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What is This?
STRUCTURAL IMPEDIMENTS OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY PROJECT IN IRAN: NATIONAL AND GLOBAL DIMENSIONS

Mohammad A. Chaichian*

ABSTRACT

The origins of the “civil society” concept can be traced to the nineteenth century European political thought. But in the last two decades the concept has been revived in an eclectic and non-critical fashion by Western governments and affiliated donor agencies with vested neo-colonial and economic interests in Eastern Europe, former Soviet republics, and developing countries. This article argues that as an alternative to radical ideologies and revolutionary processes of social change, the civil society concept has been transformed into a neutral and allegedly non-ideological pragmatic “project” for establishing democracy and promoting market-based economies in developing nations. The article entails two components. First, it traces historical origins of the civil society concept from Locke, Hegel and Marx to Gramsci and Habermas, as well as resurrection of the concept by western governments, particularly in the United States and Britain. Second, it examines the feasibility of establishing civil society in developing countries by using the Islamic Republic of Iran as a case study, particularly since the victory of Mohammad Khatami and pro-reform factions in the 1997 presidential elections. Using Antonio Gramsci’s interpretation of civil society and providing a conceptual model, the article concludes that the civil society project in Iran and other developing countries is a recipe for failure due to both internal and external structural impediments.

Introduction

With the pro-reform factions’ victory to elect Mohammad Khatami as the new president in 1997, the civil society debate has also gained considerable currency in Iranian politics and intellectual discourse. In addition to Khatami’s institutional support, other activists and intellectuals have also contributed to the clarification of civil society objectives in Iran. Notwithstanding genuine intellectual and political efforts to support the democratization process inside Iran, one can neither ignore nor dismiss the fact that Western ideas, as well as economic and political interests, have influenced the promotion of civil society in Iran. In particular, certain donor countries and affiliated international agencies are instrumental in providing economic and ideological support for what I call the “civil society project.”

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In this paper, I first argue that as an ideological concept, civil society is a historical product of a postmodern, late capitalist global economy. While the post-Cold War era’s debates have mainly revolved around Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis to legitimize the coming of a new capitalist world order, the civil society projects are prescribed for post-socialist and developing countries so that they can presumably make a smooth transition to a market economy. Next, I review and evaluate the merits of the civil society project as it is defined by the donor agencies such as the USAID and the World Bank. I then provide a brief comparative account of six interpretations of civil society by Iranian intellectuals and political activists, demonstrating their overall compliance with the programmatic guidelines set forth by the said donor agencies.

Finally, I review the internal and external structural impediments of establishing a civil society in Iran, and conclude that the project is neither feasible, nor might it be desirable in Iran. Using Gramsci’s interpretation of civil society, I provide a conceptual model to demonstrate the “problematic” of democratization in Iran, linking it to her subordinate position within an international capitalist division of labor.

Post-Modern Theoretical and Ideological Roots of the “Civil Society” Project

Historically speaking, the emergence and evolution of “civil society” as a concept goes hand in hand with the emergence and evolution of capitalist market economy and its domination over all other economic forms. The earlier definitions ranged from finding a social sphere for citizens to protect their property rights (Locke 1968), to guaranteeing the privileged classes’ right to have economic, political, and cultural freedom (Hegel 1967), and enabling the bourgeoisie to control and organize the production of commodities and market relations (Marx 1972). With further development of capitalism in the twentieth century, some theorists regarded civil society as an auxiliary social sphere controlled by the state. For instance, Gramsci (1980) considered civil society a system of control over the political and economic practices through non-violent means, hand-in-hand with the coercive arm of the state (political society). According to Gramsci, while the latter exerts control through police force, surveillance, taxation, imprisonment, and control of the judiciary, the former uses cultural and ideological means to control the subordinate classes:

It should be remembered that the general notion of state includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that state = political society + civil society), in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion. (Gramsci 1980:263).

The concept of “civil society” has been revived in the last two decades in an eclectic and non-critical fashion, mostly by Western governments and affiliat-
ed donor agencies. I will argue that the civil society project is, in fact, a revised postmodern version of earlier modernization projects of the 1950-1980 decades and their economic, political, and ideological objectives. For instance, the post-WWII efforts by Western capitalist economies (notably the United States) promoted modernization projects in the “Third World” in order to expand their spheres of economic and political domination. But this was done with the help of an ideological package that allegedly sought to fight communism on one hand and help poor developing nations to achieve economic development on the other.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and increasing hegemony of global capitalism has effectively undermined the possibility of successful insurgent movements that seek to establish independent and progressive nationalist regimes in developing countries. On the other hand, the Soviet Union’s sudden demise as the main ideological force behind centralized socialist governments has allowed the West to promote the civil society project both in post-socialist and developing countries. However, this is being done without addressing the “problematic” of developing nations’ structural dependency on the West, or questioning the shortcomings of a corporate-dominated global capitalism and its ideological legitimacy.

One of the earliest ideologues of postmodern politics was Daniel Bell (1974), whose “post-industrial society” thesis popularized the assumption that industrial-capitalism is reaching its zenith whereby labor and capital will no longer be in conflict. In an earlier work, by capitalizing on the defeat of fascism in Germany and the failure of the Stalinist socialist policies in the Soviet Union, Bell (1962) concluded that: (1) ideological projects have an appeal only in less developed and Third World countries; (2) maturation of political systems and liberal democracy in the West has become capable of supporting pluralism in politics; and 3) social revolutions are no longer a historical necessity, as political and economic reforms are now fully possible within the context of the industrial-capitalist system.

It is within this context that Francis Fukuyama’s “the End of History” thesis (1992) finds a receptive audience in the West and, in my opinion, provides ideological support for the “civil society” as a postmodern project. In brief, Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy has finally overcome all other ideologies, and has put an end to all ideological conflicts in the world. He concludes that Western liberal democracy has become a universally acceptable concept, one that all nations will move to embrace. Thus, the post-Cold War advocates of this “new world order” argue that the globalized, industrial-capitalist system is no longer threatened by alternative political and economic systems such as socialism:

There will not be three “worlds” but only one world, a world in which countries at various levels of development interact in a multitude of diverse and mutually beneficial ways. The development model that largely prevailed from the 1950s to the 1980s and that was characterized by non-democratic, authoritarian *dirigisme,*
and social engineering aimed at “modernization” has indeed been washed away by the tide of history. (Madison 1998:188)

The underlying message of the civil society advocates is that the project is viable based on two assumptions. First, all the nation building efforts of the twentieth century, from Third World modernization projects to nationalist liberation movements, have failed. Second, Western industrialized nations have achieved a state of “civility,” and hence can serve as a model for other “uncivil” or “less civil” societies to follow. As Keane (1998:116) has aptly observed, the hypocrisy of this claim lies in that it serves “as a mask for the conniving egoism and violence of men with a reputation for refined manners” as they advance their economic interests through colonization. One of the earliest criticisms of “Western civility,” is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s rather harsh remarks on Hobbes’ notion of civil society:

I open the books on rights and ethics; I listen to the professors and jurists; and, my mind full of their seductive doctrines, I admire the peace and justice established by the civil order; I bless the wisdom of our political institutions and, knowing myself a citizen, cease to lament I am a man. Thoroughly instructed as to my duties and my happiness, I close the books, step out of the lecture room, and look around me. I see wretched nations groaning beneath a yoke of iron. I see mankind ground down by a handful of oppressors. I see a famished mob, worn down by suffering and famine, while the rich drink the blood and tears of their victims at their ease. (Rousseau, 1917:124-5) [Italics added]

Rousseau’s assessment of a nascent civil society in an industrializing Europe ravaged by civil wars may not conform to today’s reality. But his implicit reference to the ideological nature and limits of a Western “civil order” still has relevance. In particular, two factors should be taken into consideration as we assess the merits of the civil society project. First, the development and sustenance of a late capitalist, “just-in-time,” flexible production in advanced industrialized societies is only possible with the transfer of mostly labor-intensive production to less developed regions of the world. There, a repressed and cheap work force, deprived of basic working rights and conditions, is put to work in the interest of a global market. A pre-requisite for this postmodern stage of late capitalism, is repression of organized labor at home, along with the creation of union-free production sites such as the export processing and free economic zones in developing countries. Second, while the Cold War era dictated a positivist-conservative ideology dividing the world into the irreconcilable and contradictory “democratic capitalist West” and “totalitarian socialist East;” the post-Cold War, post-modern “civil society project” has equally served a similar purpose. That is, with no factual documentation this positivist-conservative ideology assumes that all non-Western and post-socialist countries are both willing and capable of
achieving a Western-style democracy. The inherent flaws in both ideological positions should not be discounted. As an ideology, the “East-West” dichotomy blamed the “East” for all the things that have gone wrong in their nation-building efforts, without even taking into consideration all the “West’s” efforts to sabotage their projects. The post-Cold War civil society project also assumes that a Western-style capitalism and democracy in developing and post-socialist countries is possible, ignoring that the latter are unequal partners in this globalized, late capitalist economy (Chaichian 1998:195-97).

To conclude, the civil society project is being promoted at a crucial historical juncture with two distinct features. First, global capitalism faces no viable alternative economic and ideological contenders that might undermine its hegemonic status. Second, capital- and resource-poor, less developed and developing countries are not only incapable of achieving an independent economic and social development, but are also increasingly incorporated into an unequal and immensely hierarchical global division of labor that only benefits advanced capitalist economies.

Global Trends in Formulating a New Understanding of Civil Society

With the increasing globalization of capitalism and new shifts in world politics during the post-colonial phase (1960s to the present), new definitions of civil society are gaining currency. These interpretations are both initiated and promoted by certain Western countries with economic and political interests. Keane (1998:12-31) identifies three phases of the “contemporary renaissance of civil society.” The first phase that took shape in the late 1960s in Latin America and Japan, was based on a new interpretation and redefinition of the concept where a neo-Gramscian account of civil society was used as a theoretical weapon against dictatorship (Mengotti 1998; cf. Keane 1998:12). In Japan, for example, using a neo-Gramscian analysis, Marxist theorists broke away from European social sciences and their definition of civil society that bore no relation to the Japanese cultural reality. Instead, they tried to understand “civil society” related to the peculiar nature of Japanese capitalism that was based on “communalism” and lack of individual power vis-à-vis an omnipotent state (Keane 1998:13-14).

The second phase of this renewed interest began during the 1970s in Central-Eastern European countries. But unlike the Japanese, the advocates of the concept abandoned the Marxist interpretation and argued that “democracy and totalitarianism are not opposites,” and regarded the establishment of a civil society as “the best antidote to the demagogy spawned by the mass ideologies and mass movements.” Consequently, civil society advocates in Eastern Europe argue, “the protracted struggle of civil society- not sudden revolutions from above or below-is also the strongest weapon against totalitarian dictatorship” (Keane 1998:19-20).

Finally, the language of civil society and its perceived contrast with the
power of state has been immensely expanded and redefined during the 1990s, which Keane calls the “third phase of the civil society renaissance.” Supporters of this new revival call for advancing the cause of citizens’ entitlements, redefining the relationship between religion and politics, resisting bureaucratic and authoritarian military regimes, and using the civil society concept for political gains. The most significant aspect of civil society’s revival during the third phase is its proliferation in a variety of geo-political contexts at the global level. Examples include Taiwan, South Korea, China, and Malaysia in Asia; Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Senegal, and South Africa in Africa; and several countries in the Middle East including Iran, Turkey, and recently the tiny Island nation of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf.5

As an alternative to radical ideologies of social change, the civil society project is thus a neutralized and allegedly non-ideological pragmatic solution for establishing democracy and promoting a market-based economy, particularly in the developing countries. What is expected of a civil society depends on the particular donor agencies and countries supporting the project. But the overall expectation is that once it is in place, it will serve as a “reservoir of political, economic, cultural and moral resources to check the power of the state;” help donor agencies better distribute funds via NGOs; promote “sustainable development” through “capacity building” and “human resource development;” and help to facilitate economic liberalization and privatization of the economy (The North-South Institute 1996:10-12).6

Western donor societies and their affiliated donor/aid agencies play a significant role in the redefinition of the civil society concept and its eventual institutionalization in the recipient nations. Interestingly, they all appear to have an overall consensus about the concept’s meaning and applications. As one of the major players in funding economic development projects in the world, the Washington-based World Bank has clear lending policy criteria and objectives. Similar to other multilateral development banks (MDBs), the World Bank supports “good governance” in the borrowing countries through its emphasis on government transparency, economic efficiency, accountability, and effective public sector management. Similarly, its support of civil society initiatives is based on a platform aimed at reducing poverty, increasing public participation in making and implementing policy, and improving project performance. The World Bank is also concerned about the corrosive effects of corruption on governance and economic development in receiving countries, and conducts annual surveys of corruption levels in most countries. The bulk of these studies are carried out through an NGO, The Transparency International, which was founded by a former World Bank career staff (Nelson 2000). Another influential international agency promoting the “cause of freedom” is the U.S. based Freedom House. Supported by the Ford and Soros foundations, the Pew Charitable Thrust, as well as the USAID and U.S. Information Agency (USIA), Freedom House’s main mission is to engage the business community and international financial institutions in a discussion of central
requirements of constructing freedom such as,

The independence and impartiality of judiciaries, the effective functioning of constitutions and legal system, checks and balances against corruption and impunity, safeguards against the inordinate concentration of power, protections for the rights of minorities, and the enforcement of contracts and property rights. (Freedom House 1999)

Civil society is also being defined by agencies in a unified language. For instance, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), a major player in assisting development projects in developing countries, provides a streamlined and simple definition for civil society:

The independent, non-governmental realm of citizen activity is termed civil society. As the nexus for participation in governance, civil society is essential in a democracy for political expression and influencing government policy choices. (USAID n.d.)

However, USAID is not an unconditional supporter of civil society organizations such as NGOs. Rather, “given the scarcity of funding for democracy programs” it has chosen to lend support only to the “politically active” or advocacy civil society organizations (CSOs) (USAID n.d.; see also Hansen 1996). Along the same line of policy objectives, the U.S. Department of State has also launched its English Teaching Forum online that provides teaching material for English teachers overseas. One volume of the forum under “Language and Civil Society” is devoted to civic education. Topics range from “rights of individuals,” to “freedom of the press,” “responsibilities of the government,” to dynamics of “building a civil society” (U.S. Department of State n.d.).

In general, any discussion of civil society by the above entities revolves around three distinct “sectors” of state, market, and NGOs. The state is considered as the first sector, which if left unchecked will lead to concentration of economic and political power. Thus, one objective of the civil society project is to include parts of the state within civil society. But a better solution is the decentralization of decision-making and power structures. The market is the second sector, and the civil society project also aims at inclusion of the private sector within its “sphere” of activities through its funding efforts to support Non-profit organizations. As a rule, civil society and entrepreneurship are seen as being intricately linked. Finally, the civil society project equates civil society with the third sector; namely, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with clearly defined public interest goals (The North-South Institute 1996:13-15). As a clear reflection of the preceding criteria, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provides a definition that is widely accepted by most donors:
Civil society is, together with states and market, one of the three “spheres” that interface in the making of democratic societies. Civil society is the sphere in which social movements become organized. (UNDP 1993:1)

The notion of “spheres” and their presumed interactive relationship is a recurring theme in donor countries’ and organizations’ definition of civil society. For instance, Freres (1998) adopts the following working definition for the European Union’s Civil Society Cooperation Program with Latin American countries:

A minimal working definition might be one defining civil society as that space in the public sphere where self-organized groups, movements and individuals, relatively autonomous with respect to government, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarity, and promote their interests. (Linz and Stepan 1996:17; cf. Frere 1998)

It is important to recognize the significance attached to a market economy and sustainable development in establishing and sustaining civil societies in the post-socialist Eastern European nations, in the former Soviet republics of Asia Minor, and in other developing countries. For example, the European Bank for Economic Development (EBRD) publishes annual reports titled Transition Report on the status of former Soviet Republics and Eastern European socialist countries and the extent of their progress toward a market economy. According to EBRD’s definition, economic transition is a “process which leads to the establishment of a market economy,” while economic development refers to “advancement of the standard of living, including education, health, command over resources, and economic and political rights” (EBRD 1996:2). Similar to the World Bank, in order to be eligible for financial aid EBRD has established strict guidelines for borrowing governments in transition. For instance, the agency stipulates that they shall commit themselves to “a shift from state control of the whole political and economic system towards an emphasis on state support for democratic procedures, freedom, and a well-functioning market economy” (ERBD 1996:4). The post-Cold War, post-colonial reality of a global economy has also prompted the heads of the governments of the Commonwealth countries to define rules of economic and political engagement (The Commonwealth 1991; 1995). The stated measures to support civil society initiatives in the Commonwealth nations are identical to those of the EBRD and the World Bank. That is, respect for the constitution, holding free and democratic elections, strengthening the rule of law, promoting an independent judiciary, and supporting a “good government” in a civil society.

Regarding the Middle East, the geopolitical realities along with Western countries’ reliance on its oil reserves have not been conducive to promoting democracy and democratic regimes in this region. Although USAID and the World Bank are actively involved in most Middle Eastern countries, as is aptly put by
Henry (1997), the American foreign policy objectives in the region have become the major roadblock in their democratization process:

Ironically the current policy of the “dual containment” of Iran and Iraq strives to put one of the region’s most participant polities in quarantine. The United States is also committed to the security of Israel and to a peace process pretty much on Israel’s terms. This may be incompatible at present with any substantial democratization in Egypt, Jordan or Palestine, as popular sentiment in all of these places run diametrically counter to U.S. policy.

As related to Iran, since she has no formal diplomatic relations with the United States, American aid agencies are not directly involved in Iran. But the U.S. policy objectives can still be conveyed through other channels such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the UNDP in particular. Also, due to their vested economic interests in Iran, European governments have become major players in Iranian politics and promotion of the civil society project. A careful review of the civil society debate in Iran will indicate the striking similarities in the definition of the concept and its objectives with those of the international donor agencies and countries, which shall be discussed in the following section.

Interpretation of Civil Society by Iranian Intellectuals, Activists, and Politicians

Since the 1997 victory of Mohammad Khatami in the presidential elections, the terminology of civil society (jame’e-ye madani) has also gained great currency among Iranian intellectuals and political activists. A survey of articles in Iranian newspapers, magazines, and recently published books on the topic of “civil society” in Iran leads the reader to conclude that Iranians are highly informed about the current debates on this subject. However, these varied, and at times contradictory, interpretations seem to be in line with the individual, group, and partisan political interests of their supporters. The following statement by a Western observer is not far from reality of the civil society debate in Iran:

State officials in the Middle East use the term “civil society” to promote their projects of mobilization and “modernization;” Islamists use it to angle for a legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty. (Bellin 1994:509)

Although not fully inclusive, I have identified six interpretations of the civil society concept as being fair representations of individual and group positions on this issue. What follows is a brief comparative discussion of the selected viewpoints, which will demonstrate the diverse nature of positions taken by Iranian intellectuals, politicians, and activists on this issue.
I. Liberal Interpretation (Musa Ghani Nezhad)

In his book *Jame’e-ye Madani*, Ghani Nezhad (1998) provides an interesting, liberal, pro-market analysis and interpretation of civil society. After outlining various interpretations of the concept from Locke and Hegel to Marx and Gramsci, he considers economic freedom a prerequisite condition for the realization of civil rights and hence a civil society. Rejecting all socialist and government-controlled economies (and indirectly referring to post-revolution Iran) Ghani Nezhad argues that unlike a monopolistic economy, in a free, competitive, market economy individuals are not controlled by a dominant economic entity. He contends that freedom for political activities and the press are only meaningful when respect for private property and economic independence for individuals is guaranteed by the state.

He further argues that civil society can only function outside the realm of state, and places it within the context of a market-based economy. As a consequence, he sees the state as being detached from any class or group affiliation, and assumes that a market economy accompanied by a civil society is, in fact, an economic reality that will function independent of government intervention (Ghani Nezhad 1998:24-32). Finally, in his analysis, he likens the government’s role in the economy to that of a coach in a sports game:

> The coach’s function is basically to maintain order and prevent infractions. Although the coach plays a significant role in the game, this by no means is an indication of his dominance over the individual will of players. (Ghani Nezhad 1998:33).

Ghani Nezhad contends that a competitive market economy free of external political and social intervention will never lead to a monopolistic stage, thus disregarding the fundamental structural necessity of capital accumulation and the economic expansion of capitalism.

II. Developmentalist-Pragmatic Interpretation (Hooshang Amir Ahmadi)

Another interpretation that has gathered some audience in Iran is the developmentalist-pragmatist approach that is best represented in several articles by an Iranian expatriate, Hooshang Amir Ahmadi (see, for example, 1998a and 1998b). Amir Ahmadi adopts a pragmatic approach to define civil society and its functional utility for a process of economic development, especially in developing countries:

> The civil society is a public sphere situated between the government and the citizen (family unit) that sets the rules of conduct among the two entities. It is a ter-
ritory for autonomous and volunteer social discourses and processes, activities
and movements, and organized social institutions that take shape and are aimed
at a common goal or a set of coordinated rules and codes of conduct. (1998a:81)

Based on the above definition, he rejects the “liberal” and “radical” interpre-
tations, and offers a different approach for understanding the dynamics of
“civil society.” On the one hand, he considers the liberal approach as being flawed
because it considers civil society a progressive phenomenon serving as an engine
for economic growth and social welfare in a market-oriented economy, with lim-
ited government intervention.9 On the other hand, he considers the radical
(Marxist) approach as also being shortsighted because it rejects the civil society
for serving the interests of global capitalism. Considering both approaches “unre-
alistic” in their understanding of the government’s role in development, Amir
Ahmadi argues that in order to achieve a level of sustainable economic develop-
ment, there should be a logical/functional relation between government and civil
society. For this to happen, he identifies three periods of development—growth,
transition, and sustainable development. During the growth period, there is a need
for a strong government and a relatively weak civil society. During the transition
period, both the government and civil society have equal power to affect the devel-
opment process, while in the sustainable development period, a strong, developed
economy will allow for a full fledged democratic process (Amir Ahmadi, 1998b:
268-273).

This rather mechanical approach assumes that the civil society and gov-
ernment can function as independent agents during the development process, pre-
sumably taking a developing society to the final stage of sustainable develop-
ment.10

III. Developmentalist-Democratic Interpretation (Akbar Ganji)

One of the most prolific and influential writers of the past decade in Iran, espe-
cially after the 1997 presidential election that led to Khatami’s presidency and the
political victory of the so-called “second Khordad” movement, is the
journalist/activist Akbar Ganji. Currently serving a 10-year prison term for
attending the controversial Berlin Conference in February 2000, Ganji has written
extensively about the reform movement and the role of civil society in Iran.11

Ganji is highly critical of certain government officials and agencies
regarding their alleged role and functions in suppressing civil liberties, silencing
the voice of opposition, and even physically eliminating political dissidents and
activists. Nonetheless, he is a firm believer in the Islamic government and its flex-
ibility to accommodate political and structural reforms.12 His reformist views are
best explained in his speech at the 2000 Berlin Conference:

History of humankind has proven that democracy cannot be established through
revolutionary methods, and all revolutions and revolutionaries have been unable to establish democratic governments…In my opinion the Islamic Republic of Iran can be reformed, and my evidence include the presidential elections in 1997, city council elections in 1998, and parliamentary elections in 2000. In addition, the presence of a multitude of newspapers and magazines, publication of books, improvement in human rights conditions, tolerance of opposition and their activities, are all indications of the presence of a reform movement in Iran. (Ganji 2000c:36-38; 233-34) [Italics added]

In another article titled “the Developmentalist-Democratic Government” (Ganji 2000a: 448-58), he divides the “developing” and “less developed” countries into two broad categories of nations “with” or “without” developmentalist-democratic governments. Focusing on the latter group, and employing the examples of South Korea, Chile, Brazil, and South Africa, he argues that civil society institutions in these countries are either weak or non-existent. The alternative, according to Ganji, is to allow these “transitional” societies to strengthen democratic principles within governments in order for them to get out of the underdevelopment cycle. He then provides a laundry list of “prerequisites” for a “developmentalist-democratic” government:

The presence of a free civil society, a relatively independent political society, effective enforcement of laws regarding all citizens, positive functioning of bureaucracy, a pluralist economy, regular and just elections, respecting human rights, independent press free from government control, an independent judiciary, etc. (Ganji 2000a:455) [Italics added]

Regarding civil society, Ganji uses various definitions and explanations in an eclectic manner and concludes that the reform movement’s main objective in Iran should be the expansion of public spheres in the form of various institutions supported by civil society independent of government (Ganji 2000c:253). He concludes by asserting that the aim of civil society is not to take over or overthrow the government. Rather, it shall help to expand individual and public spheres of social activities outside the government domain.” Thus, taking a Habermasian position, he argues that civil society serves as a shield to protect the government from citizen’s over-expectations, as well as the citizens from government excesses (Ganji 2000c:254).

IV. Islamic-Democratic Interpretation (Abdolkarim Soroosh)

One of the leading Muslim revisionist thinkers (degar- andish) in contemporary Iran is Abdolkarim Soroosh. He adopts John Locke’s interpretation and considers a civil society as being interchangeable with “political society,” and contends that “by nature” the latter has historical qualifications to be considered a “civil socie-
ty” (Soroosh 1998:107). As related to Iran, Soroosh sets forth four criteria for a functional civil society. First, equating civil society with a “lawful society,” he argues that “a civil society is established when individuals delegate their rights to others to judge, rule and administer society” according to a set of approved laws. Soroosh also takes a clear stand on the issue of the necessity of the separation of the judiciary, legislative, and the executive branches, something that he believes is lacking in Iran. Within this context, he then questions the logic of *velayat-e faqih* that is based on the absolute power of the Supreme Leader, an entity which he believes is in contradiction with civil society, yet legitimized by the legal force of Iran’s Constitution. Second, without much elaboration, he considers political and intellectual pluralism the main characteristic of a civil society. This makes it hard to assess whether his pluralist vision includes secularists or not. However, as the third prerequisite he also considers citizens’ religious faith, the conviction to do good, and fear of God (*taghw’a*) as prerequisites for a civil society and hence implicitly excluding secularists. Finally, emphasizing the importance of knowledge and information in a seemingly postmodern world, Soroosh (1998) advocates a fair and just distribution/dissemination of, and access to, information as a safeguard against the excesses of an uncivil government (pp.119-140). He further elaborates on Locke’s assertion that civility is a sign of transition from “animal-like” behavior to “human” conduct. A prerequisite for this transition, according to Soroosh, is the presence of social ethics that allegedly will regulate and guide individual behavior and social interaction in a civil society (Soroosh 1998:112).

V. Institutional-Islamic Interpretation (Mohammad Khatami)

In addition to other interpretations offered by intellectuals and activists, Mohammad Khatami, the current president of the Islamic Republic, has also articulated his vision of what he calls an “Islamic civil society.” In a speech delivered at the Organization of Islamic Countries’ Summit (OIC) held in Tehran in 1997, Khatami first elaborated on the emergence of a new world order that is based on pluralism, and that he hoped “will not be the monopoly of any single world power (Muslim Media 1998). He then argued that the existing nature of relations between the Islamic world and the West “suffers from mistrust, misunderstanding and misconceived perceptions,” and proposed his project of “dialogue of civilizations”:

In this connection, through providing necessary grounds for dialogue among civilizations and cultures—with the people of intellect taking a pivotal role—we should open the way towards a fundamental understanding which lies at the very foundation of genuine peace. (Muslim Media 1998) 15

Within this pseudo-historical, post-Huntingtonian framework, Khatami
then urged Muslims to “return, with reflection to the historical self” on the one hand, and to attempt for a “proper and deep understanding of the present” in relation to the Western civilization on the other. “Muslims should utilize the positive, scientific and technological accomplishments of Western civilization,” argued Khatami, “but through the realization of an Islamic civil society.” By-passing the historical changes during the Enlightenment period in Europe, Khatami further envisioned a populist civil society modeled after Prophet Mohammad’s “community of Muslims,” allegedly established in Medina upon his emigration from Mecca in 622 AD:

The civil society we have in mind has its origins, from a historical and theoretical point of view, in Madinat-ul-Nabi…Personal and or group dictatorship or even the dictatorship of the majority and elimination of the minority has no place…citizens of the Islamic society enjoy the right to determine their own destiny, supervise the administration of affairs, and hold the government accountable. The government in such a society is the servant of the people and not their master…In our civil society not only Muslims are considered citizens with rights, but all individuals are entitled to rights within the framework of the law. (Muslim Media 1998)

According to Khatami, one of the priorities for Iran (and other Muslim countries) should be a comprehensive, balanced, and sustainable economic development, that in turn should “ensure participation of all individuals, groups and segments in the process of progress” within the context of his proposed Islamic civil society (Muslim Media 1998).16

VI. Secular-Reformist Interpretation (Saiid Hajjarian)

In an interview published in the Political-Economic Ettela’at (1997, No. 9-10; cf. Hajjarian 1998:307-328), Saiid Hajjarian has laid out both historical reasons for the Islamic Revolution’s failure to establish political and civic institutions, as well as basic ingredients of a future civil society in Iran.17 Regarding the impediments of establishing a viable civil society, he identifies four distinct historical periods in post-revolution Iran. First, he sees the many obstacles and problems confronted by the new regime in the early years after the 1979 revolution as being mainly because of the populist nature of the revolution that only aimed at overthrowing the Pahlavi regime with no clear platform for the future. In Hajjarian’s words, “people only knew what they don’t want, but did not know what they want” (Hajjarian 1998). Second, the inevitable outcome of the “imposed war” with Iraq (1980-88) led to a war-time economy that created a more closed and restricted political environment. The Third historical period he identifies is the post-war period (1988-96), during which the (Rafsanjani) government advocated a state-supported, top-down economic development agenda. This, according to Hajjarian, required a “trilateral unity” between the national capital, the Islamic government,
and the international capital that, in turn, necessitated minimum public political participation in order to secure a safe investment environment (Hajjarian 1998:310-312).\footnote{18}

For him, what was achieved by the revolution was a promotion of citizen participation at the level of the “masses.” But in order to achieve “full democracy” in the new Islamic Republic, there was a need for a pluralist society that allowed competitive political participation for various interest groups (p.308). This, according to Hajjarian, was initiated during Khatami’s presidency or the fourth post-revolution historical period, but needs to be nourished and strengthened to prevent a return to authoritarianism and even fascism (pp.327-28). As to the possibility of establishing civic institutions, Hajjarian envisions a “republic” within an “Islamic” context, which is apparently in the making in Iran since the reform movement’s victory in the 1997 presidential elections.\footnote{19} However, he rejects Khatami’s contention that the early Islamic period during Prophet Mohammad’s residence in Medina can serve as an appropriate model of civil society. Adopting a rather materialist approach, and emphasizing the importance of internal forces, he delineates social-structural prerequisites for the emergence of civil society in Iran:

I still give priority to objective issues and material conditions, and believe their historical development will in turn lead to the development of subjective and legal entities...Also, among objective factors, instead of emphasizing international conditions and wars, I primarily value social structure. I believe that with the advent of urbanization, development of mass education/communication, and the emergence of the citizen as a civic entity, subjective factors will more-or-less adjust themselves to the new reality. (Hajjarian 1998:313)

It is important to note that of all the interpretations of the civil society concept by Iranian intellectuals and activists, that of Hajjarian is unequivocally secular, emphasizing the necessity of the separation of church and state as well as religion and politics:

Some have stepped out of bounds and argue that we can have a religion based on civil rights. Since religious language is that of obligations, it is hard to accept the above claim. How can we have a religion based on individual rights? Is this the same as Rousseau’s civil religion? The latter interpretation may resemble to volunteer religious associations in the West. First, individual’s right to have or not to have a religion in the West is respected. Second, having the right to make their own interpretation of the scripture they establish volunteer religious associations (denominations). In this way, the religious regime achieves pluralism by being broken down into various associations. Thus the privatized religion returns to the public sphere in order to control the state along with political parties, guilds and trade unions. (Hajjarian 1998:319)

Thus, without discounting the role of religion in people’s everyday lives,
in an unequivocal language he criticizes those who advocate the fusion of religious faith with the rationality of social agreements in a civil society.

**In Search of a Common Ground: Putting the Pieces Together**

The preceding discussion represents a cross-section of currently debated interpretations of the civil society project in Iran. To put the civil society debate in perspective, and at the expense of overgeneralization, we can identify two distinct models that pertain to the Iranian situation. The first model, espoused by Ganji, Amir Ahmadi, and Hajjarian conceptualizes the civil society as a “sphere” independent from that of state. In contrast, the advocates of the second model, namely, Khatami and Soroosh consider the (Islamic) state a major supporting force behind a sustainable civil society. Although there are disagreements on the state’s role in Iran’s economy, the common denominator for both models is the primacy

**Figure 1. Conceptualization of Civil Society by Iranian Intellectuals and Activists**

![Diagram of Civil Society by Iranian Intellectuals and Activists](image-url)
of a market-based capitalist economic system (see Figure 1). It is interesting to note that most participants in the civil society debate in Iran base their analyses on one or more interpretations borrowed from the West. For example, the models conceptualized by Ghani Nezhad, Amir Ahmadi, Ganji, and Hajjarian are all based on Western notions of parliamentary democracy and liberalism. They also hold on to the idea of the primacy and autonomy of civil society vis-à-vis the state, as conceptualized by Habermas (1994). In fact, their interpretation of civil society is strikingly similar to USAID’s adopted definition during the first Clinton Administration, that civil society “inhabits the area between individual (or families) and the state and is made up of associational groupings of all sorts” (Blair 1994:4-5). But while the USAID model seeks to utilize a set of voluntary associations within the public sphere, the Iranian model more closely follows Habermas who conceptualizes the “sphere” as a public discursive space.

In contrast to the above model, others such as Khatami (the current president) consider the state as a major player in the formation and perpetuation of civil society. The latter position is more in line with debates over the totalitarian nature of socialist states and possible alternatives that evolved in Europe in the 1970s. According to Seligman (1992:7-8), the East and East-Central European countries began to envisage a post-socialist future where the interests of a civil society are subsumed to those of the state. To envision the fusion of civil society and the state apparatus is characteristic of societies with a long history of foreign domination and authoritarian governments. Poland serves as a perfect example, whereby her revolution in nineteenth century was crushed by the Czarist Russia and, except for a brief independence during inter-war years, it continued to be dominated by Germany and the Soviet Union (1934-45 and 1945-89, respectively). It was under these circumstances that the civil society debate entered into Poland’s political discourse in the 1970s (Seligman 1992). Although never colonized by the West, Iran nonetheless bears some resemblance to Poland. That is, Iranians’ democratic aspirations have also been thwarted by centuries of domination by despotic governments and foreign interventions. Of note, is the failure of the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, the defeat of nationalists to establish an independent government due to the joint efforts of the British and American governments in 1953, and Iran’s continued economic dependence on the West.

Several issues raised in two interpretations, namely, those of Soroosh and Hajjarian, merit further attention. First, for Soroosh the root cause of most political and economic disputes in Iran lies in the fusion of the three branches of the government. In addition, his discussion of the “problematic” of the velayat-e faqih and its constitutional legitimacy in the Islamic Republic has stirred a controversial debate within the rank and file of both “conservative” and “reformist” supporters of the state. Second, Similar to Ganji and Amir Ahmadi, “civil society” for Hajjarian is the “sphere” between individual citizens and the state, where economic, political, and social disputes are galvanized and resolved. However, his historical approach to civil society that correctly identifies four distinct phases of
social transformation in post-Revolution Iran is more realistic than the other two. In addition, Hajarian’s implicit support of the separation of church and state politics is distinctly secular, which sets him apart from Ganji.

In addition to the reform-minded individuals and factions that support the civil society project in Iran, some conservative political factions are also embracing the idea. Of note, is the rift within the Jam’iyat-e Mo’talefe-ye Eslami (The Islamic Coalition Society), one of the most prominent and well-funded factions within the conservative movement. Formed as a support group for Ayatollah Khomeini in the late 1970s, the ICS is known to have strong supporters from the traditional bazaar merchants and affiliated religious groups. Pressed by the forces of reform and international pressure, factions within the ICS are reconsidering their hard line position. For example, according to a report in the right-wing Entekhab daily, several organizations associated with the ICS, such as the Society of Engineers, the Islamic Association of Physicians, and conservative Islamic student organizations, are gradually distancing themselves from it, and lending their support to civil society advocates (Keshavarzian 2001).

The current efforts by reform-minded intellectuals, social activists, and politicians to establish a civil society in Iran as a “project” have both local and global dimensions. One cannot discount the sincere aspirations of Iranians to bring about democratic reforms and establish a civil society. But historical changes in the global economy and Western ideologies that promote this new pro-democracy and pro-development movement should not be ignored either, a subject that I shall discuss in the following section.

Is the Civil Society Project Possible in Iran?

The preceding discussion about current interpretations of a “civil society” in Iran is indicative of the eclectic nature of the debate, the pragmatic approach for its implementation, and the fundamental differences that exist in the conceptualization and realization of this project. However, there appears to be almost unanimous agreement that a civil society is a mandate for establishing democracy and supporting governments that are responsive to people’s demands. Assuming that civil society is a plausible project, and aside from populist optimism and ideological illusions espoused by the supporters of civil society, Iran still has to overcome many structural economic, political, and social obstacles. These obstacles are both internal and external, and none should be ignored in the debate on the democratization process. The following discussion addresses these concerns related to the Iranian situation.

Internal Obstacles

Several economic, political, and social factors impede the realization of civil society in Iran. Three factors stand out related to economic impediments. First, and probably the most significant, is the constitutional provisions that effectively divide Iranian economic activities into state, cooperative, and private sectors.
According to Article 44 in the Constitution, all large-scale and mother industries, foreign trade, banking and insurance, air and rail transport, large-scale irrigation systems, and mass media/telecommunications networks have to be publicly owned and administered by the state. This makes the state a major employer (about 12 percent of the work force), which, in turn, contributes to the inflexibility of the work force during both economic contraction and expansion periods (Salehi-Isfahani 2000:617). Second, although a market-based capitalist economy is in the making in Iran (a prerequisite for civil society, according to donor entities), there needs to be a stabilization of a “systems of rights” in social, economic, and legal realms as well (Cohen 1988:325). Related to Iran, an absence of a competitive environment and “unsustainable policy making capacity” has effectively discouraged investment in the private sector (Khajehpour 2000:583-85). The uncertainties of investing in the private sector also affects the process of capital accumulation, which in turn limits the expansion of division of labor needed for a developed market economy. Finally, due to continued dependence on oil revenues, Iran’s government is still a “rentier state.” This effectively increases the state’s autonomy vis-à-vis citizens, and hence reduces the latter’s ability to successfully demand democratic reforms independent of the state’s political interests.

In terms of structural political impediments to achieve civil society objectives, several issues are worth mentioning. First, as a secular project, civil society is based on the political autonomy for individuals and associations from the state and government leadership. This is clearly contradicted by the Supreme Leader’s (Magham-e Rahabari) constitutional power and religious authority with a mandate to rule for life (Arjomand 2000:296-300). Second, the provision of several constitutionally sanctioned “checks and balances” institutions effectively hampers a truly liberal democratic process in the Islamic Republic. Of note, is the Supreme Leader’s command on the judiciary, the armed forces, national broadcasting agency, the Council of Guardians, and his veto power over the Parliament that grants him immense political, military, and ideological power (see Arjomand 2000; Monshipoori 1999:106). At a lower level, but critically important, is the Council of Guardians and its role in Iranian politics. Appointed by the Supreme Leader, the CG is the most influential political body with the power to disqualify candidates in elections for local councils, the parliament and the presidency; as well as reject all bills passed by Parliament on grounds that they do not conform to Islamic laws and codes.

In terms of social-structural impediments to active citizen participation, the roles and functions of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be carefully studied. NGOs are considered to be the most significant component of any civil society project. A recent study sponsored by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) categorizes Iranian NGOs into two groups: (1) the new and modern so-called “development” NGOs; and (2) the traditional “relief” community-based organizations (CBOs) and charity societies (Namazi 2000:13). The study group pays a close attention to the role of CBOs within Iranian society:
Community-based organizations (CBOs), both modern and traditional, have been active in meeting and coping with the critical needs of under-served and vulnerable populations. Traditional forms of community organizations, such as charities, co-operatives, boneh and vahrah—and more recent structures, formed after the Islamic revolution, such as foundations, Baseej, etc.—are all striving to keep pace and find a niche for themselves in the process of civil society development. (Namazi 2000:11)

An interesting feature of this exploratory report is its exclusion of over 5,000 women’s cooperatives that “served as viable vehicles for combating poverty,” and another 3,000 mosque-related charities and community funds from its list of NGOs, since they all failed to qualify as not-for-profit groups. Thus the report identifies and includes only 752 groups that qualified as NGOs (Namazi 2000:15). The report is also critical of current social and political conditions, and identifies the structural constraints for NGOs to properly operate in Iran:

The central body for registration of NGOs, the Ministry of Interior, still takes an outdated, security-oriented approach that discourages NGOs. Old regulations, reflecting official suspicion of any gathering and associations of people and citizens, continue to dominate official attitudes and procedures. The same procedures are used to register NGOs and political parties. Unless an NGO is able to pull some strong political strings, registration is usually a taxing and exhausting task. It can take several years to complete. Moreover, if an NGO accepts the conditions set by existing procedures, it will have little independence. (Namazi 2000:13)

Another social impediment to the realization of a civil society in Iran is the status of workers and their professional and occupational rights both in the private and public sectors. Iran is a signatory of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of the United Nations. Article 8 of the Covenant calls upon states to ensure (1) workers’ rights to form and/or join the trade union of their choice; (2) the rights of trade unions to establish national federations and function freely and with no limitations other than prescribed laws in a democratic society; and (3) workers’ right to strike. According to the Iranian Human Rights Group (2000), although the Iranian labor code grants workers the right to establish unions, no independent unions are currently in place within the private sector, and workers have no recourse to negotiate collective bargaining agreements. The situation is not that different for government employees either. A 1993 law passed by the Parliament (majlis) also prohibits government workers to strike (Iranian Human Rights Group 2000). However, as a credit to the Iranian government, a 1990 labor law grants all workers the right to appeal to the government-controlled councils if they are unjustly dismissed. The government can also levy heavy fines on employers for “unjust” layoffs (Salehi-Isfahani 2000:617).
Finally, despite remarkable improvements in the area of freedom of expression, especially using the print media, the press freedom is still a highly problematic issue in Iran. It can be argued that in the last four years the reform-oriented press has seemingly broken the taboo of state monopoly by being tolerated within the limits of the Islamic Republic guidelines. However, the banning and closing of more than 30 reformist newspapers and periodicals, and jailing more than four dozen journalists in the year 2000 alone is indicative of the state’s limited tolerance and patience for any voice of dissent. More importantly, all the newspapers and book publishers are dependent on the government for licenses and funds and, in one way or another, a good number of newspaper license holders and editors are members of the state-sanctioned groups and their supporters, leaving no room for outsiders and secular opponents (Boroumand and Boroumand 2000:333). A Muslim dissident journalist inside Iran reflects this reality in the following revelation:

Indeed, freedom and democracy do exist, but not for ‘outsider dissidents.’ As for ‘insider reformists.’ They can only make use of freedom and democracy within the boundaries established by the conservatives…That no political party completely independent from the official factions (oligarchy) has obtained an approval proves the case. Why is it that no independent political-intellectual movement, and no independent dissident have the right to publish a daily? (Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari cf. Boroumand and Boroumand 2000)

External Obstacles

Iran continues to be dependent on Western (and recently Asian) technology and know-how as well as the global capitalist markets, on both of which she has limited leverage. This includes Iran’s inability to build machines that build machines, and the effect of sustained international sanctions and financial constraints that keep Iran’s currency far below a fair and realistic exchange rate in international markets. In addition, Iran’s intransigence in opposing the American policies and interests in the Middle East has led to the imposition of economic and political sanctions by the United States. For instance, when in 2000 the World Bank approved a $234 million loan to support two civil projects in Iran, the United States was the only country that fiercely opposed its approval (World Bank 2000). The donor countries and agencies also send often contradictory messages to the borrowing nations. For example, in the aforementioned case the World Bank made it clear that “it will only consider a broader resumption of lending after the current efforts under the leadership of President Khatami to strengthen governance and economic reforms begin to show concrete results (World Bank 2000). Yet the World Bank, the USAID, and other international agencies exclude trade unions and their members, if they exist at all, from participation in civil society projects (Henry 1997; Nelson 2000). Needless to say, in a country where most industries
are still labor-intensive, this exclusion has considerable negative political consequences.

Reconceptualization of the “Civil Society”: The Case of Iran

All interpretations of civil society, from Locke and Hobbes to Hegel and Marx share a common theme: civil society is a “sphere” in which certain types of individual activities and social interactions take place. What is different, is the relation between the “civil society sphere” and the state. For instance, Hegel (1967) argues that civil society was developed in order to protect the individual rights and guarantee the freedom of the privileged in economic, political, and cultural spheres independent of the state’s coercive power. In a critique of Hegel’s model, Marx redefined the structural position of civil society by simply asserting that it can not be developed independent of a state dominated by the bourgeoisie:

Civil society as such only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce. (Marx 1972:163)

Although in different ways, both Marx and Hegel considered civil society as an ethical entity: Hegel predicted its eventual dissolution into the state, while Marx, refuting its bourgeois nature, envisioned its eradication after a proletarian revolution succeeds in uniting the state and civil society. Marx’s prediction that a proletarian state will somehow eliminate bourgeois civil society with no need for substitution under socialism was clearly utopian. Cognizant of this “problematic,” Gramsci later provided a more workable model of civil society. As was discussed earlier, Gramsci conceptualized the state to be comprised of two spheres of “political” and “civil” societies—the former protects the upper-class hegemony through coercive means, while the latter controls subordinate classes by popularizing the dominant bourgeois sense of reality. Unlike Marx, however, Gramsci realized the importance of civil society for the working class to confront the property-owning class through cultural means. Gramsci’s interesting analysis of civil society’s function is clearly summarized by Keane (1998:15):

It is precisely the complexity of civil society that enables those who are well organized and cunning to penetrate its (state’s) manifold structures. Gramsci considered that a protracted ‘war of position’ within the trenches of civil society could undermine the power of the bourgeoisie within its home territories of the economy and the coercive state.

Despite some strategic flaws in Gramsci’s model, it is my contention that his analysis of civil society most clearly conforms to reality. It is important to note that Gramsci was cognizant that civil society, as a “sphere” for class conflict resolution, is “posed for modern states” and “not for backward countries or for
colonies” (Gramsci 1980: 243). Figure 2 is a conceptualization of Gramsci’s model as it can be related to Western democracies and the Iranian society.

As is illustrated in Figure 2, the relatively secure and stable position of the dominant classes in Western industrialized countries has allowed the state to limit and restrain its coercive power (political society) and strengthen the civil society “sphere” where various social classes can compete for their interests. In contrast, Iran’s structural dependence on global capitalist markets and technologies not

**Figure 2. Structural Impediments for a Civil Society in Iran**
only contributes to the perpetuation of a dependent property-owning class, but also forces the state to take extra measures to help the ruling class cope with both the internal and external pressures discussed earlier. In return, these pressures lead to a weak and truncated “civil society sphere,” while the bureaucratic and coercive institutions of the state are strengthened and reinforced. For example, the Iranian government’s reaction to the democratization process during Khatami’s presidency has oscillated from a relatively relaxed attitude toward the expression of ideas via the reformist press from 1997-99; to an unprecedented harsh suppression of the opposition forces and their voice during the 2000-2003 period. As is illustrated in Figure 2, it can be argued that in both cases the property-owning classes and their political allies command over the civil society sphere. Also, because of their peculiar class position in both cases, the middle classes are active players in the debates on civil society as well as its realization as a social project. But the poor and working classes’ ability to utilize this “sphere” for their demands in the West and in Iran ranges from average to minimal, respectively.

To conclude, the rush to democratization in Eastern Europe, former Soviet socialist republics, and other developing countries (Iran included) has suppressed legitimate questioning about the inherent flaws of existing Western democracies—let alone those in transition (Hermet 1991). The emphasis on democratic pluralism by civil society advocates, without considering the geopolitical realities of developing countries, is another shortsighted position. According to one critic,

It is clear that the formal institutionalization of democracy-ritual elections or multi-partyism—does not equal democracy in its fullest sense. Too much focus on the formal elements might lead one to argue that the Philippines and Zaire, with their multi-party systems and parliaments, would be among the most democratic in the world. (The North-South Institute 1996:7)

The preceding review of divergent interpretations of civil society in Iran leads one to conclude that dividing existing political factions into “anti-reform conservatives” and “pro-reform liberals” is also too simplistic. For instance, Iran’s dependent position within a global division of labor inevitably forces all political factions to heed international pressure and support the reform initiatives. This clearly explains the so-called “hard-line conservative” government leadership’s implicit, and at times reluctant, support of most reform initiatives spearheaded by Khatami and his supporters. There are also no indications of the presence of any class-based conflicts in Iran, nor are there any discussions concerning their sudden disappearance from political debates by the civil society advocates. It seems as if all class-based differences have been miraculously resolved overnight, and the only obstacle to overcome is to tame the “uncivil” governments so that they can serve the faceless, classless, and yet highly politically active citizenry in a civilized manner.
NOTES

1. My argument in this section has benefited from Keane’s interesting discussion in a chapter titled “Uncivil Society” (1998:114-156).

2. See David Harvey’s path-breaking and interesting analysis (1989) on the issue of just-in-time flexible capitalist production, as well as a critique of postmodernism.

3. This postmodern reality clearly applies to the Iranian situation: domestic economic and political constraints have so-far kept the workers in Iran from having professional organizations and unions independent of the state. In addition, with marginal success, Iran has also had her share of export processing zones with the creation of the Kish and Qeshm Island facilities and the Port of Bushehr in 1993, all in the Persian Gulf. As one observer has noted, the zones have “sucked in more imports than they created exports and have been accused of becoming havens for smugglers and un-Iranian behavior between men and women” (Dinmore 2001).

4. Strikingly, this approach and interpretation closely relates to those of several Iranian intellectuals and activists in the Islamic Republic of Iran including Mohammad Khatami and Abdolkarim Soroosh, some of which shall be discussed in the next section.

5. As the latest political change in the Middle East, the referendum initiated by the ruling Amir in Bahrain and publicly supported in February 2001 calls for a partially elected parliament, an independent judiciary, a constitutional monarchy, and women’s right to vote.

6. As is explained in this report, “there is a general consensus that in order for any development effort to endure past the project period, the community must have the capacity to shape and continue the effort… There must be structure, both formal and informal, in which capacity is developed and democratic processes created, and so the interest has turned to the institutions of civil society” (The North-South Institute 1996:10-12).

7. See Foucault (1980:134-45) for a postmodern perspective on the issue of decentralization of power and decision-making.

8. As an exception to the rule, in response to the Iranian President’s “dialogue of civilizations” initiative, in 1999 the U.S. State Department announced that the USAID has funded nine American graduate students to study in Iran (Wright 1999).
This is a rejection of Ghani Nezhad’s model.

It is interesting to note that Amir Ahmadi’s definition of civil society is strikingly identical with that of the USAID (see Henry 1993), and his “three periods of transition” are clearly in line with EBRD’s agenda (see EBRD 1996).

Sponsored by the Heinrich Boll institute, the Berlin Conference organizers invited several active members of the reformist movement in Iran (including Ganji) and other prominent lawyers, writers, and intellectuals. Titled “Iran after Elections,” the conference organizers aimed at providing a forum to discuss the state of reforms after reformists’ landslide victory in the 6th Majlis elections in 2000. But members of Iranian opposition groups in exile effectively disrupted the conference.

For his often-controversial views on the state of politics and politicians in contemporary Iran, see Ganji (2000a and 2000b).

It is important to note that Soroosh is quick to mention that his “lawful society” is the one in which people willingly delegate certain people to act on their behalf. Using “prisons” as an example, he asserts that one can not take the orderly and “lawful” prison environment as an indication of the presence of a civil society (Soroosh 1998:123).

Installing electronic information systems has been a major component of USAID efforts to enhance existing “democratic” institutions. Similar to Soroosh, some advisers also urge aid agencies to promote Internet use. For example, in his recommendations to USAID, Henry (1997:178) suggests that the agency’s efforts should be directed toward helping Middle Eastern and North African countries increase exposure to the Internet, as “virtual communities could encourage democratic discourse.”

Apparently Khatami builds upon Samuel Huntington’s (1996) Thesis “The Clash of Civilizations.” In brief, Huntington argues that in the post-Cold War era the world politics is entering a new phase in which the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups representing six major but different civilizations. Aside from the Western civilization (Western Europe and North America), the Islamic civilization is a major force to contend with. According to this thesis, Western countries should “suspend their fruitless and dangerous efforts to spread their civilization to the rest of the world,” as well as “join forces to defend themselves against the challenges posed by other civilizations.” In particular, “Islamic civilization may pose a threat if intra-civilization-al conflicts continue to deepen and there is no core state to play an effective role
as mediator.” (cf. Sato 1997). Apparently adapting Huntington’s original thesis, Khatami accepts the existence of different civilizations, but transforms the confrontational nature of his thesis into a more benign and non-violent proposition of “dialogue of civilizations.”

This is in clear compliance with the World Bank, EBRD, and other donor agencies’ formulae of civil society.

Many consider Hajarian as being the mastermind and main intellectual force behind the second Khordad movement.

A clear sign of this “trilateral unity” was the resumption of the World Bank’s regular activities with Iran in 1990. In addition to conducting a major economic study in the early 1990s, the World Bank also approved six development projects during the 1990-93 period for a total amount of $847 million (World Bank 2000).

The reformist faction’s victory was based on a loose coalition of diverse groups and political interests. Nicknamed as the ‘dovvom-e Khordadi-ha’ (the second of Khordad group), referring to the day in which Khatami was elected as president by a landslide, the coalition includes Majma’-e Ruhaniyun-e Mobarez (Assembly of Militant Clerics), Khatt-e Emami-ha (Line of the Imam Khomeini Faction), Saseman-e Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Eslami (Organization of the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution), Kargozaran-e Saazandegi (Servants of Construction), several student organizations, as well as a number of pro-reform newspapers and publications.

On this issue, Ghani Nezhad, Amir Ahmadi, and Khatami have taken clear positions. However, I am making a deductive conclusion about Ganji, Hajjarian, and Soroosh, and take their lack of clarity on this question as their implicit acceptance of market economy as a prerequisite for having a civil society.

With some variation, this Habermasian approach that regards civil society as a “sphere” independent of that of state, is also a typical trademark of all interpretations adopted by donor agencies (see Habermas 1994).

See Mahdi (1998:128-38) for an interesting analysis of structural impediments for a civil society in Iran.

It is interesting to note that Mohammad Khatami’s landslide victory in the 1997 presidential elections was based on a “civil society” platform that emphasized human rights, political pluralism and tolerance of opposing views, citizen participation, and empowerment of NGOs.
Similar concerns are reflected in the writings of pro-reform journalists and activists. For example, Ganji (1998c:254-56) sees the government as a bulwark to the formation and growth of a free and independent public sphere (civil society). In his opinion, the increasing growth of professional associations and NGOs will lead to a grass-roots support for individual rights and in turn will help the citizens to curb government’s excessive power.

To be fair to the ongoing internal debate on this issue, political and economic decision-makers inside Iran are not always in agreement. For instance, during Khatami’s presidency, Hossein Namaazi (then Minister of Economics and Finance) and Mohsen Noorbakhsh (then the Central Bank Governor) disagree on currency exchange rate and taxation policies. The former favored Iran’s entry into the international monetary market as an equal partner, and lowering current interest rates on savings accounts (around 18 percent) to a level congruent with international standards; while the latter opposed both ideas arguing it will undermine people’s trust and destroy Iran’s internal economic strength (see Solh Joo 2000:4).

The main strategic flaw is his thesis of the “leading role of the proletariat” in using the civil society “sphere” to defeat the bourgeoisie. The realities of a post modern, late-capitalist production have effectively weakened the power of organized labor in the “core,” as well as dashed any hopes that working classes in the “periphery” can easily achieve any meaningful level of organizational unity and political power (see also Keane 1998:16).

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