The Prospects for Democratic Change in Iran

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The Prospects for Democratic Change in Iran

Abstract
The quest for democracy in Iran can trace its roots back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1907. However, Iranians have yet to establish a successful democratic government due to a combination of foreign interference and the lack of proper socio-political structures to accommodate such a transition. The generation born after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is by far Iran's best hope for finally realizing the goals of this century long struggle. In this paper I will argue that the legal structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran, her politics, the demographics of the country, and the role of women how they are an integral part of the vitality of the Green Movement, all indicate that the necessary ingredients are present for successful democratic transition in the next decade or so.

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LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

The Prospects for Democratic Change in Iran

by

Ala Hashemi-Haeri

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The report of the investigation undertaken as a Senior Thesis, to carry two courses of credit in the Department of Politics

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The quest for democracy in Iran can trace its roots back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1907. However, Iranians have yet to establish a successful democratic government due to a combination of foreign interference and the lack of proper socio-political structures to accommodate such a transition. The generation born after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is by far Iran’s best hope for finally realizing the goals of this century long struggle. In this paper I will argue that the legal structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran, her politics, the demographics of the country, and the role of women how they are an integral part of the vitality of the Green Movement, all indicate that the necessary ingredients are present for successful democratic transition in the next decade or so.
Introduction

The agreement reached between Iran and the six world powers of the P5+1 in the summer of 2015, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), sets relatively modest goals despite its arguably historic significance. The JCPOA regulates and limits Iran’s nuclear research activities in return for alleviating punishing sanctions that have hobbled the Iranian economy over the past decade.¹ Yet the agreement has proven to be a hard sell to conservative audiences both in the U.S. and Iran. As such, debates over the merits of the agreement to regulate Iran’s nuclear activities have more often than not focused on the technical details of the JCPOA such as timelines, and inspection and enforcement mechanisms. To a certain extent there was also speculation about the hope that the JCPOA would lead to a broader rapprochement with Iran, and that in turn would turn the Islamic Republic into a more responsible international actor.

There is another dimension of the consequences of a successful reintegration of Iran into the global community that has the potential to have far reaching consequences in the region: the effect on democratic development within Iran. Proponents of the JCPOA have alluded to the potential of decreased tensions to improve the horrendous human rights situation in Iran, and it is hoped that the success of the deal will strengthen the hand of the moderate/reformist elements within the Iranian regime.² However, these projected benefits are often portrayed as ancillary and are not what the JCPOA was intended to accomplish. The Obama administration’s insists that the JCPOA is a deal “based on verification, not trust,” and that it doesn’t require a change of the

¹ US Department of State, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, July 14th, 2015 http://www.state.gov/e/eb/ts/spi/iran/jcpoa/
domestic and international policies of the Iranian regime. These narrow expectations of what can come out of the JCPOA may make it easier to sell to a skeptical American public. However, I will argue that the JCPOA should only be a first step to a broader easing of tensions between, since the Iranian regime has a need for the existence of a foreign threat in order to justify its repressive policies. The more the level of the external threat is deescalated, the harder it will be for the regime to paint its critics as agents of a foreign aggressor. This will in turn make it easier for those within Iran who are seeking a more pluralistic and democratic society to push for the necessary change without being labeled as agents of the enemy. The prospects of the Islamic Republic turning into a liberal democracy in the near future might seem farfetched at first glance. However, as I will attempt to show in this paper, conditions within Iranian society are far more favorable to such a transition than at any time in the country’s over-a-century long quest for democracy.

The history of democratic reform in Iran dates back to the early year of the 20th century, and its development can be broadly separated into three distinct eras. Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1909 was a rejection of the manipulations of the colonial powers and the excesses of the ruling Qajar dynasty. The tenuous civil society that had emerged out of the reforms of the late nineteenth century marked Iran’s entrance into political modernity. However, the democratic aspirations of this movement were short lived and with the rise of the authoritarian Reza Shah Pahlavi instituted a new model of development within Iranian society. The Second World War ushered in a new era of openness to Iranian society after Reza Shah was deposed by the Allied powers to establish the Persian Corridor to supply the Soviet Union in their fight against Nazi Germany. Reza Shah’s son and successor Mohammad Reza Pahalvi did not have the same

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authority as his father, leading to a period of national self-assertion that culminated in the election of Premier Mossadeq, only to be cut short by a CIA-backed coup in 1953. This marked the return of the strong state until the Shah himself was deposed as a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Revolution did not produce the democratic reforms its disparate groups of supporters had hoped for, as Ayatollah Khomeini established an Islamic theocracy with subordinate democratic elements. It is through these diminished democratic channels that today a myriad of social movements, such as the Green Movement, are attempting to put the country back on the path of the creation a democratic and pluralistic society.

Iran’s young, educated and connected population is the main driver of democratic change within Iran. However, many are leaving due to a lack of economic opportunity as a result of international sanctions. Additionally, Iran’s declining population means that this window of opportunity for transition to a liberal democracy is quickly shrinking. Therefore, the success of the JCPOA at this juncture is crucial, as it lifts the most punishing sanctions and creates a viable economic future for young Iranians who can stay and push for change within Iran. Reengagement and reintegration therefore, is the best way to abet democratic reform within Iran. Nearly 70% of Iran’s population are under the age of thirty five. This population is highly educated and hungry to be connected to the world. A majority of college graduates are women, and they have been at the forefront of pushing for change within Iran. This population has matured beyond the uprisings of the late nineties and the late aughts. Despite the failure of those efforts to topple the clerical regime, Iranian youths have managed to bring about real positive, but incremental change in the face of brutal repression by the regime.
However, according to the International Monetary Fund, Iran leads the world in brain drain, with many of its recent college graduates choose to leave the country every year.\(^4\) While political repression and social restrictions do play a role in this decision, most are leaving due to a lack of economic opportunity. The devastating effects of the economic sanctions has had a disproportionate impact on young Iranians.\(^5\) If these exoduses were to continue at the current pace it will have a deleterious effect on the effort to achieve democratic reforms within Iran, as the main drivers of such change would be leaving the country in droves. This population is not being replenished either, as Iran’s birthrate has fallen below replacement level.

In the first section, I will examine whether the Islamic Republic’s system of government is capable of reform by examining the constitution of Iran. I will demonstrate that while there certainly are mechanisms for bringing about democratic change, the unelected theocratic elements of the regime stand in the way of implementing such reforms. It should be noted, however, that these do not provide an insurmountable challenge to the cause of democratic reform.

In the next section I will examine the role of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, or Guardianship of the Jurist which makes up the core of the ideology of the Islamic Republic established by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. The doctrine went through significant changes in the latter years of Khomeini’s time in power and this does provide some avenues for change, especially given the fact that a successor might have to be chosen to replace Iran’s current leader, Ayatollah Khamenei in the next few years.

Then I will examine the political cleavages in the factional politics of Iran as they have provided an avenue for reformist groups to remain relevant even when they have been excluded from having any real power in recent years, through mass disqualifications of their candidates and other intimidation tactics employed by regime hardliners.

Next we will look at what a civil society looks like in the Iranian context. The regime’s repressive policies have prevented the formation of strong civil society groups that might serve as competing power centers to its authority. Therefore, it is necessary to examine what can fill the void left in the absence of civil society, and I will demonstrate that social movements can fulfill the same function.

The Green Movement, a loose coalition of disparate groups that came together to push for democratic change in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential elections in Iran, is the most prominent social movement in the country right now. In the section on the Green Movement, we will examine the roots of the movement and how it can impact political discourse within Iran going forward.

We will also look at Iran’s youth who not only make up the majority of the country’s population, they are also the main component of the Green Movement. While Iran’s youth are by no means monolithic in their political views, an examination of their educational attainment, their overall views on religion and gender equality make them a potent force for democratic change within Iran. I will demonstrate that Iran has passed the era of volatility that is often associated with a “youth bulge.” The forceful protests that happened from the late nineties until 2009 failed to dislodge the Iranian regime. While Iran’s population is still overwhelmingly young, it has matured to a point that it doesn’t see another revolution as a viable path to democratic change. Revolutions are inherently messy and unpredictable, and there is a great deal of revolution weariness in Iran.
Iranian democracy and human rights advocates see gradual reform as a much better alternative to achieve their goals.

Finally, we will look at the important role Iran’s women have played in the democratic movement, particularly since the Islamic Republic came into existence. Their long non-violent and incremental approach to change Iran’s discriminatory laws has had a significant influence on how the Green Movement approaches its struggle for democracy.

Iran has the many of the necessary ingredients to potentially to develop into a liberal democracy in the next few decades. This can happen through gradual reform or through another revolution. However, both of these paths are contingent upon the reform-minded Iranian youth to remain in Iran to push for the necessary changes. The lifting of the most damaging sanctions against Iran will improve the economic outlook for young Iranians, incentivizing them to remain in the country instead of fleeing. Additionally, imposition of further sanctions under a different guise, as has been suggested by some US lawmakers, will have the same damaging effect. Iran has the potential to develop into a viable democracy, but we should recognize that the window of opportunity is shrinking, and that creating a better economic future for ordinary Iranians is the best way to help them achieve that goal.
Is the Islamic Republic System of Government Capable of Democratic Reform?

Before we can assess the prospects for democratic change in Iran, we must first examine if the Islamic Republic, as it is currently constituted, is even capable of reform. Any reform of the system requires a certain degree of buy-in from the political elites. This is the main difference between a revolution and reform. In contrast to reform, a revolution will seek to change the political paradigm through replacing the existing elites. Whereas a revolution will attempt to completely supplant the ideology of the previous regime, reformists pursue their goals through reinterpretting elements of the dominant ideology in order to bring about the desired changes. The Iranian system of government can be democratic if the oversight of the unelected, Islamist institutions is eliminated or modified, and there is enough support among the political elites that reform (instead of revolution) is still possible.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran envisions a hybrid system of government that attempts to provide democratic elements (such as the direct election of the President and Parliament or Majlis) under the guidance of an Islamic scholar in order to ensure compliance with Sharia (Islamic religious law).6 It is an attempt to create an Islamic society and system of government based on Sharia laws while incorporating elements of modernity. The republican part of the Iranian constitution is based on that of the French Fifth Republic (with some significant amendments in 1989) and Article 6 of the Constitution states:

The Islamic Republic of Iran has to be governed according to the general beliefs and decisions of the populace as expressed through voting; through the election of the President, Members of Parliament, and the councils and their monitors, or through referenda on topics which will be mentioned in other parts of this document.7

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6 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Preamble, 1998 [1377]
7 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1998 [1377]
The Islamic part of the Iranian constitution is based on the philosophy of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) as articulated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. However, the preamble to the Iranian constitution makes it specifically clear that it is an ideological constitution and “Islam was put into place as the dominant ideology in the in the constitutional documents.” The combining of religion and democracy, while popular upon its adoption in 1979, has created such immense conflict that the system as it is currently constituted cannot survive without major changes and reforms. Even though the regime itself does not tolerate any open discourse that questions the nature of the Islamic Republic “the taboos on open discussion of the separation of religion and state have been broken.” There are mechanisms within the Iranian Constitution, such as a popular referendum or parliamentary amendments of existing law that would allow for such changes to occur, paving the path for a transition to democracy. However, the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is unlikely to allow any path forward that would diminish his power or the Islamic nature of the Republic. What makes the proponents of reform hopeful a change can occur despite the current Supreme Leader’s steadfast opposition is that Ayatollah Khamenei will not be in office for much longer given his relatively advanced age (he is currently 76) and his failing health.

*Figure 1* illustrates how the Supreme Leader (*Vali-e Faqih*), the religious/political post created according to Khomeini’s doctrine, can exert influence over all the elected and non-elected

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bodies of the Islamic Republic. The Supreme Leader appoints all twelve members of the Guardian Council who are tasked with vetting candidates and laws to ensure they are in compliance with Islamic Law and the goals of the Revolution. He also controls the military and national security apparatus as well appointing the heads of the state television (the IRIB) and the judiciary. It is this arrangement that short-circuits democratic institutions in Iran, and it is the first element of the regime that must be examined. It is necessary to examine the evolution of Khomeini’s concept of the Velayet-e Faqih, otherwise the political developments in today’s Iran would be unintelligible.
The Doctrine of the Velayat-e Faqih

Ayatollah Khomeini was the leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the main driver of his ideology was antisecularism. 12 A series of lectures compiled in *Velayat-e Faqih* first published in 1970, years before the revolution, Khomeini says that “it is part of colonial propaganda that religion should be separated from politics, that Islamic scholars should not get involved in political and social affairs.” 13 In another lecture, he tries to highlight the fallacy of the separation of religion from politics by posing a series of rhetorical questions harkening back to the early days of Islam when he asks “Was religion separate from politics at the time of the Prophet [Mohammed]? […] Was politics separated from religion during the time of Imam Ali?” 14 Khomeini saw the *Velayat-e Faqih* as a way to combat this trend and return Islam to its golden age. His goal was to implement Sharia law and give the clergy, as experts in Islamic law, ultimate authority over all matters of state in order to ensure that the government is run in harmony with Islamic laws. Even though *Velayat-e Faqih* was written and published long before the revolution, in the months leading up to the victory of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, he deliberately sought to deemphasize the vision of government he had laid out in order to present himself someone merely seeking to end the despotic rule of the Shah without any particular political agenda of his own. During the last leg of his long exile from Iran, while staying at the Neauphle-le-Château outside of Paris, he emphasized to foreign journalists that “In Islam we have absolute freedom” 15, and “an Islamic government is a democratic state in a real sense” 16, emphasizing that “in an Islamic

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16 Ibid., 190
Republic, everyone enjoys freedom of thought and expression.” Khomeini also declared that the Islamic Republic he envisioned would be the very same type present in Western democracies.

At its height, almost 11% of the Iranian population from all political stripes participated in the 1979 Revolution, the highest in history, making it a “popular revolution” in the truest sense of the word. The people were united in their opposition to the despotic rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi whom they saw as a corrupt dictator, and someone who was beholden to the secular Western powers. Works like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad’s Gharbzadegi (Westoxification) made many Iranians predisposed to accept the kind of religious opposition figure Khomeini represented as the anti-Shah figurehead of the Revolution. The Revolution itself was not Islamist in nature given that it was by and large pluralistic, encompassing peoples of different classes, ethnicities, genders, and religions (including Christian Armenians and Iran’s native Jews). Put simply, the Iranians knew what they didn’t want (the Shah) and they were ready to rally behind a figure that offered a viable alternative. Many chose to ignore, or simply were not aware of Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic government headed by an Islamic jurist. Once the Shah was deposed, Khomeini made sure, through a series of shrewd and opportunistic political maneuverings, that the doctrine of the Velayat-e Faqih, and not a secular democracy (like he had promised in France) became the foundation of the new Islamic Republic.

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18 Ibid., vol. 3, 145
19 Abbas Milani, The Three Paradoxes of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, http://www.mei.edu/content/three-paradoxes-islamic-revolution-iran
Khomeini’s concept of the rule of the jurist rejected the separation of religion and state and during much of his rule, he implemented it based on what he had envisioned during his exile. His doctrine was made of three major components:

- Sharia law is complete and contains everything needed to achieve happiness and progress.
- It is necessary to control the state in order to implement Sharia law properly.
- Proper implementation can only be overseen by an expert in Islamic law, therefore the ruler must be an Islamic jurist. 23

However, this vision of government proved extremely problematic in addressing the exigencies of actually governing. For over a decade, the rate of economic growth was severely affected by political and social turmoil caused by a number of factors including: the revolution itself, which created a number of domestic political crises; legal uncertainties following the collapse of the old order; revolutionary justice; debates over property rights; the eight year war with Iraq; and international isolation.24 Khomeini himself was extremely uninterested in economic matters and dismissed such concerns as “foolish.”25 In 1988, after the war with Iraq ended, the dire economic conditions of the country could no longer be blamed on the deprivations of a war economy.26 Khomeini recognized that for his vision of government to survive him, the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih needed to be fundamentally revised.27 In a drastic departure from his initial theory of Islamic government, where the state was restricted by the laws of Sharia, Khomeini now claimed that the needs of the government took primacy over Sharia. 28 He said that the practice of Ijithad,
the independent analysis of religious law, was too theoretical to meet the needs of the
government. In order to preserve the established Islamic government then, the needs of the
government, or the “secondary principles” (ahkam-e sanavieh), must take precedence over the
“primary principles” (ahkam-e avallieh) of Sharia. There is a central paradox in this second
version of the doctrine since it is required that all legal and political powers be subordinated to one
individual who must be an Islamic jurist (the Supreme Leader), who can then overrule Sharia if it
conflicted with the interests of the state (maslahat-e nezam). This created a theocratic monism
that completely did away with the traditional dualism of religious and political authority that had
existed in the Shi’a tradition. While the first part of the new doctrine might be welcomed by
traditional Islamic jurists, they might find the Supreme Leader’s ability to override Sharia (which
in traditional Muslim scholarship is inviolable, no matter the cost) as extremely troubling.
However, this also opens the possibility that the public interests might be able to supplant what is
demanded by Sharia. While Khomeini’s interpretation of maslahat-e nezam does not exactly line
up with what modern political language might consider as public interests, it does give proponents
of reform within the Islamic Republic some room to maneuver. It is this second characteristic of
Khomeini’s final version of the Velayt-e Faqih that subordinates religious law to some measure of
human reasoning, and it might ironically lead to the secularization of the role of the Supreme
Leader, despite the intentions of its creator.

The philosophical foundation of such a transition can be found in the works of Iranian Islamic
intellectuals such as Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush. Islamic intellectuals are Muslim scholars that seek

30 Ibid., vol. 20, 170
Abbas Milani & Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner): 19-20
to present a new understanding of the religion that would make it more compatible with the requirements of modernity. Sorosh offers an alternative approach to establishing a government in an Islamic society to the one offered by Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih*. He presents his ideas in the broader context of reforming Islamic thought through the “humanization of religion.” He argues that Islamic Jurists have no privileged access to divine knowledge, arguing that “religion is for humans, not humans for religion.” This is a direct Khomeini’s claim that only an Islamic jurist is fit to rule because he is the only one who can correctly interpret divine law, thereby invalidating the need for the *Velayat-e Faqih*.

Opposition to the Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih* can be also found among prominent members of the clergy. The late Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, once the anointed successor to Khomeini who later fell out of favor and was replaced after he criticized Khomeini’s policies, called for a more liberal interpretation of *Velayat-e Faqih*, legalization of political parties, and a greater respect for pluralism in the Islamic Republic. He even went so far as to question the qualifications of Ayatollah Khamenei, Khomeini’s successor, a criticism that resulted in his house arrest until his death in 2009. Other critics from the ranks of the clergy such as Mohsen Kadivar, Ayatollah Jalaleddin Taheri, Mohammad Mojtahed-Sabestari, and Hasan Yousefi-Eshkevari, carried forth this criticism of the regime. The regime tried to silence these critics through arrests and trials,

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34 Ibid.
but it only managed to amplify their dissenting voices, with the televised trial of Mohsen Kadivar becoming something of a sensation.\textsuperscript{39}

While these philosophical discussions questioning the legitimacy of the concept of \textit{Velayat-e-Faqih} were useful in chipping away at the edifice of the regime, pragmatist reformers such as Said Hajarian, took on a more realpolitik approach. Hajarian, an adviser to the reformist President Mohammad Khatami, advocated for democracy and the separation of religion and state. However, he did recognize that “the balance of power within Iranian government is not in favor of” such a radical change.\textsuperscript{40} In order to achieve the goals of creating a democratic system, Hajarian opted for a constitutional approach. While the hardliners in Iran see the second version of Khomeini’s doctrine as to mean that the appointed Supreme Leader has absolute power and legitimacy, Hajarian favored a view that advocated for the election of all public officials, including the office of the Supreme Leader; and the powers of these officials should be limited to what is listed in Iran’s constitution.\textsuperscript{41} The Iranian constitution states that the Assembly of Experts (who are directly elected by the people) elect the Supreme Leader, and through their power of oversight have the authority to remove him at any point.\textsuperscript{42} However, the Assembly has never exercised its oversight mandate for two main reasons: the Supreme Leader appoints the Guardian Council who can vet the candidates for the Assembly of Experts; and the Supreme Leader also has the legal authority to dismiss members of the Assembly at any time, if he so chooses.\textsuperscript{43} Hajarian argues that this cycle
of impotent oversight can only be broken by mobilizing social forces from below in a strategy he summarized as “pressure from the bottom, negotiation from the top!”

Khomeini’s doctrine of the rule of Islamic Jurist, controversial to begin with, has lost significant religious and political legitimacy separated from his charismatic authority. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the current supreme leader, succeeded to the office with very weak religious credentials, and even though he has expanded the powers of his office in a more authoritarian direction, he has had to constantly play political factions within Iran in order maintain his position. At this time there is no one with the religious authority or political backing within Iran to succeed Khamenei, who himself has been in failing health for several years. This has intensified the factionalization of Iranian politics, and it is an important development that might create some avenues for change in Iran’s future political landscape.

**Political Factions in Iran and Reform**

Iran does not have political parties in the sense they exist in Western democracies. Involvement in Iranian politics requires fidelity to the core ideals of the Islamic Republic found in the constitution as interpreted by the Guardian Council. In this regard the Guardian Council was meant to work very much like the *Conseil constitutionnel* in the French system of government. Given the Islamic Republic’s Islamist ideology, all parties operating in Iran’s political system must fit within that spectrum, in effect eliminating political participation by non-Islamist political entities. The Guardian Council has never laid out the criteria for what makes a candidate or

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46 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 98
A political party sufficiently Islamic, and it rarely, if ever provides a reason for its decisions. Moreover, since candidates and political groups can be arbitrarily banned at any time by the Guardian Council, the process of party crystallization is not allowed to be completed. An ideological and authoritarian regime, such as the one that exists in Iran, has a vested interest in preventing the crystallization of political parties, lest they start to present a competing center of power. This creates a perennial arrangement of transitory and shifting alliances between different political groupings around certain political and economic issues. Therefore, it is more useful to examine Iran’s politics in terms of political cleavages. Hossein Bashiriyeh identifies cleavages as “relatively lasting or long-term and structural conflict lines that generate opposing political attitudes and preferences and divide people over a number of important issues (cleavage issues) for a rather long period of time, as opposed to shifting and temporary confrontations over secondary issues.” These cleavages are precursors to the creation of political parties, however, for the purposes of this paper we will focus on whether these cleavages can be exploited by reformists to facilitate the transition to a more democratic system of government in Iran.

Iran is an ideological state in that the ruling elites seek to shape every aspect of culture, society, and identity to match the tenets of Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic society. While the regime cannot be considered a democracy because of the Supreme Leader ability to override the democratic elements of the government, it is not by any means a completely authoritarian or totalitarian system either. The ideological drive towards the utopian vision laid out in the constitution promotes factionalism as the “pulsating heart of ideological states” since everyone has to operate within the confines of the dominant ideology. This is very much the case in a system

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47 Hossein Bashiriyeh, “Cleavages in Iranian Politics Since 1979”, in Politics & Culture in Contemporary Iran, ed. Abbas Milani & Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015): 34
48 Ibid., 37
like the Islamic Republic where two main cleavages have emerged, and each has its own set of sub-cleavages that “provide the ground for shifting and temporary coalitions across the main cleavage.”

During the history of the Islamic Republic these political cleavages have shifted over a variety of issues, ranging from the fight between secularists and Islamists in the early days of the Revolution, to socioeconomic and cultural issues that predominated especially after Khomeini’s death in 1989. However, all of these cleavages were working within the confines of the original ideology of the Revolution. It wasn’t until the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the rise of the reform movement that a new cleavage was created, “leading to some shifts in the ideological positions of parties and factions.”

The rather hurried election of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to post of Supreme Leader after Khomeini’s death was in violation of the 1979 constitution that required the leader have a rank of marja’iyyat per article 107. The Constitution was retroactively changed to remove this requirement and expand the Assembly of Experts’ power to dismiss the leader in cases other than mere incapacitation. Khamenei received all of his predecessor’s political powers and titles except for the title of Imam, making it clear from the very beginning that Khamenei’s weak credentials would not allow him to exercise the same type of charismatic authority that Khomeini had enjoyed as the founder of the Islamic Republic. Some of his promoters tried to encourage the idea of the Imamate of Khamenei in the late nineties but it was never successful and it faded away. In fact, for much of the nineties, Khamenei’s position as leader was overshadowed by the

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50 Ibid., 41
52 Amended Article 111 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran
strong presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as he pursued a policy of neoliberal economic reform, privatization and reconstruction. Rafsanjani’s political machinations after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini were instrumental in Khamenei’s ascendance to the office of the Supreme Leader, despite his weak qualifications.Both owed their positions in the regime to the experience they had amassed during the revolutionary struggle, their management of state affairs during the Iran-Iraq war, and their close ties to Ayatollah Khomeini. Khamenei came to increasingly rely on conservative clergy and the ties he had built up with Revolutionary Guards Corps of the Islamic Republic while he was President during the Iran-Iraq war. These bonds were key when the surprise election of the reformist President, Mohammad Khatami, in 1997 prompted conservative forces to rally around the supreme leader in order thwart any attempt at changing the nature of the Islamic Republic. Ironically, Khamenei himself had started his career aligned with the political faction that would eventually become the heart of the reformist movement in Iran.

The reformists were born out of the populist Khomeinist faction - named so because Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly threw his support behind them during the last two years of his life. Khomeini supported them because the egalitarian economic policies and leftist militancy of this faction were more in line with his revised doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih, and the principle of ahkam-e-sanaviyeh. After Khomeini’s death, the revolutionary fervor of the radical Khomenist faction died down and their ideology evolved from a militant form of Islamic populism to focus on personal freedoms. Many members of this radical faction such as Ebrahim Nabavi, Said Hajarian,

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55 Ibid., 107
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 108
Mehdi Karrubi, and Mir Hossein Mousavi would later reemerge as part of the reformist movement. This change in philosophy can be also attributable to the fact that after Khomeini’s death, this faction fell out of favor because of their radical policies that were blamed for much of the economic stagnation in Iran after the war. With the passing of their main supporter, the Khomeinists were sidelined by an alliance of pragmatists and conservatives. The pragmatists, represented by Rafsanjani, had close ties to the mercantile class of the Bazaaris and were concerned with building a viable modern state without challenging the founding ideology of Khomeini. The conservatives believed in an absolutist-Islamic theocracy that had no room for the populist policies of the Khomeinists because it meant the Supreme Leader had to be responsive to the needs of the people. As you will note, all of these factions represented different aspects of Khomeini’s ideology and most of the cleavages revolved around the issues of economics and reconstruction.

The emergence of the reformist faction with the election of Khatami, heralded a new type of political cleavage that was not related to any of the salient issues of the preceding periods. The populism of the old Khomeinists had morphed to focus more on individual freedoms and democracy. Khatami’s election took the establishment by surprise, as he won with seventy percent of the vote in a record turnout. As a relatively unknown candidate with liberal view on social issues during his time as culture minister in the early nineties, Khatami was supposed to be the

60 Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, Democracy in Iran, (Oxford University Press, 2006): 108
63 Ibid.
64 Hossein Bashiriyeh, “Cleavages in Iranian Politics Since 1979”, in Politics & Culture in Contemporary Iran, ed. Abbas Milani & Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015): 50
token candidate that mollified those who wanted some opening up of the political and social space.\textsuperscript{66} Khatami’s aim was to reconcile Islam with a version of democracy that would address the conflict between Iran’s elected and non-elected institutions, emphasizing “popular consent and sovereignty, political pluralism, competition and participation, civil society, human rights, the rule of law and constitutionalism, republicanism, a limited version of theocracy as a legally bound office elected by the people (not appointed by God)” among others.\textsuperscript{67}

In response to Khatami’s attempts at reform, the conservative factions rallied behind the Supreme Leader, and new fundamentalist factions emerged and were promoted by the Office of the Supreme Leader to counter the reformists.\textsuperscript{68} At the core of these new fundamentalist factions were the IRGC with their Basiji militia units under the direct control of Ayatollah Khamenei, and a cadre of hardline clerics such as Ayatollah Jannati and Muhammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi who served as sources of spiritual inspiration for them.\textsuperscript{69} Mesbah-Yazdi in particular was quite vitriolic in his rhetoric calling for violence against anyone who would seek to reform Islam.\textsuperscript{70} As a result, while Khatami was able to provide some opening up of the cultural and political space in the country, most of his efforts at major reform were rolled back or stymied leading to disillusionment among his supporters.\textsuperscript{71} In the subsequent elections, through a combination of low voter turnout, and mass disqualification of reformist candidates, the conservatives and their fundamentalist allies

\textsuperscript{66} Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, \textit{Democracy in Iran}, (Oxford University Press, 2006): 129-131
\textsuperscript{67} Hossein Bashiriyeh, “Cleavages in Iranian Politics Since 1979”, in \textit{Politics & Culture in Contemporary Iran}, ed. Abbas Milani & Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner 2015): 51
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 53
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 54
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, \textit{Democracy in Iran}, (Oxford University Press, 2006): 148
were able to completely dominate Iranian electoral politics especially after the 2005 election of the conservative mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.\(^72\)

While this overreliance on the conservative and fundamentalists seems to have made Khamenei a more powerful political figure and had halted the reformists at first glance, a deeper examination arguably reveals that it may have weakened the position of the Supreme Leader. The constitutional amendments of 1989 were meant to turn Khomeini’s informal authority into a constitutional form that would make up for Khamenei’s weak credentials.\(^73\) Additionally, in order to extricate himself from the shadow of Rafsanjani, Khamenei had been meticulously replacing the President’s men in powerful positions with his loyalists since the mid-nineties.\(^74\) Along with his control over the IRGC and the Basij, who were the driving force behind the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, Khamenei’s influence had never seemed more pronounced. In the elections for the Seventh Majlis (parliament), “more than one-third of the candidates […] were war veterans.”\(^75\) The Revolutionary Guard had also significantly expanded its footprint in the Iranian economy, obtaining no-bid contracts valued in the billions of Dollars for Southern-Pars Gas field, expanding the Tehran Metro, among others.\(^76\) However, having sidelined the reformists, Khamenei had become overly reliant on the conservatives and especially the fundamentalists, making it difficult for him to balance out their influence.\(^77\) The situation became even more problematic after Khamenei threw his support behind Ahmadinejad after the disputed 2009 elections, in a bid to

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\(^74\) Ibid.


\(^76\) Ibid.

prevent the reformists regaining the office of the Presidency. That saw many Iranians pour into the street, alleging that the elections had been stolen from the candidates backed by the reformists, Messrs. Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi. As the demonstrations went on, the crackdown intensified and chants of “Where’s my vote?” challenging the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad’s election changed to that of “Death to the Dictator” in direct reference to Khamenei himself.

The Green Movement, as the protests came to be known, was not able to achieve its aims of overturning the results of what was widely considered to be “the most blatant vote-rigging in the history of the Islamic Republic,” and was suppressed by the regime, seriously damaging the legitimacy of the regime. Ahmadinejad, who was unruly even before his reelection bid, having challenged the Supreme Leader on a number of occasions during his first term, became even more difficult to work with, butting heads with parliament and the Supreme Leader on numerous occasions. As a result there “was a further intensification of a secondary cleavage between the fundamentalist and the traditionalist-conservative parties.”

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78 Nader Hashemi, “Rowhani’s Challenge” The Cairo Review of Global Affairs 10 (Summer 2013): 30
80 Mehrangiz Kar, “Democracy After the Green Movement” in Politics & Culture in Contemporary Iran, ed. Abbas Milani & Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015): 70
81 Ibid.
82 Most notably, in a significant act of defiance, President Ahmadinejad exercised his constitutional prerogative to replace Ali Larijani, who had been appointed by the Supreme Leader as the head Supreme National Security Council, with one of his own confidants, Said Jaliili. Khamenei was forced to settle for merely having Larijani as one of his 2 representatives on the SNSC.
conservative factions to coalesce around a single candidate in the 2013 Presidential elections, paving the path for Hassan Rouhani’s surprise victory.

Rouhani’s election was made possible by an unlikely alliance between Iran’s embattled reformists and the center-right faction to which Rouhani and Rafsanjani belong. This benefited both sides since it allowed the reformists to regain influence after being in the political wilderness during the conservative-dominated Ahmadinejad era, and it benefited Rouhani in that it allowed him to benefit from the popularity of the reformist movement to get-out-the-vote. Given the economic and international problems caused by Ahmadinejad’s hardline government, Khamenei’s permissiveness during the election and the subsequent towards Rouhani could be interpreted in the light of the principle of Maslahat-e Nezam. The regime could hope to 1) quiet the remnants of the Green Movement and alleviate popular anger at the regime that had been building since 2009; 2) find solutions for the economic and foreign policy issues that were threatening the viability of the regime; 3) they could show that elections in Iran were indeed “free and fair” thus mending some of the damage caused by the fraud allegations of 2009.

However, it can be argued that the regime has miscalculated its ability to control the outcome of the events that have been set in motion since Rouhani’s election. Despite Khamenei’s deep ambivalence and hostility towards the U.S., he gave Rouhani enough political space to reach a nuclear deal with P5+1 Group and alleviate Iran’s economic and political isolation. Once the deal was reached, Khamenei forbade any further contact with the “arrogant powers” but the Iranian

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87 Ibid.


foreign minister, Javad Zarif, has had numerous contacts with his U.S. counterpart, Secretary John Kerry, in regards to various regional matters.\textsuperscript{90} The judiciary, which is controlled by the Supreme Leader, imposed a press embargo on the former reformist President, Mohammad Khatami in the lead-up to the 2016 parliamentary elections.\textsuperscript{91} Rouhani has violated this embargo on numerous occasions, most notably during a televised speech in Khatami’s hometown of Yazd, causing a raucous response from the massive crowd that was muted by state television.\textsuperscript{92} In some ways, Khatami has proven to a more potent force for reform since he has left office. His endorsement of Rouhani in 2013 rallied reformist support behind him and energized the electorate. During February’s Parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections in Iran, the Rouhani’s pragmatist-reformist coalition worked to defeat the hardliners, resulting in the reformist “List of Hope,” spearheaded by a former vice president of Khatami’s Mohammad Aref, winning all 30 of Tehran’s seats, and ousting all but one of the hardliners from the Assembly of Experts, thereby returning Rafsanjani to the Assembly after his ouster in 2011.\textsuperscript{93} This was despite the disqualification of almost all of the reformist candidates from the February elections which even included Ayatollah Khomeini’s reformist grandson, Hassan Khomeini.\textsuperscript{94} Most notably, Rouhani himself is a creature of the deep state and has connections across the ideological spectrum, having served in Iran’s

\textsuperscript{90} Roula Khalaf, “John Kerry and Javad Zarif set an example in the Middle East” \textit{Financial Times}, Jan. 20 2016. \url{http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c3527314-bf57-11e5-846f-79b0e3d20eaf.html}

\textsuperscript{91} Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Iranian media banned from mentioning former president Mohammad Khatami” \textit{The Guardian}, Feb. 17, 2015, \url{http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/iranian-media-banned-from-mentioning-mohammad-khatami}


national security and foreign policy apparatus in several important positions, including as the head of the National Security Council from 1989-2005 (having been appointed by Khamenei) and chief nuclear negotiator from 2003-2005.\textsuperscript{95} This is in stark contrast to Khatami who had only briefly held the position of Minister of Culture before he became President. As such, Rouhani is better able to navigate the byzantine workings of the myriad of factions in Iranian politics and will not be as susceptible to the kind of pressure from hardliners that derailed much of the promise of Khatami’s presidency.

Another major reason the hardliners might not be able to exert as much pressure is due to the regime’s fear that it can ill afford to have a repeat of major street protests of 2009’s Green Movement. General Mohammad Ali Jafarian, the senior commander of the Revolutionary Guard said that the events of the Green Movement posed a greater threat to regime stability than Saddam’s 1980 invasion of Iran.\textsuperscript{96} The Basij (\textit{Sazman-e Basij-e Mostazafan}, meaning the Organization for the Mobilization of the Oppressed) are civilian militias initially created by Ayatollah Khomeini through decree during the Iran-Iraq war, have become the main component of the regime’s coercive apparatus domestically. The Basij are under the control of the IRGC, and they were used extensively to control and eventually suppress Iran’s Green movement protests following the disputed 2009 election.\textsuperscript{97} However, the brutality of the effort it took to suppress the Green Movement has not only tarnished the image of the IRGC (which controls the Basij militias), it has also brought into question the reliability of the Basij in the event of another uprising.\textsuperscript{98} Only a fraction of the members of the Basij are true believers, while the rest join for the generous state

\textsuperscript{95} Nader Hashemi, “Rowhani’s Challenge” \textit{The Cairo Review of Global Affairs} 10 (Summer 2013): 35
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 30
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 134
benefits or just for the thrill of violence.\textsuperscript{99} The fact that the Basij are not driven by a complete devotion to the theocratic ideology of the Islamic government is not a recent phenomenon, as a survey conducted in 1995 also “showed that only 35 percent of Basij members believe in the culture of the Basij and its values and live according to these beliefs.”\textsuperscript{100} Even the true believers don’t like to be involved in internal repression but will gladly defend the revolution from external threats, as evinced by the willingness of many who have travelled to Syria to achieve “martyrdom.”\textsuperscript{101} The last type of Basiji, the ones who are generally considered thugs (\textit{owbash}) that just enjoy violence, have a long history going back centuries of being used by politicians and clergy to intimidate and marginalize their opponents.\textsuperscript{102} While they are very useful for intimidation, they cannot be counted on to remain loyal if a serious challenge to the regime where to threaten its viability.

There is also an element of class-warfare to the way Basij members are recruited. An analysis of the Basiji’s economic backgrounds indicate that a majority of them are from lower-income and working classes, with only 2.2 percent identifying as upper middle class.\textsuperscript{103} Candidates from poorer backgrounds tend to be more religious, which would make them better recruits for an Islamist militia organization since the Basij relies on volunteers to fill its ranks. Economic incentives, access to jobs and preferential admission to state universities, and not ideology are the

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\textsuperscript{100} Reza Mahbobi, “Investigating of Factors Affecting the Decline or Increasing of Activities of Basij Resistance Bases,” \textit{Basij Studies Quarterly} 4, no. 11-12 (1996): 77 \\
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., p.135 \\
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p. 125; and Young Journalists Clab, “A Comprehensive Information System Should Establish for Identifying Veteran Students,” October 28, 2012, \texttt{http://goo.gl/NgJvU}
\end{flushright}
primary reasons people enlist with the Basij. Given the religious background of many of the members, the organization itself is ideologically more in line with the hardliners in Iran; but since the majority of its members have joined for opportunist reasons, the regime is limited in using them to coercively respond to the reformists (especially after 2009) and has been using them mostly as rent-a-crowds to demonstrate the Islamic Republic’s popularity.

The Islamic Republic’s dual religious/democratic nature has been a source of constant friction since its founding. The leaders of the Islamic Republic, especially after the death of Khomeini, have touted voter turnout as a signifier of the regime’s legitimacy and the embrace of the Islamist ideology by the Iranian people. Ironically, higher voter turnout has historically translated to victory for those who emphasized a more democratic and pluralistic view, leading to the conclusion that most Iranians don’t participate in high numbers in elections because they believe in the regime. Rather, they see the ballot box as the only viable path to effect some sort of change in the regime, especially after Khatami’s election which gave rise to the reform movement within Iran. The reformists have also learned from the negative impact of boycotting elections following their disillusionment with Khatami’s failed efforts to bring about change.

Iran’s hybrid system is neither completely democratic, nor is it completely despotic. It can be best described as a system of “Electoral Authoritarianism” where the regime holds regular elections but has violated “the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so profoundly and systematically as to render elections instruments of authoritarian rule rather than instruments

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104 Afshon Ostovar, “Iran’s Basij: Membership in a Militant Islamist Organization,” *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 345-361
of democracy.”¹⁰⁷ The Iranian electorate is perfectly aware that the elections are not “fair and free” as the regime often claims, yet they have come to expect a fair chance to have their voices heard within the limited ideological context that the Islamic Republic’s constitution allows. The main impetus for the protests following the disputed 2009 elections was that the regime had violated this unspoken arrangement by blatantly rigging the vote.¹⁰⁸ While the protest might have been suppressed, it exposed deep cleavages within Iran’s political elite, which has allowed the reformists to participate by proxy (as they did with Rouhani, and the recent parliamentary elections), even when most of their own candidates are disqualified by the Guardian Council. The list of Hope included many candidates with dubious backgrounds, who might have even been opponents of the reformists in the past, or as Sadegh Zibakalam, a prominent reformist analyst from the University of Tehran puts it, “we had to choose between bad and worse.”¹⁰⁹ It remains to be seen how effective of a voting block they will be in the next Majlis. A principled stand would have meant that reformists would have been completely blocked out of Iranian politics at a critical period where there is the potential for selecting Khamenei’s successor. A survey of a 125 legislative election in sub-Saharan Africa held between 1983 & 2009, dispels the notion that opposition boycott and protests can delegitimize electorally authoritarian regimes and bring about democratic change; rather it is “opposition participation and acceptance of the outcome” that are


¹⁰⁸ While it has never been conclusively proven that the election was fraudulent, a host of circumstantial evidence backs up this assertion. The election had a very high rate of turnout (higher than Khatami’s election in 1997) and yet the results started coming in from across the country almost immediately after the polls closed, in a country that has to bring back paper ballots from remote areas for counting. Also Ahmadinejad’s percentages were suspiciously uniform across the country, winning even in Mousavi and Karrubi’s respective hometowns. For more see: Ali Ansari, Daniel Berman and Thomas Rintoul (26 June 2011). "Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran’s 2009 Presidential Election" Chatham House and the Institute of Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews. [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/iranelection0609.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/iranelection0609.pdf)

“associated with the transformation of electoral autocracies into democracies over a sequence of multiparty elections.”  

A figure that stands out when examining the voting patterns in Iran is that about fifteen percent of the population has consistently voted for conservative and hardline candidates during presidential elections. This means that boycotting the elections by reformists during the 2005 cycle only amplified the effect of the conservative votes, even though their total number of votes had remained unchanged. Boycotting elections therefore, is a losing strategy by those wishing to bring about democratic change to the Iranian system as the regime can rely on these voters to maintain a veneer of legitimacy.

The democratic elements of the constitution of the Islamic Republic are short circuited by the unelected religious components of the hybrid system based on the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih. Yet as I have attempted to show, there are ideological as well as practical approaches to reforming these institutions to become more democratic and pluralistic. The hardline elements within the Iranian regime, led by Ayatollah Khamenei, still control the state’s coercive apparatus and have access to extensive financial resources with the IRGC’s business interests and the opaque religious foundations known as Bonyads. Therefore, even though the reform movement does have a high degree of buy in from certain members of the political elite, this is not enough to overcome the power imbalance in the political structure of the Islamic Republic, which highlights the need for a strong civil society (Jame-e-ye Madani) in Iran to pursue Hajarian’s “pressure from the bottom, negotiation from the top!” strategy.

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Civil Society in Iran

As it was established in the previous section, there is indeed at least a small but growing group of political elites within the Islamic Republic who seem committed to establishing a more pluralistic form of government.\footnote{Larry Diamond argues that an elite committed to democratic values is necessary for such a transition. See: Larry Diamond, “Democracy: Toward Consolidation”, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 218.} However, this group has very little control over the coercive apparatus of the regime, the reins of which are under the control of the Supreme Leader and his hardline allies. Therefore, the role of the Iranian people and civil society in pushing for democratic change from below cannot be overemphasized.

Civil society as a concept is rather amorphous and difficult to define. According to Larry Diamond, civil society is “the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.”\footnote{Larry Diamond, “Democracy: Toward Consolidation”, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 221} Through civil society, private citizens can as individuals or collective grouping, express their interests, make demands of the state to check its power, and as such can include a whole host of non-governmental groups that have varying degrees of organization.\footnote{Ibid., 222} This is why civil society is so closely associated with the establishment and consolidation of democracy.\footnote{Jean Cohen, Andrew Arato, Civil Society and Political Theory (MIT Press, March 29 1994): 346} Yet, civil society as it is understood in modern political science, as the intermediary between the private sphere and the state, is absent in Iran. This begs the question, that why in the long history of democratic struggle in Iran, has civil society not managed to take hold?

During Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1907, the leaders of the revolution were more concerned with curbing the excesses of the Qajar dynasty than with creating a strong civil society
While the quest for establishing the sovereignty of the people was undoubtedly a democratic endeavor, the movement did not have deep roots outside of a small group of enlightened aristocracy. Consequently, a host of obstacles militated against the creation of a democratic state in Iran at the time, including but not limited to: Iran’s overall backwardness at the time; the diverging interests of powerful Shia clerics whose aim was not democracy but to restore their privileges that had been diminished; a largely illiterate and nomadic population; and finally, the imperial rivalry between Russia and Great Britain as part of the Great Game that hobbled efforts at reform. The Constitutional Revolution was a grassroots attempt at self-governance that fell victim to the turmoil in its aftermath. In the face of such chaos the natural tendency to gravitate towards a strong state that could provide some measure of stability in exchange for the surrender of civil liberties was all too tempting. This can be referred to as “repressive development”: social and economic development without political modernization.

The authoritarian state-monopolized type of modernization, followed by Reza Shah Pahalavi and his son Mohammad Reza, alienated many sectors of Iranian society and limited the interactive development of civil society, a paternalistic pattern held throughout the Pahlavi Era.

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118 “there was no single charismatic leader in the Constitutional Revolution... On the whole, the anjomans, collective leadership, and cooperation were the hallmark of this period,” Cosroe Chaqueri, The Russo-Caucasian Origins of the Iranian Left, (Routledge, Aug. 3 2001): 111
119 “A strong state would, in the eyes of the clerics, protect Shi’i Islam from foreign infidel encroachments such as were being suffered by Shi’i population under the British in neighbouring Iraq. Both the socialist and liberal intelligentsia desired a strong state to keep foreign powers out, and to create modernity and prosperity, though at least a few of them realized early on the price that might have to be paid in civil liberty, creating a grim dilemma.” Vanessa Martin, Creating An Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000) 10
The premiership of Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951-1953) is often heralded as a democratic period that was thwarted by CIA-backed coup, saw the prime minister taking on emergency powers to combat both perceived and real threats against the drive to nationalize Iran’s oil industry. 122 The movement that brought Mossadeq to power had three components: the National Front that had a nationalist-democratic bent, the Tudeh (the Communist party of Iran), and the Islamists of Fedayan-e Eslam. These three groups were only loosely aligned and there was nothing to turn them into a coherent political force since outside of the National Front, both the Tudeh and the Fedayan-e Eslam rejected democratic pluralism and were in fact anti-democratic in nature. 123 While the coup saw the Shah returned to power with expanded autocratic powers, it did provide a valuable lesson: “that without constitutionalism, and by implication without the expansion of civil society and the mutual interactive development of social interests, national self-assertion will not lead to the liberation of the people from foreign powers and indigenous dictatorship.” 124 It is a lesson that was forgotten by the time of the 1979 Revolution when Khomeini took power trying to recreate an Islamist version of the strong state. 125 Instead of a strong state, however, factional rivalries and the domination of economic activity by the regime elite has contributed to the creation of a rentier state version of “plunder capitalism” 126 that has stunted the development of

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123 For more see: Stephen Kinzer, All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003)
independent economic interests which is the prerequisite for the development of a robust civil society.

In fact, the very idea of civil society is a fairly recent phenomenon in Iranian political discourse as it did not achieve any real prominence until the election of the reformist Mohammad Khatami in 1997.\(^{127}\) Since then, *jame-ye madani*, has become central to the discussions relating to the advancement of a pluralistic democratic society in Iran.\(^{128}\) It is because of this association with the reform movement that the hardliners have either cracked down on civil society institutions such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), a situation that has worsened since the aftermath of the Green Movement. The hardliners see any organization that can give the people the ability to take control of the various aspects of their lives, no matter how benign the cause, as a direct threat to the authority of the regime.\(^{129}\) NGOs are technically legal under the laws of the Islamic Republic. Under Article 8 of the Parties, Societies, and Associations Act of 1981, the Interior Ministry is in charge of issuing licenses.\(^{130}\) In practice, an NGO is unlikely to get “approved unless it has explicit or implicit links with the authorities”\(^{131}\) making the supposed non-governmental nature of the organization moot. Article 26 of the Constitution\(^{132}\) stipulates a vague “Islamic Standards” for any organization or party that wants to register, creating an ideological


\(^{132}\) Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 26: “Political parties, societies, political and craft associations, and Islamic or recognized minority religious associations may be freely brought into being, provided that no violation is involved of the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, Islamic standards, and the foundations of the Islamic Republic. No person may be prevented from joining, or compelled to join, one of the above.”
criteria that makes the establishment and nurturing of a vibrant civil society nearly impossible. Consequently, while Iran has many NGOs, they “lack independence and financial resources” which, coupled with the fact that many are unable to take advantage of the expertise of foreign entities for the fear of government reprisals, serve to restrict their efficacy. Moreover, as we have seen with the Basij, the regime sees the poor (mostazafan) as its core constituency and co-opts the role civil society would play in providing aid to them. Given these restrictions, and the lack of a historic background of a civil society in Iran, we must then attempt to conceptualize a different arrangement that would fulfill the functions of a civil society in aiding democratic development.

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<tr>
<th>Figure 2. Institutional Features of Civil Society</th>
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<tr>
<td>A sphere of society separate from the state and economy (but with some mutual interpretations with these spheres)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiplicity of autonomous voluntary associations (e.g., NGOs, community groups, faith based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movement groups, advocacy groups)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom of Communication (Freedom of media and gathering)</td>
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<td>Individual and collective rights that are guaranteed and regulated by laws</td>
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<td>Tolerance and nonviolence in conflict resolution</td>
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<th>Figure 3. Human Foundations of Civil Society</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Space (Privacy): a domain of free individual moral choice and self-development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solidarity: a sphere in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined</td>
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135 Ibid.
Farzin Vahdat argues that for the institutional features of a civil society (Figure 2) to take hold, the human foundations of a civil society (Figure 3) must come first.¹³⁶ The first element of the human foundations of a civil society create an agency (or subjectivity) within the individual. The second element creates inter-subjectivity which allows individuals to share their agency in pursuit of a common goal. In fact, the Revolution of 1979 had both of these elements in place with Khomeini and other ideological architects of the revolution, such as Ali Shariati and Morteza Motahhari, encouraging the masses to become empowered (with a sense of agency) and to participate in revolutionary activities.¹³⁷ Khomeini’s charismatic authority and the regime’s suppression of competing centers of power where people can freely associate with each other, have prevented the formation of a civil society strong enough to work for the purposes of democratic consolidation.

In the absence of such a civil society, social movements can provide the same functions in expanding the demands and interests of the people of Iran.¹³⁸ As Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato point out in *Civil Society and Political Theory*, “social movements constitute the dynamic element in processes that might realize the positive potentials of modern civil societies,” adding that this “reconstructed theory of civil society in indispensable to an adequate understanding of the logic, stakes, and potentials of contemporary social movements.”¹³⁹ The Green Movement is perhaps the social movement that can fill this role. The movement has created a sense of agency in the generation born after the revolution, and even though the demonstrations of 2009 were brutally

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¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33
suppressed, it did allow for a sense of inter-subjectivity to develop between the participants. Moreover, while the movement enjoys the support of some of the regime elites, it is essentially a leaderless grass-roots phenomenon that is very much like the Constitutional Revolution in spirit, but with a much broader base of support. Its pursuit of gradual reform allows it to avoid the chaos of that failed attempt, while its leaderless nature prevents the kind of personal domination that led to the authoritarian nature of the ensuing Islamic Republic.

The Green Movement

Ramin Jahanbegloo, an Iranian philosopher and academic who was imprisoned by the Iranian regime in 2006 for a 125 days, described the Green Movement as “a major nonviolent movement in a Gandhian style.” The Green Movement got its name from the color of banners and bandanas used by the supporters of Mir Hussein Mousavi. After the events of 2009, however, it has generally come to represent the reform movement as a whole. The protests that occurred on the streets of Iran in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential election were the culmination of decades of frustration with the Islamic Republic’s failed economic promises and repressive policies. The movement was praised by Abbas Milani, another Iran scholar, “as a new, nonviolent, nonutopian, and popular paradigm of change.” A movement of such size did not develop in a vacuum, and even though the street protests were brutally quashed it has perhaps irreversibly damaged the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and reinvigorated the reform movement at a crucial juncture in the regime’s history. In this section I will illustrate why despite its seeming

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141 Abbas Milani, “Iran’s Democratic Movements,” in Politics & Culture in Contemporary Iran, ed. Abbas Milani & Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015): 249
failure to dislodge the regime, the legacy of the Green Movement has the potential to outdo Iran’s failed past attempts at democratization.

The Green Movement can be broken down into three distinct periods: The weeks preceding the 2009 Presidential elections, that saw enthusiasm grow around the election process among all the supporters of the candidates, but mainly on the reformist side represented by Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi; the period after the results were announced that saw massive street demonstrations that lasted for an entire week; the ensuing crackdown by the regime (by some estimates more than seventy demonstrators killed and many thousands arrested and tortured). This was the crackdown during this period that seems to have done the most lasting damage to regime legitimacy.

In the first period two major characteristics of the election set it apart from what had preceded it. For the first time ever, the candidates held debates where they able to challenge each other, creating an atmosphere that engendered free speech in stark contrast to the previously tightly state controlled events of the past. This broke the repressive atmosphere that had predominated the Ahmadinejad era where most of the reformist press had been shut down and it attracted the attention of the electorate. Before this, there was a general atmosphere of apathy following the failed reformist presidency of Khatami that led to the run-off victory of Ahmadinejad in 2005. Voter indifference was such during that election that even though there was strong evidence of fraud, the result did not cause any public indignation.
the contest, the electorate started participating in huge gatherings for both the reformist and conservative candidates, in an almost “carnivalesque” atmosphere where the sexes comingled without any harassment from the morality patrols (Gasht-e Ershad), that would have been unthinkable only a few weeks before.145

Much like the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, the regime seems to have underestimated the level of excitement that the elections would generate. Mir Hussein Mousavi had been out of government since the post of Prime Minister (1980-1988) had been eliminated after Khomeini’s death. He had previously declined to run in the 1997 and the 2005 elections, even though he supported Khatami.146 As was discussed in an earlier section, Mousavi used to belong to the radical faction that was favored by the late Khomeini, and one point he had sided with the prime minister in a dispute with the then president, Ali Khamenei. Despite his history of executive conflict with Khamenei, and his associations with the reform movement and his prominent profile in the formative years of the Islamic Republic, the Guardian Council approved his candidacy. In the calculations of the conservative forces, Mousavi’s lack of natural charisma combined with his long absence from politics, would limit his chances of getting elected.147 The same coalition of Iran’s nascent civil society, women’s movement, student groups, and economically disaffected population that had elected Khatami, rallied behind Mousavi’s campaign.148 Despite his disastrous first term, marked by a reckless style of populism that had led to international isolation and economic pain, Ahmadinejad had the support of Ayatollah Khamenei and his conservative

146 Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, Democracy in Iran, (Oxford University Press, 2006): 131
147 Abbas Milani, “Iran’s Democratic Movements,” in Politics & Culture in Contemporary Iran, ed. Abbas Milani & Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner 2015): 249
148 Ibid.
faction.\textsuperscript{149} The festive and open mood that characterized the election campaign season, raised hopes that the regime will allow for a “fair” vote much like when Khatami was elected.\textsuperscript{150} If the regime had not allowed such an open atmosphere in the lead up to the election, which raised people’s expectations about the fairness of the vote this time around, the outrage against electoral fraud would have been as muted as the 2005 elections.

The announcement of Ahmadinejad’s overwhelming victory even before the polls had closed, marked the beginning of the second period of the Green Movement, and for week that followed huge, but initially peaceful demonstrations took over the streets of Tehran and other major cities. Much ink has been spilled about whether Ahmadinejad’s re-election was fraudulent or not, and the evidence for both sides is circumstantial even if it tilts in favor of the fraud side. The perception of fraud is all that matters in this context. By some estimates as many as 3 million people participated at the height of the protests, demanding simply “Where’s my Vote?,” and capturing the essence of the fundamentally democratic ideals of the Green Movement.\textsuperscript{151}

When the protests didn’t stop after a week of the security forces attempting to discourage it through intimidation, beatings, and cutting off mobile and internet connections, the Supreme Leader unambiguously threw his support behind Ahmadinejad during his June 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2009, Friday sermon, thereby unleashing the IRGC and Basij units on the demonstrators in what marks the third period of the Green Movement.\textsuperscript{152} When Karroubi, Mousavi, his Zahra Rahnavard (Mousavi’s wife who had actively campaigned with her husband in what was a first for the Islamic Republic)

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\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
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refused to accept what they believed to be the fraudulent results of the election, they were put under house arrest on direct orders of Khamenei.153

As the crackdown intensified, the chants of “Where’s my Vote?” turned into “Death to Dictator” in direct reference to the Supreme Leader.154 While there had been numerous protests against the regime, it was hitherto unimaginable to hear slogans directly challenging the central pillar of the Islamic Republic system, the doctrine of the Velyat-e Faqih. By so brazenly supporting Ahmadinejad, Khamenei had compromised the façade of the “neutral arbiter” the Supreme Leader was supposed to maintain, leading to a loss of legitimacy.155 The arrests of its leaders and brutal tactics of the regime, meant that the protests could not go on indefinitely, especially since the participation of the lower classes of society had been episodic at best due to a lack of organization and limited consideration of their mainly economic demands within the Green Movement.156 Consequently, the regime was finally able to bring about the end of public protests.

The end of the Green Movement’s street protests does not mean that it is a spent political force. The brutal tactics the regime had to resort to in order to quash the protests has done some serious (perhaps irreparable) harm to its connection with the people. The regime tried to paint the protests as another “color revolution” fomented by Western governments,157 but the widespread nature and the intensity of the protests makes that a hollow argument. More importantly, the Green Movement and the enthusiasm it generated, renewed the sense of agency in the Iranian electorate,
especially among the reformist coalition that had become so disheartened after the Khatami administration. Moreover, the protests allowed for a sense of inter-subjectivity to be established among the participants. It was this same group that proved so crucial in the decisive first round election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, and the parliamentary and Expediency council elections in February 2016, illustrating that the Green Movement still maintains a significant degree of political influence. In the following section we look at how the demographic make-up of this group, and their beliefs provide the best chance for democratic reform within the next decade or so.

Iran’s Youth – What Makes them a Force for Democratic Change?

The vast majority of those who took part in the Green Movement protests were young, more specifically they are the generation that was born after the Islamic Revolution. A staggering 63 percent of Iran’s population is under the age of 35, making this group the largest voting bloc in Iran’s electorate. This population pattern is not unique to Iran, as many countries in the region also have populations in which the youth comprise the largest segment. In fact this “Youth Bulge” was arguably one of the contributing factors to the upheavals in the MENA region that came to be known as the Arab Spring, as numerous studies have shown that countries with such a skewed population structure are at high risk of experiencing political violence and civil strife. The Youth Bulge theory is only marginally applicable to the Iranian case since it mostly predicts the occurrence of violence as a result of the presence of a large male cohort, and such

159 CIA World Factbook – Iran Entry
a gender imbalance is not evident in the Iran according to the available census data.\textsuperscript{162} Iran’s young population, however, has certain other characteristics that set it further apart from the other countries in the region, namely their educational attainment, as well as their more liberal attitudes towards gender roles and religion. It is the combination of these factors that has made them such a potent challenge to the authoritarian nature of the Islamic Republic.

Given the overwhelmingly young, and highly educated group that has formed the backbone of the reform movement since the presidential elections of 1997, one of the Islamic Republic’s proudest accomplishments (universal education) might be the very thing that in the end will lead to its demise as an ideologically Islamist state. Lipset’s 1959 modernization hypothesis sees the development of a country, particularly in regards to its educational attainment, as the main factor in creating and sustaining democratic politics and institutions.\textsuperscript{163} On the individual level, higher levels of education lead to a stronger sense of civic duty and interest in politics, which in turn leads more political participation.\textsuperscript{164} One of the main social changes in Iran after the Revolution has been a concentrated effort by the government to expand mass formal education.\textsuperscript{165} As figures 4 and 5 illustrate, there has been a dramatic improvement of educational attainment among the relatively large generation that was born after the 1979 Revolution. The gender gap in education has all but disappeared for the younger age groups, and this reflected in enrollment rates public universities (that are much more difficult to enter), where women are entering at much greater

\textsuperscript{162} CIA World Fact book – Iran Entry
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
numbers than men\textsuperscript{166}, comprising 65 percent of those admitted in 2007.\textsuperscript{167} The Islamization of education, as part of a nationwide literacy \textit{jihad}, which segregated schools based on gender, turned education into a religious duty and made attending school more acceptable for daughters of religiously conservative families even when their parents might have otherwise objected.\textsuperscript{168}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.png}
\caption{Reconstructed 1970 distribution of the population of Iran by age, sex, and educational attainment\textsuperscript{169}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5.png}
\caption{Population of Iran ages 15 and older by age, sex, and educational attainment, 2000\textsuperscript{170}}
\end{figure}

This narrowing of the education gap between men and women has social implications that effect democratic development. Even though women’s labor force participation rates in Iran

remain low compared to their level of education, they are no longer settling for low-paying manual jobs in the carpet and textile industries.\textsuperscript{171} Instead they have increasingly moved into the higher paying service sector jobs, reaching almost 50 percent of the total jobs in that sector by 2006.\textsuperscript{172} Despite some obvious and some not so obvious glass ceilings, Iranian women have managed to rise in executive and managerial ranks as well, albeit in much smaller numbers that reflect the numerous legal and cultural impediments that are still present.\textsuperscript{173} Combined, these factors have significantly improved the status of women, their confidence, and their increased expectations about having more options in determining their own futures, at least in their private life.\textsuperscript{174}

This sense of self-determination is reflected in the record-setting fertility rate declines, the rise of divorce rates, and the increasing prominence of “White Marriages” (co-habitation of couples without marriage, in defiance of the country’s strict Islamic laws). Fertility rates among Iranian women has declined from a high of 7.0 in the mid-1980’s to 1.9 in 2006, and this pattern is the same for women in rural and urban areas.\textsuperscript{175} The increased sense of independence among women has also changed the nature of marriage in Iran. Even though the family unit remains an important component of Iranian society, it is has moved away from a mere financial arrangement between the family of the bride and the groom, towards a more secular, individualistic version that is akin to marriages here in the West, along with the corresponding increase in divorce rates.\textsuperscript{176}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., p. 92
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 274
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Although there have yet to be any studies conducted about the recent trend of the rise of White Marriages, anecdotal evidence points to the same move away from a financial arrangement to the personal choice of cohabiting partners.\footnote{Ramin Mostaghim and Sarah Parvini, “’White marriage’ a growing trend for young couples in Iran” \textit{LA Times} May 29\textsuperscript{th}, 2015. \url{http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-white-marriage-20150529-story.html}} It is the incongruity of this elevated sense of independence and agency among Iranian women, and the patriarchal laws and attitudes of the Islamic Republic that has made women of the main driving forces for democratic change in Iran. Not only were women instrumental in the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, there has remained a vibrant women’s rights movement even during the most repressive days of the Ahmadinejad administration\footnote{Haideh Moghissi, “The Other Side of the Quest for Democracy in Iran,” in \textit{Civil Society And Democracy in Iran}, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2012): 191}, and as we will examine in the next section, the non-violent template of the movement is what has been adopted by the Green Movement as well. Women’s widespread involvement in the 2009 protests was far deeper than merely being present, as very often they would use their bodies to shield others from the security service beatings, producing the double effect of tempering the violence, as well as inspiring their male counterparts to stand their ground, making gender, one of the main points of contrast between the Green Movement and the Islamic regime.\footnote{Ibid., 190}

Another notable aspect of Iran’s youth is their attitude towards religion in general, and towards the role of religion in government in particular. Despite the 1979 Revolution’s establishment of an authoritarian Islamist government, it has failed to create a religious order in society during its thirty seven years in power. Iranians today seem to be far less religious than the populations of other Islamic countries.\footnote{Mansoor Moaddel,”The Iranian revolution and its nemesis: The rise of liberal values among Iranians.” \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East} 29, no. 1 (2009): 126} A survey of public values in Iran in 2005 pointed towards
a dramatic shift towards liberal democracy and secularism, especially when it came to placing a higher value on such things as social individualism and gender equality.\textsuperscript{181} This shift towards individual rights and democracy happened in the absence of a robust private economic sector (the regime through state and semi-state owned entities controls the as much as 70 percent of the Iranian economy)\textsuperscript{182}, suggesting that the change is attitudes in Iranian society is an oppositional reaction to the stifling authoritarianism of the religious ideology of the Islamic Republic.\textsuperscript{183} The aforementioned survey by Iranian researchers was further validated by another study conducted out of Israel that found that the Iranian public is more embracing of liberal democratic values than more established democracies (according to Freedom House rankings) such as Turkey or India.\textsuperscript{184}

This new brand of secularism is different from what was present in Iran in previous generations, which had an antagonistic approach to religion. The old approach embraced by late nineteenth and twentieth century secular intellectuals in Iran and influenced by the French Revolution’s \textit{Laïcité} and Marxism, advocated for the elimination of religion from the public sphere.\textsuperscript{185} It was partially the rejection of that kind of secularism that led to Khomeini to argue that it was incompatible with Iran’s Islamic culture, mockingly stating that the goal of the Western Imperialists was to limit the role of Islam to instructions about “menstruation and parturition.”\textsuperscript{186}

\textsuperscript{181} Mansoor Moaddel, "The Iranian revolution and its nemesis: The rise of liberal values among Iranians." \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East} 29, no. 1 (2009): 135
\textsuperscript{182} CIA World Fact book: Iran Entry
\textsuperscript{183} Mansoor Moaddel, "The Iranian revolution and its nemesis: The rise of liberal values among Iranians." \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East} 29, no. 1 (2009): 135
\textsuperscript{184} Yuval Porat, Yael Stern, Gal Lin, Ester Asherof and Alex Karpman, “Could Iran Turn into a Liberal Democracy?” (Research, The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Lauder School of Government, January 2012) \url{http://www.iranresearch.org/webfiles/fck/Research_Paper_-_Could_Iran_Turn_Into_a_Liberal_Democracy.pdf}
The Green Movement does not reject religion itself, but it wants to remove religion’s role in government, as evinced by the fact that the protesters either appropriated the slogans and tactics of the 1979 Revolution verbatim by shouting “Allahu Akbar” from rooftops at night, or they modified them to reflect their demand for a separation of Mosque and State, shouting “Estaghlal, Azadi, Jomhury-e Irani” (Independence, Freedom, Iranian Republic) instead of the original slogan that ended with a demand for an Islamic Republic (Jomhury-e Eslami).\textsuperscript{187} In essence it is a type of nationalism that is not characterized by xenophobia, rather it seeks to emphasize the primacy of Iranian-ness (no matter what ethnic group or religious sect one might belong to) over the Muslim identity, which is at the heart of the justification of the rule of the Velayat-e Faqih. It would be simplistic to say that all those who participated in (or silently supported) the 2009 protests were looking to drastically change the nature of the regime. Yet, their economic demands and slogans that focused on government accountability, respect for human rights, and freedom of expression were all predicated on the liberalization of the Iranian political system.\textsuperscript{188}

According to a study published by the Wilson International Center for Scholars, Iran’s demographic trends make it a prime candidate to transition to a liberal democracy by the year 2030.\textsuperscript{189} While the robustness of Iran’s regime might prove to be a significant obstacle, as it was discussed in this section, the attitudes of the youth population in Iran in favor of such a change would indicate that the necessary conditions might be present for a successful transition. Before we can proceed to a summation of the elements covered thus far, it is imperative to examine the

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crucial role Iranian women and Iran’s women’s movements have had in shaping the contours of the struggle for democracy, especially since the advent of the reform era in Iran.

Women & the Green Movement

For anyone watching footage of various protests during June of 2009, the strong presence of women in the Green Movement is inescapable. While the protests may have started as a response to a perceived stolen election, there was a broader context preceding the election that made gender politics play a defining role in the subsequent creation of the Green Movement. As was discussed in the previous section, the majority of Iran’s women are young, more educated than their male counterparts, and have consequently developed a sense of agency that sees the restrictions put upon women by the ideologically Islamist laws of the constitution as unfair and they seek to change it. As of 2012, there were more than forty groups focused on women’s issues and more than seven hundred women civil and human rights activists in Iran, making up the women’s movement that has come into existence since the first years of the 1979 Revolution. Of course that is not to say that the women’s movement in Iran only emerged after the Islamic Revolution. On the contrary, Iranian women have been a constant force that has been involved in the various democratization attempts in Iran going back to the Constitutional Revolution. However, in each instance women’s rights and freedoms were sidelined by other concerns. In the case of the Constitutional Revolution, active opposition from the Shi’a clergy and the ensuing chaos meant that women, who had a small but significant role in the success of the movement, did not see any dividends for their efforts. In the intervening years, urban women were subjected to forced unveiling, something that was

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191 Hoodfar, Homa. The women’s movement in Iran: women at the crossroads of secularization and Islamization. (Grabels Cedex, France: Women living under muslim laws, 1999): 8
welcomed by the higher social classes but had an isolating effect on women from more traditional families.\textsuperscript{192} During Mohammed Reza Shah’s 1963 series of reforms dubbed the White Revolution, universal suffrage was extended to all of Iranians, giving women the right to vote for the first time.\textsuperscript{193} Interestingly enough, it was opposition to these reforms that marked Ayatollah Khomeini’s first foray into the national political spotlight, as his fiery speeches railing against the details of the White Revolution, including the right of women to vote led to his arrest and exile. During the latter years of he Shah’s reign, women’s issues were coopted by the state for propaganda purposes and lost their legitimacy.\textsuperscript{194} Iranian women of all backgrounds participated massively in the Islamic Revolution and many adopted the veil as a temporary way to protest the Shah’s \textit{Westoxification}.
\textsuperscript{195} The Revolution undid many of the legal reforms that had benefited women during the Shah’s time, the most visible manifestation of which was the imposition of the Islamic \textit{hijab}, something that was protested against vociferously but to no avail.\textsuperscript{196} Contrary to the supporting role women played in the Islamic Revolution, which muted their concerns due to the association of women’s rights with the unpopular Shah, the women of the Green Movement, equipped with a feminist consciousness due to decades of struggle against the Islamic mores of the regime, are protesting alongside their male counterparts to gain access to equal rights in all spheres of social, cultural and political life. In the process of doing so, not only have they made their demands about the equality of genders a central platform of the reform movement, they have

\textsuperscript{192} Hoodfar, Homa. \textit{The women's movement in Iran: women at the crossroads of secularization and Islamization.} (Grabels Cedex, France: Women living under muslim laws, 1999): 15
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 18
\textsuperscript{194} Hoodfar, Homa. \textit{The women's movement in Iran: women at the crossroads of secularization and Islamization.} (Grabels Cedex, France: Women living under Muslim laws, 1999): 18
\textsuperscript{195} Hoodfar, Homa. \textit{The women's movement in Iran: women at the crossroads of secularization and Islamization.} (Grabels Cedex, France: Women living under Muslim laws, 1999): 22
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 25
also influenced the non-violent manner in which the Green Movement has chosen to pursue its struggle.

Iran’s women’s movement of the past three decades has been a genuinely grassroots movement that is not divided along ideological lines of secularism versus religion and as such has “freely borrowed from the heterogeneous fabric of Iran’s rich Islamic, pre-Islamic, national and secular heritage and discourses.”197 Women have been engaged in a constant push back, using creative tactics, against the Islamist ideologues of the regime, who were trying to minimize the social, cultural, and economic space available to women. The constant struggle between the morality police and the women with what is deemed to be insufficiently pious hijab, the excessive use of cosmetics, the shrinking size of overcoats and scarves, might seem trivial at first glance, but it serves to subvert the state’s attempt to control women’s bodies.198 Various notable women’s rights campaigns in Iran including One Million Signatures and Stop Stoning Forever draw support from a plethora of different social strata.199 This latter approach can be described as more goal oriented, in contrast to the general spirit of defiance that characterizes the run ins with the morality police. These goal oriented movements saw the changing of specific discriminatory laws will gradually lead to a society in which men and women are treated equally.200 They had decided that the movement would encounter the least amount of resistance from the hardliners, if it remained apolitical. While this did give the women’s movement some room to maneuver in the repressive

days of the Ahmadinejad administration, both campaigns were under constant pressure and harassment by the hardliners and neither one was able to achieve its stated goals.\textsuperscript{201}

In order to remedy this lack of success, a few months before the presidential elections of 2009, for the first time in Iranian history, “women formed a broad coalition which brought together civil rights advocates, NGOs, political activists, and women who were active in presidential campaigns, media, and trade unions under one banner.”\textsuperscript{202} The coalition’s approach mirrored the goal-oriented manner of the previous campaigns (which despite their apparent failure, had managed to garner much international attention) by demanding that Iran become a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and calling for the elimination of all the laws that discriminated against women in the Iranian constitution.\textsuperscript{203} The relatively open atmosphere of the presidential elections forced all four candidates to take positions on the matter (the respective reformist campaigns of Mousavi and Karrubi supported the measures while the conservative candidates, Ahmadinejad and Rezaei’s opposed it). The organizational power of this coalition was instrumental in generating enthusiastic support for the reformist candidates, especially since Mousavi’s wife, Zahra Rahnavard, herself a successful academic, became a source of inspiration for women through her active participation in her husband’s campaign.

The spontaneous and bewildered nature of the protests that ensued after the election results were announced left the coalition leadership paralyzed as everyone took part in the demonstrations.

\textsuperscript{203} Haideh Moghissi, “The Other Side of the Quest for Democracy in Iran,” in Civil Society And Democracy in Iran, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2012): 192
as individuals and not a cohesive movement.\textsuperscript{204} However, the sense of agency that had been built up because of the unified voice in the pre-election period, made women integral parts of the Green Movement. The failure of the protests to force a proper accounting of the election results and the viciousness displayed by the regime in crushing the protests, meant that the women’s movement could no longer return to being apolitical. The tactic of focusing on changing specific laws that was pursued by women’s groups prior to 2009, acknowledged that government institutions had some legitimacy. Given that most government institutions fell in line behind the Supreme Leader, the lack of legitimacy now extended beyond the mere fraudulent re-election of Ahmadinejad to implicate every organ of the state. Following the election, the struggle became about something more fundamental, such as the right to have your vote counted, to assemble peacefully, and to participate in politics without being subjected to the horrific rape and torment the Green Movement protesters had to endure.\textsuperscript{205}

While it might appear that women’s issues are once again taking a backseat to broader concerns in the context of a democratic struggle, this dichotomy is a fallacy. There is no reason Iran’s women’s movement should have to choose between pushing for equal rights for women, and being part of the Green Movement, especially in a country where the constitution is based on religious law that explicitly discriminates against women.\textsuperscript{206} This either/or view also fails to appreciate that the Green Movement is only the most prominent section of a much broader movement towards democracy in Iran.\textsuperscript{207}

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., p. 196
Women were once again instrumental in getting Rouhani elected in 2013 and he has appointed four women as vice-presidents and three women as governors. However, he has not achieved anything concrete in terms of women’s rights since the majority of his focus was on completing the nuclear deal. With the recent electoral victories for Rouhani’s coalition in the parliament and the Council of Experts, his supporters are looking for more tangible results. Iran’s women’s movement can and should continue to play a decisive role in this path towards democracy and self-determination by changing Iran’s social and political landscape through non-violent struggle.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have shown that while the Constitution of the Islamic Republic has mechanisms that might allow it to be reformed along more democratic and pluralistic lines, the second version of the Khomeini Doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih gives the Supreme Leader and the unelected religious institutions of the government too much power. However, the very fact that the Supreme Leader can decide to override Sharia law if it were in the interests of the regime (Maslahat-e Nezam) means that were a more accommodating leader to succeed the aging Ayatollah Khamenei, the obstacles to such reforms would be much easier to overcome. This is partially why the supporters of the reform movement have decided to remain relevant through voting strategically for more moderate and conservative allies in order to remain politically relevant at this critical juncture. The List of Hope in Iran’s February 2016 elections for the members of parliament and the Assembly of Experts (which is charged with selecting the next

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Supreme Leader) was a rare opportunity for Iranians to have an impact on the question of who will succeed Khamenei.

The success in getting the List of Hope candidates elected to the parliament and more importantly to the Assembly of Experts is only a first step in that strategy and it remains to be seen if it is going to be successful. The approach being advocated by reformist leaders such as Mohammad Khatami relies on exploiting cleavages that have developed between the moderates and the traditional conservatives on the one side and the hardline camp on the other as a result of Ahmadinejad’s divisive policies. Ayatollah Khamenei is more ideologically aligned with the latter, but even he came to the realization that Ahmadinejad’s overly antagonistic policies had put the survival of the regime at risk and is attempting to rebalance. Despite this supposed softening on the part of the Supreme Leader, he remains hostile to any further rapprochement with what he calls “the arrogant powers” of the West.

The main driver behind Rouhani’s election was the Green Movement that came about as a result of the protests over Ahmadinejad’s re-election. Rouhani seems to be in a very unique position due to several factor: he has ties to both the reformist/moderate camp and Ayatollah Khamenei; He has a good working relationship with Ali Larijani, the conservative speaker of the parliament that shepherded the nuclear deal through a contentious process; and finally, he seems to move at a deliberate pace in order to avoid a backlash from the more hardline elements of the regime. He made quite a number of promises to open up society and more importantly secure the freedom of the leaders of the Green Movement, Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi who have been under house arrest along with their spouses since 2009. The fact remains that he has yet to deliver on many of these promises. His supporters have been patient since most of his first three years in office has been focused on securing a nuclear deal that would lift the crushing sanctions
on the Iranian economy. The decisive victories secured by Rouhani and his allies in the February 2016 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections show that he seems to have a clear mandate from the voters to push for more freedoms, yet it remains to be seen how aggressive he is willing to be.

The Green Movement itself is rather amorphous and comprises a variety of groups that have different interests and yet see democratic reform as the best way to bring them to fruition. Not only have the leaders of the Green Movement been silenced for the most part during their house arrest, they are much more loyal to the regime itself and this constrains the ability of the movement to push for more drastic change. The Green Movement also needs to broaden its base of support by incorporating the economic concerns of the lower classes and minority rights. What became evident after the protests of 2009, is that the regime can survive a mass uprising as long as it can count on the support of its more hardline elements in the Basij and IRGC. The lengths the regime had to go to in order suppress the Green Movement took a toll on its coercive apparatus and it has relied on more subtle forms of repression lately, namely by mass disqualifications of candidates and judicial harassment of opponents. Even if the capacity to overthrow the regime were present among the opponents of the regime, the turmoil that has engulfed the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, has left little appetite for another revolution in Iran. Reform seems a much more promising path especially since the country might have a new Supreme Leader in the coming years.

Economic malaise and political repression have made Iran the world leader in brain drain, with many thousands of highly educated college graduates leaving the country each year.209

Economic sanctions only serve to reinforce this pattern as the regime can blame the poor economy on an outside enemy. It can also silence dissent by claiming opponents are just agents of the enemy as well. According to Kenneth Pollack, “sanctions have an uneven record in general”\textsuperscript{210} as a landmark 1990 study of a 115 cases of sanctions being imposed, showed that they only have a success rate of about 34 percent. \textsuperscript{211} Daniel Drezner has laid out what he calls the “sanctions paradox,” in which sanctions have a better rate of success in achieving the strategic goals of the imposing country if the target country is an ally and a democracy.\textsuperscript{212} The sanctions that led to the nuclear deal worked because they had a specific and very limited goal in mind,\textsuperscript{213} but more importantly, they worked because the Supreme Leader seems to have changed his mind based more on internal political calculations (his need to rebalance his power base) than any external threat. Moreover, the likelihood that we would be able to recreate such a sanctions regime for the purposes of regime change in Iran seems foolhardy at best. Much of the world is eager to tap into the lucrative Iranian market as evinced by the procession of trade delegations from Europe and Asia that started arriving in Iran even before the JCPOA was fully implemented. While US sanctions alone can do some damage, it will not be enough to put the survival of the regime at risk. It is this kind of opening that the hardliners find threatening and have been trying to limit its scope by targeting Iranians with dual nationality who are trying to reestablish business ties,\textsuperscript{214} and pursuing a ballistic missile program in contravention of UN resolutions.\textsuperscript{215}

\textsuperscript{210} Kenneth Pollack, \textit{Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy}, (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 2013): 152
\textsuperscript{213} For more on application of sanctions with a limited goal in mind see: Meghan O’Sullivan, \textit{Shrewd Sanctions: Statecraft and State Sponsors of Terrorism} (Washington, DC: Brookings Institutions Press, 2002): 288
\textsuperscript{214} Most recent examples include dual Iranian-British citizen Bahman Daroshafaei, American Iranians Siamak Namazi and his father
\textsuperscript{215} Tim Hume and Alireza Hajhosseini, “Iran Fires Ballistic Missiles a day After Test; U.S. Officials Hint at Violation,” CNN March 9, 2016. \url{http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/09/middleeast/iran-missile-test/}
The biggest threat to the survival of the Iranian regime as an authoritarian Islamist entity is the lack of external threats. Khomeini’s ideology was anti-secularist (and by extension anti-West) and to abandon that antagonism will be the end of Islamic Republic as the ideologically driven state that Khomeini had intended. The regime is also ignoring the demands of its own populace for a more open and democratic society, leading them to employ ever harsher measures to hold on to power. In Iran, it has long been conventional wisdom among regime elites that the Shah’s pusillanimous response in face of the street protests is what ultimately led to his downfall.\textsuperscript{216} As Abbas Milani points out, “Ironically, events since June 12, 2009, have shown that many of the top leaders in the Islamic regime, particularly Ayatollah Khamenei, seem to have drawn exactly the wrong conclusions about why the Shah fell”, because it wasn’t that he finally offered concessions to the protestors that undid his regime, rather that he offered them far too late.\textsuperscript{217} If the goal of US foreign policy is to see a change in the Iranian regime towards a more democratic form of government (as this paper will hopefully have illustrated that Iran has the potential for such a transition), then our policy should be crafted in a way that increases economic opportunity for young Iranians inside Iran. In practical terms this means fewer sanctions and more engagement, as both of these serve to undermine the regime’s political and economic narrative. Iran’s long quest for democracy spans more than a century and at no other time in its history has it had so many of the necessary components for achieving this goal. This is not to say that a democratic transition is an inevitability or that the regime is on the cusp of collapse. The Islamic Republic has proven time and again that it is far more resilient than its critics wish to acknowledge.

\textsuperscript{216} In reference to a televised speech Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi made on Nov. 20 1978 where he said “I heard the voice of your revolution ... Let all of us work together to establish real democracy in Iran ... I make a commitment to be with you and your revolution against corruption and injustice in Iran ...”

The regime has shown it is willing to make tactical concessions such as loosening the enforcement of moral restrictions, allowing a certain level of dissent among the regime elites, or even negotiating with their stated mortal enemy, the United States, in order to ultimately ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic’s system of government. The regime’s coercive apparatus is not as robust as it was prior to the 2009 protests, therefore it has had to rely on trying manage electoral conditions by disqualifying candidates it sees as threat, and making the aforementioned concessions when necessary. The results of the February 2016 mid-term elections seems to indicate that the hardline elements within the regime have overestimated their ability to manage the pace of change. Moreover, as a result of tactical voting by the reformist-pragmatist coalition, and the general disunity among the conservative factions, it is more difficult for the hardliners to roll back any tactical concessions they have had to make in order to stave off unrest without provoking a backlash. All these factors, combined with the looming end of Khamenei’s time as the Supreme Leader, make the authoritarian aspects of the regime especially vulnerable at this time, making reform a viable path to democratic transition.

Given the failure of past attempts to dislodge the regime through popular uprisings, and the chaotic geopolitical situation engulfing the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, there is very little appetite among Iranians for pursuing a revolutionary path in order to achieve the goals of creating a more democratic and pluralistic society. The Iranian people who wish to see such a change, view incremental reform through participation in the existing system of the Islamic Republic as the most feasible route to achieving their objectives. The process of gradual reform will either succeed in bringing Iran’s system of government closer to that of a liberal democracy, or it will expose the futility of seeking gradual change and pave the way for a more revolutionary approach. A revolution will only come about when it is clear that reform will not
bring about the changes the populace wants. While I have argued that Iran demographic and political conditions are favorable to the goals of reforming the existing system, this process of reform must be allowed to run its course, one way or the other. The goal of U.S. foreign policy should be to encourage these favorable trends by seeking more positive engagement opportunities with the more willing elements of the Iranian government. Hostile acts by the U.S. towards the regime such as the re-imposition of sanctions under a different guise, or the constant rhetoric of regime change emanating from all political corners, or not living up to the terms and spirit of the JCPOA, not only undermines our credibility in any future diplomatic efforts, it also creates further obstacles for the democratic movement in Iran as it plays directly into the narrative of the Iranian hardliners opposed to reform and rapprochement.
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