, and he adopted a more relaxed view when it came to cultural and social issues.¹⁰ Very quickly, he pursued economic policies that were not in line with the established positions of either the conservative right or the populist left.

The pragmatism of Hashemi-Rafsanjani

As he staked out a position of pragmatism in the left-right divide of Iranian factional politics, Hashemi-Rafsanjani attracted support from among the managers of the state bureaucracy. His government pursued economic liberalisation and industrialisation hoping to benefit from greater interaction with the global economy. With their First Five-Year Development Plan, aimed at reconstructing the Iranian economy after eight years of war, they hoped to privatise a number of state-owned enterprises, liberalise the foreign exchange market, attract increased foreign investment, and reduce or even eliminate the state's provision of subsidies on consumer goods.¹¹

This new line soon provoked opposition from both the populist left and the conservative right, which curtailed Hashemi Rafsanjani's ability to achieve many of his ambitious goals. For example, soon after the 1993 liberalisation of the foreign exchange rate, the country's oil income decreased, domestic prices escalated, the rial depreciated further, and concerns were raised about an impending foreign debt crisis, resulting in the abandonment of this policy.¹² Similarly, privatisation occurred at a very slow pace, foreign investment in the Iranian economy continued to be negligible, and any attempts to eliminate state subsidies were blocked by the *Majlis*. By the end of Hashemi Rafsanjani's second term in 1997, the improvements that had been achieved were perceived to have benefited only a small elite surrounding the President,¹³ and in

10. Mehdi Moslem, op. cit. in note 6, p. 128.

11. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 2 March 1990.

12. See Behdad, op. cit. in note 8

13. Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2006), p. 58.

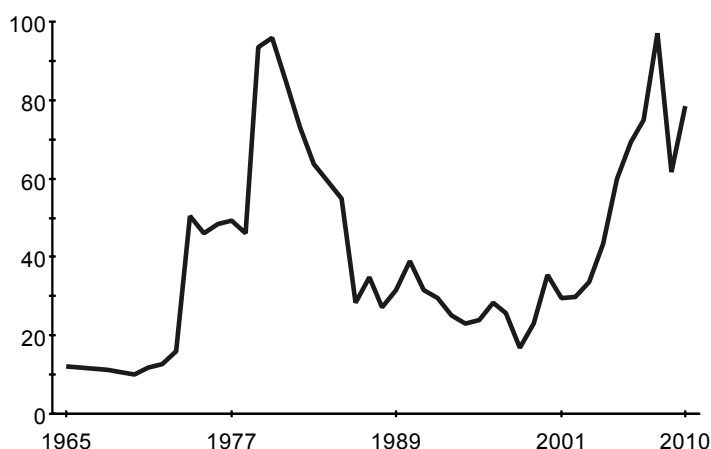
addition most Iranians were concerned with the potential fallout of a serious budget deficit, rising unemployment, a weakening currency, and a flight of capital investment.¹⁴

This notwithstanding, the economy did improve significantly during the wartime situation under his watch (see Table 1). Although inflation rose, so did both oil export revenues and the *per capita* GDP growth rate.

Reform under Khatami

While the next President, Mohammad Khatami, did not initially have a clear economic agenda, the 'reformist' camp supporting him signalled a commitment to continue many of the pragmatic policies of the previous administration. Given the urgency of the economic challenges facing the country, aggravated by a drop in already low oil prices (see Figure 2), reformists hoped that they would be more successful than the previous government at implementing economic reforms.

Figure 2: Price of crude oil (Brent) (in constant 2009 US\$), 1965-2010



Source: BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy* (2010).

In general, this newly-formed camp – many of whose members had previously been affiliated to the populist left but had since the end of the war changed their economic outlook¹⁵ – believed that the development of a mixed economy with greater space for the private sector would solve many of Iran's economic ills. They supported the growth of the private industrial sector, but their efforts were to a large degree thwarted by the conservative right, who for political reasons favoured the maintenance of the *status quo ante*.

14. Jahangir Amuzegar, 'Khatami and the Iranian Economy at Mid-Term', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 53, 1999, pp. 534-52.

15. See, for example, Bahram Ahmadi-Amui, *Eqtesad-e Siyasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami* (Tehran: Gam-e Naw, 1383/2004-5), p. 162.

After the parliamentary elections of 2000, which gave the reformists a majority of seats, they together with the pragmatists introduced a number of important economic policies. These policies were intended to combat the problems associated with falling oil revenues, rising unemployment and the weakened Iranian currency. Notably, they paved the way for the establishment of Iran's first private banks, introduced new legislation aimed at attracting increased foreign investment, and established an Oil Stabilisation Fund (OSF) to shield the Iranian economy from the volatility of oil revenues.¹⁶

Over the course of the Khatami presidency, oil export revenue growth fell, but inflation also dropped and real GDP growth *per capita* remained similar to that achieved during the previous presidency (see Table 1).

However, the Khatami administration's ability to implement the new rules and regulations that it had introduced was seriously hampered as the Guardian Council, a powerful unelected body dominated by the conservative right, persistently blocked or rejected the legislation. Additionally, it was not long before former members of the populist left faction who had not adopted a reformist economic outlook in the post-war period, but instead remained staunchly in favour of economic statism,¹⁷ began to form an uneasy alliance with the conservative right as part of a broader political strategy to bring an end to the Khatami era policies of reform.¹⁸

The members of this new coalition of populists and conservatives referred to themselves as 'principlists'. They benefited not only from their control over many appointed bodies within the Islamic Republic, but also from the growing disillusionment with reform among the general population. In particular, the persistence of high unemployment caused many Iranians to find the principlists' populist economic proposals increasingly attractive. In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took advantage of this movement towards a revival of the revolutionary slogans of social justice and economic independence, winning the presidential elections of that year on a populist platform that was surprisingly effective in electoral terms.

Policies under Ahmadinejad

Even before the election of Ahmadinejad as President in June 2005, it was clear that the liberalising economic programme favoured for so long faced an uncertain future. The almost institutionalised obstruction of the Guardian Council to a broad range of proposals for economic reform over the previous 16 years ensured that the policies of counter-reform were eventually seen as the only viable option. While Ahmadinejad's

16. Jahangir Amuzegar, 'Iran's Third Development Plan: An Appraisal', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2005, pp. 46-63.

17. For a discussion of the roots of this leftist group, see *Asr-e Ma*, 3 Esfand 1373 [22 February 1995].

18. For further details, see Evaleila Pesaran, *Iran's Struggle for Economic Independence: Reform and Counter-Reform in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.128-30.

election was unexpected, it did effectively spell the end of the pragmatist-reformist experiment.

A populist approach

Ahmadinejad famously pledged to deliver Iran's oil wealth to the people's dinner tables, and the support he gained through the promotion of these kinds of populist slogans was significant. Around the country, in urban as well as rural communities, there were many Iranians who felt that they had missed out on the promised benefits of the era of pragmatism and reform. Believing that the fruits of post-war economic growth had been enjoyed only by the pragmatist elite surrounding Hashemi Rafsanjani, they hoped that Ahmadinejad's form of economic management would at last help them to improve their lot in life.

However, given that the new President's supporters in the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic included principlists from the conservative right as well as others who favoured a more statist economic approach, he faced a number of challenges in realising his economic goals from the beginning. Even with the eradication of the influence of the reformist camp, it was still going to be difficult to pursue a united economic programme with the full backing of all the state's institutions.

The challenges he faced were highlighted by the *Majlis*' opposition to a number of Ahmadinejad's preferred nominees for the oil, cooperatives, welfare and education ministries. The nominees were viewed with suspicion by many *Majlis* deputies because they were handpicked by Ahmadinejad from among the circle of friends and acquaintances that he had formed during his time as governor general of Ardabil province (1993-1997) and then mayor of Tehran (2003-2005), but they were largely unknown entities to everybody else. Contestation over the nominee for oil minister was particularly heated, and it took just over three months for the final appointment of Kazem Vaziri-Hamameh (who had been deputy oil minister under Khatami) to be made.¹⁹

This is indicative of the fact that while the principlists in the *Majlis* were broadly supportive of the new President's commitment to bring the Islamic Republic back to its core roots, consensus on what those roots are and how they should be realised as actual state policy has been lacking.

The range of possible interpretations contained within the Constitution, with its stipulations of both strong state involvement in the economy and protection of private ownership and enterprise, allows for widely differing policies to be proclaimed as true to the revolution. This variety and concomitant division exists within the principlist camp in the Ahmadinejad era just as it did when the main battle line was drawn

19. International Crisis Group, 'Iran: Ahmadinejad's Tumultuous Presidency', *Middle East Briefing*, no. 21, 6 February 2007, pp. 3-5.

3 Challenges facing the Iranian economy

between conservatives and reformists during the Khatami presidency. Thus, implementing Ahmadinejad's populist plans for the Iranian economy, even with a *Majlis* dominated by various principlist factions, proved a daunting task.

Having promised to support Iran's poor and 'downtrodden' communities, Ahmadinejad was keen to appear to be following through on this promise, and he benefited from high oil prices at the start of his first term to support a range of policies directed primarily at helping those most in need. As the price of oil started to soar from 2005 onwards, the income accrued by the Ahmadinejad administration from the sale of oil far exceeded that which had been received at any point in Khatami's second term (see Table 2).

Table 2: Oil exports and prices, 2001-2010

Year	Oil Exports (million barrels per day)	Oil Prices (US\$ per barrel at constant 2009 prices)
2001	2.21	29.61
2002	2.02	29.84
2003	2.40	33.62
2004	2.55	43.46
2005	2.60	59.89
2006	2.43	69.32
2007	2.48	74.90
2008	2.06	96.91
2009	1.98	61.67
2010	1.87	78.35

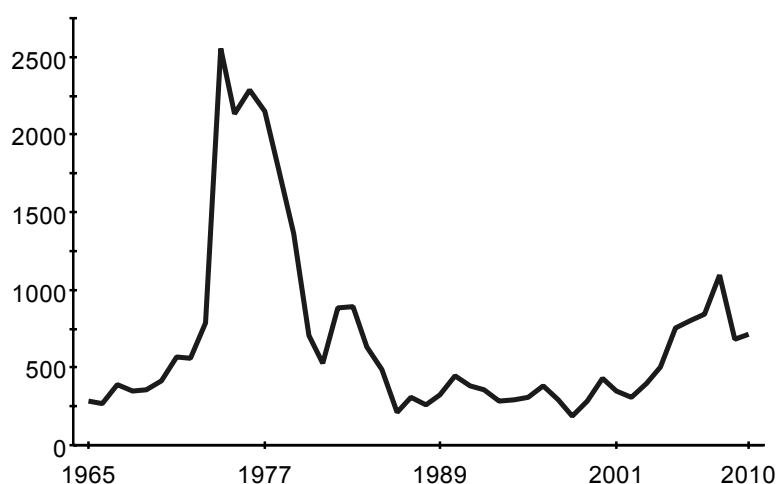
Source: BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy* (2010) and Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *Economic Time Series Database* (2010). Estimates for 2010 are from IMF, *International Financial Statistics* (2011).

Real oil revenue *per capita* increased from an average of \$345 per annum during the Khatami years to \$815 over the course of the period from 2005 and 2010 (see Figure 3). Taking advantage of these increasing funds, Ahmadinejad travelled all over the country, holding cabinet meetings in remote towns, and offering handouts to the residents of many places being visited. Annual current and development budgets were soon inflated as a result of all of this charitable assistance to families and small communities,²⁰ and where existing funds were not sufficient, the Oil Stabilisation Fund (OSF) was dipped into, enabling

20. Jahangir Amuzegar, 'Iran's Oil as a Blessing and a Curse', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2008, pp. 53-54.

such populist projects to continue unabated. This defeated the purpose for which the OSF had been established, namely to inject money into the economy when oil prices were falling, and it aroused the opposition of many principlist groups both inside and outside of the *Majlis*.²¹

Figure 3: Oil export revenue per capita (in constant 2009 US\$), 1965-2010



Source: IMF, *International Financial Statistics* (2011) and OPEC, *Annual Statistical Bulletin* (2009).

Another pivotal economic policy trumpeted by Ahmadinejad, which again aroused widespread resistance from *Majlis* deputies, was his plan for the Imam Reza Love Fund. This fund, proposed to the *Majlis* in October 2005, was aimed initially at providing financial support to young people hoping to get married, to help pay for the cost of the wedding, although it was envisaged that over time further provisions would be added to this preliminary remit. The proposal was that 30 percent of Iran's foreign exchange reserves would be used for the establishment of the Imam Reza Love Fund, and its activities would be largely free of governmental control. For many members of the *Majlis*, this was simply not acceptable.

Amendments were introduced over the course of the parliamentary debates to establish increased scope for monitoring the fund, to change the source of the fund, and to limit the amount of money made available to it. While the proposal to set up the Imam Reza Love Fund was ultimately passed, the considerable amendments that were made to it

21. International Crisis Group, *op. cit.* in note 19, p. 9.

highlighted the extent to which parliamentary support for Ahmadinejad was waning, appearing lukewarm at best. However, this episode also revealed how much more influence the new President had at his disposal for furthering his policies compared to Khatami. Since Ahmadinejad was not willing to alter his ambitious plans, he went ahead and founded the Imam Reza Love Fund in its original format by siphoning off money from a range of inactive government funds.²²

Thus, Ahmadinejad displayed enormous commitment to his vision for the Iranian economy, being willing and able to remove critics of his proposed policies when deemed necessary. He increasingly relied upon his own hand-picked economic advisers, breaking up the bureaucratic machinery that had advised policy for previous governments and disempowering those who did not agree with him in order to consolidate his own economic and political influence. This was evident in the shutting down of the Management and Planning Organisation, the governmental body charged with preparing and monitoring Iran's annual budgets and five-year development plans, in July 2007.²³

The impact of sanctions

In addition to being affected by internal factionalism and wrangling over economic policy, the Iranian economy is also influenced by a number of external factors, which in turn further contribute to the complex interplay of political and economic concerns within the Islamic Republic. Of these external factors, international sanctions can be seen as key in shaping the Iranian political economy today, giving rise to competing domestic responses and reactions. Specifically, the imposition of United Nations sanctions not long into Ahmadinejad's first term engendered two opposing trends. On the one hand, Ahmadinejad's more defiant style on the nuclear issue rallied support to him among principlists who felt that Khatami had been too accommodating to Western demands. On the other hand, the persistence of this confrontational approach to dealing with the international community risked inflicting harsh economic penalties that might in time arouse political opposition to the Ahmadinejad administration.

Identifying the specific impact that international sanctions have had on the Iranian economy separately from the effects of other economic policies that have been adopted within Iran since 2006 is an impossible task. There is little data on which to rely for the evaluation of sanctions, and even if data were available, it would be highly problematic to establish a clear causal relationship between sanctions and economic outcomes in Iran.

Nevertheless, even though the continuation of high oil prices throughout Ahmadinejad's presidency appears to have minimised the impact of

22. Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: the Secret Story of Iran's Radical Leader* (London: Tauris, 2008), p. 226.

23. BBC Persian, 'Sazman-e Modiriyat va Barnameh-rizi Monhal Shod' [The Management and Planning Organization Dissolved], 10 July 2007. See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2007/07/070710_ka-mpo.shtml.

sanctions, it seems that the uncertainty surrounding the economic environment within the country over the past five years has had some implications for the national economy. There has certainly been a reduced access to international finance, as foreign banks no longer take on large Iranian debts,²⁴ and inflows of foreign direct investment have also dropped.²⁵ Furthermore, some oil companies, including Total and Shell, have decided to halt or cease their involvement in existing oil and gas projects within Iran. However, it should not be ignored that alternative contracts with Brazilian, Chinese and Venezuelan oil companies have been attracted over this period, thereby offsetting some of the negative consequences of sanctions.²⁶ But in spite of this, oil exports have been falling since 2005 (see Table 2), suggesting that without further investment in exploration, production might continue to decline.

Additionally, the fact that domestic oil consumption growth has been significantly higher than that of production over the past two decades is a cause for concern. The growth rate of oil consumption has remained high throughout the post-war period, while the growth rate of production has fallen dramatically since 1997 as the oil industry has approached its output capacity (see Table 3). At the current rate of consumption growth, any increase in capacity will be offset by increasing domestic demand. This will impact negatively upon Iran's ability to secure sufficient funds through the sale of oil on the international market, further worsening the future outlook of Iran's oil-dependent economy.

Table 3: Growth rates of oil consumption and production (in percent), 1980-2010

Time Period	Growth Rate of Oil Consumption	Growth Rate of Oil Production
1980-1988	1.81	1.98
1989-1996	6.34	6.31
1997-2004	2.77	1.70
2005-2010	2.27	-0.14

Source: BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy* (2010).

It should be noted, however, that although the onset of the global economic downturn in 2009 caused the price of oil to drop by 36 percent on the previous year, oil prices picked up again in 2010. As of April 2011, they were double the average price of 2009, further boosting the Iranian economy and insulating it from the full force of sanctions. Therefore, a more worrying prospect for Iranians than the immediate damage caused by international sanctions would be the

24. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 18 August 2006.

25. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Foreign Direct Investment Database* (2010). See: <http://www.unctad.org/wir>.

26. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 21 March 2009 and 5 February 2010.

broader effects of the global economic downturn itself. The ensuing volatility and uncertainty in oil prices could by extension adversely affect government revenue.

In response to these economic conditions and specific aspects of the sanctions regime, certain policies aimed at cutting government spending and stimulating the economy have been introduced in recent years. Many of these policies have contrasted noticeably with the populist agenda of Ahmadinejad. One such policy of particular interest is that of privatisation.

Privatisation

Steps towards privatising the heavily state-dominated economic sphere in Iran had already begun before Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency, but they have rather surprisingly gained momentum since 2005. While Ahmadinejad himself had spoken out against the evils of privatisation during his election campaign, stressing the need for the state to provide economic and social justice for all, pressure from Khamene'i has ensured the survival of the country's privatisation programme.

In May 2005, Khamene'i announced a series of new policies that effectively overturned the previous interpretation of Article 44 of the Constitution. Specifically, he called for the government to hand over to the private sector many of the activities that had previously fallen under its own remit, relinquishing its shares in state-owned industries over the course of the Fourth Five-Year Development Plan from 2005 until 2010.²⁷ When it appeared that Ahmadinejad's government was not striving sufficiently hard towards achieving this goal, the Supreme Leader again issued an executive order stressing the need for privatisation in July 2006.²⁸

In response to this, privatisation was pursued with more vigour, though not necessarily with the intended result. As experienced in other newly-liberalising economies where state insiders have dominated the privatisation process (e.g. Russia), much of Iran's privatisation appears to have benefited state-affiliated companies close to important elite actors such as President Ahmadinejad, the Islamic Republic's parastatal revolutionary foundations (*bonyads*), or the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). For example, a subsidiary of the IRGC purchased a majority stake in the state-run Iran Telecommunications Company in 2009.²⁹ Power has thus not been transferred from the state to the private sector as a result of this privatisation process, but instead the process of economic liberalisation has been used to bolster the support base of particular political actors.

27. Ali Khamene'i, 'The general policies of the Article 44 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran', 22 May 2005. See: http://www.iranembassy.or.id/law_detail.php?idne=780.

28. Evaleila Pesaran, op. cit. in note 18, p. 179.

29. *New York Times*, 'Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps', 9 October 2009. See: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/i/islamic_revolutionary_guard_corps/index.html?scp=1&sq=IRGC%20telecommunications&st=cse.

While this liberalisation of the economy appears to contradict Ahmadinejad's populist rhetoric, his supporters would argue that on the contrary, the beneficiaries of this post-2005 privatisation are committed revolutionaries working for the 'common good'. Thus the transfer of assets from the state to bodies such as the IRGC is, according to them, entirely in the public interest. In contrast, they consider the privatisation drives of the Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies to have only benefited the bourgeois and Westernised sectors of Iranian society.

In order to reconcile his populist discourse with actual policy, Ahmadinejad has tried to steer Iran's privatisation process according to his own vision. Thus, after Khamene'i's renewed privatisation push in July 2006, Ahmadinejad requested that 50 percent of the available shares be handed over to provincial investment cooperatives and the two lowest-level income groups in society. In this manner, the privatisation could support the 'ordinary' man on the street, not just big business. This request was granted, and the distribution of 'justice shares' that had already begun a few months earlier was given permission to continue and expand.³⁰ The scheme has not in practice transferred much wealth from state-owned enterprises to needy communities around Iran, largely because of the loss-making nature of many of the enterprises whose shares were distributed,³¹ but it did provide some positive publicity for Ahmadinejad as the protector of social justice and Islamic values.

Subsidies and social pressures

By reiterating the need for greater national security, Ahmadinejad's government has been able to undermine nascent domestic opposition to the potentially disruptive economic policies of his administration. The rifts in the principlist camp became very serious in the spring of 2011, but up until these recent developments, the siege mentality encouraged by this faction stymied many would-be or actual critics. Especially in the aftermath of the contested 2009 presidential elections, policy discussions have become highly securitised and the parameters of debate increasingly narrowed. This has contributed to the general lack of an open and vociferous reaction to the removal of subsidies on a range of consumer goods that was introduced in December 2010. Yet parliament remains a site of open and at times vicious competition and criticism between different factions and the government.³²

Since 1980, Iranians have benefited from the provision of state subsidies on water, electricity, natural gas, diesel and gasoline, as well as on foodstuffs such as wheat, sugar, oil and rice, and on medical products and services. Having been introduced soon after Iraq's invasion of the Islamic Republic, the subsidies were retained after the end of the war, and the regime's emphasis on its commitment to social justice has made it very difficult to abolish them. Attempts were made to eliminate

30. *Kargozaraan*, 5 July 2006.

31. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 24 August 2007.

32. See the chapter by Farideh Farhi in this *Chaillot Paper*.

3 Challenges facing the Iranian economy

them by previous administrations but conservative opposition always prevented these attempts from reaching fruition. In addition, riots sparked by Hashemi Rafsanjani's post-war austerity plans highlighted just how sensitive and emotive the issue of subsidy removal is. However, the imposition of sanctions has made the need for their removal even greater and also more acceptable to the political elite.

No-one knows for sure how much subsidies cost the Iranian state, but estimates vary from 50 to 100 billion US dollars per year, corresponding to roughly 15-30 percent of the annual government budget.³³ There are fears that as the Iranian population continues to grow, the cost of these subsidies will become unmanageable. As they benefit everyone across the board, Ahmadinejad has sought to present their removal as a positive step that would allow the provision of more targeted financial aid for those who really need it.

The plan for subsidy elimination aims to phase out all subsidies on energy products, utilities and foodstuffs by 2015, but it keeps in place the existing subsidies on medical products and services. Having been approved and passed into law in December 2010, the plan allows for as much as \$20 billion worth of subsidies to be eradicated within the first year, but in subsequent years, additional cutbacks will have to be approved by the *Majlis* as part of discussions over the annual budget.³⁴ Ahmadinejad had initially sought to introduce similar subsidy reforms in 2008, but these were blocked due to the existence of strong resistance within the *Majlis* at the time. It was only after the 2009 presidential election, and with the benefit of strong support from Khamene'i, that a compromise agreement on the subsidy issue was eventually achieved.

Thus far, the popular reaction to these subsidy reductions has been relatively muted, unlike in the summer of 2007, when the announcement of petrol rationing sparked violence. Presenting the removal of subsidies as good for the environment, reducing the wasteful consumption of the nation's precious energy resources, the government also minimised the risk of widespread resistance by maintaining a heavy police presence on the streets of Tehran on the day of the policy announcement,³⁵ as well as by providing a small cash handout to each Iranian household, to be accessed when reductions took effect. Such handouts were intended to be distributed on a monthly basis to Iran's poorest families by the newly-established Subsidy Reform Organisation (SRO), thereby using some of the money saved by eliminating the subsidies to provide more targeted assistance for those most in need.³⁶

However, there are many challenges, technical as well as political, to ensuring that this plan proceeds and succeeds. Given that the Iranian government's information on household income is largely inaccurate, due to poor collection of tax and census information, as much as 90

33. See, for example Djavād Salehi-Esfahani, 'Estimating the Value of Iran's Subsidies', *MRZine*, 30 March 2010. Available at: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/si300310.html>.

34. Semira Nikou, 'The Subsidies Conundrum', *The Iran Primer*. See: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/subsidies-conundrum>.

35. BBC News, 'Increased security as Iran's subsidy programme bites', 9 November 2010. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11685293>.

36. Semira Nikou, op. cit. in note 34.

percent of the Iranian population initially registered for SRO cash handouts. Consequently, financial aid is currently being distributed to virtually the entire population, largely undermining the purpose of the subsidy elimination plan and creating a considerable budgetary burden for the future.

Furthermore, there is a risk that the plan will stoke up already high inflation rates (which currently stand officially at 10 percent³⁷ but are thought to be significantly higher in reality), and the removal of subsidies for the industrial sector may well result in a loss of jobs, worsening Iran's already high unemployment rate. If Iranians can be convinced that subsidy cuts are beneficial to them in the long term, and that the plan is feasible, then these challenges may not result in negative political fallout. However, if subsidy reductions result in worsening economic conditions, the risk of political unrest increases, although whether this can be capitalised upon by the opposition is an open question.

Protest on a narrow economic basis is not unheard of in recent Iranian history. For example, in both December 2008 and July 2010, merchants at Tehran's Grand Bazaar, joined by the Tabriz and Esfahan bazaars, went on strike to protest at government proposals to increase the sales tax rate by 70 percent.³⁸ Again in September 2010, gold dealers in the Tehran bazaar went on strike in opposition to plans to levy sales tax on gold transactions, and these strikes soon spread to other parts of the country too.³⁹

All these strikes were brought to a relatively swift end, disrupting the economy for only a short while even though the core issues were not fully resolved. They did however highlight that even in a situation characterised by Ahmadinejad's forceful presidency combined with the firm leadership of Khamene'i, societal actors can and will limit the state's writ.

In particular, given that even with the benefit of high oil prices, the Ahmadinejad administration failed to achieve the 8 percent GDP growth rate that had been planned for the period from 2005 until 2009, such societal opposition is rendered increasingly likely. Over Ahmadinejad's first term, the actual average growth rate was 3.8 percent, which in *per capita* terms is even lower, 1.9 percent. This situation has worsened since 2009: in 2010, Iran's GDP growth rate was only 1 percent.⁴⁰ Those who oppose Ahmadinejad's economic plans can thus point not only to their own alternative interpretations of how the Islamic Republic's goals should best be achieved, but also to the Ahmadinejad team's apparent failure to reach its own targets.

37. Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *Economic Trends*, no. 61, Second Quarter 1389, 2010-2011.

38. Yasaman Baji, 'Tehran Merchants in Showdown with Government', *Mianeh*, 6 August 2010. See: <http://mianeh.net/article/tehran-merchants-showdown-government>.

39. Yasaman Baji, 'Iranian Gold Trade in Tax Battle', *Mianeh*, 12 November 2010. See: <http://mianeh.net/article/iranian-gold-trade-tax-battle>.

40. International Monetary Fund, *International Financial Statistics 2011* (Washington, D.C.: IMF, 2011).

Conclusion: looking to the future

Ahmadinejad began his first term as President claiming to be capable of saving the Iranian economy, thereby bringing Iranian society closer to the founding goals of the revolutionary movement. Both social justice and economic independence would be achieved at last. Over the course of his presidency, however, the actual policies enacted by Ahmadinejad have not appeared capable of realising these goals even though they have continued to be presented in a populist light.

Although the imposition of international sanctions may be facilitating the achievement of economic independence – quite simply, there are fewer foreign companies interested in ‘exploiting’ the Iranian economy – this form of economic independence is not promising for the long-term health and strength of the country’s economy. Iran’s oil and gas fields require increased investment to boost production, and in the absence of this, the wealth acquired by the Iranian state from the sale of petrochemicals is at risk of serious decline, as has already begun to happen over the past two years (shown in Figure 1).

Thus far, Ahmadinejad has been able to ride a wave of high oil prices, but this cannot continue forever. Given that Iran’s economy is so dependent on the oil and gas sector, if exports should dip further at the same time as oil and gas prices decrease, the implications for Iran’s foreign currency reserves – and for the national economy as a whole – will be dire. The role of natural resources in the Iranian economy thus continues to be the most serious determinant of economic outcomes, and a major decline in production could equal economic disaster. Indeed, the decline in oil exports that has been experienced since 2005 (see Table 2) highlights the urgency of the situation, drawing attention to the long-term need to diversify the economy away from petrochemicals.

Another key challenge facing the Islamic Republic stems from disillusionment with the populist vision of social justice that was promoted so strongly by Ahmadinejad at the start of his first term. This sentiment can to some extent be mitigated by diverting responsibility for economic difficulties to international sanctions and ‘seditionist’ opposition. Yet the effectiveness of this in reducing the risk of a backlash is likely to diminish over time.

The introduction of the plan to eliminate subsidies promises to lead to price increases on a broad range of commodity goods, raising the cost of living for all Iranians. As the cost of fuel increases, so the cost of transportation will go up, and with it the price of food and other consumer goods. To what extent this can be compensated for through cash handouts is not yet clear, but it is highly unlikely that they will

be able to fully offset the anticipated price increases. The risk of a further increase in inflation, and the impact that could be wrought by a concomitant reduction in demand for consumer goods, could lead ultimately to an economic crash. If economic growth cannot be maintained, then all sectors of the economy will suffer and social tensions and divisions will increase.

The combination of subsidy cutbacks and worsening sanctions provides potential for further re-alignments of elite factions and nascent grassroots movements. Ahmadinejad's position could become more vulnerable if recently introduced economic policies start to place more pressure on a broader spectrum of the Iranian population, alienating his support base. In the short term however, the beneficiaries of anti-Ahmadinejad sentiment will be other principlist groups with their own vested interests in the survival of the post-revolutionary regime. Such a volatile situation may force a change of course of economic policy, but whether this would solve the multiple economic challenges facing the Islamic Republic is far from clear.

As has been highlighted throughout this chapter, the fate of the Iranian economy continues to be very much influenced by the particular outlook of whichever faction is dominating the key institutions of the state at any given time. The economic system of the Islamic Republic, as established in the 1979 constitution, allows for a broad range of interpretations and approaches to be adopted, and rival political factions have consistently pushed for their own preferred brand of economic policy. Although the principlists remain in a strong position, able to suppress opposition in the name of the 'national interest' and thereby ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic, it should not be forgotten that there are significant differences within this dominant camp. Intense factionalism divides the country's powerful political elite, and this leaves open the possibility that alternative economic policies could be pursued in the future.

However, given that the same structural constraints will persist well into the future, including not only those that are imposed by the country's constitutional framework but also those that have been created by the economy's significant dependence on oil and gas reserves, the options open to any emerging political factions will inevitably be limited. Major systemic reform of the Iranian economy is thus highly unlikely, but there will nevertheless be scope for a less populist economic programme to be followed should Ahmadinejad's rivals (principlist or otherwise) gain control of the policy-making process in the months and years to come.

CHAPTER 4

Gendered citizenship and the women's movement in Iran

Azadeh Kian

Introduction

The pioneering role played by women of all ages in the run-up to and aftermath of the June 2009 presidential elections demonstrated, yet again, that women are at the centre of the changes afoot in Iranian society. The assassination of Neda Agha-Soltan in June 2009 and the murder of Haleh Sahabi in June 2011, the ongoing arrests and imprisonment of several women's rights activists, and the closure of women's independent publishing houses and NGOs, clearly indicate that women and their rights have become a critical challenge for a state that is founded on gender inequality.

The discriminatory laws that were implemented in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution triggered widespread discontent among women, many of whom had actively participated in the revolution. The discrepancy between women's legal status before and after the revolution, on the one hand, and the contradictions between a post-revolutionary modernising society and archaic laws and practices that institutionalised gender inequality, on the other hand, has contributed significantly to the mobilisation of women in Iran.

In the 1990s and early 2000s women's civil institutions attempting to eliminate gender discrimination were expanding and trying to reach out to both middle-class women and women from lower-class backgrounds. Several campaigns were launched by a coalition of secular and Muslim women activists in 2006: the One Million Signature Campaign to change the discriminatory laws, the Campaign Against Stoning and All Forms of Violence against Women, and the White Scarves Campaign against sex segregation in stadiums. This process and the ability of these institutions to be effective have been severely weakened during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. In this dire situation middle-class urban women, the core constituency and engine of the women's movement, have reached the conclusion that gender equality and democracy are intertwined, and that Iranian women will not obtain citizenship rights without struggling for democracy. Thus

they have increasingly turned towards civil society-based pro-democracy organisations and activities.

Owing to the importance of civil society for the decentralisation of power and the interrelation between the women's rights movement and democratisation, the weakening of women's social institutions is likely to hinder the expansion of the democratisation movement throughout the country.

This chapter will explore the structural causes for the actual and potential role that Iranian women play as agents of change as they are 'exposed' to the many developments and contradictions of a dynamic Iranian society. How are the attitudes of Iranian women changing with regard to the traditional social mores of Iranian society? What issues are they actively trying to influence and to what extent, if at all, can women in Iran be described as a homogenous group?

The legal status of women under the Shah and in the Islamic Republic

The legal status of Iranian women started to change following the Shah's agrarian reform and the granting of voting rights to women in 1963. The Shah's decision created scandal in Qom among the leading clergy; Khomeini, the most vocal among them, had sent a telegram to the Shah on 9 October 1962 criticising women's involvement in politics as running counter to Islam.¹ In 1967, the Family Protection Law was adopted. It gave women the right to divorce, with custody of their children upon the court's approval, and increased the minimum age of marriage for girls from 13 to 15. From his exile in Iraq, Khomeini declared that the new law was anti-Islamic, that all marriage and divorce acts under this law were illicit, and that children born under this law were not recognised by Islam.² Additional laws were also adopted to facilitate women's access to jobs, including in the judiciary and the army. In 1975, during the United Nations decade for women, additional laws were adopted, and the minimum age of marriage was increased to 18. Despite statutory changes gender inequalities persisted and women continued to suffer from occupational and income disparities and lower status. Moreover, the reform of the law and new job opportunities primarily concerned urban women, while the majority of Iranian women (and men) lived in rural areas. These disparities along with the absence of an independent women's movement and the state monopoly on gender discourse impeded the awakening of gender solidarity and did not trigger aspirations for equality between the sexes.³ State feminism (or 'femocracy') as part of the general policy of the state had not and could not profoundly modify

1. Azadeh Kian, 'Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: the Gender-conscious Drive to Change', *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1997, pp. 75-96, p. 76.
2. (Ayatollah) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Towzih al-Masael* (Tehran: Qadr-i Velayat, 2nd edition, 1996), p. 330.
3. Parvin Paidar, *Women in the Political Process of Twentieth Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

patriarchal culture and customs, for the Shah's state itself remained quintessentially patriarchal. The failure of the Shah to mobilise women's support for his regime ultimately paved the way for political Islam to gain a popular base among middle and lower-class women.⁴ Women's collective political involvement in the movement led Ayatollah Khomeini to retract his earlier positions and to endorse women's political rights. He further declared that women's social and political rights would be guaranteed by an Islamic state.⁵

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, however, gender inequality was institutionalised when a series of restrictions were imposed on women's rights in both the public and the private realms. For example, the Islamic veil became compulsory; women's access to several professions, including the judiciary, was prohibited (women judges gradually reappeared in family courts from the late 1990s onwards). In addition to gender-segregating occupational policies, the law gave overwhelming privileges to men in matters of marriage, divorce, guardianship of children after divorce, parental authority or inheritance. The minimum age of marriage for girls was lowered from 18 to 9 years (it increased to 13 under the reformist Sixth Parliament in 2002). These regressive measures provoked a strong reaction among many women and created a common ground of protest for both secular women, many of whom had been dismissed from their posts during the revolutionary period (1979-1986), and the disillusioned educated Islamists, who had gained social mobility thanks to the revolution and the thrusting aside of their secular sisters. They rejected the idea that women should be confined to the home, and challenged institutionalised gender inequalities by emphasising their activity in the economic, social and cultural realms.

Patriarchy and modernity

Although the Islamic state remains attached to patriarchal order, revolutionary changes combined with globalisation and the implementation of modernisation policies, especially in rural areas and small towns, have had critical consequences for women from traditional religious middle and lower-class families. The scope of change thus goes far beyond social actors to encompass the entire female population.

As women's social, cultural and economic activities (especially in the informal sector of the economy that employs 50 percent of Iran's labour force) have increased, so too has their authority and presence in society – despite laws and institutions that attempt to enforce a patriarchal order. The changes over a 30-year period, from before the revolution

4. Azadeh Kian, *Secularisation of Iran. A Doomed Failure? The New Middle Class and the Making of Modern Iran* (Paris and Louvain: Peeters, 1998), pp. 144-148, pp. 240-54.

5. (Ayatollah) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nour*, Tehran, 1989, vol. 9, p. 136 and vol. 4., p. 60.

to the late 2000s, can be illustrated by comparing some basic facts of women's lives in Iran.

Table 1: Statistics regarding women in Iran

	1976	2006
Literacy rate of total female population	47.5%	85%
Literacy rate of rural female population	17%	70%
Share of university population	30%	60%
Number of female university students	57,000	2,000,000
Average number of children	7.2	2
Average age of marriage	19.75	24

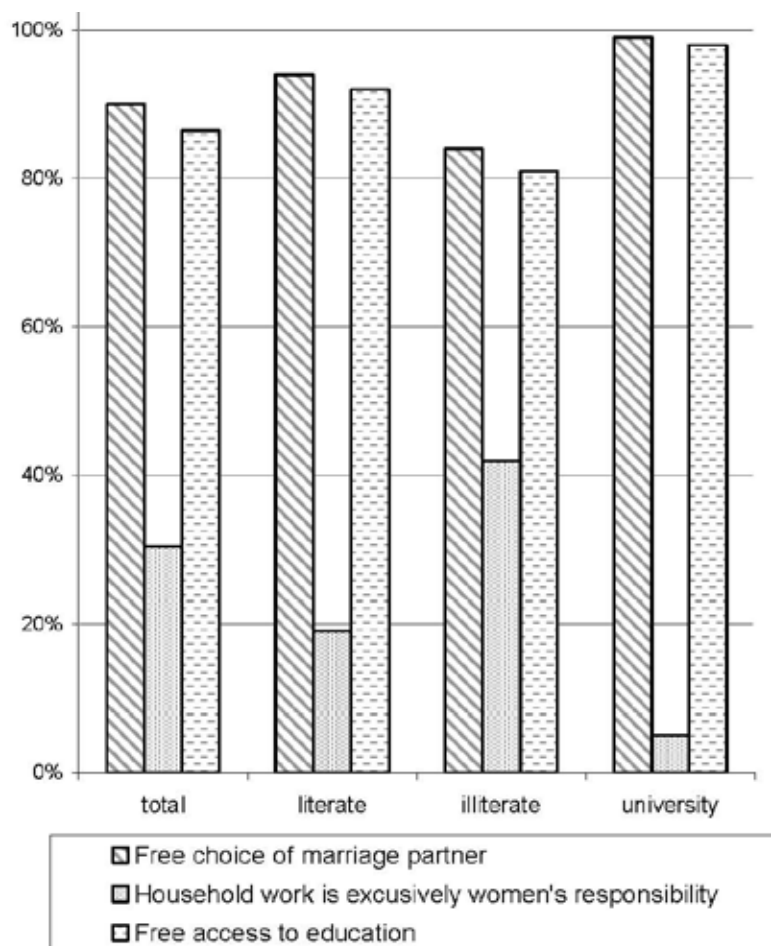
Source: 2006 National Census of Population and Housing.

The dramatic change in the literacy rate combined with educational opportunities and the steep decline in the average number of children per household (over 76 percent of Iranian women now use contraceptives) have transformed the lives of many women.

6. The quantitative survey was the result of a collaboration between Le Monde Iranien, the French Research Institute in Iran and the Statistical Centre of Iran. The sample, comprising 6,960 urban and rural households, was composed of 30,714 individuals, including 7,633 women aged 15 years and older who were married at least once, and 6,154 single youths, between 15-29 years old, who lived with their parents: 3,437 boys and 2,717 girls. The sampling frame used was adopted from the results of the 1996 National Census of Population and Housing conducted by the Statistical Centre of Iran. For a more detailed discussion, see Azadeh Kian, 'From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of Patriarchal Order', in Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (eds.), *Iran in the 21st Century. Politics, Economics and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 86-106.

The extent of social change in both urban and rural areas was assessed through a quantitative survey conducted under the author's joint responsibility in 2002 (later complemented with a qualitative survey through open-ended interviews with a sample of women).⁶ The crucial change in women's behaviour and the contradictions between the laws of the land and the actual attitudes of Iranian women are illustrated in the results of this opinion poll. The survey shows that education has a crucial impact on their demographic behaviour: literate mothers of 15 years and older have given birth to an average of 2.5 children as compared to 6.4 for illiterate mothers. Moreover, literate women often play a much more assertive role in family decision-making. There is also a correlation between the level of education and the number of children: 3.1 for mothers with primary-level education only as against 1.4 for those with university-level education. Education also impacts on the age at which they enter into their first marriage (the average was 23 in this survey), enhances the decline in arranged marriages and increases the likelihood of the marriage being based on free choice.

Table 2: Attitude Survey



It is interesting to note that despite the official discourse that encourages young people to engage in *sigheh* or temporary marriages (see page 67) 90 percent of young people aged 15 to 29 in our survey reject temporary marriage, which many regard as legalised prostitution.

The crucial change in women's behaviour and the contradictions between official state laws and people's attitudes are illustrated in the results of the opinion poll taken among married women aged 15 years and older in our survey.

In matters of marriage, 90 percent of women are for free choice. The rate is 94 percent for literate women (99 percent for women with a high-school diploma or with university education) and 84 percent for illiterate women.

Women also question the sexual division of labour within the family. Only 30.5 percent of women think that housework is women's exclusive responsibility. The rate is 19 percent for literate mothers and 42 percent for illiterate ones. Among women with higher education, only 5 percent believe housework to be women's sole responsibility.

Concerning childcare, only 15 percent of women in this survey believe it is women's exclusive responsibility. The rate is 9 percent for literate women and 5 percent for highly-educated women.

Although the official ideological discourse in Iran values women mainly as mothers and wives, and until 1993 women's access to several university courses such as management, engineering and law was prohibited, young women's quest for education continued and they increasingly enrolled in universities. The active presence of young women in education led the older generation, overwhelmingly illiterate, to place a high value on women's education. Thus 86.5 percent of our respondents believe that men and women should have equal access to education. The rate is 81 percent for illiterate women, 92 percent for literate women, and 98 percent for highly-educated women. Many poor and illiterate respondents in the qualitative survey conducted by the author attribute their inferior status in the family and society to their lack of educational qualifications which, they believe, also prevented them from choosing their own husbands. They therefore advocate their daughters' education and financial independence as a crucial means to their empowerment.

Discriminatory laws in a modernising society

Despite ethnic, religious, class or age differences and significant inequalities among women, the profound social, demographic and cultural changes which have occurred in the lives of Iranian women over the past 30 years have also led to an increase in women's awareness. Traditional perceptions concerning men's authority in the family structure and the patriarchal order founded on male domination are gradually being weakened. Women have also started to question the enforced laws that promote gendered relations within the family and submit women to men's control.

Since the election of the radical populist president Ahmadinejad in 2005, and his contested re-election in June 2009, new restrictions have been imposed on women's rights: the government has attempted to curb the increasing number of highly-educated women that is likely to implement change in gender power relations between men and women by adopting a quota in favour of men in universities. Also, measures are being taken to reduce women's employment in the public sector, which employs almost 40 percent of active urban women, with the aim of forcing women back to domesticity.

Likewise, in 2007, the government prepared a new Family Protection Bill that introduced further restrictions on women's rights.⁷ Some of the most controversial provisions of the proposed bill are: Article 22 which removes any requirement to register temporary marriages (*sigheh*). Temporary marriage is peculiar to Twelver Shi'ism. The civil code authorises men to enter into an infinite number of temporary marriages called *sigheh*, the length of which many vary from a couple of minutes to 99 years. The Quran does not seem to recommend this type of marriage.⁸ The removal of the registration requirement in temporary marriage eliminates any financial or legal protection for women in these unions, and for children who are born into temporary marriages. Article 23 authorises polygamous marriages contingent upon the financial capacity of men. It does not set specific parameters for adequate financial resources to support multiple wives, or define overall concepts of justice or equal treatment of multiple wives. Most notably absent from the Family Protection Bill is any effective requirement of consent of the first wife for her husband to enter into a second marriage. It is worth noting that despite the legalisation of polygamy, the number of polygamous marriages remains low, the same as before the Revolution when it was authorised but regulated (2 percent of permanent marriages). In addition to the high economic costs that polygamy imposes on men, most people in modern Iran disapprove of polygamy. The encouragement of the practice of temporary marriage is another development that is unpopular with women.⁹

The aim of the supporters of the bill is to normalise polygamy and to alter society's negative perception of it. Article 25 imposes a tax on the *mahr* (dowry) of the wife. While this amount is legally owed to the wife at the time of the marriage, women often do not receive their dowries. Usually it is only paid upon termination of the marriage if divorce is initiated by the husband. Taxation of the dowry reinforces a husband's financial power over his wife during marriage, and further inhibits a wife's potential for financial autonomy at the time of a divorce. The Family Protection Bill imposes additional procedural impediments to divorce, particularly for women, who under the current civil code already have only limited access to divorce. Article 46 criminalises the marriage of a foreigner to an Iranian woman without proper authorisation. The foreign man is subject to between ninety days and one year's imprisonment, and the woman (if she married of her free will), her father (if he gave permission) and the marriage official will be sentenced as accomplices.¹⁰

Faced with this new set of regressive policies and trends, some secular and Islamic advocates of women's rights opted for gender solidarity and, looking beyond their political divisions, joined ranks and worked together to oppose the Family Bill. In September 2008, over fifty of these secular and Muslim women who had decided to prevent its ratification went to the parliament and demanded to meet the members of parliament

7. For the English translation of the Family Protection Bill, see the website of the Women Learning Partnership: <http://learningpartnership.org/en>.

8. *The Qur'an*, Surat V, *The Table Spread*, Verse 3, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 6th Sixth edition, 2001), p. 64.

9. For a discussion see Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989).

10. See: <http://learningpartnership.org/en>.

concerned. They argued that, in its current form, the bill would be inevitably detrimental to women's interests and rights, and presented proposals to change the controversial provisions of the proposed bill. Following in-depth discussions with the members of the judicial committee and other MPs, and capitalising on the rivalries between President Ahmadinejad and Ali Larijani, the Speaker of Parliament, they succeeded in convincing a majority to withdraw the two controversial articles (articles 22 and 25). Likewise, on the occasion of the June 2009 presidential elections, a large coalition of secular and Islamic women published a declaration demanding that the future president takes measures to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), promulgated by the reformist majority sixth parliament (2000-2004) but rejected by the Council of Guardians and the seventh and eighth conservative majority parliaments. They also demand that discriminatory articles of the constitutional law and the civil code be revoked.

Women's press: a forum for social activities

Women's press as a civil institution in Iran has played a crucial role in bringing together Islamic and secular advocates of women's rights and establishing a dialogue between them. Despite their political and ideological differences, a sense of gender and class solidarity has emerged among these women who overwhelmingly belong to the urban middle classes. Some women's magazines published in the 1990s by Islamic women (especially *Zanān*, *Farzāneh*, *Payām-e Hājar* and *Zan*) also served as a forum for discussion between women activists who criticised civil and penal codes, work legislation and the Constitutional law, and the state authorities.¹¹

Shahla Sherkat, the editor-in-chief of the influential women's magazine *Zanān* (which was banned in January 2008), argued that 'many articles of the civil code are based on the *Shari'a*, its reinterpretation proves necessary and women should be involved in this undertaking'. She further maintained that 'the Qur'an has not banned women from becoming judges. This prohibition was initiated in the history of jurisprudence and in the opinions of the previous religious authorities'.¹² In November and December 1992, a few months following its publication, *Zanān* printed a series of articles written under a female pseudonym by Hojjat ol-Islam Mohsen Sa'idzadeh (who was imprisoned for several months in the summer of 1998 by the Special Court for the Clergy). These articles examined the obstacles against women holding positions of, and exercising, authority in religious and judicial institutions and maintained

11. Azadeh Kian, 'Le féminisme islamique en Iran: nouvelle forme d'assujettissement ou émergence de sujets agissants?', *Critique internationale*, vol. 46, January-March 2010, pp. 45-66.

12. Author's interview, Tehran, July 1994.

that none of the main Islamic texts justified such prohibitions, that no consensus existed among religious authorities on the issue, and that in the past, several women in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world had attained the summit of religious authority. The author thus concludes: 'a man has no natural or contractual privilege over a woman. If a man can become a judge so can a woman, and if a man can become a *marja'i taqlid* [source of emulation for the faithful, highest form of religious authority] so can a woman.'¹³

Payam-i Hâjar, published by Azam Taliqani, was the first women's magazine to advocate the reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses, especially *al-Nisa* (women) and to contest the legalisation of polygamy in 1992: 'The analysis of the Qur'anic verse on polygamy shows that this right is recommended in some specific cases and exclusively in order to meet a social need in view of expanding social justice'.¹⁴ Specific cases are argued to be times of war during which the heads of households were killed, leaving many widows and orphans with no financial resources. According to the author this caused serious problems for the Muslim community. In the absence of social institutions to take care of widows and orphans this responsibility was delegated to Muslim men via polygamy. The author maintains: 'God has recommended polygamy only in the case of a social need, and only if men can preserve equity between their wives'.¹⁵ The author rejects polygamy as a social necessity on the grounds that the modern state and its social institutions are conceived to assist needy families. Therefore, 'polygamy has no social function to fulfil'.¹⁶

The press contributed to an increase in middle-class women's political awareness and provided women with the opportunity for more active involvement in the public sphere. Women could thus air their grievances as public or political rather than purely private issues, and ultimately challenge institutions that they had formerly seen as all-powerful

Gender-conscious readings of Islamic laws and traditions and feminist social struggles

The same drive for re-interpreting basic assumptions that justify gender discrimination can be found in other legal areas as well.¹⁷ Nahid Shid, a lawyer with both a university and a religious education (she was a student of the late Ayatollah Najafi-Mar'ashi), maintained that 'the bulk of the enforced laws can and should be changed because they are not divine orders. They are based on secondary orders. Blood money is one of them. This law cannot be functional in a society in which women are

13. Mina Yadigar Azadi, 'Qezavat-e Zan' [Women's judgment], *Zanan*, vol. 1, no. 5, Khordad-Tir 1371 [May-July 1992], p. 21; and 'Ijtihad va marja'iyyat-e zanan' [Women's religious authority], *Zanan*, no. 8, Aban-Azar 1371 [October-December 1992], p. 24.

14. Forouq Ebn-Eddin, 'Lozoum-e eslah-e qavanin-e talaq, t'addud-e zojat va hezanat' [The necessity for the reform of laws concerning divorce, polygyny, and child custody], *Payam-e Hâjar*, 19 Shahrivar 1371 [10 September 1992], pp. 28-29.

15. Ebn-Eddin. Ibid., p. 28.

16. Ebn-Eddin. Ibid., p. 29.

17. Azadeh Kian, 'Gendering Shi'ism in Post-revolutionary Iran', in Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund (eds.), *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries* (London: Routledge – Iranian Studies Series), April 2011, pp. 24-35.

medical doctors, university professors, engineers, and the like. Blood money should be the same for men and women'.¹⁸

Religious women also reinterpret the Qur'an and traditions to justify women's political and religious leadership. Some have been in positions of power themselves, such as Ashraf Boroujerdi from the Centre for Research on Humanities and Cultural Studies and a former Deputy Interior Minister in charge of social affairs under President Khatami, who has argued that the Qur'an makes no distinctions in referring to men and women.¹⁹

Monir Gorgi, a renowned specialist of Islam, is one of the leading figures among them. She has a religious education and is the Director of the Centre for the Study and Research on Women's Problems in Tehran. Gorgi's reading of the Qur'an refutes the position of the traditional jurisprudence that forbids women's access to leadership positions under the pretext that women are physically and morally weak. She analyzes the personality, opinion and governance of the queen of Sheba (*Bilqiyis*) as reflected in the Qur'an and argues that, 'although the Qur'an mentions only a few rulers, the queen of Sheba is among them and she is depicted as one of the most just and rationalist rulers. This alone shows that the Qur'an accepts the capacity of women to manage and to lead'.²⁰ Gorgi therefore questions the pertinence of Islamic political jurisprudence for which manhood is one of the preconditions of Islamic leadership.²¹

Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the context of the issue of the presidency. The Islamic constitution attributes religious and judicial leadership exclusively to men (articles 5, 107, 163), while remaining ambiguous with regard to political leadership (article 115). Indeed, the word *rajul*, used to define the prerequisite condition for assuming the post of president of the republic, means both a man, and a renowned personality – which by definition can also be a woman.

This ambiguity has led women activists to argue that constitutional law authorises women to run for presidential elections. Among 238 candidates for the 1997 presidential elections, eight were women. Azam Taliqani was among them. She decided to run as a candidate in order to challenge the traditionalist views on women: 'It is my legal right to run for the presidency. Moreover, I want the meaning of the word *rajul* to be clarified in the constitution. If the Guardian Council respects Islam, there should be no problem with my qualification'.²² The number of women candidates increased to 47 in the 2001 presidential elections, and to 89 in the 2005 elections. They were 42 in 2009. Nonetheless, the meaning of the word *rajul* remains ambiguous since all female candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council, who did not furnish any reasons for rejecting the candidates.

18. Author's interview with Nahid Shid, Tehran, February 1996.

19. Ashraf Boroujerdi, 'Women's position in Islam,' paper presented to the First International Conference on The Role of Woman and Family in Human Development, Tehran, 22-24 May, 1995. Available at: www.salamiran.org/Women/News/The Role of Woman and Family in Human Development.html.

20. Monir Gorgi, 'Zan va zamāndāri. Negahi beh hokumat-e malakeh-ye saba dar qorān' [Women and leadership. A glance at the Queen of Sheba's Reign in the Quran], *Farzaneh*, vol. 1, Autumn 1993, p. 28.

21. Ibid, p. 29.

22. Interview with Azam Taliqani, *Zanan*, vol. 34, April-May 1997, pp. 6-7.

Secular women's contributions to these debates have been manifold. Through articles they have published in women's magazines (especially *Zanân* and *Farzâneh*) or interviews, lawyers and jurists, sociologists and historians, political scientists, artists and writers, sportswomen, movie directors, and others – often considered as role models for the younger generation – have questioned the predominant ideological discourse on women. Several lawyers and jurists, including the 2003 Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, Mehranguiz Kar, Shadi Sadr and Nasrin Sotoudeh, have been particularly vocal. The first three were forced to leave the country but continue to denounce discriminatory laws. Nasrin Sotoudeh was jailed and sentenced to 11 years in prison, barred from practising law and from leaving the country for 20 years. In their writings, they have criticised the laws of the Islamic Republic from a universalist point of view by invoking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions that the Islamic Republic has signed.

As a result of women's struggles and their questioning of traditional gender roles and identities and advocating equal rights, the law on the procedure regarding the choice of judges was reformed in 1996 leading to a better representation of women in the judiciary. According to the new law women judges can be appointed as examining magistrates, counsellors in the administrative court, family courts, and in the Office of the Protection of Minors. The country had 300 women judges in early 2000.²³

Women and the struggle for political opening

The number of women writers, novelists, journalists, publishers and film directors also grew significantly. Women film-makers used the camera to unveil the mechanisms of patriarchal control and to demonstrate women's struggle against gender disparities. They highlighted women's legal and social problems and portrayed women as active and courageous beings with strong personalities. The widespread success of these films showed that the urban population had become interested in modern interpretations of gender questions.²⁴

The civil society that started to emerge after the end of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88) has been marked by the vibrancy of debates on the social, civil, cultural, economic and political dimensions of women's citizenship. Aspirations to all-out change and to equal rights exist throughout Iran, especially among the increasingly educated young generation. Through 'civil democracy' women social actors attempted to acquire full citizenship rights.

It was with strong hope for a radical political, juridical and cultural change and the improvement of their status and condition that the

23. *Khabarnameh-ye Zanân* [Women's Newsletter], Tehran, Centre for the Participation of Women, 3, March 2001, p. 15.

24. Among them are filmmakers such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Tahmineh Milani and authors such as Simin Daneshvar and Shahrnosh Parsipour who had started publishing prior to the revolution. In the 1990s a new generation of women put pen to paper; Qazaleh Alizadeh (who died in 1996), Monirou Ravanipour, Fariba Vafi, Zoya Pirzad, Sepideh Shamlou and Mahsa Moheb-Ali.

majority of women, from different social and family backgrounds, participated in the 1997 presidential elections, using their right to vote as a potent means of instigating change. Many Tehran women voters said at the polls that they had voted for Khatami because he was the only candidate who respected women, posited their equality with men, recognised their crucial role in the family and society and in his electoral programme acknowledged women's specific problems and promised to find appropriate solutions.²⁵

Despite women's contribution to President Khatami's election, gender inequality and the issue of the status of women were largely absent from debates between male reformists, some of whom even argued that the question of women and their legal and citizenship rights was not connected with the building of democracy and therefore did not constitute an urgent issue for democracy advocates.²⁶ Likewise, the law continued to consider women as minors and placed them for life under the guardianship of their fathers or husbands. Although the thirteen gender-conscious women members of the sixth parliament²⁷ proposed bills to improve women's status (modification of the civil code, facilitating women's access to divorce, sending female students abroad, or increasing the minimum age of marriage for girls from 9 to 18) the Guardian Council rejected these bills, arguing that they were incompatible with Islam. Finally the minimum age of marriage and penal responsibility for girls was increased to 13. Likewise, in July 2003 the reformist parliament ratified CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) with some reservations; but this was rejected by the Guardian Council.

President Khatami excluded government intervention to promote women's status and argued that the development of civil society would inevitably contribute to satisfying women's demands and would provide women with the means to translate their demands into laws.²⁸ Nonetheless, secular feminists finally obtained the authorisation to publish a magazine in 1998 called 'The Second Sex' (*Jens-i Dovvom*), edited by Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani. They later founded the Women's Cultural Centre, organised public meetings to discuss women's citizenship rights and publicly celebrated 8 March, International Women's Day. During the reformist era, some reformist women members of parliament also publicly celebrated this day.

Although women voters played a crucial role in his re-election in 2001, President Khatami conceded to conservative pressures by refusing to nominate women ministers in his cabinet. Ma'soumeh Ebtekar, Vice-President and Head of the Environment Protection Organisation of Iran, and Zahra Shojayi, the head of the Centre for Women's Participation Affairs, remained the only women appointed by the President. The policies of the Islamic state remained ambiguous with regard to women.

25. From author's interviews with women voters in Tehran on the day of presidential elections, 1997.

26. See *inter alia* Abbas Abdi's interview 'Religious Intellectualism and More Urgent Questions than the Women's Questions' (Rawshanfikri-yi dini va masa'il-i fawritar az masa'il-i zanan), in *Zanan*, no. 58, 2000, p. 38.

27. Especially Elaheh Koulayi, Fatemeh Haghighatjou, Fatemeh Rake'i, Jamileh Kadivar and Akram Mansourimanesht.

28. Interview with Mohammad Khatami, *Zanan*, no. 34, April-May 1997, pp. 2-5.

This doctrinal ambiguity does not only concern women. Its roots should be sought in the very foundations of the Islamic regime which claims to be both republican and Islamic. Its republican component praises gender equality, while its Islamic component advocates gender inequality. Article 20 of the Constitution has posited the equal protection of men and women by law and their equal political, economic, social and cultural rights, but this is conditioned on the observing of Islamic principles. Likewise, article 21 requires the Islamic state to guarantee women's rights according to Islamic principles. In post-revolutionary Iran, traditional jurisprudential interpretations have been predominant in both primary and secondary political institutions, especially under Khamene'i's tenure as Supreme Leader (1989 to the present) as he appoints members of the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, and the head of the Judiciary.

Nonetheless, reformist interpretations of Islamic laws and traditions also emerged among jurists in Qom following Khomeini's death. For example, Grand Ayatollah Yusef Sane'i has argued that Islam does not prohibit women from becoming presidents, judges or *mujtahids* and that they can deliver *fatwas* (religious edicts).²⁹ He also ruled that blood money should be the same for men and women. Ayatollah Jannâti, a cleric who teaches at the Qom seminary, declared that the majority of the fifty thousand *hadiths* (sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammad) that have not been authenticated are nonetheless used against women. He argued that they are used to prevent women's access to higher positions and prevent them from obtaining their social rights.³⁰

Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari refutes the arguments of Islamic jurisconsults who maintain that the family and society should be established according to a preordained natural structure. Mojtahed Shabestari contextualises and historicises the reading and understanding of the Qur'an and traditions and argues: 'We should understand the Prophet's undertakings in the social and historical context of his time. He has modified certain rights and regulations, which he considered to be unfair to women. He established women's right to property, reformed women's inheritance rights and limited the number of wives for polygamous men. He has thus advanced from injustice towards justice. If we accept this assumption, then we should also admit that the changes the Prophet made in the status of women are not definitive. The main message of these changes introduced by the Prophet is that other inequalities which have been imposed on women throughout history should be abolished.'³¹ These reformist interpretations, however, have only had a minor impact in terms of legislation, which remains disadvantageous for women and their rights.

Both Islamic and secular advocates of women's rights rejected divine justifications for gender inequality through a new reading of Islam, which

29. See Ayatollah Yusef Sane'i's interview with the magazine *Payâm-e Zan*, published by the Qom religious seminary: *Payâm-e Zan*, no. 63, Khordad 1376 [May-June 1997], pp. 6-9.

30. Interview of Ayatollah Jannâti with *Hoquq-i Zan*, no. 19-20, March 2001, p. 13.

31. Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, *Naqdi bar Qara'at-e Rasmi az Din. Bohrânâ, chaleshâ, rah-e halâ* [A critique of the official reading of religion: crises, challenges and solutions], (Tehran: Tarh-i Naw, 2000), pp. 503-04.

accommodates the equality of rights between men and women. They engaged in an intellectual effort to reconcile Islam with modernity, thus challenging the hegemony of the official version of Islamic discourse and practice, and reinventing and reinterpreting traditions to the benefit of women. For example, they successfully campaigned for the abolition of the law on stoning as a punishment for adultery. Women lawyers and activists demanded its abrogation on the grounds that no Qur'anic verse stipulated such punishment for adultery.

The persistence of patriarchy

The persistence of gender inequality during the Khatami presidency and the sixth parliament dominated by reformers disillusioned women activists who had supported Khatami and the reformers, and widened the gap between the female population and the state. Jamileh Kadivar, a member of the sixth parliament from Tehran declared: 'We know that nominating one or two women ministers will not resolve women's problems, yet we are convinced that such nominations could have had positive social and cultural consequences'.³² Likewise, Akram Mansourimaneh, a member of the parliament from Isfahan, declared: 'President Khatami's refusal to nominate women who are more competent than male ministers humiliates the entire female population'.³³ Women's disillusionment with reformers further radicalised the women's movement, and women activists started to rely on their own abilities to promote the status of women and gender equality.

Political demobilisation of women activists first contributed to the election of a neo-conservative seventh parliament (2004-2008), and then to the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, supported by fundamentalist clerics and gender segregationists. Unlike women members of the sixth parliament who had attempted to reform laws, anti-feminist women members of the seventh parliament supported polygamy, advocated more repressive measures against 'improperly veiled women', and rejected the approval of CEDAW. In contrast to the reformist era when these women interacted with the power elite in their endeavours to implement change, today it is through social activity and the mobilisation of civil society that women activists who have now gained autonomy from the power elite attempt to introduce change from below.

Following the success of their campaign against the controversial provisions in the Family Bill in 2008, and prior to the June 2009 presidential elections, a large coalition of secular and Muslim women was formed and put forward a series of demands including the change in discriminatory articles of the constitutional law and the civil code,

32. See Jamileh Kadivar's interview with *Siyat-I Ruz*, no. 115, 4 September 2001.

33. See interview with Akram Mansourimaneh in *Zanan*, no. 79, September 2001, p. 12.

and the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Mansoureh Shojaei, a founding member of the One Million Signature Campaign, declared: 'By launching the Campaign we wanted both to put pressure on the Parliament to implement legal reforms, and to create a large network of women. Shirin Ebadi helped us to write a booklet on laws that perpetuate gender inequality. We then distributed the booklet clandestinely. Our demands were not ideological but exclusively juridical. For this reason we managed to create a large coalition which brought together a large spectrum of advocates of women's rights from Islamic to secular to atheist women. We also organised clandestine workshops to increase women's knowledge of legal issues and of feminism. Several thousand women participated in our workshops before several of us were arrested'.³⁴

Forty-two women seized the opportunity provided by the 2009 presidential elections to challenge conservatives and to voice women's demands by presenting their candidacy. Secular and Islamic advocates of women's rights, who are overwhelmingly from the middle class, formed a large coalition and demanded that the future president undertake efforts towards the ratification of CEDAW. The coalition also demanded the modification of the articles of the constitutional and the civil and penal codes that are particularly discriminatory against women. Following the contested result of the presidential elections and despite the repressive measures applied by the government against all opponents, and the imprisonment of dozens of women's rights advocates, some vocal Islamic and secular women continue to struggle against conservative bills, laws and perceptions that are to the detriment of women and their rights. In January 2010, when the Islamic Parliament was discussing the new Family Protection Bill prepared by Ahmadinejad's government, Ashraf Boroujerdi severely criticised its article 23 of the bill, which concerns men's right to polygamy. She argued that the aim of the supporters of the bill is to normalise polygamy and to alter society's negative perception of it. Like Azam Taliqani and numerous other gender-conscious Islamic women, Boroujerdi believes that the Qur'an emphasises the impossibility of polygamy and advocates monogamy. She therefore maintains that 'those who prepared the bill and those who support it are not propagating Islamic traditions, but the Arab traditions prevailing during the era of Arab ignorance (*jahiliyya*)'. For Boroujerdi, this new Family Protection Bill targets those married women who tirelessly pursue their social and civil rights. 'Conservative policymakers have decided to launch a war against active women and their struggles and want to force women back to domesticity'.³⁵

The unprecedented political crisis that followed the contested results of the elections, with post-electoral protests and repression of opponents,

34. Talk by Mansoureh Shojaei, 'Women and Violence in Iran', CEDREF, University of Paris Diderot-Paris 7, 22 November 2011.

35. Ashraf Boroujerdi, interview with *Khabar Online*, 5 January 2010. Available at: www.fardanews.com.

has, for the time being, overshadowed the plight of Iran's women. Despite the opposition of women's rights activists, the parliament has continued working on the Family Protection Bill. Likewise, in March-April 2010, Ahmadinejad expressed concern about Iran's modern demographic patterns and declared that two children per family was not enough, claiming that the country could support a 30 percent rise in the population.

Repeated attempts by the government to revive patriarchal traditions, however, are likely to be doomed to failure in a society in which modern social behavioural patterns are so well-established. Moreover, in the current context of a deep economic crisis and a sharp decrease in the purchasing power of families, women are likely to continue seeking a wage-earning activity, especially in the informal sector of the economy, to pursue higher education, and to have fewer children. As for polygamous marriages, they will be limited to a minority of rich men. Likewise, Islamic laws and institutions that tend to reinforce patriarchy and gendered social relations in both the public and the private spheres are likely to continue to be challenged, especially by the country's youth, precisely because they are in contradiction with women's new demographic, social and cultural aspirations and experiences.

Young women increasingly reject assigned identities, transgress norms and refuse to be constrained by rigid gender roles and dress codes. Many young women who actively participated in post-electoral street demonstrations were 'improperly veiled', had long varnished nails and dyed hair, and yet they took the risk of participating in highly dangerous street demonstrations, sometimes throwing stones at the *Basij*. But some of these young women also appropriated the sphere of martyrdom. During the Iran-Iraq war women acceded to martyrdom only as family members (mothers, wives, daughters or sisters of martyrs).³⁶ The assassination of Neda Agha-Soltan (who was a 'transgressor') by the *Basij* on 17 June 2009 during the post-electoral protests, made her a female martyr who entered the sphere of martyrdom as a woman/individual (because she was not married and was not a mother), and became the icon of the whole movement.

Despite the post-election repression a number of secular and Islamic advocates of women's rights continue to meet and protest. Zahra Rahnava, a university professor and a women's rights advocate, who plays a crucial role in shaping the political views of her husband (Mir-Hossein Moussavi), started to participate in these meetings from March 2010 onwards. But like the Green Movement, the women's movement as a civil society movement has no unified leadership or a structured organisation. It is a rather loose coalition of women with different aspirations and from diverse political or ideological backgrounds who joined forces to implement change in laws and improve the status and condition of Iranian women. But because gender inequality is an integral component of the Islamic state, every endeavour to promote gender

36. Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister. Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

equality is a challenge to the power structure. Lack of organisation in both the women's and the Green movements is a major impediment to the expansion of these social movements. The limitations set by the government on freedom of expression and action, the arrest and imprisonment of a number of women's rights advocates, including Nasrin Sotoudeh (a prominent lawyer), Bahareh Hedayat (a student leader), Fakhrosadat Mohtashamipour (an influential member of the reformist Participation Front Party), Zhila Baniyaghoub and Shiva Nazarahari (prominent journalists), the house arrest of Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karoubi, and the exile of several others (including the Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, the prominent lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, Mansoureh Shojaee, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, Parvin Ardalan and Shadi Sadr), have led to a decrease in the activities of women's rights advocates and their campaigns (e.g. the One Million Signature Campaign to change the discriminatory laws, the Campaign Against Stoning and all Forms of Violence Against Women, and the White Scarves Campaign against sex segregation in sport stadiums).

For the time being, women's rights advocates remain largely confined to the educated urban middle class and more often than not ethnic Persian women in large towns. Thus there is a need to diversify and expand the base of women sympathetic to women's rights. Many of these 'ordinary women', some of whom are working to improve women's conditions in their villages or towns, have no well-established connection to the urban-centred women's rights campaigns. The latter, including the One Million Signature campaign, several of whose activists have been arrested and imprisoned for defending women's rights, are almost exclusively active in Tehran and large towns and are better known outside of Iran than inside the country.

Like the Green Movement, the women's movement in Iran has adjusted to and been influenced by the expansion of internet use that has become such a salient feature of today's globalised world. The number of internet users in Iran soared from 250 in 1994 to 1 million in 2001, and to over 32 million in September 2009, which means that 46 percent of the population has some kind of access to the internet.³⁷ The number of weblogs has increased from 1 in 2001 to over 65,000 today.³⁸

The networking is by definition oblivious to territorial borders, allowing for a transnational mode of mobilisation in collective action, which exposes activists to new forms of socialisation. One of the most tangible effects of this globalisation of communication, and increasing interaction with the Iranian diaspora, is that both women's rights activists and those of the Green Movement (who are sometimes the same) overwhelmingly use the internet and cyberspace to the detriment of classical modes of organisation and physical contact with ordinary women. Although the internet might constitute a basis for inventing new forms of solidarity

37. See: www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm.

38. Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, 'Blogging From Qom, Behind Walls and Veils', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2008, pp. 235-49.

among citizens that are likely to enhance collective action in the global space, nation-states still remain the major framework for collective action, and international civil society has yet to prove its efficiency. Therefore, if women's rights advocates fail to reach out to non-elite women inside Iran through more traditional social networks, they will isolate themselves from the majority of Iranian women (and men). Moreover, instead of working *for* women, women's rights advocates will have more success if they work *with* women. Together and through their social pressure on the governing elite they are more likely to implement change and reform in Iranian society.

Conclusion

As has been shown in this chapter, Iranian women have a significant structural presence and strength in their society. This crucial role is also confirmed by the massive and active participation of several generations of urban Iranian women in the protest movement that started following the contested results of the June 2009 presidential elections.

Women's active presence in the protest movement can partly be explained by the long history of a women's movement in Iran stretching back to the beginning of the twentieth century, the legal and institutional reforms of the Pahlavi monarchy, and women's participation in the 1979 revolution. But the most important reason lies in the paradoxical outcomes of the revolution that increased the social, political, cultural and economic activities of women, and radically changed their self-perception.

As discussed in this chapter, the interplay between the modernisation undertaken by the state, regardless of the authorities' initial intentions, in the spheres of education, demography and the effects of a changing economy and accelerated urbanisation, has led to major shifts in behavioural patterns and attitudes. Iranian women are increasingly well-educated, marry later, have fewer children and more and more aspire to the equal sharing of responsibilities for home and children with men.

These developments highlight the contradictions between women's modern social, demographic, political and cultural behaviour, on the one hand, and the archaic laws and institutions that attempt to reinforce patriarchal power relations, in both private and public realms, on the other hand. These ongoing contradictions constitute an important impetus for women's mobilisation against gender inequality.

Women's mobilisation also points to the existence of a dynamic civil society that started to emerge after the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Faced with an authoritarian state, and a closed political system that

did not authorise non-governmental political parties, women's rights advocates realised that the fulfilment of equal rights for women could not be achieved other than in a democratic environment. They therefore attempted to decentralise power and promote democracy through civil institutions. The orchestrated attacks by the government against civil institutions (including women's press, women's NGOs and campaigns) to further control their activities indicate how threatening women's civil society institutions have become for the powers that be. Under these circumstances formal organisations might be forced to go underground for a period of time but women's well-established informal networks are not likely to disappear.

The socio-political developments discussed in this chapter should however not be seen as uniformly affecting all women. There are important divides in Iranian society and they can be said to affect women to a significant extent. Educational and income levels in the countryside, and the concomitant differences in attitude and mobility, are still far below those in major urban areas. The economic disparities, which partly intersect with the geographical divide, also affect the women's movement's ability to foster solidarity and mobilise women across the whole social spectrum.

These informal networks, however, limit and weaken themselves by overwhelmingly concentrating their efforts on internet and cyberspace activities to reach out to educated middle-class women in Iran and those of the diaspora. Although about half of the Iranian population has access to the internet, the other half is still deprived of such tools. Thus, unless women's rights advocates strengthen their ties with women from rural or lower-class backgrounds, and ethnic women in middle and small towns where the majority of the population live, they will not be able to reach 'critical mass' in terms of sustaining themselves and achieving greater representability.

Despite the shortcomings of the women's rights movement, an increasing number of Iranian women from different generations and social categories, both urban and rural, play a crucial role in the weakening of patriarchal family and social structures. Young women who are overwhelmingly highly educated, vocal and open to the outside world, have realised that gender equality and democracy are intertwined, and have become standard-bearers of the ongoing genuine non-violent movement for democracy that contests the patriarchal political order. Looking at the experience of women participating in Iranian politics, and their support for and subsequent disillusionment with reformist leaders, an increasing number of gender-conscious women are now determined that the coalition of the women's rights movement with the Green Movement for Democracy must prioritise women's autonomy and their demands for gender equality.

Student movements in the Islamic Republic: shaping Iran's politics through the campus

Paola Rivetti

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Introduction

Universities and student activism have proven to be central to Iranian politics. Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, university students actively participated in the political life of the country, sometimes backing the ruling governments, sometimes violently contesting them. It is, however, important to remember that students organised in political associations and voiced opposition to the government well before the 1979 revolution. Student opposition to the ruling powers in Iran goes back to the early twentieth century, with the student movement achieving international credibility and becoming the vanguard of opposition to the monarchy in the 1960s.¹ Then as now, after the 2009 presidential election when the country was shaken by large demonstrations demanding fair elections, student protests have received extensive international attention.

The notion of universities being centres of political activism and dissent is particularly pertinent in Iran given the history of the student movement's opposition to the Shah and their subsequent resistance to the authoritarian developments of the Islamic Republic.²

This chapter, however, seeks to qualify this view of students as naturally keen to engage in opposition and protests – although this is often true. It rather tries to investigate 'the other side of the coin', focusing on the continuity and linkage between student activism and state institutions,

1. See Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2001), *passim*, in particular chapters one and three.
2. See Mehrdad Mashayekhi, 'The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2001; Behzad Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran: An Eyewitness Account of Dissent, Defiance, and New Movements for Rights* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002). There is also a rich literature in Persian on this topic. See below in the text and, for example, Morad Saghafi, 'Daneshjoo, Dowlat va Enqelab' ['Students, Government and Revolution'], *Goftogu*, no. 5, 1994, pp. 9-26 and 'Jarian-e Daneshjuian, chalesha va rahkarha. Goftogu ba Ali Tajrania' ['Student movement, challenges and solutions. A discussion with Ali Tajrania'], *Cheshmandaz-e Iran*, no. 26, (1383/2004), pp. 107-11.

going beyond the idea of university as an autonomous site of opposition against the state. While it may be that universities are, as a site and system of higher education, the locus of dissent *par excellence*, they are also institutions where co-optation and social and professional identities are forged. Universities are the crucible where a sense of patriotism is instilled in students and the future political elite is educated and socialised into politics. This importance is reflected in the attention that governments give to universities: the campus is the first context of political education, where loyalties and political affiliations – which may have future implications beyond the campus – are established. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the connections between Iranian institutional politics and the university campus as a site for recruitment, political mobilisation and power distribution among the competing political factions of the Islamic Republic.

The chapter focuses on two main aspects. First, the interactions between the regime and student movements³ in terms of factionalism, political recruitment and power distribution: this perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of Iranian domestic politics. In addition, as many dissident students have fled the country due to the clampdown on political activity in the last few years, the potential influence that this diaspora can exert from abroad on the political situation in Iran is the second element that is taken into consideration.

Universities are inherently political institutions, and their internal dynamics need to be understood in order to acquire a deeper insight into political developments in Iran: a study of the struggle for the control of an important cultural and economic resource for the Islamic state, as represented by universities, sheds substantial light on the factional struggles that are such a salient feature of Iranian politics. Furthermore, it provides a barometer of the state's level of tolerance for freedom of speech and civil rights and also of the likelihood of change in the Islamic Republic – a scenario which may also be linked to the high number of activists living outside of the country. This chapter covers all these issues, attempting to provide an assessment of the current situation and some suggestions for the future.

Historical background: student politics and the revolution

The student movement in Iran has deep historical roots. Since the establishment of the University of Tehran in 1934 by Reza Shah Pahlavi, universities have been an important arena where the regimes have tried to forge national identity and form an educated political elite and

3. Although Iranian universities are home to a large number of student organisations, which are quite ideologically diverse, for the purposes of this chapter the focus is on the main organisations.

where at the same time opposition movements have tried to mobilise support. During Reza Shah's reign, the university population was both rather small and homogeneous, a situation which changed due to the opportunities ushered in by the political opening up that took place between 1941 and 1953.⁴ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah, had ambitious plans for the Iranian higher education sector. As he wanted Iran to become one of the most developed countries in the world, he needed well-prepared and educated technicians and intellectuals to lead such a process, and he therefore established more campuses and increased scholarships for studying abroad.⁵ Ironically this provided the anti-Shah students with the opportunity to meet and organise both domestically and abroad – where approximately 200,000 resided⁶ – to express their dissent despite the harsh repression.⁷

Thus, when the revolution erupted in 1979, the universities were hotbeds of activism. A witness recalls that period as one in which various political groups established their headquarters on the campuses and universities became the most active political arena in society, to the point that the then government was afraid of losing control over the whole anti-Shah student movement.⁸ Another witness, who took active part in the management of universities after the revolution,⁹ explains that the conflict within campuses came to an end with the Cultural Revolution (1980-1983). The university system was under strong pressure as it was perceived to be a legacy of the former unwanted regime and some clerics saw it as posing a challenge to the religious seminaries (the *Howzeh*). As he put it: 'The universities needed control. I was part of the delegation which exposed this problem to Khomeini: it was on that day that the *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat* was born'. *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat-e Howzeh va Daneshgah* (Office for the Strengthening of Unity between the Islamic Schools and the Universities, DTV) is an umbrella organisation whose central office coordinates all the Islamic associations in the individual universities. For many years to come it would constitute the main networking hub for politically active students whose engagement in politics took them beyond the world of the campus.¹⁰

The delegation visiting Khomeini was composed of many soon-to-be main players in Iranian politics such as Seyyed Ali Khamene'i (the present *Rahbar* – Leader – of the Islamic Republic) and Abdol Hasan Bani Sadr. Bani Sadr became the first president of the Islamic Republic only to be deposed in 1981 and now lives in exile in Paris. Other members were: Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha, a leading cleric and founder of the *Majma-e Rohaniyoun Mobarez*, the Assembly of the Militant Clerics (the Islamic leftist group, supportive of President Khatami) and of the newspaper *Salam*; Mojtabeh Shabestari, a pro-democracy reformist Ayatollah; Peiman Habibollah, a member of the Socialist Islamic Party who is today is an influential member of the Religious-Nationalist Alliance, an oppositional group outside of Iran; Hasan Habibi, a leading

4. In 1941, the Shah Reza Pahlavi was forced to abdicate by the Allies and an opening up of the political system occurred up until 1951-1953, when the *coup* against Mohammad Mossadeq and the restoration of the Pahlavi regime with the ascension to power of Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, took place.
5. Mohammad Reza Djalili, 'Les relations culturelles internationales de l'Iran', *Revue iranienne des relations internationales*, no. 2, 1974-75, pp. 107-26.
6. Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi, 'Reordering Public and Private in Iranian Cyberspace: Identity, Politics, and Mobilization', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, p. 223.
7. Reza Razavi, 'The Cultural Revolution in Iran, with Close Regard to the Universities, and its Impact on the Student Movement', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, January 2009, p. 1.
8. Personal interview with an Iranian leading politician, Tehran, June 2007. He held important institutional functions and headed a dissident semi-legal party, the Liberation Movement (*Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran*). Although seriously ill, he has been recently arrested.
9. Personal interview with a leading Iranian politician, Tehran, May 2008. He was a founder-member of the *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat* and the Islamic Participation Front, which supported Khatami's government. He was an advisor to Mehdi Karroubi in the 2009 presidential elections. A journalist at the newspaper *Salam*, he also writes for the online newspaper *Roaz Online* (www.roozonline.com).
10. Until 1993 only members of the Islamic associations elected the members of the central office. Since that date all students have been able to cast their vote.

politician who served as Minister of Justice and vice-president in both the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations (until 2001).

The group was not ideologically homogeneous, and it was Mousavi Khoeiiniha who emerged as the dominant leader: he enjoyed many connections with the Islamic students' groups, which is why the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979 involved so many students.¹¹ From that time on, up until the advent of Ahmadinejad, the cultural hegemony of the Islamic left was firmly established within universities and the DTV.

It was Khomeini who called for a cultural revolution, but many others echoed his words. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the Islamic leftist prime minister between 1981 and 1989 and later well-known reformist who accused Ahmadinejad of having stolen the 2009 election, stated that 'universities are not a place for professionals (*motakhasses*) but are a place for pious and engaged religious persons (*maktabi*) who at the same time are learning a profession (*takhassus*). We cannot accept anything other than to have a *maktabi* university.'¹² In those early heady days of the Islamic Republic, Mousavi's wife described the universities as 'nests of spies, although she herself had headed the Al-Zahra University in Tehran for many years.¹³ The immediate practical consequence of these accusations was the closing down of all universities from 1980 until 1983 and the Islamisation of the *curricula* and of the general atmosphere of the universities.

In 1980, a special council, the Cultural Revolution Council, was established in order to implement this programme. Among the members of the council were Abdolkarim Soroush (the famous philosopher, who today stands accused by the conservatives of being Western-oriented) and Ali Khamene'i (currently Supreme Leader).¹⁴ The mission of the council was to supervise the Islamisation of the universities, which was accompanied by massive purges¹⁵ and the hiring of new 'selected' faculty members and the admission of new students. The Cultural Revolution still occupies an important place in the memories of the reformist and democratic students, the present-day members of the DTV. The youngest generation of activists defines those years as a 'betrayal' of the then revolutionary ideals of the students. The Cultural Revolution brought about a major change in the student population in universities. Facilities for students from lower-class backgrounds were introduced and, as a result of the faculty purges, a significant number of wealthy and upper-middle class families sent their sons and daughters to universities abroad or to the private Islamic Azad universities.¹⁶ The emphasis on religious adherence and moral rectitude as admission criteria, as well as the introduction of admission quotas for the children or relatives of war veterans and *Basij* (a volunteer militia force) members, changed the character of the student body both qualitatively and quantitatively.

11. Personal interview with a leading Iranian politician, Tehran, May 2008 (see footnote 8).

12. Razavi, *op. cit.* in note 7, p. 4.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Other members were Mostafa Moin (former Minister of Science and staunch reformist, accused today of being too liberal by the conservatives) and Hassan Habibi.

15. According to Abdolkarim Soroush, 700 out of 12,000 professors and assistants were purged and some 200,000 students were dismissed. See Matin Ghaffarian, *One Cultural Revolution was enough: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush*, June 2007; available at: www.drsoroush.com. Other sources give much higher figures, and put the number of assistants and professors purged at 8,000; see Ali Aziminejad cited in Razavi, *op. cit.* in note 7, p. 6.

16. The private Azad Universities were established in 1982 to offer an alternative to the public universities, which had been closed down.

The end of the war and Ayatollah Khomeini's death helped a new era to take shape. At the political level, the Islamic left was pushed aside by the election of Hashemi Rafsanjani as President of the Republic and the nomination of Ayatollah Khamene'i as Supreme Leader of the Revolution. Both these men were hostile to the Islamic left. As the DTV, the only student organisation in the country, was strongly linked to the Islamic left, the government made great efforts to weaken it, by generating factionalism within the campus – a factionalism which mirrored the political divisions within the national political landscape. Student *Basij* units were introduced in universities and a new student group (the Islamic Association of the Student *Basij*)¹⁷ was established in 1992, under the auspices of the government. The creation of the student *Basij* units was accompanied by a law which introduced a special quota for student *Basij* members to enter universities. Furthermore, the Cultural Revolution Council passed new guidelines for choosing university councils and presidents. Under these new rules, Islamic leftist students were prevented from participating in such councils and influencing the nomination of the highest university functionaries, who decided on the legal status of student associations. A new office was also established, the Office of Representatives of the Supreme Leader, which had a permanent presence in universities.¹⁸ Reza Razavi also reports that voices were raised in favour of dismantling the DTV: its formation in the early days of the revolution had been designed to unite all Islamic groups within universities against the opposition, composed mainly of Marxist and liberal parties. Since by the 1990s the stability of the Islamic Republic was secured, some conservatives argued, the DTV's existence made no sense and thus it should be dissolved.¹⁹

But the introduction from above of new student organisations had unintended consequences: instead of marginalising the DTV, it created a new configuration of political alternatives on the campus, since the DTV became more aware of its own distinctive identity and allegiances. Up to that moment, the *Basij* and the DTV were not ideologically very different, but the arrival of the former on the campuses led to the polarisation of the two organisations. According to a former student: 'We discovered our difference. The content of that difference was suggested in Dr. Soroush's and Dr. Mohsen Kadivar's lectures'.²⁰ The presence of Abdolkarim Soroush among the lecturers of the University of Tehran is cited as one of the most important factors that helped to transform the DTV from a loyal ally of the regime into a critic of the regime's increasing authoritarianism. It began to call for more democratic accountability and more freedom of expression. In 1997, these positions and its dependence upon the Islamic left, which was itself undergoing a transition from the intransigency of the past to a reformist stance, led the DTV to support Khatami's presidential candidacy. This change can be seen as the result of a reaction of the young generation against the political models set by their predecessors. In the words of a political

17. The organisation was headed by Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, and later changed its name to the Union of Islamic Students. Tabarzadi broke with the DTV in 1991 and established this group. The group also published a magazine, 'Nameh-ye payam daneshjuy-e basij' ['The message of the *Basij* student']. However, the group quickly developed increasingly critical positions towards the regime. Tabarzadi has been in jail since December 2009. See Ali Akbar Mahdi, 'The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1999, p. 11.

18. See *ibid.*, pp. 8–11.

19. Reza Razavi, *op. cit.* in note 7, p. 9.

20. Personal interview, Tehran, June 2007. Kadivar is an outspoken reformist cleric who now lives in exile in the United States.

veteran of the Islamic Republic: 'if the father is a monarchist, then the son is a radical Islamist, while the grandson is a liberal and a democrat', suggesting a rather simplistic but effective dialectic that can explain the dynamics of change within Iranian society.²¹ But there is another element which explains the transformation of the DTV from a stronghold of the regime into one of its most vociferous critics, namely the introduction of free elections for the Central Committee in 1993. The whole student body chose the members of the Central Committee, and many restrictions on candidacy were abandoned. The DTV started to attract people with different views and opinions, becoming a relatively 'free harbour for political activists,' as one interviewee observed, moving away from its early ideological moorings, characterised by an uncritical loyalty to the Islamic left and later on to the reformists.²²

From a social point of view, at the beginning of the 1990s the Islamic Republic was confronted with tumultuous change. Having emerged from a decade of war, followed by the death of Khomeini, it now needed to find a way to reintegrate the international political and economic system. In this transition to a post-revolutionary society, the universities of the Islamic Republic lost their former homogeneity as the numbers of students in higher education increased: the students and faculties became more politically diversified, leading to internal diversification of student movements. In this regard the universities mirrored the broader transformation taking place in Iranian society.

The number of students rose from 150,000 in 1976 to 1,150,000 in 1996,²³ and this exponential growth was to a large degree due to the increasing number of female students. This particular aspect became a source of concern for the conservatives, since it presented the DTV with new opportunities for recruitment. This increase in numbers was accompanied by a change in students' attitudes towards politics and life in general. As Ahmad Rajabzadeh shows, in 2004 a decrease in traditional religious beliefs was detectable among the students, and a corresponding adherence to rationalism, a more scientific approach to life, began to prevail. In particular, the authority of the clergy to prescribe the correct interpretation of religion came under a great deal of criticism.²⁴

Universities are a space for the socialisation of beliefs and values. This can be a threat as well as an opportunity for ruling élites. The situation in the late 1990s was very similar to the pre-revolution context, when Mohammad Reza Shah expanded the higher education system. Although he thought he was initiating a process of building a new and loyal élite, in reality he was creating optimal conditions for an oppositional movement to develop. Similarly the expansion of higher education provided the reformists and the Islamic left with a good opportunity to strengthen the alliance with the students. When Mohammad Khatami inaugurated

21. Personal interview with a well-known journalist, Tehran, July 2008. He was editor-in-chief of many reformist newspapers and journals. He worked for the regime propaganda organisation in Beirut, Lebanon, between 1983 and 1985. During Khatami's presidency he was a supporter of the reforms and a vociferous critic of the authoritarian elements of the Iranian regime.

22. Personal interview with a former student and member of the central committee of the DTV, Tehran, May 2007.

23. Mahdi, *op. cit.* in note 17, p. 14.

24. Ahmad Rajabzadeh, 'University and Religion in Iran: A Survey on the State Universities of Tehran', *Discourse*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2004, pp. 107-38.

his campaign for the 1997 presidential election, whose keywords were ‘democracy’, ‘civil society’ and ‘rule of law’, the students were urged to become actively involved through the DTV. Still dominant on the campuses, the DTV had undergone major internal changes caused by the massive influx of new members with different political viewpoints: this engendered its growing ambition to become independent from institutional politics, an unexpected development for the reformist governments.

Universities as the site of power and factional struggle

Khatami: promotion of and transformations in student activism

Reformist students have long played an active role in the factional politics of the Islamic Republic, supporting the Islamic left. Universities were a real stronghold of the reformists during Khatami’s first presidential term, and the DTV and Islamic associations of every university were transformed into electoral headquarters for the reformists during Khatami’s presidential campaign and the 2000 parliamentary elections.²⁵ For many, this showed that the DTV had never had any political independence to begin with.²⁶ The reformist government headed by Khatami repaid this loyalty by giving favourable treatment to the DTV students and allowing the organisation a great deal of political visibility. Thus Khatami’s presidency represented a new opportunity for the DTV and student activism.²⁷

Khatami was central to the promotion of student activism both personally as well as by virtue of the importance of his office in the institutional governing of Iranian universities. As the head of the Council of the Cultural Revolution, the President supervises the nomination of university chancellors, the devising of *curricula*, the selection of student candidates, and finally promotes the ideological and political order on university campuses.

But the alliance between the DTV and the reformist faction proved to be a precarious one. The first step towards a breakdown was the July 1999 student protests, which were sparked by a factional dispute over newly passed amendments to the press law.²⁸ Students considered the amendments, approved by a parliament dominated by the conservatives, to be yet another restriction on the freedom of speech and the press. Thus when *Salam*, one of the well-known Islamic-leftist newspapers, was closed down as a consequence of this new law, the students staged

25. See Mashayekhi, op. cit. in note 2, p. 296 and following pages.

26. The interviewees who were active members of the DTV supported such a view. The interviews were conducted in 2007 and 2008 in Iran, and in 2011 in Turkey.

27. For an example of Khatami’s attitude toward university students, see the video of one of his visits to Tehran University in 2002, where he was met with vociferous protests from angry students. The video is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrZw-yGlyTk>.

28. See Mahdi, op. cit. in note 17, pp. 13 and following pages.

29. *Hamshahri* reported 5 dead, 11 July 1999.
30. Neshat, 28 July 1999. Charles Kurzman, 'Student Protests and the Stability of Gridlock in Khatami's Iran', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, XXV, 1, 2001, p. 41.
31. *Khordad*, 8 June 1999. Behzad Nabavi, a reformist deputy, accused the students of creating confusion in the country.
32. 'Jarian-e Daneshjuian, chaleshha va rahkarha. Goftogu ba Ali Tajrania' ['Student movement, challenges and solutions. A discussion with Ali Tajrania'], *Cheshmandaz-e Iran*, no. 26 (1383/2004), p. 190.
33. Personal interview with a member of the DTV, Tehran, 2008.
34. Personal interview with a female student member of the Special Commission for Women within the DTV, Tehran, 2008. See also the magazine *Gozaar*, no. 11, 2007 (www.gozaar.org).
35. Mehdi Karroubi had done likewise in 2003, when the DTV organised protests against a hike in tuition fees. Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 16 June 2003.
36. Personal interview with a leading Iranian politician, Tehran, May 2008 (see footnote 8).
37. Such as the association of liberal students (*anjoman-e daneshjuian liberal*), still active in Iran. It is not recognised as a lawful student organisation. Its website is: <http://cheragheazadi.org>. Some of its members are among the 19 activists who signed a letter calling for isolating the Islamic Republic (see below, note 66).

a peaceful protest. The protest was followed by a bloody attack by paramilitary forces (among which Ansar-e Hezbollah and sections of the *Basij*) on the student dormitory in Amirabad in Tehran. Several people are known to have been killed and many wounded, but precise figures are not available.²⁹ The students asked Khatami to support them, but he described the protests as 'an attack on national security'.³⁰ Many within the reformist front shared this attitude, probably because they feared an uncontrolled escalation of violence.³¹ The dormitory incident occupies a special place in the memories of Iranian students, as it generated a profound feeling of betrayal. The incident also constitutes a precedent for the latest attacks against the students' dormitories that took place in 2009. It led to a major debate on the role of students in politics, although the DTV's membership in *Dovvom-e Khordad*, the coalition that was created to support the reformist candidate at the 2000 parliamentary election, delayed a standoff with the regime somewhat.³²

In 2002, however, the debate led to the splitting of the DTV into two branches and the severing of ties with *Dovvom-e Khordad*. The Allameh branch, the majority, advocated an independent democratic opposition to the conservatives 'from below', within society and outside institutions, whereas the Shiraz minority branch joined the conservative camp. The Allameh students were determined to act as a sort of 'watchdog' and counterbalance to the government, because they judged the government to be unable to foster a path to democracy for Iran.³³ They set up a number of special commissions to establish collaboration with organisations outside the universities, such as women's NGOs and the 'bus drivers' trade union for example: according to the students, an extra-institutional alliance of citizens and 'civil society' was much more likely to usher in the much awaited transition to democracy.³⁴

This independent attitude and critical stance was not welcomed by the reformists, who accused the students of being manipulated by foreign powers – a heinous accusation in Iran.³⁵ The DTV brought this conflict into the public arena, and was marginalised and excluded by the very same government it had supported. To borrow the metaphor of one reformist politician and former leader of the DTV, the students were 'swept away like grains of sand, no longer protected by the desert'.³⁶ Factionalism was the only approved model for governing university campuses and the student movement, and the DTV's independent attitude was interpreted as a betrayal and an unacceptable option, eventually leading to their marginalisation.

Thus, one of the outcomes of the shifting relationship between Khatami's government and the DTV was the disintegration of the unity of the students: hit by 'friendly fire', the DTV broke up into several smaller groups which spanned a broad ideological spectrum, ranging from conservatism, as in the Shiraz group, to radical liberalism.³⁷ The

government's determination to force the DTV to submit to a factional-reformist allegiance led the student organisation to exit from the political game altogether. Ironically, this was a great boon to Ahmadinejad's efforts to bring the universities to heel, and detrimental to the reformists who lost an important support base.

After Ahmadinejad's ascension to the presidency in 2005 the campuses again turned into battlefields between the pro-government students (mainly organised in *Basij* units) and the opposition student groups (brought together in the DTV-Allameh and other minor forces). The repression of reformist students and the promotion of *Basij* units in turn led to the strengthening of connections between these marginalised students and external reformist organisations (women's movements, workers' movements etc.)

The oppressive atmosphere is best described by the students themselves: many of them underline the fact that the youngest students now feared to be seen with activists, to such an extent that even to 'have a chat is thought of as too dangerous.'³⁸ Thanks to governmental support, being a *Basij* is seen as a more rewarding and opportune option than engaging in opposition activities. This altered political landscape on the campuses does not mean that the spirit of dissent among the students has disappeared: only that it has moved underground, or outside the country.

Ahmadinejad: universities as a means to attain domination

Regimes and governments of all sorts employ a variety of means to shape the political identity of future citizens while they are still students. In the Ahmadinejad era this means that the student *Basij* units receive financial and political help enabling them to become stronger and bigger. When the student *Basij* units were first created their functions were diverse and consisted mainly of welcoming the new students and performing other 'representational' duties. Their task was to control and contain the DTV as well, but until Khatami's victory in 1997 they were not endowed with a role beyond the confines of the universities. It was only after the rise and strengthening of the reform movement that the *Basij* units became an operational tool in the hands of the conservatives to suppress active reformist groups. The *Basij* presence on campuses was then reinforced by a law passed in 1998, which changed the *Basij* units into a military institution and allowed the presence of military units in the universities.³⁹ This 'new' role of the *Basij* units became even clearer during the suppression of the student protests in July 1999. Since the late 1990s, some new regulations for *Basij* units in universities have been adopted. For example, 40 percent of the total number of places for new students entering the universities every year

38. Personal interview with a former member of the DTV, Tehran, August-September 2008.

39. A move which, according to one of the author's interviewees, was supported by Said Hajjarian, a former member of the Institute of Security and Strategic Research and a leader of the reformists who, in 1992, launched the 'Security Plan', whose purpose was to prevent a possible uprising and protests emanating from the DTV and Iranian society in general. The student *Basij* units within the universities had this function. Hajjarian is close to Rafsanjani. This information was revealed in a personal interview with a former member of the DTV central committee, Tehran, May 2008.

have been reserved for active *Basij* students. At the national level, the Student *Basij* Organisation has grown substantially in recent years: in 2004, the student *Basij* in Iranian universities numbered some 420,000, and by 2007 they had increased to 600,000.⁴⁰ These developments have changed the student population. In the state universities, it was only after 2005 that the special quota for *Basij* was introduced.

The establishment of the *Basij* in the universities has been important to Ahmadinejad and conservatives in the post-Khatami era since they are a key instrument for challenging the reformists' domination over the campuses and for suppressing opposition and student dissent. During Ahmadinejad's first presidential term (2005-2009) there was talk of a projected second cultural revolution, as the government moved to enforce Islamic values and purge universities of 'liberal' and 'Western' views, introduced thanks to the 'moral lasciviousness' of the 'Rafsanjanists' and reformists. The *Basij* units were at the forefront of that project, enjoying some related privileges (e.g. a special university admissions quota, discounts on books and food, access to sports facilities, pilgrimages, travel and entertainment),⁴¹ enticements which especially appeal to students (both male and female) from poor and conservative families, whose aspirations to social mobility may, in this way, come to be realised.

Thus after Ahmadinejad's election, the DTV was explicitly targeted by the government who prevented it from organising the election for the Central Committee or from organising its own meetings, which eventually were held off campus.⁴² Active student groups were now only tolerated if they had pro-government credentials and the subsequent political vacuum left by the DTV was mainly filled by the *Basij*. Some Marxist and liberal student groups were also present in universities, although they were rather small and had been only recently been set up. As Babak Zamanian has stated, 'while the situation had not been ideal in the Khatami years, Mr. Ahmadinejad's anti-reformist campaign ... led students to value their previous freedoms.'⁴³ In 2005 the newly appointed dean of the Polytechnic, Alireza Rahai, ordered the demolition of the office of the Islamic Association, the pro-reform group which was the core of political activities on campus. According to students interviewed in 2006, since 2005 more than 100 liberal professors have been forced into retirement, at least 70 students have been suspended for political activities, and some 30 students have been given warnings.⁴⁴ Obviously these numbers have increased further in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections.

This 'second cultural revolution', as it was swiftly dubbed, has seen the firing or forced retirement of teachers regarded as having liberal sympathies and the removal of activists from the universities. The banning of students is also known as the 'starring of students' because the files of students with activist backgrounds are rated according to a scale of one to three stars, with students assigned three stars being barred from

40. Saeid Golkar, 'The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities. How the Student *Basij* Serve the Regime's Purposes', *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2010, p. 26.

41. See also Ali Reza Eshraghi, 'Iranian students fight hard and soft', *Asia Times Online*, 2 July 2010.

42. Personal communication with a student who escaped from Iran, March 2011. The last general election of the Central Committee of the DTV was held electronically, through the internet, in 2010. According to two of the members of this last Central Committee, the election was not conducted according to the rules. These two former members have left the country, and are today living abroad. Personal interview, July 2011.

43. Babak Zamanian, quoted in Nazila Fathi's article, 'Iranian students fight hard and soft', *New York Times*, 21 December 2006.

44. Ibid.

entering university education. This is a well-known practice, which has been denied by the government, although the issue has been openly debated in the media.⁴⁵ Those who are 'starred' are not able to pursue their enrolment in universities (or to continue their education) because their files are said to be 'incomplete,' as the Central Selection Committee of the University and the Ministry of Science prefer to use the term 'incomplete file' rather than 'starred student.'⁴⁶ Those who find themselves in such a situation are given the opportunity to be re-integrated into the academic community through abjuration. They have to sign a letter of regret, and can then register conditionally. The goal of the government is to chasten and to punish 'bad' students, not primarily to exclude them, and in this case bureaucracy rather than overt repression is used to obtain students' compliance. The practice of starring students is the result of a 'security-driven' use of bureaucracy, and is a good indicator of the degree of collusion between the Security and Information Ministry and the universities. The real reason for their exclusion, and eventually in some cases expulsion, is not clearly communicated to the students, although those excluded know why they are in this predicament (because of their political activities or 'incorrect' religious behaviour). As reported by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, university staff mainly express a sense of powerlessness or at best moderate solidarity with the students in this situation.⁴⁷ But this exclusionary practice is not the only tool used by the regime to bring university students to heel: recruitment and factionalism are other tools used to control the campuses. An examination of these latter issues can help towards a better understanding of the origins and evolution of domestic conflicts in Iran.

Universities as the recruitment pool of competing state elite factions

The elite system of the Islamic Republic is characterised by strong factionalism, whose boundaries have shifted over the years, and whose origins may often be traced back to political allegiances forged by politicians when they were student activists.⁴⁸ Retracing a politician's past is useful for understanding their political frame of reference as well as their actions; furthermore, this kind of analysis may be of great help when factional disputes emerge, as it can clarify individual political loyalties and stances. There are networks of 'special connections' within the system of the Islamic Republic, which forge political identities. A case in point is the inter-connectedness of politics, universities and the military sector by means of the *Basij* and *Sepah-e Pasdaran*, the revolutionary guards. This relation is not particular to Ahmadinejad's era; the link between the intelligence service, the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* and the *Basij* – which are today one military corps – has been a constant feature of the political history of the Islamic Republic. It is in the ranks of these organisations that many present-day politicians started their careers.

45. In 2007-2008, Iranian newspapers debated the issue at length. See *Punishing Stars: Systematic Denial of Higher Education in Iran*, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), 2011, pp. 41-51.

46. Ibid, p. 22. According to the ICHRI report, this has been happening since 2009.

47. ICHRI (2011), p. 37. In October 2011, the Science Minister Kamran Daneshjoo announced that students who participated in the post-2009 election protests will not receive any grant or financial help for studying. 'Protesters Won't Get Grants: Iran's Minister of Science', *Payvand News*, 24 October 2011.

48. See Bahman Bakhtiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran. The Institutionalisation of Factional Politics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996): 'factionocracy' is a fluid quasi-party system, where loyalty and belonging are defined by many aspects, not only ideological; Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002); and Farideh Farhi's chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.

From an historical point of view, membership of the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran* or the *Basij* should not be understood as a clear sign of a pro-Ahmadinejad or conservative political orientation. For instance, in the first decade after the revolution, the (para)military sector was strongly influenced by the Islamic left – which turned reformist in the 1990s. This is because these institutions are central to the whole system and have been conceived as a shared political lineage across the political spectrum of the Islamic Republic for many years. Nevertheless, today they are influenced by pro-Ahmadinejad forces. But their main loyalty is to the *Rahbar*, Khamenei, as the recent disputes between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei have shown.

Among Ahmadinejad's collaborators, it is easy to find persons who have a past in the ranks of the *Basij* and *Pasdaran* serving on university campuses. This is the case for Alireza Zakani, a parliamentary deputy and former head of the Student *Basij* Organisation, the coordinating authority of all the student *Basij* units.⁴⁹ Mehrdad Bazrpash is the former head of the *Basij* unit at Sharif University of Technology and was the Head of the National Youth Organisation until October 2010.⁵⁰ A rather interesting case is that of Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi, who is considered one of Ahmadinejad's closest collaborators and friends. He organised and managed Ahmadinejad's 2009 electoral campaign, was appointed as deputy Interior Minister in 2007 (a key position for the supervision of electoral procedures) and has numerous relatives and close friends who have been awarded government appointments. Mohamad Javad Bahonar, an experienced deputy and former Speaker of the Parliament, is Samareh's maternal uncle. Samareh's two brothers also have important posts in the Ministry of Oil and Energy.⁵¹ He is very close to the ultra-conservative Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, who has been seen as Ahmadinejad's mentor and who advocated the use of violence to suppress the reform movement in the 1990s.⁵² The relation between Ahmadinejad and Samareh is a *primus inter pares* relationship. In the past, Samareh helped the President with his political career, and now Ahmadinejad is returning the favour. Like Ahmadinejad, Samareh studied at Tehran's University of Science and Technology (popularly known as Elm-o Sanat), where the two started their shared history of engagement and activism. In the first student national election in 1979 Samareh was elected as the first representative from Elm-o Sanat, and Ahmadinejad as his deputy.⁵³

There are close links between the Tehran University of Science and Technology and Ahmadinejad's government, and there is a high concentration of its alumni among the president's entourage. They include many ministers of the current presidential cabinet: Ali Akbar Salehi, who lectured at Elm-o Sanat, former head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation, is the current Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁴ He also served for many years as the Chancellor of the Sharif University of Technology,

49. Zakani became famous as he criticised Ahmadinejad's harsh repression of the protests in December 2009.

50. Golkar, op. cit. in note 40, p. 26.

51. Muhammad Sahimi, 'Ahmadinejad and Family take on "new" Foreign Policy', Tehran Bureau, 2 September 2009.

52. Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), pp. 162, 168. See also Babak Ganji, 'Iranian Strategy: Factionalism and Leadership Politics', Defence Analysis of the United Kingdom, London 2007, p. 7.

53. Interview with a leading politician (see footnote 8).

54. Salehi's loyalty to Ahmadinejad is evidenced by the position the Minister took in the context of the recent dispute between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei – and in particular on the occasion of the dismissal of the Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Sharif Malekzadeh. See Najmeh Bozorgmehr, 'Iranian deputy foreign minister dismissed', *Financial Times*, 21 June 2011.

the most prestigious technological university in Tehran. Mehdi Ghazanfari is the Minister of Commerce, Industries and Mines, Ali Akbar Mehrabian was the Minister of Mines as well as being Ahmadinejad's nephew,⁵⁵ and Hamid Behbehani, a lecturer in transportation at Tehran's University of Science and Technology, was Ahmadinejad's mentor at university and Minister of Transportation. Behbehani was impeached by the *Majlis* in February 2011. The move against the Minister was endorsed by the Expediency Council too. Since Ahmadinejad is close to the impeached minister and the Expediency Council is headed by Rafsanjani, many have seen this dispute as a reflection of the rivalry between Rafsanjani and the current president.⁵⁶

Among Khatami's collaborators, too, many received their political education within the ranks of the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* or revolutionary *nezam* (system). These included the following: Akbar Ganji, a dissident journalist, who today lives in the United States, and who is one of the most well-known figures of the dissident Iranian diaspora; Mohsen Armin, a leading member of the Mojahedin of the Islamic revolution, a radical-Islamic leftist faction turned reformist faction, who is currently in jail; Mohsen Sazegara, a well-known dissident who was a leading politician in Iran and a close collaborator of Mousavi during the first decade after the revolution – he supported Khatami's government but in 2003 he moved to Europe and later the United States, and currently collaborates with a number of dissident websites and newspapers; Said Hajjarian, who was a key figure in the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic, before becoming the most influential strategist in the reformist camp. He survived an assassination attempt in the year 2000 but was left paralysed. In the aftermath of the presidential elections in June 2009 he was imprisoned. Ganji, Hajjarian, Armin and Sazegara were among the founders and leading commanders of the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* during the 1980s and 1990s

Later, as a result of the change in the domestic political scene during the 1990s, many turned to the world of culture, journalism and academia.⁵⁷ The strength of the link between institutional politics and student activism within the Islamic leftist-reformist circles is also demonstrated by the DTV's membership of the *Dovvom-e Khordad* Front. After the reformists won the election, the *Mosharekat* party, Khatami's party, supported the establishment of a 'student faction' within the sixth Parliament (2000–2004). This faction was headed by Ali Akbar Mousavi Khoeini and several members were former DTV leaders,⁵⁸ who stood as reformist candidates in the 2000 election and were subsequently banned from standing for re-election in 2004 by the Guardian Council.⁵⁹

The above-described cases illustrate how factionalism within the institutions originates in universities, underlining the centrality of this institution to a deeper understanding of Iranian politics. But factionalism

55. Mehrabian lost his portfolio to Ghazanfari when the two ministries (Mines on the one side, and Industries and Commerce on the other) were unified. See 'Ahmadinejad chahar vazir pishnahady-e khodra beh Majlis mo'arefi kard' [Ahmadinejad presented his four proposed ministers], Fars News, 29 August 2011, available at <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=9005050180>. See also Ali Alfoneh, 'All Ahmadinejad's Men', *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2011, p. 83.
56. See Kayvan Bozorgmehr, 'Expediency Council Issues a Warning to Ahmadinejad after he Disregards Even Impeachment', Rooz Online via Payvand News, 7 February 2011, available at <http://www.payvand.com>.
57. This is the case for people such as Abbas Abdi, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, Hamid Jalapour, Hashemi Aghajari and Said Hajjarian, who became intellectuals closely associated with reformist political circles after having built up the system of propaganda and intelligence services shortly after the revolution. They all share a long history of engagement in student activism and universities.
58. Among them were Fatemeh Haqiqatjou, Ali Tajernia, Meisam Saidi and Reza Yusefian.
59. See the presentation of the student faction at the first national convention of the Islamic Iran's Participation Front, *Nameh-ye Komiteh Daneshjuy Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami beh monasebat-e entekhabha-ye jadid shura-ye markaz-e jam'e eslami daneshjuyan-e sar-o sar keshvar* [Letter from the student committee of the IIPF on the occasion of new national elections of the central council of the IIPF], *Ta Kongre dovjom. Biancha va movase Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami* [Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Islamic Iran's Participation Front], 2000, pp. 30–32.

is not only the outcome of the way universities are governed, it is also adopted as the model for governing universities. This is the case of the governmental efforts to control the private Azad universities: another battlefield where the political factional dispute has recently moved. The Azad universities were established in 1982 and today have more than a million fee-paying students all over the country. They were established by Hashemi Rafsanjani, towards whom both the Supreme Leader Khamene'i and the President are hostile for many reasons, the most recent being that Rafsanjani is suspected of being a supporter of the Green Movement.⁶⁰ Since the summer of 2010 a factional struggle has developed to gain control of the assets of the Azad universities: Ahmadinejad has repeatedly denounced the management of the Azad Universities as corrupt and immoral. At the height of the dispute, which was reached in late June 2010, Khamene'i stepped in too, indicating the importance of the struggle.⁶¹

The factional struggle between the 'Rafsanjanists' and moderate conservatives versus the government revolved around Rafsanjani's announcement that the Azad universities were to be converted into a religious endowment – making the Azad universities a totally private institution, theoretically immune from governmental control – and the issue of who has the power to nominate the next Chancellor. The incumbent, Abdallah Jasbi, has been a member of the traditional conservative Islamic Coalition Society, which supported Rafsanjani's presidential candidature in 2005, and backed Mousavi's candidacy in 2009. Khamene'i's intervention has on the one hand thwarted Ahmadinejad's ambition to control the Board of Trustees and the appointment of the Chancellor,⁶² but on the other hand prevented Rafsanjani from transforming the Azad University's properties into an endowment, leaving the door open for Ahmadinejad to try another assault. If, as many believe, Khamene'i's move aims to reinforce the image of a Leader who keeps the system and factions in balance,⁶³ the whole controversy proves the central importance of the university as a 'war chest' for Khamene'i and his circle. It also indicates the lengths to which elite factions are prepared to go in order to achieve their ambitions – by reproducing the factional structure of the political sphere on the university campuses.

60. See Nazanin Kamdar, 'Iran's Azad University, Coming Battleground Against Rafsanjani', *Rooz Online*, 5 October 2010.

61. *Payan-e ghole-ye daneshgah Azad bah nameh-ye rahbari?*, *Rah-e Sabz*, 13 tir 1389 [4 July 2010]. See also Babak, 'The Battle over Islamic Azad University', *Foreign Policy*, 12 July 2010 (available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/12/the_battle_over_islamic_azad_university), and also Raha Tahami, 'Battle of Wills Over Top Iranian University', *Payvand News*, 29 July 2010.

62. The names of the members of the current Board of Trustees are: Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mousavi Ardebili, Abdollah Jasbi, Ali-Akbar Velayati, Hassan Habibi, Hasan Khomeini, Mohsen Ghomi and Hamid Mirzadeh.

63. Babak (pseudonym), 'Khamenei Sides with Parliament and against Ahmadinejad in Fight over Islamic Azad University', *InsideIran.org*, 8 July 2010. This may reveal the competition between Khamene'i and Ahmadinejad too, which in recent months has become more and more acute.

Politics from abroad? The post-2009 electoral crisis, migration and regime stability

Ahmadinejad's policy of containing student activism and clamping down on anti-government organisations on university campuses has achieved its goals, namely the effective exclusion of democratic-reformist student activism. Those who attempt to continue engaging in such activism are expelled from the universities. But even prior to this recent policy, going back to 2002, the students' increased estrangement from institutional politics has been compensated by their proximity to other social forces. The reformist student movement has networked outside the campus in order to reach out to society at large, beyond the state-controlled institutions, and build a social movement strong enough to lead a democratic transition: as one student has put it, 'our idea was that Khatami's government couldn't lead the country to democracy. The students must therefore create a social movement in order to achieve that.'⁶⁴

Almost ten years later, the 2009 protests have proven that universities are no longer the pulsating heart of the political struggle that they were in July 1999. 'It is fair to say that the 2009 protests were more broad-based. In fact the protests didn't start in the universities. Although students constituted an important segment of the movement, they were not its vanguard.'⁶⁵ Contrary to what happened in 1999, when the students were at the core of the protests and were leading them, in 2009 the student movement proved to be alive, but also to be divided into small and poorly organised groups.⁶⁶ On the one hand, this has allowed students to dissociate themselves from factionalism, and they have been able to enjoy more independence and revitalise the campuses politically. On the other hand, the pro-democratic students are handicapped by the fact that they have no direct links to the institutional politics of the Islamic Republic, since all the most important reformist figures are today either under arrest, serving jail sentences or have fled abroad.⁶⁷

This situation has furthermore created unsafe conditions and very weak political protection for activists: due to this, many have decided to leave Iran. The process leading to this decision follows an established path: arrest, detention, lack of money and employment, or expulsion from university. In such circumstances emigration appears as the logical option, all the more so as it is now part of the Iranian collective psyche due to the historical experience of emigration. According to the statistics of the Iranian Refugees' Alliance, in 2009 almost 16,000 Iranians applied for asylum worldwide and in 2010 they

64. Personal interview with a female student member of the Special Commission for Women within the DTV, Tehran, 2008.

65. Personal interview with a former student who left Iran, March 2011.

66. A recent example of this is the controversy sparked by a letter to the President of the US calling for the diplomatic isolation of Iran. Ali Golizadeh, a student activist linked to the DTV, dismissed it as shameful and not representative of the general will of the student population. See 'Nouzdah faoll-e saheb va faoll-e daneshjui Iran be Obama: beh momoshat be diktatorha paian dahid' ['19 Iranian former and current student activists to Obama: stop flirting with dictators'], 3 November 2011 (www.daneshjooonews.com), and Ali Golizadeh, 'Nameh-i sharmovar' ['Shameful letter'], 7 November 2011 (www.roozonline.com). Another letter was written in reply to both the previous texts, signed by some 150 activists, who called for the halting of the nuclear programme and a peaceful and cooperative approach to Iran (<http://online.wsj.com>).

67. See Ali Honari, 'Daneshjuyan va tajrobeh jonbesh-e sabz' ['Students and the experience of the green movement'], July 2011 (available at: www.jomhourikhahi.com), and 'Jonbesh-e daneshjuiian: az johme ya bar johme? Taqdi jonbesh-e daneshjuii, fazay ejtemahi va sakhtar qodrat-e siyasi' ['Assessing the student movements' relationship to society and political power structure'], *Goftogu*, no. 50, January 2008, pp. 165-79; Mustafa Khosravi, 'The student movement's approach vis-à-vis the green movement', *Gozaar*, 1 March 2010 (www.gozaar.org); and Sadegh Shojai, 'The Universities are Alive: Students and the Green Movement', *Gozaar*, 11 June 2010.

were 19,000.⁶⁸ In 2010, some 6,700 Iranians had applied for asylum in EU Member States,⁶⁹ where some 150,000 Iranian refugees and asylum-seekers are already living.⁷⁰ The numbers are even higher in Turkey, where Iranians can immigrate illegally with a smaller amount of money and where they constitute the highest number of asylum applicants; unofficial statistics estimate the number of Iranians currently living in Turkey as somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000.⁷¹ Generally, those leaving Iran are well-educated, politically active and young.⁷² The question is whether such a huge population abroad will act in the same way as did the Iranian student diaspora during the reign of the Shah, when it played an important role in drawing international attention to the situation in Iran, or whether the recent exodus will simply end up impoverishing the ranks of the internal opposition, condemning Iran to become a closed and stagnant society. It would be naïve to assume that the majority of young Iranians abroad are willing to continue their past political engagement;⁷³ but considering the special relationship of student politics to factionalism and the centrality of their 'home institution,' namely the university, to national debate, they could be important voices for the international community to pay attention to as an indicator of emerging political trends.

The probability of such an outcome depends on the feasibility of a united opposition front to the Islamic Republic being established. In this regard, there are some distinctive characteristics of the Iranian exilic diaspora that must be taken into consideration. Because of an often overly-simplistic depiction of the context of the post-2009 electoral crisis, there is a common perception that all Iranians, whether in exile or not, are activists or anti-regime oriented. Although the vast majority of Iranians residing abroad and seeking asylum are very critical of the regime, not all among them are activists nor do they necessarily see political engagement as their priority for the future.

In fact many are just looking for opportunities to study and build a professional career abroad, where they can enjoy better conditions and fewer social restrictions. Many others are preoccupied with claiming their rights as asylum-seekers or refugees, as this is their most immediate need. In the case of asylum seekers, in some cases they may pretend to be much more active than they actually were back home in Iran, since political asylum ensures the applicants with social and economic aid – unlike the conditions endured by 'ordinary' migrants who are not legally entitled to any special treatment.⁷⁴

Apart from the question of individual political commitment, the diversification of the Iranian opposition in exile and the many conflicts between the existing groups make the establishment of a credible and united voice difficult. The success of 'pressure from abroad' is conditioned

68. Iranian Refugees' Alliance, 'Statistical Sheet: Statistical Data on Iranian Asylum Seekers and Refugees in 2009', 2009. Available at www.irainc.org.

69. Iranian Refugees' Alliance, 'Statistical Data On Iranian Refugees and asylum seekers', 2011, available at <http://www.irainc.org/iranref/statistics.php>. See also Anthony Albertinelli, 'Asylum applicants and first instance decisions on asylum applications in Q1 2010', *Eurostat Data in Focus*, 32/2010, p. 6.

70. Sebnem Koser Akcapar estimates the number of Iranians in European countries or North America in 2003 at 132,544. See S. K. Akcapar, 'Rethinking migrants' networks and social capital: a case-study of Iranians in Turkey', *International Migration*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2010, p. 165.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

72. OMID Advocates for Human Rights, *Report on the situation of Iranian Refugees in Turkey. Post June 12th 2009: one year later*, Berkeley, June 2010, pp. 11-15.

73. This is one of the conclusions of the author's ongoing fieldwork in Italy (since March 2010) and Turkey (July and August, November 2011).

74. This has been widely observed during the fieldwork undertaken by the author in Italy (since May 2010) and Turkey (July, August and November 2011).

on access to political circles in the country of residence for the various Iranian groups in exile. Achieving such access, however, does not necessarily reflect or engender real influence or appreciation inside Iran. Groups are often at odds with each other both for ideological reasons and due to competition for political credibility or governments' attention.

Another pressing structural problem among the different strands of the Iranian opposition abroad is the lack of reciprocal trust; this is weak even among single individuals who participate in oppositional activities. Several cases of secret agents sent by the Islamic Republic to infiltrate groups and associations have been reported. Spreading false news in order to create confusion and destroy the credibility of outspoken critics of the Islamic Republic is one of the techniques used by the regime in order to weaken the opposition.

Despite these constraints, the exodus of young Iranians who have left the country in the past few years may profoundly refashion the political landscape of the Iranian opposition abroad. A sense of solidarity with, and support for, the Green Movement is shared by all the Iranian political groups in exile. Efforts made by some associations, whose constituency originates in student politics, to re-unite the different strands of the Iranian opposition are an important step in the direction of establishing a credible voice that can be taken seriously by the international community. Activists share a common past in the ranks of the Green Movement, and are linked through political activities or membership in organisations since the time they lived in Iran. These connections can be maintained thanks to access to technologies which are forbidden in the Islamic Republic. In particular, many political refugees or asylum-seekers who actively supported one of the two reformist candidates in the last presidential elections, and who were prominent in reformists' political circles and in the media, still represent a crucial reference point for many of the activists outside Iran.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the sharing of common difficulties linked to their legal status as asylum-seekers and refugees reinforces their sense of solidarity: it does not, however, mean that the various groups have overcome their ideological differences thanks to the common experience of exile.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Student politics is a crucial sphere that deserves the careful attention of Iran analysts: understanding what is going on within university campuses allows a much broader perspective on Iran's domestic politics and its factional conflicts. Factional conflicts appear more comprehensible when individual connections and political allegiances, which often date back to the various actors' past as university students, are taken into

75. This is attested by the role played by the websites Jaras (Rah-e sabz), The Green Voice of Freedom, Rooz Online, Zadio Zamaneh, and the like.

76. For example, this is the case of the organisation called *Hambastegi faollin tabhidi* (Solidarity among activists in exile), whose call for solidarity and participation has appealed to diversified strands of Iranian oppositional groups abroad. Recently, the Green Congress of the Democrats (*Kongres demokrasi khandan-e sabz*) is also playing an interesting role, connecting individuals and groups from ideologically diverse backgrounds.

consideration. This is especially true in the case of an authoritarian regime such as Iran, where educational institutions have a particularly important role in maintaining ideological and cultural hegemony. Many Iranian politicians were student activists in their youth and it is no coincidence that the universities have always been one of the first places to be 'colonised' by 'new' powers when major political upheavals (such as the revolution itself, Khomeini's death and the end of the war, Khatami's election and later Ahmadinejad's) have taken place. This has been the case throughout Iran's post-revolutionary history, regardless of the ideological orientation of these 'new' powers.

Observing the situation on the campuses makes it easier to gauge the state of play with regard to factional struggles and to gain a clearer understanding of domestic politics. But universities are important as sites of rights advocacy and contestation as well. Keeping a focus on the university campuses means being able to assess the political domestic situation in terms of the prospects for social peace or conflict, the likelihood of change, and the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current politics of an important segment of the country's population.

Given the current situation and the large numbers of Iranians who have been leaving the country in recent years, communities residing abroad are increasing in size and political relevance. Although it is important to recognise and acknowledge the differences among the various strands and groups of the opposition, some interesting efforts to reunite Iranians residing abroad are currently taking place. It is of great importance that such experiments are supported since they could, in time, nurture the emergence of a fresh and reliable Iranian political voice that needs to be taken into consideration by Western policy-makers.

In the case of Iran, student politics has often been regarded as synonymous with dissidence and perceived as intimately bound up with other salient issues, such as the building of the Islamic state (since the universities were among the first institutions to be Islamised with the cooperation of the student associations), the reformists' effort to 'democratise' Iran, or Ahmadinejad's recent authoritarian entrenchment. With the election of Khatami in 1997 the perspective on student activism changed and the students were seen as harbingers of a democratisation process, which conformed to the general perception of student activism as inherently progressive. As evidenced in this chapter, this over-emphasis on democratisation has prevented analysts from explaining how the dynamics of student politics might be connected to, and interact with, the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. In order to make sense of the role of universities and student activism in Iran they should thus be viewed as organically (in a Gramscian sense) connected to the ideological and political system of the Islamic Republic.

As this chapter has made clear, universities lie at the heart of politics in the Islamic Republic, having a significance that goes beyond specific trends of democratisation (or lack thereof), and revealing important features of the wider political environment such as factionalism, resource distribution and élite selection.

The rifts within Iranian society and the factionalism that characterises its elite and pervades the state bureaucracies will hence continue to play themselves out on the campuses of Iranian universities. In this students are both actors and victims, and their actions and reactions cannot necessarily be understood in terms of schematic progressive versus reactionary dichotomies.

Annexes

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of Nationalism, Modernization and Gender in 20th Century Iran' in Eric Hooglund and Leif Stenberg (eds.), *Navigating Contemporary Iran: Challenging Economic, Social and Political Perceptions* (Routledge, 2012).

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Abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
DTV	Office for the Strengthening of Unity between the Islamic Schools and the Universities (<i>Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat-e Howzeh va Daneshgah</i>)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
ISNA	Iranian Students' News Agency
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OSF	Oil Stabilisation Fund

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This *Chaillot Paper* examines recent domestic developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The volume presents an in-depth assessment of the far-reaching changes that the Iranian state and Iranian society have undergone since the 1979 revolution, with a particular focus on the social and political turmoil of the past five years.

It is clear that in many ways the Islamic Republic is in the throes of a transition where many of its fundamental tenets are being called into question. Profound and ongoing internal transformations in Iranian society already affect the country's foreign policy posture, as some of its domestic and external issues converge and will most likely continue to do so. Pertinent examples are the nuclear issue and the socio-political upheaval in neighbouring Arab countries.

Edited by Rouzbeh Parsi, the volume features contributions from five authors who are all specialists in various aspects of Iranian politics and society. Each author explores some of the most crucial variables of the Iranian body politic. Their focus on distinct dimensions of Iranian society and culture casts light on the changes afoot in contemporary Iran and how the political elite controlling the state respond to these challenges.

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