

AJ Forum 6
From Revolution to Freedom:
The Discursive Mobilization of Civil Society in Iran, 1997-2001

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INTRODUCTION

The late 1990s witnessed the discursive mobilization of the notion of civil society in the print media in Iran backed by a political reform agenda set forth by former president Mohammad Khatami. Both the media discourse and Mr. Khatami's agenda were heavily influenced by Habermas' notion of the 'public sphere' as a sphere of democratic and critical exchange of ideas aimed at shaping the collective life of a national community. My talk will examine how the discursive mobilization of the notion of civil society was originally foreshadowed by two major historical realities: in the long run, the emergence of the civil society movement was part and parcel of Iran's long standing encounter with Western modernity and, in the short run, it was a result of the re-entry of the urban middle classes into the public and political scene starting in the early 1990s.

Before delving into these questions, I would like to point out that 'civil society' denotes a multiplicity of intellectual, ideological, and political conceptions. There is no reason to assume that those who used this concept in Iran—or elsewhere—had a systematically elaborated or unified understanding of it. Consequently, rather than examining how 'civil society' was understood in Iran, I am more concerned with how it was discursively deployed in the media and as part of a political reform agenda.

Self and other: from the defeated prince to Khatami

My first argument here is that the civil society movement was, in a sense, another phase in Iran's long standing attempts to come to terms with the west and Western modernity by way of comprehending and incorporating it in homegrown visions of what the Iranian society should look like. Admittedly, my use of "modernity" involves applying a reified view of modernity as an imagined, singular whole as opposed to modernities as a set of often contradicting views and institutions (cf. Latour, 1995). Yet my objective is to represent not modernity as such, as an objectively existing, singular past or present, but modernity as it is perceived, imagined, and acted upon in Iran.

Starting in the early nineteenth century, if not earlier, the West has been imagined as a cultural and civilisational "other," in reference to which Iranian intellectuals and leaders have developed a desire for self-reflection and change. In the early nineteenth century Abbas Mirza (d. 1833), Iran's heir apparent and a brave soldier by all accounts, lost two consecutive battles and along with them the control of much of Iran's territories to Russia's Tsar Alexander. Dismayed by the defeat, he put forward a question that has since reverberated among Iranian elite and intellectuals (Rezai 1999: 31):

You foreigners, you see this army, this court, and all the machinery of power that I possess, but do not think that I am a happy man. All my effort and bravery have been defeated by the Russian army.... A handful of European soldiers have made us confront a sad fate, and they threaten us with their recent progress. What is the ability that has made you so superior to us? What are the reasons for your progress and our lasting weakness? (ibid.)

About two centuries later in the early 1990s, a group of Iranian intellectuals began to investigate and publish works in an area that can perhaps best be described as Occidental studies. Former president Mohammad Khatami was part of this circle of intellectuals who were primarily preoccupied with questions about the differences and the possibility of coexistence between Iran and western modernity.

These questions were central to the two books he published before he was elected to the presidency, one a survey of Western political philosophy from Aristotle to Locke and Marx (*From the World of the City to the City of the World: A Journey into the Political Thought of the West*, 1994) and the other addressing the challenges and promises of the modern Western worldview for Islam (*Fear of the Waves*, 1993). His vision of a 'religious civil society' which was later put forward as part of his election platform articulated a potential way for integrating Islamic and Western visions of social, moral, and political order.

Between Abbas Mirza's defeat and Khatami's coming to power, many major turning points in the modern history of Iran have been positively or negatively a response to the perceived appeal or the perceived hegemony of Western modernity. These include events such as the religious revivalism and reformism of the 1800s by clerics such as Seyyed Jamal Al-Afghani, the constitutional revolution of 1905, which was inspired by similar revolutions in England and Russia, and the period of modernization introduced by the two Pahlavi Shahs of Iran (1920-1979). But perhaps this struggle to define an Iranian identity vis-à-vis the West is most evident in the 1979 Revolution when, as Foucault (1988: 218) has noted, many people turned to Islam as a spiritual source which "for them was like the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity." And yet rather than trying to annihilate all signs of the west from the society, the revolution in fact espoused and incorporated many western institutions and ideals such as the constitution, the parliament, and elections (cf. Al-Azm 1997: 19).

The "civil society" movement was another phase in the long-term discursive encounter calling forward the forces and representatives of the 'traditional' and 'modern' worldviews in Iran. It revived many of the old polemics by intellectuals and clerics, dating back to the 19th century, over issues such as the definition of the realms of the sacred and profane; the role of humans in determining their destiny; faith and freedom; citizen's rights; the distinction of private and public spheres; and respect for pluralism (Mafinezam, 1999).

Religion is one of the most significant topics in this context. Over the past 150 years western religious secularization has been constantly invoked, positively or negatively, in many intellectual debates in Iran. The civil society discourse helped bring this theme back to light (see Boroumand and Boroumand 2000: 304). It is often argued that the separation of religion from the public realm was central to western liberal conceptions of civil society, as is evident in the views of Hobbes and Locke on the significance of a secular social contract. It is also central to most modern day western European conceptions of civil society, such as those expressed by Habermas (Seligman 1992, 1998). The western secular vision of civil society offers a thisworldly, tangible, and secular paradigm of social order, which is designated through social contract, rather than through immutable religious principles, and which relegates the religious or traditional order to the private realm.

The Iranian discourse of civil society could not and did not dodge the question of religion and secularism. In fact, it addressed it straight forwardly and rather boldly. Although Mr Khatami had promised the creation of a "religious civil society," it soon became clear that his attempt to implement this promise required a radical redefinition of the role of religion itself in society and politics, most significantly by putting a limit on the role of religion in public and political life. This theme was most evident in Khatami's repeated calls for pluralism in politics and religious issues and his emphasis on integrating freedom with religion, as in the following statement he made in an interview in 1998.

In my opinion, one of the biggest tragedies in human history is this confrontation between religion and liberty which is to the detriment of religion, liberty, and the human beings who

deserve to have both. The Puritans desired a system which combined the worship of God and human dignity and freedom. (interview with CNN's Christian Amanpour, January 7, 1998)

The reference to Puritanism highlights the fact that the civil society discourse was to a large extent the continuation of the long standing dialogue between Iran and the West.

This topic resonated with intellectuals close to or supportive of Khatami who saw a contradiction between religion and civil society. For instance, Hossein Bashiriyeh, a leading political theorist in the area of the public sphere and civil society, has argued that the current religious theocracy in Iran is informed by a discourse of "ideological traditionalism," which according to him, consists of a mixture of traditional Iranian patrimonialism and Islamic ideology. For Bashiriyeh, ideological traditionalism seeks "to produce a new kind of obedient citizen who believes in the traditional and charismatic leaders." The essence of the political behaviour in this discourse is "loyalty and personal devotion to the leaders and their sanctioned values, and a relation between the leader and his followers based on love and emotions" (Bashiriyeh 1999b: 5, my translation). Accordingly, ideological traditionalism supports only organised and mass participation and leaves no room for individualism, active and autonomous participation, competition, diversity, pluralism, or the formation of political parties. In contrast, for Bashiriyeh, the "democratic discourse of civil society" is a framework for the appearance of a party system, which stands opposed to the mass society of ideological traditionalism.

Hence, Khatami's attempt to strengthen the institutions of the public sphere and civil society went beyond a simple institutional change and touched on more complicated questions regarding the role of religion vis-à-vis the ability of people to think and act autonomously both in the public and private spheres.

The print media played a surprisingly significant role in this process. In pro-reform daily newspapers as well as in periodical journals, which were primarily controlled by Khatami's allies and sympathizers, religion became the focal point of a debate that demanded freedom of public discussion in order to redefine the realm of the sacred, holy, and immutable and to distinguish it from what is civil, social, and changeable. The redefinition of the realm of the sacred usually entailed complex theological debates about the limits of religious jurisprudence. These debates had nevertheless concrete social and especially political implications. For instance, in an article on religious experience, the prominent religious reformer, Abdolkarim Soroush (1997: 4-11; see also 1982: 2-9), argued that, religion and its interpretation cannot be monopolized by religious schools. Rather other classes of people can and should play a role in continually reinterpreting and reinventing religion. According to Soroush, in its original inception, Islam was the product of the prophet's everyday experience, and as such provided answers only to questions of his own time. In the absence of the prophet, Moslem thinkers, artists, and poets can and should continually reinvent religion both through self-reflection and by reflecting on the changing social and political world around them. In this scenario, plurality would replace dogma and autonomous thinking would take the place of the guardianship of religious clerics.

The emphasis on the redefinition of the sacred also characterizes the works of several prominent Iranian public intellectuals who saw pluralism as a salient feature of civil society. For instance, Nikfar argues that traditional religious ethics prevalent in Iran have failed to create a sense of social solidarity necessary for modern urbanized society, and that therefore Iran is a civilization lacking in civility. For him,

the canonical question facing Muslim thinkers is how can we arrive at a civil religion, that is, a religion that respects and promotes the values of pluralism, tolerance and civil responsibility. [...] Civil religion is the religion of the metropolis not of the clan, the religion of an interconnected world and not that of the Muslim world as against the infidel world (1999: 154).

Along similar lines, Mardieha draws an important analytical line between religion as a private matter and religion as official policy. As a private matter, religion is not incompatible with civil society regardless of how dogmatically it might be held by the individual believer. But as official policy, religion cannot coexist with civil society in that while civil society belongs to the order of reason, religion belongs to the order of values. Mardieha argues that rational institutions such as law, democracy, and civil society supersede religion—although they are not necessarily superior to it—for the simple reason that rationality is a universal trait defining humankind while religiosity is subject to personal judgement and belief (Mardieha 2000: 180-185).

An example of an attempt to redefine the role of religion and confine it to the private sphere can be found in the discussions about the public imposition of the hijab (the Islamic dress code). It must be noted that many women in Iran, especially those in larger urban centres do not actually conform to the hijab and have long complained about its imposition.

Starting in 1999, pro-civil society dailies began to publicly debate the legality of the imposition of the hijab in Iran. This included a series of sociologically informed debates in pro-civil society daily called *Neshat* [mirth], which addressed not only the imposition of the hijab, but also such general issues as the separation of state and religion, boundaries of private and public, the limits of religious legislation, and the contradiction between the religious logic and the democratic logic. The supporters of the “democratic logic” claimed that the government must make a distinction between sin and crime. A sin (such as not observing the hijab) is a religious matter and is as such a private issue. A crime on the other hand is a public issue. Furthermore, one observer drew from Durkheim’s definition of crime to argue that an act can be prohibited as criminal and punished by law only when the majority of the population considers it as being offensive (Behbahani 1999: 3; Eshkevari 1999: 2). It was claimed that by this definition, religious morals and codes such as the hijab cannot be the basis of law because not everyone has firm religious beliefs and even those who do, do not observe all religious morals or commandments, and therefore there is no consensus on religious matters and as such religious commandments cannot be incorporated into the legal code.

In the freer atmosphere of the print media that was created after the election of Khatami, these issues were predominantly discussed in intellectual journals and in newspapers using the plain, but secular, language of journalism and the social sciences.

My focus on religion here should not be taken to imply that religion was the only matter that was debated in the media. In fact, many debates concerned purely political issues such as freedom of expression or the need for a clearer division of powers within the government. Nor do I wish to argue that the proponents of civil society were all secular people who opposed religion as such. On the contrary, many of them were deeply religious. In fact, some of the most influential figures in this debate were themselves clergymen who benefited from both religious and secular university education. This includes Mohsen Kadivar, a cleric who was imprisoned for his views on religion and who finished his doctoral thesis in philosophy while in prison.

Rather, I am particularly focusing on religion because it cuts across many other political, class, and gender issues in Iranian society. In particular, the question of religion was central to the concerns of urban, primarily middle and upper class youth and women, who saw the official religious dogma as an impediment to their freedoms.

The reading public and the rise of middle class values

This brings me to my second argument regarding the reasons behind the popularity of the civil society discourse in Iran. The sudden vogue of the civil society discourse is not only explained in terms of Iran’s larger encounter with modernity, as it has often been argued (Tavassoli, 2002; Kamali, 1998). It is also a specific product of the affinity of interests among intellectuals, journalists, reformist politicians, and urban educated middle classes, and in particular youth and women.

Starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Iranian socio-economic life began to witness a wholesale image makeover. The eight year long war with Iraq ended in 1987 and Khomeini died less than a year later. Relying on the oil income and foreign loans, the economic infra-structure of Iran was rapidly rebuilt as investment in roads, dams, and highways, and ports increased. With wartime restrictions lifted, foreign made products, from Japanese and Korean electronics to European clothes, made their way into the market again.

This was also a time when the government's earlier investments in primary and secondary education and rural infra-structure began to pay off. This included efforts to raise the standards of living in villages and to make education more accessible to more people, including most importantly, to women (Madanipour, 2003: 146-8). These efforts resulted in the emergence of an urbanised and educated class of formerly farmer origins (Shamsolvaezin 1999: 16-19). In 1997 the percentage of the literate population rose to 80 percent as compared to 47 percent in 1976 and the general number of students rose by 266 percent as compared to figures from 1978-79 academic year. The figures for university graduates in 1994-5 academic year also show a 179 percent growth as compared to the decade preceding the revolution (Rezai 1999: 34). Due to its peculiar age structure at the time, in the late 1990s, nearly half of the Iranian population was comprised of young people under the age of 25 (Menashri, 2001: 110; Nomani and Behdad, 2006: 75).

Soon this educated generation of young men and women populated the urban and rural scene. Nowhere is the effects of these developments more visible and dramatic than in the force with which women have broken barriers and announced their presence in the public sphere. Women constitute about 70 percent of freshmen in universities and according to one publisher the number of female authors and film directors has risen by 400% in recent years (Gooya Newsletter, October 10, 2006).

The overwhelming tendency of this generation, of which I was a member, was to move away from the culture of self-sacrifice that had informed the first decade and a half of the Islamic republic in favour of a worldly attitude to material life. In his account of change, resilience and resistance in Iran in the late 1990s, Yaghmaian (2002) has argued that these changes have taken place in the micro-level of everyday life, where a culture of life has come to dominate and a 'revolution of joy' has taken place on various levels of private and social life, especially in larger urban centres.

Yaghmaian (2002) has described this new trend as a new social movement spearheaded by upper and middle class youth in major urban centres. This new social movement was (and remains) a movement of "deviance, embracing the scorned, desiring what was not to be desired, longing for the forbidden fruits of the life of "decadence," consumerism, and the Satanic West" (2002: 24). He pointed out that the youth desired and used all symbols of massification and commodification, and constructed powerful movements against the state" (ibid.). Starting in the 1990s and continuing today, this spirit of defiance has mostly consisted in such acts of everyday life from wearing colourful and fashionable clothes and cosmetics, to voting for anti-establishment candidates in elections, to simply being jubilant, colourful and loud. As such this generation "transformed everyday life into a movement for rights."

To this urban educated middle class, official religious dogma symbolized and crystallized everything that they thought was wrong with their circumstances. Official prohibitions on public dating and drinking, the dress code, patriarchal legal codes, the ban on official distribution of western pop music and satellite dishes all contributed to a deep scepticism about the wisdom of intertwining religion and politics. The critical discussion of religion and official dogma in pro-civil society print and electronic media fed into but also feasted on this public discontent.

Although the poor and the rich equally supported Khatami's bid for presidency, it was the interests and views of the urban educated middle classes that defined the overall shape and direction of the civil society discourse, especially in the print media. In this sense, the developments in Iran, show a similarity with those of Western Europe at the time of the emergence of what Habermas calls the bourgeois public sphere. In his analysis of the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere (1989 [1962]), Habermas argues that the transformation of the public sphere in Western Europe in the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its reorientation toward public, critical discourse was preconditioned by the rise of the bourgeoisie as a socially influential class and by the creation of specifically bourgeois institutions, such as the establishment of coffee houses and the public availability of printed material such as books and journals as well as the commodification of arts. Likewise, the sudden vogue of the civil society discourse in Iran was preconditioned by the structural transformation of the public sphere characterized by the rise of the urban educated middle classes to prominence in the public sphere. This class formed a reading public around the pro-reform print and electronic media, which soon became the politically most influential class between 1995-2001.

During Khatami's tenure as the president, especially during his first term in office, Iran witnessed an unprecedented growth in newspaper publication and readership. As a man of books himself who was involved with the media before he became a politician, one of Khatami's first and foremost promises in his presidential campaigns was to create a more open atmosphere for freedom of speech in general and for the media in particular. He strongly believed that the establishment of a vigorous and autonomous civil society is not possible without the existence of an independent media that acts as a watchdog over the state process and voices the society's demands and concerns. During this period the newspaper enterprise became one of the fastest growing ones in Iran. According to one source, the number of major pro-reform daily papers grew from 2 or 3 in the spring of 1997 to twenty four by April of 2000 (Iranmania: April 24, 2000; cf. Khiabany and Sreberny 2001).

The reading public and the pro-civil society media entered into a reciprocal relation with each other in which one side offered faithful readership and the other side reproduced middle class ideologies and values in the form of news reports and articles. Within this context, the call for civil society was discursively mobilized to signify and highlight the demands of the urban middle classes for greater freedoms in the public domain, including not only freedom to criticize but also freedom to choose their own life style (as for instance, in the case of the debate over the Islamic dress code). It is not surprising that the pro-civil society media would support freedom. What is striking is that these freedoms were portrayed as being more significant than the mounting economic concerns and frustrations caused by inflation and unemployment.

This is a significant omission given the fact that poverty and economic disparity was and remains a major problem in Iran. The economic liberalization programs of the late 1980s and early 1990s that created wealth and consumerism for a portion of the population and led to the creation of the reading public, had a dark underside. They resulted in the creation of a massive underclass population who languished in poverty in shantytowns as well as in urban and rural areas and whose occasional riots were quickly suppressed. The high unemployment rate of up to 30%, resulting partly from the dismantling of state run services, and high inflation rate which according to official figures was as high as at least 22% in early 1990s crushed this population (Menashi, 2001: 111).

Yet the civil society movement was characterized by a marked refusal to discuss these issues.

The following example might help illustrate the roots of this refusal. In May 1999, a rally was planned in Tehran by a leftist, pro-Khatami student organisation to mark and celebrate the anniversary of his election to office. The rally was called "From Revolution to Freedom" partly because the students had decided to start the rally from the Islamic Revolution Square, where the University of Tehran is located, and then congregate in the Freedom Square. But the motto and the direction of the rally were perhaps chosen to convey a message: that freedom was a goal not yet achieved; that it was the ultimate destiny and the forgotten promise of the revolution; that the revolution was incomplete; and that it had to be continued or perhaps left behind for freedom to be achieved.

During the rally, a student held a banner which read "Bread, Housing, Freedom." This was the slogan of a Marxist group in the 1979 Revolution, which itself derives from the title of one of Lenin's essays. But, this pro-Khatami student had crossed off "Bread" and "Housing" and left "Freedom" in larger letters to show that freedom and not material needs are now most important. What is striking is that this poster does not merely ask for the recognition of civil rights and freedoms. Rather, it portrays

freedom to be above and beyond economic justice such as the universal provision of bread and housing, which had been among the original demands of the revolution.

This giving up of the ideal of economic justice for the ideal of freedoms has close affinities with the class and status configuration of the political forces in Iran in the late 1990s. The civil society movement has been introduced as a negation: it opposes the political oppression exerted on the “reading public” --that is, on the intellectuals, journalists, and the urban middle class, especially women and youth-- by the dominant conservative clerics and the traditional right wing. But, through the discourse of civil society, the reading public managed to universalise their point of view, agenda, and demands for civil freedoms and political pluralism. This was achieved at the expense of sublimating and silencing the needs, agenda, and demands of those groups and classes that did not share, at least immediately, such agendas.

From this perspective freedom and liberty and the whole discourse of civil society can be seen as ideological. Debates on freedom including freedom of and freedom from religion in the public sphere, which consumed the print and electronic media during Khatami’s tenure, had an ideological function in that they concealed and silenced the need to talk about economic justice. In journals and newspapers it was only the reading public’s need for freedom, and not the need of the poor for a decent life, which was propagated in the name of the rights of the “nation”. Any demand for social justice or economic reforms was forcefully criticized by the pro-civil society media as a plot by the right-wing conservatives against Khatami’s platform for political reforms. In their reports, economic facts, such as unemployment, workers’ strikes against months of delay in the payment of their wages, and high inflation rates, received minimal or no coverage. This is while a public poll by Mosharekat (participation) newspaper showed that the majority of respondents gave priority, not to political reforms, but to economic reforms in order to fight high prices and unemployment (“Economic Prosperity” in Mosharekat, February 13, 2000: 1).

Perhaps this detachment from significant socio-economic issues is one of the factors that explains the ease with which the civil society discourse and the more general reform movement fizzled out of the political scene in Iran. It is true that the conservative camp eliminated many of the media channels through which the reformists promoted the idea of ‘civil society’. Yet there is no denying that the pro-civil society reform camp had already lost touch with the people because it single-mindedly and rather haphazardly pursued a political agenda of reforms, while the majority of the people felt the burden of unemployment and inflation.

What I hope to have shown here in my talk is that Iran has remained in a constant self-reflective dialogue with itself and its surrounding world. This dialogue was intensified during the civil society movement but the decline of the civil society movement should not be taken to imply that this dialogue has ended. In fact, Iran has remained a country ripe for change and reforms. It has a growing middle class and a more or less stable economy. Barring any external pressures, it is quite possible that the general trend of the reforms will continue. It is, however, imperative that any attempt for political reform address hard economic realities.

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