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azadeh kian

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Political and Social Transformations in Post-Islamist Iran

[Azadeh Kian](#) *In: 212 (Fall 1999)*

Post-revolutionary Iran's modernization policies have led to profound social, demographic and cultural changes in both urban and rural areas — and to unintended political consequences for the political elite. Demands for political modernization, previously limited to city-dwellers, are now voiced by the entire population. These developments highlight the inherent contradictions of the Islamic regime's political system, which combines a religious autocracy (*velayat-e faqih*, or regency of the jurisconsult) with representative institutions modeled on Western democracies. The strengthening of representative political institutions will inevitably weaken religious autocracy. Mohammed Khatami's sweeping victory over the conservative Nateq-Nouri in the May 1997 presidential elections was a leading indicator of this general trend.

To prevent a rural exodus, the Islamic regime implemented modernization policies in rural areas. As a result, most villages now enjoy public facilities such as roads, electricity, drinking water, dispensaries and schools. [1] Despite religious elites' tendency to stigmatize cities as hotbeds of social ills, urban areas also grew rapidly during the last two decades. Indeed, 61 percent of Iran's population (and 64 percent of Iranian families) now reside in urban areas. The number of towns has grown from 373 in 1976 to 614 in 1996. Forty-seven towns now have over 100,000 inhabitants, as opposed to 23 towns of this size in 1976.

Rapid urban expansion and the modernization of rural areas has narrowed the gap between town and country. One result of this trend is higher literacy rates among the younger generation in both urban and rural areas: In 1996, 93 percent of people between 6 and 24 years of age were literate, compared to just 50.5 in 1976. The increasing similarity between rural and urban populations has important political implications: City dwellers and rural communities alike voted overwhelmingly for Khatami, the reformist candidate in the 1997 presidential elections. The following comment by a farmer in the province of Isfahan reveals the degree and extent of sociopolitical transformations in contemporary Iran: "In our village, we first carefully read the declarations and electoral programs of each of the four presidential candidates and widely discussed them. We also watched their debates on television. Finally, 96 percent of us votes for Khatami." (This and subsequent quotes are taken from the author's field research in Iran.)

The Islamic regime never succeeded in curbing rural-to-urban migration, especially youth migration. The population of Eslam Shahr, a town southeast of Tehran, increased from 50,000 in 1976 to more than 400,000 in 1996. Tehran's suburban population increased from 291,000 to 2,114,000 during the same period. Young people are increasingly attracted to urban areas and usually settle on the periphery of large towns. [2] From 1986 to 1996, 70 percent of Iran's total migration was rural-to-urban. Age groups under 34 comprised 68 percent of these migrants. [3] The norms and values of new urbanites, who are exposed to a modernizing, middle-class lifestyle, are no longer shaped by reference to traditional values.

Upward social mobility through education is a good example of middle class cultural influence on rural-to-urban migrants. Despite low income, rural migrants mobilize their

resources to facilitate their children's access to education, including higher education and extracurricular activities. To ensure their children's integration into the new environment, migrants from diverse ethnic origins use Persian to communicate with their children. Zari, a 38-year-old illiterate Azeri (Turkish-speaking) migrant who works as a janitor and who is the mother of two sons residing in Khak-i Sefid (a poor suburb in northeast Tehran), comments that:

My husband and I decided not to use Azeri in front of children because we did not want them to catch the Azeri accent... In order for them to study well at school, they should feel at ease, and this can only happen if they are as fluent in Persian as their Persian-speaking classmates... Although the expenses related to the schooling of our children are very high, we never hesitated to pay them. We might not have enough to eat, but our children's education is our absolute priority. I wish they could also learn English and go to university and become doctors or engineers, but because we are very poor, my dreams have no chance of realization.

Better access to higher education and the professionalization of youths from traditional and religious lower class origins was another consequence of the Revolution. To ensure the loyalty of professionals, technocrats and bureaucrats, 40 percent of university slots were set aside for families of martyrs, Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) and Basij (war veterans and volunteer militia members). Most of these students came from lower class backgrounds and lacked the criteria conventionally required by highly competitive university entrance examinations.

In Iran's university setting today, students encounter colleagues and teachers from diverse backgrounds, which exposes them to a wide variety of worldviews. Despite the Islamist elite's best efforts, universities have resisted forced Islamization. Ayatollah Khamene'i, the leader of the Islamic Republic, tacitly acknowledged the failure of Islamist education policies in a 1996 speech reiterating the need to Islamize the universities. Iranian students' political behavior has undergone dramatic transformations. Students from religious and lower class origins have developed aspirations for a meritocratic and democratic system.

The evolution of the Islamic Association of Students, composed mainly of Basijis, is a good illustration of this trend. Its founders and members were staunch supporters of the regency of the jurisconsult (*velayat-e faqih*) and Ayatollah Khamene'i. They virulently opposed Western political models and cultural values, yet radically changed their political stance and began airing demands for a democratic system, eventually siding with Khatami during the presidential elections. Five months later, the Association called for a student demonstration at Tehran University to support Khatami against his traditionalist political rivals. Heshmatollah Tabarzeddi, leader of the Association, publicly criticized the traditionalists' abuse of power. Founded on the republican component of the Islamic regime's political system, the Association demanded the establishment of the state of law and respect for political pluralism and freedom of thought, expression and the press. Tabarzeddi also demanded that the leader of the Islamic Republic be elected through direct ballot, that the length of his mandate be limited, that his prerogatives be clarified and his responsibilities be formalized in relation to the parliament. [4] Tabarzeddi was arrested in June 1999.

University curricula founded on Western models are taught by faculty members who have studied abroad in foreign universities. According to the traditionalist monthly *Sobh*, "Our entire system of higher education is copied from Western models, which are devoid of religious values. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see that our universities are entirely

impervious to Islamic values.” [5] Attempts to Islamize higher education by merging universities with religious schools has had unintended consequences: Exposing theology students to secular curricula gives students a tremendous thirst for Western philosophy (modern and Post-modern), which they avidly read and discuss. In the words of Ahmad Ahmadi, a renowned cleric and Islamic philosopher, “Theology students form study groups with the aim of learning and debating Western philosophy. They should make a synthesis between the latter and Islamic philosophy. Some might reach new interpretations (*ijtihad*) which differ from those of Muslim philosophers.” [6] The works of Wittgenstein, Derrida, Lyotard and Ricoeur are hotly debated.

Several clerics have proposed a synthesis of Islamic traditions and Western modernity — a reconciliation between Islam and democracy and the separation of religion from the state. Hojjat-ol Eslam Mohammed Mojtahed-Shabestari, who is a passionate student of Wittgenstein, argues that “a *mojahed* (doctor of jurisprudence) can infer value principles from the Qur’an and traditions. But political systems, institutions, the functioning of the government...in short, everything...relevant to the political sphere, should be dealt with through reason and human sciences. In this way, boundaries are justifiably set.” [7] Hojjat-ol Eslam Mohsen Kadivar, one of the most popular reformist clerics, opposes religious autocracy and argues that “the political and cultural struggle between proponents of religious democracy and those of religious autocracy has become the most important issue in Iran.” He has openly advocated the separation of political and religious institutions. [8]

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, which the elite had used as an excuse to justify the regime’s shortcomings, a new age, the “period of reconstruction,” began. Religious piety and self-sacrifice, highly valued during the first years of the Islamic Republic, weakened as the population, exasperated by the long and costly war, began making economic, social, political and cultural demands. In response, the government authorized a relative freedom of the press. Several hundred new journals and magazines soon appeared, representing every shade on the political spectrum. Given the absence of political parties, the press quickly became politicized, thus filling a significant gap in domestic politics.

Following the end of the war, former President Rafsanjani abandoned the principles of a state-run economy in favor of structural readjustment and the encouragement of foreign investment. Price controls, state subsidies of consumer goods and the rationing system, all enforced during the war, were lifted, sparking inflation and leading to a decline in the real income and purchasing power of urban households. A single income is no longer sufficient to make ends meet or to maintain the modern standards of living. To satisfy modern consumer demands and aspirations, especially those of youth (who want to learn English, purchase computers and listen to pop music), urban wage earners need several sources of income. In Tehran, a family of four with middle-class, Westernizing aspirations requires approximately 200,000 *tomans* (now equivalent to only \$220) each month to fulfill its needs, yet the average monthly salary of an employee is only 50,000 *tomans*.

Iran’s recent economic crunch resulted from the drastic fall in oil revenues in 1998, the mismanagement of the economy, a lack of investment in the industrial sector, overall corruption and the absence of a proper taxation system. The state has gradually relinquished a rentier state incapable of redistributing national wealth, the impoverished and the unemployed increasingly rely upon an expanding underground economy and multiple jobs, none of which are under state control. [9] Educated Iranians, no longer recruited by the public sector after graduation, turn to the informal sector of the economy. In 1996, 600,000 university graduates

were unemployed. [10] In recent years, under-employment has fueled public discontent. Between 1990 and 1993, declared salaries and revenues constituted only 33 percent of the revenues of urban households. [11] My 1996 survey in Tehran revealed that some state employees, including schoolteachers, moonlight as taxi drivers, while some doctors, dentists and engineers work as investors in the lucrative construction sector (the only remaining functional sector of the economy).

Recourse to the informal economy is also evident among military and paramilitary forces, including the Pasdaran:

I am a non-commissioned officer of the Pasdaran, and I served on the front during the Iran-Iraq war. My wife is a schoolteacher and we have two children. The cost of living is so high in Tehran that our salaries are quite inadequate for our survival. For this reason, I also work as a house painter during the weekends. Actually, my earnings as a part-time painter are twice that of my salary in the Pasdaran!

Any state incapable of assuring the livelihood of its employees and armed forces can neither control them nor command their allegiance for very long.

In assuming responsibility for their own livelihood, Iranian citizens are becoming increasingly independent of the state. The loosening of state controls is also facilitating the emergence of civil society. Yet to continue to rule, the Islamic state requires legitimacy. Paradoxically, the instrumentalization of Islam as the state ideology has secularized religion by creating a political domain encompassing the sacred and the profane. The resulting amalgamation of the religious and the political has given ordinary citizens the opportunity to intervene in religious issues by participating in politics. To attain legitimacy, different religious interpretations (traditionalist and modernist) must win public approval through debate and negotiation. This new reality is apparent in legislative, presidential and municipal elections.

Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989 provoked a crisis of consensus at the societal level while fragmenting the religious and political elite over the role of *velayat-e faqih*. The diminishing consensus undermined the religious autocracy's grip on power and simultaneously encouraged the emergence and consolidating of modernist interpretations of Islam, [12] which argue that political legitimacy should be based exclusively on the public's will.

Modernist thinkers have tremendous support from Islamic technocrats and the educated Islamic middle class, including women, who rely upon modernist views to advocate change. Women's magazines, including *Zanan*, *Zan-i Ruz*, *Farzaneh*, *Payam-i Hajar*, *Zan* and *Huquq-i Zanan* (to which secular women intellectuals contribute) are playing a critical role in this transformation. The aim of these magazines, which attempt to reach both educated women and the political and religious elite, is to promote women's aims by pointing out the regime's legal, social and economic shortcomings while advocating changes in civil, penal and constitutional laws. The editors of these publications unanimously maintain that the inequality between men and women springs not from the Qur'an, but from religious authorities' misinterpretations of divine laws. These magazines, which play a crucial role in disseminating intellectual debates on women's issues and concerns, enhance women's social and political awareness and create contexts for women's political interaction with the ruling elite. They also highlight contributions by reformist clerics, who are increasingly attentive to women's claims that Islamic laws must be adapted to the realities of contemporary Iranian society, in which women's social, economic, political and cultural activities have become integral.

Political and religious authorities, aware of the significant social impact of these magazines, often respond to the critical articles they publish. The office of the head of the Judiciary has, on several occasions, responded to articles published in women's magazines.

Despite divergent views, unprecedented gender solidarity has developed among secular and Islamic women activists. Mehrangiz Kar, an attorney, Shirin Ebadi, a jurist, Nahid Mousavi, a journalist, Zhaleh Shaditalab, a university professor, and Tahmineh Milani, a film director, are regular contributors to women's magazines published by Islamists. [\[13\]](#)

Another formidable challenge to political Islam is Iran's youth. Though born and educated under Islamic regime, young people are increasingly alienated from cultural and political Islamization. Despite the elite's best efforts to impose an anti-Western, Islamist revolutionary ideology, the younger generation is clearly attracted to Western culture and lifestyles, which they easily experience through international communication networks (satellite programs, videotapes and the Internet). Urban families open to the outside world encourage their children's exposure to Western culture. As Shahnaz, a high-school teacher and mother of two, notes:

Today, youth have no entertainment outside of the home. Those who refuse to submit to Islamist norms are repressed. For this reason, those of us who do not identify with the dominant ideology try to facilitate our children's access to Western culture by giving them videotapes or satellite television links to European or American programs. We also enroll them in private English courses. In short, we prepare their opening to the outside world.

Aspirations to Western cultural models and lifestyles are also shared by poorer people who lack financial resources and thus rely on the state for cultural facilities. As a woman rural migrant says:

The authorities think that just because we are poor, we do not share the demands of rich people. Well, they are wrong. We, too, want our children to do sports and to learn modern art. Our children want to learn English, mathematics and drawing, but the mosques in our neighborhoods only offer religious training, which is too traditional and outdated for our children. They should learn modern sciences and art to become somebody. It is not by reciting the Qur'an that they will attain this goal.

Since the voting age in the Islamic Republic of Iran is 16, discontented youth can play a decisive role in national politics. The mobilization of youth and women helped propel Mohammad Khatami, a modernist and moderate cleric who devoted much of his electoral program to the problems besetting youth and women, to the presidency in 1997. Women and youth also seized the opportunity provided by the February 1999 municipal elections (which can be considered a prelude to the February 2000 legislative elections), to reassert their demands for profound social, cultural and political transformation. These elections resulted in the sweeping victory of reformist candidates, particularly in Tehran.

The combined effect of Iran's post-revolutionary social, cultural, economic and political transformations has engendered a civil society striving for democracy and the rule of law. The extent and depth of change becomes clear when we recall that thousands of educated Islamic militants, including ardent supporters of *velayat-e faqih*, are now calling for a democratic system. The Office of the Consolidation of Unity, the first Islamic student association formed after the revolution, has undergone tremendous ideological and political change. Its founders

were radical Islamists and followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. Some, calling themselves the Students of the Line of the Imam, occupied the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979. This student association also played a crucial role in the “cultural revolution” preceding the closing of universities and the purge of secular students and faculty in June 1980. During the 1990s, however, this same association has campaigned for freedom of expression and thought, political development, political pluralism and the end of political violence. They have also abandoned their ardent anti-Americanism in order to support President Khatami’s call for a “dialogue among civilizations.”

The election of President Khatami has given Iranian civil society an opportunity to demonstrate its desire for modernity. Indeed, it was in hopes of radical transformation that most Iranians, from different sociopolitical backgrounds and age groups, used their votes to call for overdue changes. Despite the traditionalists’ resistance — and we must not forget that traditionalists still dominate Parliament, the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council — the Islamic regime is under growing pressure to change gradually, but nonetheless radically. Twenty years after its establishment, the Islamic Republic’s metamorphosis has become inevitable, even though it will require an intensification of the current struggle between traditionalists and reformists.

Endnotes

[1] For example, the remote village of Rudhal in the province of Fars (67 kilometers southwest of Shiraz) has electricity and had drinking water since 1981. Its first high school was created in 1982, and its first kindergarten in 1984. More than 50 percent of the 2000 inhabitants of this village (primarily members of the settled Lor tribes) are now literate. Every household has a radio and many also have televisions. See Jamshid Sidaqat-Kish, *Taknigari-yi Rosta-yi Rudhal* [A Monography of the Village of Rudhal], (Shiraz: Pazhouheshkadeh-yi Fars, 1998), pp. 7, 11-12, 18, 20, 24.

[2] For a discussion see Asef Bayat, “Squatters and the State: Back Street Politics in the Islamic Republic,” *Middle East Report* (November-December 1994), pp. 10-14.

[3] *Sarshomari-yi Nufus va Maskan 1375, Natayei-I Tafsili* [The 1996 Census of the Population and Housing] (Tehran: Center for Iran’s Statistics), 1997, pp. 15-16.

[4] See the speech of Heshmatollah Tabarzeddi on October 21, 1997.

[5] See *Sobh* 64 (December 1996), p. 58.

[6] Ahmad Ahmadi, “Rabiteh-yi tabi’at va falsafeh” [The Relationship Between Nature and Philosophy], *Danishgah-i Inqilab* 98-99 (Summer-Autumn 1993), pp. 35, 37.

[7] Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, “Din va ‘Aql, Sokhan-I Akhar” [Religion and Reason, the Last Word], *Keyhan-i Farhangui* (July-August 1989), p. 14.

[8] See Kadivar’s interview in *The Daily Khordad* 25-27 (January 1999). Iran’s Special Clergy Court accused Kadivar of plotting against the Islamic regime, and he was jailed in February 1999. The mobilization of thousands of university and theology students calling for his release has thus far proved unfruitful.

[9] See Firuzeh Khal’atbari, “Iran, a Unique Underground Economy,” in Thierry Coville, ed., *L’économie de l’Iran islamique: entre Etat et le marché* (Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1994), pp. 113-131.

[10] *Bahman*, February 24, 1996. *Bahman* was a weekly published by Ataollah Mohajerani, the current minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Following the March-April 1996 legislative elections, he was forced to cease publication due to his profound disagreements with the conservative clergy.

[11] A. H. Mehryar, M. Tabibian, R. Gholipour, *Changing Patterns of Household Incomes*,

1974-1993 (Tehran: Institute for Research on Planning and Development, 1995), pp. 6-7.

[12] See Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud, "Les strategies des intellectuels religieux et clercs iraniens face à la modernité occidentale," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 47/6 (December 1997), pp. 776-797.

[13] For further discussion see, among others, Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender-Conscious Drive to Change," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24/1 (1997), pp. 75-96, and "L'émergence d'un discours féminin: un enjeu politique en Iran post-islamiste," *Les Cahiers de l'Orient* 3 (1997), pp. 55-72.

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