Breakout Session 3:  
Civil Society, Public Sphere, Democracy

1) Bagher ASADI  
Challenges of the Civil Society in post-Revolutionary Iran: An Historical Overview

Abstract

Iran finds itself among the founding members of the human culture and civilization. Situated in a highly strategic and volatile area – the Greater Middle East and the Persian Gulf – it has undergone accelerated socio-political fermentation over the past century - since the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-06. In a span of eight decades the country has changed from a traditional despotic monarchical system to a constitutional monarchy (1906-1921), then to an autocratic monarchy under a new dynasty (1925-1941); it has experienced quasi-constitutional monarchy for a short period (1941-1953); then it was subjected to another 25 years of autocratic monarchy in the aftermath of the August 1953 coup; and finally in February 1979 it overthrew monarchy through a popular uprising and replaced it with a republic with an overarching Islamic ideology.

The continuum of socio-political change in Iran during this long period can be analyzed through the prism of civil society and its development. The history of modern civil society in Iran dates back to the days of the Constitutional Revolution. Its emergence, genesis and functioning in the Iranian society over the past one century – including the post-1979 period - can be viewed and analyzed with respect to the idiosyncratic nature of governance and politics in the country. Historically, the Iranian state has exhibited a certain unmistakable dominant trait, especially strong central governments. The Constitutional Revolution tried to make the government accountable and law-abiding, but the question of historic predominance of the state was simply not on the national agenda. As subsequent developments corroborated, the state retained its overarching preponderance and, in fact, claimed a stronger position and role in the country’s national life during the succeeding decades due, among other things, to the persisting and growing impact of the oil industry on the country’s economy and politics. While the role of oil revenues in the economy was rather modest during the reign of Reza Shah (1921-1941), it played an ever-increasing role in the post-1953 period. The August 1953 Anglo-American-engineered coup against the constitutional government of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh and restoration of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to the throne ushered in a period during which oil and its rising revenues came to shape the political and economic – and subsequently, the social – policies of the Iranian state, hence the formation of an oil-based Rentier state between 1953 and 1979.

The demise of the Pahlavi State in early 1979 led to the establishment of an ideological revolutionary regime with strong idealistic aspirations and slogans. The creation of an “oil-free economy” – a slogan dating back to the Mossadegh days – figured prominently among the early economic slogans of the Iranian revolutionaries. That slogan, however, soon lost its lustre in the midst of a wide range of daunting challenges faced by the new state. The Iraqi invasion in September 1980 encountered the country and the revolutionary regime with a politico-military crisis with tremendous economic implications – how to manage the post-revolutionary economic turmoil and simultaneously finance the war effort. Reliance on oil revenues for running the war economy became all but a fait accompli – hence, the perpetuation of the reliance of the state apparatus on oil. That state of reliance – and the attendant “Rentier” characteristic – remained in force in the years that followed. The wide range of economic policies adopted and implemented by the state and various administrations since the end of the War in 1988 have hardly been able to lessen the extent and degree of reliance on the oil, and subsequently, oil and gas sector.

The present paper intends to look into the state and challenges of Iranian civil society in the post-1979 period. The central thesis of the paper is that the socio-political circumstances and factors affecting the formation and development of modern civil society in Iran, during the past one hundred years, have
The state, in its intrinsic traditional predisposition to domination of all spheres of national life, has in general shown little inclination towards allowing civil society to prosper and develop into an active, robust, dynamic component in the national life. Such overt disinclination, bordering on open hostility and actual suppression during periods of dictatorship and authoritarian rule, has left civil society proper in a generally weak, fragile, and vulnerable state. The short periods of sudden blossoming of civil society activity in Iran have been short-lived and ill-fated. In a nutshell, civil society has failed to develop into an institutionalized, permanent and immutable feature of the Iranian society – thus far.

The paper will argue that in the context of the historical preponderance of the state, and the corollary weakness of civil society, including a weak and marginal (economic) private sector, the formation and perpetuation of the Rentier state in Iran since the discovery of oil in the country (1908) and particularly in the post-1953 period, has served to buttress the state -- Pahlavi State between 1953 and 1979, and the Islamic Republic since 1979 -- to the clear detriment of civil society and its components. The systematic and unmistakable opposition of the state/ruling establishment – both prior to 1979 under the Shah and after 1979 under the Islamic Republic – to the formation of independent political parties, formations or organizations, provides a clear example in this regard.

The paper, drawing upon the above reasons and factors accounting for the historical failure of civil society in Iran, will endeavour to posit that prospects for the future of Iranian civil society will move in tandem with the prospects for the overall change in the society and its institutions - both public and private - in the direction of developing a more pluralistic, representative, accountable governance. This will, in turn, need the requisite element of positive, proactive change in the society’s political culture – itself a function of and contingent on the conducive mutually-reinforcing functioning of the wide range of institutions in the society.

The paper will consist of the following sections: introduction; a brief overview of the early genesis during the Constitutional Revolution; state of civil society under the Pahlavi state (1921-1979); role of civil society in the popular movement leading to the February 1979 Revolution; the civil society-State relations since 1979; and concluding remarks – prospects for the future.

**Biography**

(Mr.) Bagher Asadi (ambassador), is currently serving as Senior Expert at the International Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, Iran. Born in 1951, he holds B.A and M.A. Degrees in Economics. A career diplomat since 1984, he has served in a number of positions at the Foreign Ministry, and has been posted abroad as the Charge d'affaires at the Geneva Mission (1988-90) and as the ECOSOC Ambassador at the New York Mission (December 1996-January 2002). While posted in New York, he held a number of intergovernmental positions and led a number of intergovernmental negotiating processes. He was the Chairman of the Group of 77 in 2001. He received the Elizabeth Haub Award for Environmental Diplomacy for the Year 2001. He also served on the Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons on the United Nations-Civil Society Relations (2003-04). Since 2002 he has served as the Special Invitee of the Board of the South Centre - a developing countries think tank based in Geneva. Most recently, He served as Chairman of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) for the years 2007-8.

2) Dariush BORBOR
End of Colonialism, Beginning Of Democracy
Abstract

Although Iran has never been a colony in the real sense, it has been subjected to intense social, political, economic and technological colonial pressures in the past one and a half centuries, first by Britain and Russia and since the Second World War by the United States of America.

In the same period, Iran has championed the fight against colonial rule and dictatorship in the region with consequential results in many other countries and movements, such as the 1908 re-institution of parliament in the Ottoman Empire, the 1911 Chinese Revolution and the 1917 uprising in the Tsarist Russia.  

The combination of colonial and autocratic rule in Iran has given rise to a number of passionate popular responses, including the Reuter unrest (1872), the Tobacco uprising (1891-92), the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), the Oil Nationalization (1949-53), the Islamic Revolution (1979-89) and the ongoing Atomic controversy (2002-) – all with strong undercurrents of anti-colonial reaction.

Each and every attempt by the Iranians to stave the yoke of colonialism or dictatorship has been encountered by tough foreign or internal encounter and consequent nationwide privation and suffering of the people.

The policy of the dictators (be it the Qājārs or the Pahlavi’s) and the colonial powers coincided in disregarding the will of the people – it is quite understandable therefore for the reformists to have encountered confrontation in two fronts.

In the absence of popular political institutions in Iran, the only establishment to which the popular movements could turn to for support were the clerics and the religious organizations. The common denominator of the “populist-religious” formula will remain the same until the appearance of strong political parties.

A great contradiction of all this has been in the fact that although some religious leaders have been supportive of change, uprising or revolution, the end-result of the popular movements they supported have always reversed to the advantage of the conservative elements. The reason being that while the clerics may promote reform or revolution in opposition, when in power they are handicapped by an inborn non-reformist nature on the one hand and conservative religious consternations on the other.

Although the result of each of the above mentioned movements might appear as non-productive and even negative, the sum total of all have been positive.

Our intention is to argue and illustrate that the most important achievements of the Revolution and thirty years of the Islamic Republic’s governance may be summarized in the following major venues:

1. The dismantling of the colonialist rule in Iran (possibly forever), in spite of the inevitable political isolation and negative consequences.
2. The establishment of self-confidence and self-reliance which has led to the development of its domestic resources more fully, including agriculture, industry, technology generally and nuclear in particular.

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3. Paradoxically, in spite of many policy inconsistencies and religious hurdles, Iran has taken great strides in the participation of women in all levels of the society, also in education with a near total eradication of illiteracy among the 15-25 age groups, which has led to another important phenomenon, and that is a sharp decrease in annual population growth to a figure below 0.9 %.

4. The transcendence of Iran to a regional power, in spite of political and economic mismanagement, imposition of sanctions and the international isolation.

5. Improvements in a number of democratic institutions and processes, including more active village and town councils, more assertive parliament, and more open and critical media, in spite of the widespread negative intrusions of the radical elements.

**Biography**

Dariush Borbor is an architect, urban planner and Iranist. He is a researcher on Iranian affairs, including, architecture, urban planning, history and linguistics, and a frequent contributor to scholarly publications which include *The Architectural Review*, *The Architects’ Journal*, *The Contemporary Architecture*, *The Iran and the Caucasus* and *The Encyclopedia of Urban Planning*. He is presently engaged on two monographs — *A Computer Aided Comparative Etymological Dictionary of Reduplication in Arabic, Armenian, Balochi, Brahui, Kurdish, Mandaic, Persian, Syriac and Turkish: with Synonyms, Equivalents, Cognates and Quotations* and *Borbor Tribe: Origins, Age, Ethno-Linguistic Characteristics*.

3) Mohammadreza KOLahi and Saeedeh ALLAHDADI

**Application of the concept of "Public sphere" in Iran**

**Abstract**

Growing capitalism in European countries led to raise a new social class which has the ability to struggle for achieving independency from church and state.

"Word" was the main struggle tool for this class. In that way, this class maintained freedom of speech, equality and parliamentary reforms. These kinds of protections shaped an area which is independent from the traditional sources of power. Habermas named it as "Public Sphere".

Public sphere as Habermas defines, is free of power area, equally available for everyone, a place for dialogue which is based on logic and reason. Participants always are ready to accept possibility of error. Choose of topics is free and dialogues are directed to criticizing state.

Therefore "public sphere" gets its meaning through contrast between Bourgeoisie and Feudal classes in 18th century. In such a sphere, a critique of the state is not equal to the critiques of a management system but a class.

Iran is an unstructured society where social classes (as European's) have not formed.

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8 Borbor, op.cit., 10.2, pp 284-86.
Both agriculture and trade have been simultaneously active in Iranian society but not in the conflicting structures of "Bourgeoisie – Feudal" as in the European society happened. Therefore trade and exchange relations didn't end to values as equality and liberty in Iran.

However, fighting for liberty and equality has had some examples in Iranian history (such as Constitutional Movement) but has not been based on class struggles. 1979 revolution in Iran was the consequence of the attempts of a class (not in the European meaning) which although their economic relations were based on exchange and trade, but their cultural values were taken from traditions of Islam and Shia. Such values were completely particular and resist against figuration of universal values such as liberty and equality. So, this kind of class doesn't support the concept of Habermas' public sphere. Habermas' public sphere just realize in the presence of capitalism and Bourgeoisie class. But after revolution, this class hasn't still formed because of slow process in privatization.

**Keywords**
Public sphere, social class, Bourgeoisie

**Biography**