

SPEA-V 499

*Iranian Civil Society:  
Investing in the Public  
Sphere to Create  
Lasting Institutional  
Change*

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SPEA Honors Thesis

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## **Abstract**

*Can the United States help to create an atmosphere conducive to the creation and maintenance of democracy in the Middle East during regime change? Historically, the answer is no. The promotion and securing of democracy during regime changes have been ineffective at best. By working to invest in social movements, the citizens of Middle Eastern nations are more directly empowered to make decisions concerning their political rights and quality of life. The Tobacco Boycott of 1890s, Iranian Constitutional Movement, the election of Mosaddegh, and the 1979 Revolution are each examples of social movements in Iran that have worked toward significant change within the country. The US should capitalize on such populist movements in an effort to support self-determination that may one day create an improved standard of living and overall quality of life for the citizens of the region.*

## **Khatami, a More Liberal Iran?**

On August 2, 1997 Sayyid Mohammad Khatami was elected by seventy percent of the popular vote. A scholar, Shi'ah theologian, and reformist politician Mohammad Khatami ran on a platform of liberalization and reform. He advocated the ideals of freedom of expression, tolerance, civil society, economic policies to support a free market and foreign investment, and opening diplomatic relations states in Asia and the EU. Khatami was seen as a symbol of change and liberalism. He asserted the need to reform the Islamic republic in order to save it. He wished to promote social capital, rule of law, and good governance in an *Iranian* context, taking these Western ideals and making them unique to Iran. Khatami's era was seen as a more open and free time in Iran. The growth

of NGO's and the public discourse was significantly more energetic and effective during his presidency. The people had a voice in shaping a "distinctive vision of a desirable order."<sup>1</sup> The election of Ahmadinejad, however, was seen as a shift from popular republicanism to absolute theocratic authority. It was a warning to others: don't interfere with Iran's internal affairs, such similar rhetoric has been seen with communist dictators of the past. Many activists were jailed or killed with no warrant. As Iran develops more and more in the twenty-first century, there exists the question how can the United States and the rest of the free world support Iran in becoming a regional power and a nation ruled by it's own people; to support the ideal of self-determination through an active public sphere. This goal can be best realized through a healthy civil society.

### **Civil Society and Social Movements in the Iranian Context**

The work of NGOs and public participation in self-governance is all a part of the civil society of a nation. Civil society is the rational pursuit of shared interests in a collective organization; furthermore it is a buzz term that political scientists, politicians, other public policy professionals throw around when explaining any sort of organized public action outside the private or political arena. Civil society can refer to any number of groups, organizations, and movements. It is a voluntary zone of societal interconnectedness outside of family and politics. The idea is complex and multifaceted; and is vital to the health of any nation-state that wishes to be free and democratic.

Democracy cannot function without a working public sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Christensen 83

Democracy is a system of government for which is ideally is suited to the people it serves. However, it isn't necessary to have democracy to have a working civil society; the existence of a healthy civil society doesn't exclusively include democracy in its definition, both civil society and democracy are good indicators of each other.

### Conditions for a Viable Civil Society<sup>2</sup>

1. Relative autonomy of societal sphere from the state
  - a. There has to be a degree of freedom for groups to work outside of the influence of the state.
2. Relatively autonomous access of some societal actors to the state or its elite
  - a. Social groups have to be able to somewhat influence the state.
3. Existence of a relatively independent public sphere
  - a. The public sphere must be able to operate without the constraints of traditional institutions, such as a tribe, family, or state.
4. Legal and/or normative protection of societal agents and institutions
  - a. The people or the law must value and safeguard civil groups.
5. Existence of a solidary sphere based on redistribution of resources
  - a. There must be a sense of belonging or safety of individuals in their society.

Iran has a long history of civil society, as do most other Muslim countries, examples such as Islamist associations, NGO and service organizations, professional associations, companionship and social groups, and political associations. In Iran there have long been

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<sup>2</sup> Kamali 40, Civil Society is meant to counterbalance state power. These conditions make it possible for civil actors to work independently of the state and create meaningful change or significantly protect interests.

charity and other social work groups that work in close collaboration with mosques and other religious organizations. Men's groups, or fraternities, have been available for social and often religious companionship; Sufi masters could be found at the head of the religious organizations to guide the young men seeking leadership. Beside the social and charitable functions of the aforementioned civil associations, the purpose of civil society has taken on the republican struggle for justice. Undemocratic and volatile collective explosions of anger to gain access to political power have not led to lasting change but by having a concerted effort by a rational system true change can be made by civil groups. Essentially the idea is that a group of dedicated individuals can institute lasting change.

### **Cultural Section**

Iran has a traditional background that is vital to understand. The history of patriarchy and well-defined societal roles makes public life in Iran structured. The succeeding four sections will briefly explicate important segments of Iranian society, as each of these sections were and still are instrumental in achieving change in the Iranian public sphere. Each are important on their own, but even more so in conjunction with one another.

#### Ulama: the Religious Leaders

Iran is a theocracy, meaning the country is run by a religious leader or by a secular leader with oversight by a religious figure. Islam has been part of Iran for hundreds of years and particularly Shi'ah Islam since the sixteenth century. The Shi'ah clergy have had a fixed position of authority in Iranian politics from the beginning. Although the power held by the clerics and their political involvements have ebbed and flowed over the centuries, the

ulama have always been revered and followed by the religious masses in Iran. *Marja taqlid* is a concept that means, “source to be followed” and ulama as they grow in knowledge and popularity become *mujtahids* (religious leaders) that deserve the designation of *marja taqlid*. The clergy are very educated and dedicate their whole lives to Koranic studies and interpretation and dissemination of Islamic thought and law. These *mujtahids* were the leaders that religious members of society sought out for advice in daily life and in political dealings. The clerics issue *fatwas* or religious directions that condemn, praise, or otherwise advise the faithful on any number of subjects. The ulama enjoy a close tie with the traditional middle class otherwise known as the bazaaris who are mostly merchants.

#### Intelligentsia: Educated New Middle Class

This sector of society is the urban elite. Many of these members are Western educated, liberal, and secular. They firmly believed in the ideals of democracy, public political participation, modernism, and the “inalienable rights of man”. Educated largely in France, but also other Western nations, the politics of the West took root in the ideologies for these members of society. Additionally, many were civil servants and were the technocrats in government. Their role in any of the social movements has often been the ideological background needed to jump-start and to fuel the outrage of the people. The intellectuals were able to articulate the issues and craft solutions that were needed for an effective outcome to social uprising. They were the back-bone of the political groups that helped facilitate the revolutions and movements.

### Bazaaris: Traditional Middle Class

This last major sector of society is perhaps the most important. They are the economic and cultural center points of Iran. They control the *bazaar* or the market place where not only all shopping can be done, but most socializing, religious gathering, political maneuvering, and other public interactions occur. The Bazaaris are closely linked with the ulama. They are conservative, traditional, and adhere to strict Islamic principles. Ulama house their mosques in the bazaar and get most all of their money from this sector of society. These are the quintessential Iranian citizens.

### Majles-e Shura-ye Eslami

Majles-e Shura-ye Eslami is the official title for the parliament in Iran (the creation of which will later be discussed). In Iran parliament goes by Majles for short, and in the rest of the Islamic world uses the word Shura. Shuras are an element of Islam that is in place to protect Muslims from unjust rulers and to keep their voices heard. Shuras, typically, are made up of ordinary citizens that come together for public decisions. In Iran, as a parliament, elected officials come together to create laws and public policy decisions along with the rest of the government. While in Iran the official Majles is only about one hundred years old, the idea of a Shura is as old as Islam. Shuras are the basis of civil society in the Muslim world. Shuras are where the values, identity, and culture of a society is crafted and debated. The public sphere outside of politics can best be described as a Shura. As Iran has developed and become a modern nation state, the vestiges of this Islamic institution have become part of the government. But the legacy as a public forum

for the people has also remained, leaving a gap for the advance of other groups to maintain the civil society of Iran.

### **Iranian Cases**

The following revolutions of the last one hundred years showcase the power and success of Iranian civil society. Each of these cases are direct examples of how when the people work together they are able to implement lasting institutional change.

#### **1890 Tobacco Concession and Boycott**

Naser al-Din Shah of the Qajar dynasty signed a secret agreement with a British company in March 1890 granting a concession over all of Iran's tobacco. The tobacco trade was a significant part of the economy in the late 1800s. The concession gave the British a monopoly over the export and internal trade sale and growth of Persian tobacco. The direct control by the British had substantial and far-reaching consequences on the tobacco industry felt by mostly Iranians. The farmers had to sell their product to the British who would then turn and sell it right back to the farmers and other citizens of Iran. This industry had touched every social station in Iran: the agrarian poor, wealthy consumers, merchants, and even the ulama. The negative impacts of this deal felt severely by the people led to the first social movement to be discussed in this paper.

As previously discussed there are three specific actors that were the driving force behind social movements: the intelligentsia, the ulama, and the bazaaris. Each of these factions worked together to create effective change. In this circumstance the intelligentsia proved



to be the ideological bedrock for the movement. These individuals could vocalize in eloquent terms the desires and feelings of the people. Next the ulama proved crucial in taking the words of the intelligentsia and shaping them into protests, demonstrations, and disseminating the ideas to the masses. The clerics issued fatwas promoting the ideas of the intelligentsia and created a pulpit from which to spread these ideas. The ulama could amass the public force necessary to effect change. Lastly the bazaaris, had the economic power and expertise to shut down the market to cut the British monopoly down. When the bazaar is closed the British couldn't buy, sell, or trade their goods. Despite the autocratic regime within which this protest lived, it was successful. The cohesive efforts of each sector of society brought about firm change. The legacy of this movement has lived on in the legacy of distaste of foreign interference and economic control.

### **Iranian Constitutional Revolution**

The next major populist movement took place in the early 1900s and is known as the Constitutional Revolution. The people frustrated with the lack of fair governance and the obviously corrupt political system rose up again. The Qajar dynasty was the prototypical despotic government in the central east. The social structure was hierarchical and mostly centered around scattered, small, agrarian communities; about only twenty percent of the population was urban. The Shah relied on his ministers and chancellor to rule his people. The Shah increasingly sold rights and gave concessions to foreign companies and nations to pay for his extravagant lifestyle. The combination of an absent ruler and inconsiderate economic policies led to growing frustrations of the people. The poor economic choices made by the Qajar dynasty most immediately affected the bazaaris and educated

members of the new middle class. The merchant class struggled with their domestic trade options and couldn't develop their foreign trade due to the heavy favor shown toward outsiders. The middle class suffered ideologically. Many of these educated members of society had spent their formative years in Europe and other western nations learning about and experiencing liberalism, socialism, equality, liberty, and fraternity. The Enlightenment ideals of parliamentary democracy and "inalienable rights of man" were deeply ingrained lessons that traveled back to Iran through the new intelligentsia class. The Shah was traditionally viewed as the "shadow of God on earth", however that view was not held by the intelligentsia any longer. The standard of living in Iran began to drastically fall when Western economic competition arose. The merchants lost their edge on the market. These bazaaris were the main contributing source for charitable donations to the ulama, religious class. The intelligentsia, as the professional class, also began to feel the pinch.

As these three very important sectors of society once again became marginalized, they began to work in tandem to create change. Semi-secret societies were formed and worked to raise consciousness among the people about the injustices perpetrated by the Shah. Demands to end the economic favoritism given to foreign nations and companies were not met and thus mass protests were held in major cities throughout Iran and bazaars shut down. Most notably, the holy city of Qom went on strike. By 1905, the country was ready for a constitution that put limits on the Shah and protected the rights of the people, but the Russo-Japanese war and the further economic decline truly gave the movement its final push. In 1906 with overwhelming support and popularity there was a

cry for a parliament and a constitution. The Shah essentially on his death-bed signed the constitution and parliament (majlis) into law. The people worked in opposition to the regime and foreign pressures to achieve their collective desire for popular government. While the new parliament was dissolved and the constitution ignored soon after its inception due to civil war, the precedent had been set. The constitution as well as the Majlis reappeared with more and more authority in subsequent years.

### **The Election of Mosaddegh and Oil Nationalization**

During the reign of Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah (the Pahlavi era) there was implemented a program of modernization, industrialization, and secularization; more on this program later. There was an atmosphere of democracy and increased respect for public interest. A multitude of political parties and interest groups were formed and worked freely in the government during this time. Ministers in the government were held accountable and the courts operated independently. A democratic government was successful and Iranian self-determination was upheld. Dr. Mosaddegh was the popularly elected prime minister of Iran from 1951-1953. The hot button issue of the time was once again about foreign holds into Iran's economy. The British owned and operated Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was a major sector of the economy. AIOC employed locals under terrible conditions and poor wages; additionally, the company refused to agree to fair royalty payments to Iran. The frustrations finally boiled over March 7 1951 with the assassination of Prime Minister Haj Ali Razmara, the strongest opposition to nationalizing the AIOC, by Fadayan-e Islam.

With Razmara's leadership gone the Majlis voted to nationalize and shortly thereafter elected Mosaddegh who was a fervent supporter of nationalization. The British upset with the decision and direction of public policy in Iran convinced the US to assist in toppling the new government under the pretense of diverting Soviet influence the region. This coup d'état left the nation open for stronger control to the pro Western Shah. While the Majlis and popular democracy were thwarted by British and American interference it was not a total loss. The AIOC was forced to join a consortium that broke its monopoly and gave Iranians slightly more favorable conditions. Democratic process was still ingrained in the political process from the Constitutional Revolution.

### **The 1979 Islamic Revolution**

After the overthrow of Mossaddegh's democratically elected government the Shah controlled Iran through martial law, secret police, and loyal ministers. Eventually martial law was eased and abolished but in its stead there was created a "two party system". The Shah ordered two senior ministers to create a majority party and a loyal opposition party, the Melliyun party and the Mardom party. In this two party system the Shah appointed the prime minister and approved all candidates. Along with the obviously orchestrated political parties the Shah implemented a vast program of reforms in order to bring Iran into the modern world. The White Revolution was a progressive tract of reforms that were implemented by the Shah in order to Westernize Iran, but indubitably had ulterior political motives. Along with the Shah's vision for a new Iran he wished to curb the rights and influence of certain members of society, most importantly the landed nobles.

Part of the White Revolution was an extensive land reform that redistributed most all of the land ownership. The program was an authoritarian, top-down reorganization of society that did not take into consideration any of the people's wishes. The Shah did not expect that the White Revolution would lead to new social tensions. It helped create many problems the he had been trying to avoid. The Shah's reforms significantly increased the size of intelligentsia and the urban working class (bazaaris). These two sectors of society have repeatedly worked to oppose the power of the monarchy. "The White Revolution had been designed to preempt a Red Revolution. Instead, it paved the way for an Islamic Revolution" as pointed out by Ervand Abrahamian in his book, The Rise of Khomeinism.

The rapid urbanization caused the industrial wage to lag and for inflation to rise. Military expenditures rose as the Shah sought to compete with Western military status. The agrarian sector began to fall, as they couldn't compete with foreign investors. The bazaaris depended on state loans with unaffordable interest rates and stiff foreign competition for business. The intense modernization and attempted secularization of Iran led to political repression and forced change in the social structures. This move was not organic and didn't take into consideration the needs and patterns of the people. As social tensions rose and unrest was felt the Shah was eventually turned out of Iran and his Prime Minister could no longer control the unrest. Khomeini returned from exile into the arms of a welcoming public. The intelligentsia and the ulama worked tirelessly to support and promote Khomeini who promised democracy and a revived Shi'ah Iran. With the Shah exiled and Khomeini returned and secured into power, Iran was established into an

Islamic state, to the enthusiasm of some of the more traditional elements of society but to the dismay of the other liberal educated segments.

The new status quo was a strictly regimented society, with rigidly defined roles and separation of the public and private spheres. However, as the regime became more conservative and asserted more control of every aspect of life there began raids and other infringements on life in the home. The outrage felt and vocalized by private citizens made it necessary for Khomeini to explicitly state the right of the private citizen to have privacy of the home. In the 1990s with the election of Khatami and a more liberalized era, citizens began to assert their right to participate in the public sphere. As the regime intruded on their private homes, the people decided they had the right to take space in the public sphere again. Khatami argued that civil society is a means to turn righteous demands into law, setting the tone for new public activity in Iran for the 1990s and 2000s.

### Iranian Encounters with Democracy

Ancient and Modern Persia has seen many empires, dynasties, cultures, ethnicities, and languages. This heritage has led to a vibrant cultural exchange and pride in Iran as a nation state. Iran's borders, unlike most other regional nations, contain a people that have pride in state as well as nation. Combining the cohesive national cultural identity with an intellectual class creates the atmosphere for a focused public sphere able to articulate desires with greater clarity and unification. Iranian intelligentsia and politicians, as the outside world looked on their development, desired to define Iran as unique and moving beyond the Western model of democracy and modernity. There seems to be an

element of wanting to prove Iran's vision of democracy and modernity to be uniquely their own and just as exceptional as the rest of the modern world. Especially between the Mossadegh government and the 1979 Revolution there has been a struggle for Iran to develop and define a unique, modern, and republican character of government that is a direct competitor with Western standards, yet is exclusively Iranian. According to author Ramin Jahanbegloo in Democracy in Iran this struggle to be independent yet comparable to the West has been a huge contributor on the journey for a freer Iran.<sup>3</sup> The character of democracy and civil society in Iran has had this desire for exceptionalism<sup>4</sup> that has provided an extra dimension to the struggle. Iran wants to move toward a system of government in their own way with limited help or direction from outside nations. Development must come from within Iran. The best source within Iran should be its people, by those who will ultimately be ruled.

The Middle East has long been under the thumb of various colonial and imperial powers. Yet in the twentieth century, nations have been forming their own identity outside of Ottoman rule and colonial oversight. The first half of the twentieth century has been defined by autocratic rulers and military strongmen; however, that has not limited civil society from growing and developing within these nations. Intellectuals have long been sent to study in France and Great Britain. Taking the principles and ideals learned from

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<sup>3</sup> Jahanbegloo 60, Iranian political development, as seen by the author, has been defined by constant comparison to the Western ideas of democracy and good governance. Iranian intellectuals and politicians are "haunted" by a sense of insecurity; they need recognition from the West in order to define Iran as different. The struggle to deny the West as a point of reference while continuing to use it to emphasize the differences between Iran and the West has highlighted the insecurity of Iranian political and public development.

<sup>4</sup> Iranian exceptionalism is the desire to be unique and particular yet a universal ideal toward which others can strive.

their time abroad, Iranian intelligentsia started to create their own republican-democratic identity. The social movements or revolutions, of which will be later defined, have shown the move toward republican-democratic systems by Iran and how the people have been instrumental in bringing about lasting change.

### Social Movements and Republicanism

In Iran, by popular republican movement the people have been able to institute lasting change to the structure of their government at different times through out their history. The voluntary zone of societal interconnectedness during the times of concerted movements allowed for a united desire that made lasting change inevitable. The most effective vehicles for change were not from a single authority at the top of the power hierarchy. Rather successful bids for change were the culmination of many sectors of society working together to have their voices heard.<sup>5</sup> The public sphere allowed for institutional political reform to be called for and eventually implemented by active public participation. Without the unified efforts of multiple factions in Iranian society, these reforms and institutional changes would have been impossible to implement. The key segments of Iranian society can be broken into several loose categories: the ulama, or the class of clergyman, the intelligentsia, the educated more liberal members of society, and the bazaaris (merchants), the more traditional members of society. The ulama and the bazaaris are strongly linked due to the more traditional lifestyle led by the bazaaris. The intelligentsias became the new elites and were more involved in political activism. In

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<sup>5</sup> These “successful bids” for change as defined in the Iranian Cases section. Essentially the major revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were run by the people and set a precedent for future political and societal norms.



order to have a working social movement, these three elements of society are vital to create lasting change. In Iran the social movements of the twentieth century were not simply labor concerns. These movements were centered on the overall quality of life. It was not an uprising of the lower class, but rather a more unified ideal that was worked toward between the lower, middle, and religious classes. The human central message of the movements of the twentieth century were markedly different from other revolutions of the time. Iranians were no longer content to follow the Shah blindly and as his status as the “shadow of God on earth” dwindled there was a clear change to spread the power to the hands of more accountable rulers. The ulama’s position of authority gained more importance as did the educated class’s status as experts in certain fields. The people wished for the government to be held accountable and put the people’s interests first.

#### The White Reforms and Forced Development <sup>6</sup>

Iran has a unique history that makes it impossible to study its history through a general lens of analysis. It is located in the central east, but has developed unlike most of its neighbors. Iran emerged early in the twentieth century as a modern nation state that is relatively industrialized with a highly urbanized and educated population and as a regional power. However, Iran in the early 1900s and somewhat today is still experiencing a traditional state and society. The power structure has remained autocratic and leader centric. The development of democracy and republican rule has therefore

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<sup>6</sup> Fadaee 34, The forced development, in form of the White Reforms, has made Iranian democracy and public sphere growth a unique challenge. Additionally, the top down system limited the possible organic growth, creating another challenge.

been uneven, but present. Differences in development create a fundamentally different experience of moving toward democracy.

The authoritarian top-down modernization attempts did not enable Iranians to move into that phase naturally. During the Pahlavi era, the Shah instituted the White Reforms, which he hoped would speed Iran into modernity, industrialization, and westernization. Yet, that was not the case. The reforms couldn't keep pace with the natural growth of Iranian society. The industrialization was too rapid. The infrastructure was not yet stably in place and couldn't effectively support the growth that the Shah wanted to see. Iran was still mostly an agrarian society and for industrialization to work effectively it is necessary for there to be a transition from rural to urban living. The secular component of the reforms were highly unpopular among the bazaaris and the ulama. While the new intelligentsia were supportive of the increased emphasis on education, women's rights, and non-Islamic legal system, the larger more traditional sector of society was not in favor. The mandated reforms enforced by the Shah were seen as an aggressive affront to Islamic principles. Iran had not had a chance to go through its own version of the enlightenment. The intelligentsia had been educated in an enlightened Europe but had not yet been able to create their own socio-cultural revolution. The imposition of these values by the state outraged the traditional population. The globalized age of today and the last century created pressures not previously felt by developing nations. Iran had to develop unevenly, keeping pace with the rest of the world fighting off the competing interests of foreign nations in order to maintain a semblance of independence and organic

growth. Regardless of the lukewarm reception of the forced program of reforms there was some success and growth.

Modernity and industrialization led to increased job freedom and more leisure time. Individuals have not only had their basic needs fulfilled but have been freed from nature to pursue other interests for the ultimate goal of self-realization. As such there has been a growth in the importance of individualism. Individualism is the philosophy that there is moral worth in each unique human being. Additionally individuals should advocate their interests over that of the state or society while the state will promote competing interests to maintain a “fair” balance, that being the implicit social contract giving the state legitimacy over the individual. The White Reforms and the new educated urban class disseminated this western political thought, which ultimately backfired on the Shah. As the intelligentsia put to use the ideas of the inalienable rights of man and natural law, the position and authority of the Shah declined. The desire to be free from autocracy grew with focus and the “divine right of kings” was challenged more fervently. Out of this democracy took a foothold, making it possible and inevitable for social movements to occur. This new type of political space is disorderly but also pluralistic and boisterously public. Politics regulate competing interests in the social sphere. Collective behavior and rational resource mobilization can explain how and why individuals conform into groups and how they accomplish goals of the political nature.

## Theoretical Frameworks<sup>7</sup>

The reforms instituted by the shah destabilized his subjects and opened the door for there to be a concerted effort by society to change the unwanted policies implemented by the shah. The conditions of modernity, foreign influence, and industrialization all create a unique circumstance for the nation of Iran during its social movements of the last one hundred years. Following are two theories of how civil actors behave to accomplish goals.

The collective behavior approach focuses on the cycle of societal shifts. Social actors seeking change start outside of the appropriate conventions, as deviants, to institute fundamental value changes in their society, once they are successful these actors move into the active participant category and are once again socially acceptable. This theory states it is necessary to have deviants, societal outcasts, active participants, and passive participants. Societal outcasts are deviants that don't successfully institute their desired change and passive participants are social actors that don't take part in the changes of society. These actors play a role in how the quality of life, culture, and lifestyles are determined. The changes in values, identities, and symbols are accomplished by the cycling through societal roles as described above.

Resource mobilization focuses on rational actors and institutions. Individuals are not ruled by magic, as there is reason and limited religion; and religion does not have to

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<sup>7</sup> Fadaee, Synthesis and adaptation of Alain Touraine's and Alberto Melucci's theory on social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically applied to Iran. These theories relate to us how civil actors in Iran have been able to participate in the public sphere.

compete with reason. Culture is formed and reformed in the public sphere and dictates what the political realm should look like. In light of modernity and the new thought on the state of nature, magic or religion, and individualism; civil society can work to accomplish things in the public sphere through bypassing the state and working directly with the people. The changes determined are more immediate and long lasting in contrast to the long-term process by which change is accomplished through the state.

These frameworks give us a look at how the individual actors relate to the state in the public sphere, separate from the political sphere. Individual actors work as citizens, following the rules and norms of the state; they work as public actors, creating new culture and changing societal rules; and finally as decision makers, creating change and participating in politics along with social movements. The concerted efforts of the dedicated individual actors through the cycle of state interaction and as a rational decision maker help effect lasting institutional change that is organic and of the people.

### **Promoting Democracy Abroad, US perspectives**

“Democracy allows individuals to become free subjects who produce their own history, and whose actions can reconcile the universalism of reason, with the particularism of a personal or collective identity.” (Fadaee 25) Democracy is a vehicle for self-determination, protecting individualism, and securing human rights. Through civil society and democracy, public actors can safeguard their interests in the public and political sphere. Promoting democracy abroad has long been the American policy directive. Since the Cold War, the race to extend the American field of influence over

Soviet dominion has shaped US foreign policy remarkably. It has also been a means to “achieve security, stability, and prosperity for the entire world.”(Department of State)

However, in current years, spreading democracy has waned in public popularity.

A survey conducted in Oct. 2012 pointed to the disillusion that had set in. Those believing the Arab Spring would lead to lasting improvements dropped from 42% in April 2011 to 25%, and along with that change, the U.S. public began putting less importance on democracy in the region than in having stable governments. That view is even more pronounced in the latest survey than it was last year: 63% now put more importance on stable governments while 28% see democracy as a priority<sup>8</sup>.

After the long involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American public is much less willing to get entangled with an active program of promoting democracy. In each of those engagements the aftermath has made the public and politicians alike hesitant to push for foreign interventions; even though, it is a widely accepted claim that democracies are more stable, economically viable, and peaceful toward one another. It is the nations in transition that are very often volatile, unstable, and prone to violence. The transition period for nations is distasteful to the public, and ultimately the policy makers, because of its unstable nature.

Democratization is a far from smooth process, in which newly elected governments are not always able to deliver

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<sup>8</sup> Americans Put Low Priority on Promoting Democracy Abroad

positive changes. Often during this process, Iraq being a prime example, we see political backlash against democracy, the rise of corruption, and economic instability...also point out that countries in democratic transition are more prone to conflict and are more unstable.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the dangers of democratization in countries with histories of violence, the benefits of democracy are worth continuing to promote this ideal.

### **Non-Governmental Organizations and Pluralized Public Participation**

Iranian political desire for exceptionalism can be seen in every aspect of the public sphere. Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are utilized in every region of the world and are supported by a varied number of sponsors. NGOs are one great way that civil society can begin to take form in a public space. The buzz of NGOs as a self-generating and energetic effectuation of being “modern NGOs” reinventing the public sphere in Iran have given some structure to an otherwise less structured system. That said many autocratic regimes, like Iran, mistrust the outside influence of NGOs operating in their nations. In the book Drugs, Deviancy, and Democracy in Iran goes into great depth outlining how the Iranian power structure could turn against any NGO at the mere whisper of Western influence taking hold, that they are solely the tool of the West, specifically America, to institute regime change. Ahmadinejad claimed that NGOs “operate in the margins and defile the values of the revolution”.

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<sup>9</sup> “The U.S. and Hegemonic Power: Should Promoting Democracy Abroad Be a Top U.S. Priority?”

Reformers such as Khatami, and now Rouhani, wish to seek the “third path”, or a political society that seeks to find Islamic democracy and civil society in an Iranian context. Khatami coined *jameh-ye madani* (civil society) and *mardom-salari* (democracy) as local etymology to Persianize these Western notions. These reformers believe pluralized participation is what is necessary to save Iran. Conservatives fear mass public participation because they know their rule isn’t as popular as it once was. Despite their fear and restriction, NGOs have taken hold. The role of the people has once again been pushed toward the public sphere. The regime can no longer keep as strict a rule as before. Youth and women’s movements have been picked up with great popularity and fervor; technology has redefined and expanded the public sphere as never before. While Iran has been a nation where social movements have always been a part of its political history, the exciting possibility is that civil society and pluralized participation may be here to stay. Each round of revolution in Iran has instituted a change some that have been firmly rooted into place, others that have been established but intermittently functional. Civil society needs to be a change that is firmly rooted into place. While aiding civil society is a difficult task it is a worthwhile endeavor. There have been mistakes and efforts that have backfired. US aid in Russia failed as soon as the government got wind. Putin cracked down on any group seen as opposition to his government<sup>10</sup>. In Iran, especially under Ahmadinejad, western aid in any form was highly suspicious. Uzbekistan, and many other nations, has taken aid that should have been given to NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) and fraudulently spent it<sup>11</sup>. But it has worked in some nations or has at least jumpstarted some nations efforts at democratization. For

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<sup>10</sup> Khanna 13

<sup>11</sup> Khanna 104



example the country of Kyrgyzstan has received aid in the form of grants, personnel, and educational resources.

In partnership with national and local governments, civil society and the private sector, USAID assistance is helping the country strengthen the only parliamentary system in the region, improve communication between the government and the people, foster greater economic prosperity, improve the quality of health care and education, and incorporate participation of marginalized communities in the political process and private sector development.<sup>12</sup>

Kyrgyzstan is seen as a model and a success in the region. USAID's efforts to promote civil society as well as the government and private sectors has helped Kyrgyzstan have a freely elected parliament, one of the only in the region. It has helped the quality of health, economic growth, and educational achievements of the Kyrgyz people. Aid to Iran should be a cautious endeavor, one taken with care and precision. The mistakes and failures of the past should not deter support of civil society, rather it should be a lesson on how to proceed.

### **Investing in the People: Civil Society Here to Stay**

Civil society has certainly made its mark on Iran's socio-political history. The movements of the last century have proved what a group of dedicated public actors can accomplish when there is a dedication to the pursuit of shared interests. While civil

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<sup>12</sup> "USAID/Kyrgyz Republic Country Profile."

society refers to any number of groups that operate in the public sector, the ideal of civil society as a whole remains unchanged from group to group: to put in effect a clear vision of a collective goal. To invest in a healthy civil society in Iran, is to work toward guaranteeing the freedom of self-rule in the nation. Iran has undergone a tumultuous development with notable social movements to carry it toward its current state. With a dynastic past and a slowly changing autocratic present, Iran is a nation that must invest in its people. The social movements of the last one hundred years have all met with success because of the vibrant public sector. Each one bringing about irrefutable changes to the political landscape. The autocratic and centralized regimes of Iran's past have been unsuccessful in stifling pluralized public participation. The post Islamic revolutionary period has disenchanted its citizens with the new Islamic order and the over reaching oversight of the regime. The public dissatisfaction has brought about even greater public involvement. While it may not be popular at home or within Iran for the US to engage in active democracy promotion, what should be essential is the support of the Iranian people's right to self-rule. President Rouhani has run on a platform of reform and a call for dialogue between nations. This is the time to take advantage of a more open Iranian foreign policy. The US and other nations should support NGOs by sending in monetary aid, technical experts, and other tools to help Iran develop as its people choose to. As history has shown most successful bids for change have come from the people of Iran; if the US wishes to see democracy take hold, American policy should support the people of Iran in their own organic movements through a healthy civil society.

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