

The Resilient Republic: can civil society bring change?

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What is 'civil society'?

- Civil society is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state. (Diamond 1994)
- Civil society is , together with states and markets, one of the three 'spheres' that interface in the making of democratic societies. Civil society is the sphere in which social movements become organized. (UNDP 1993)
- Confusion: 'State officials in the Middle East use the term "civil society" to promote their projects of mobilization and "modernization"; Islamists use it to angle for a legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty.' (Bellin 1994)
- Dichotomy of state versus non-state, coercion versus freedom and autonomy
- Attractive for countries like Iran



The debate on 'civil society'

- Intellectual/academic trend since end of 1980's, 1990's; the 'Third Wave'
- Policy makers: donor countries and international organizations (e.g. www.gozaar.org)
- Promoted as a non-ideological, pragmatic understanding of democratization
- In essence continuation of the liberal modernization theories: capitalist development democracy
- Inversion since the 1990s: from outside through e.g. 'velvet revolutions' or even war
- Romantic view



Civil society in Iran

- **Historical roots**

 - Early 20th century

 - 1940's

 - 1979 revolution

- **Islamic Republic, 3 formative moments**

 - 1) End of war/death of Khomeini

 - 2) Economic reconstruction under Rafsanjani

 - 3) 1997 Khatami



Civil society in Iran

- Khatami in his inauguration speech:
'...strengthening and expanding the institutions of civil society (*jame-eye madani*) and preventing any violation of personal integrity, rights and legal liberties.'
- Intellectual discourse (Soroush, Ashkevari, Hajjarian, Ganji...)
Accompanied by an amount of indigenization (relation to Islam)
Civil society became the cause célèbre of all pro-democracy activists
- Growth of civil society organizations



Civil society in Iran

- Expansion of the public sphere: educational system (2005 = 1.2 million), internet (700.000 bloggers), parks, sport and cultural centers, coffee shops etc.
- Media: 1.500 periodicals in 2.000 (200 % rise since 1996)
- NGOs:
 - 752 in 2000 (Namazi 2000), excludes 5.000 women's cooperatives and 3.000 mosque related charities
 - 4.000 registered in 1999 according to the IRI Population Council Information Bank
- Students: Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, ISNA, 700 publications, 1.437 local scientific, social and cultural associations
- Women: 137 NGOs in 2000 (CNWN)
- Workers: Khane Kargar, informal and illegal networks
 - 91 labour protests in 1998; 319 in 2001/2002



Political organizations: 95 established between 1997-2000



The experience of the reform project

- **Conservative backlash (July 1999, chain murders, closing down publications etc)**
- What gave them the power to launch the counter-attack?
The political structure
Theocratic and military institutions against democratic institutions
- Could the reformists have done anything?
Counter-mobilization – but this was not even contemplated
- Hajjarian (2004): 'While reformists with seats in the Majles were often thinking of compromise, those outside, the rank and file, were thinking of challenging the system in an extremist way. (...) We should have struck a balance between challenge and compromise which we did not.'

And he pointed out the reformists represented the interests of the middle class and asked: 'So what is our relationship with the working class'

Strategy of the reformists: mobilization from below and negotiation from above

Even those promoting 'civil society' were limiting it



Rethinking civil society and democratization

Civil society not a democratic force in itself

Bringing back politics

- Political structure of the IRI:
democratic and theocratic institutions

Additional requirements for civil society organizations in order to play a more independent role:

1. Democratic functioning
2. Putting forward political demands in addition to their own agenda's
3. Building counter-power to the state
(Kamrava and O Mora 1998)

Lack of these requirements has been an obstacle for change



Rethinking civil society and democratization

- Escaping from the state-civil society dichotomy
state-society complex imbedded in economic relations
- Civil society not a neutral sphere, contested by different social classes
- Coercion versus freedom is false; capitalist market relations



- Inequality

Top 20 percent: 50 percent of income

Bottom 20 percent: 2 percent of income

(World Bank 2006)

Gini coefficient is relatively high: 0.42-0.45 (Egypt

=

0.34; India = 0.36)



Resilience of the IRI

- 1980's: authoritarian populism
- Crisis of legitimacy
- Rafsanjani: economic development
- Khatami: political development
- Ahmadinejad: neo-populism



Resilience of (semi)autocracies

