

# THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAN: RETROSPECT AFTER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT** During the last quarter of a century, Iran has undergone fundamental changes. The revolution was supported by a heterogeneous coalition of social forces, but it led to a war with Iraq and the stabilization of an Islamic regime. Since the end of the 1980s, four different types of new social actors have emerged in Iran: post-Islamist intellectuals; feminists; students as a non-revolutionary, reformist and democratically minded group; and ethnic movements. These actors mostly (with the exception of some intellectuals) belong to a generation which did not take part in the revolution; their aspirations and demands are totally different from those most characteristic of the revolutionary phase. The election of President Khatami in 1997 was a result of these changes. Since then, a stalemate has prevailed: the society is post-Islamist, whereas the decisive power centres are controlled by Islamist conservatives.

**KEYWORDS** ethnic movement • Islam • post-Islamist intellectual • student movement • women's movement

## INTRODUCTION

The Iranian revolution of 1979 overthrew a modernizing monarchy which had since the 1920s changed the face of Iran through authoritarian policies. The Pahlavi regime was brought down not so much by a homogeneous movement in which the goals and the means to achieve them would have been clear from the beginning, but by a heterogeneous group of social actors ranging from the traditionalist bazaar people and a radicalized clergy under the leadership of the Ayatollah Khomeini, to the young people in the

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cities who had gone through a long process of modernization within the school and university system set up by the Pahlavi regime, and the various leftist forces (including communist and other Marxist groups) that rejected a government seen as the 'lackey of imperialism'. The aim of the revolution was summarized by a slogan chanted in the streets of the main cities by the demonstrators: 'Independence, Liberty, Islamic Republic'. None of these ideals was clearly identified or contextualized. The different groups that took part in the revolution had different interpretations of these central themes. The only common feature that bound them together was the charismatic figure of Khomeini. On the other hand, the Iranian revolution was one of the last upheavals within a bipolar international system in which the Soviet system and the Western liberal system opposed each other and affected, through their interaction, political movements throughout the world, especially in the sensitive frontier areas of their respective zones of influence. Iran, as a country situated on the southern frontier of the former Soviet Union, was of major importance to the Americans and everything was done to prevent its becoming a Soviet satellite during the Cold War and after. That is why the deep discontent of the major part of Iranian society during the last years of the Pahlavi regime was ignored or dismissed by the West. The Western powers persisted in unwavering support for the shah who was supposed to embody opposition to the Soviets on a long border of some 1500 km.

The most active force of the revolution was the youth in the large cities and in those parts of Iran which had undergone modernization, like the Isfahan region (south) or Azerbaijan (northwest) and Tehran (north); this force was weaker in those parts of Iran that were largely untouched by the modernizing process, like the Kirman (south) or Belouchistan (southeast). On the other hand, the capital Tehran, and even more Tabriz (north east of Tehran) and the religious city of Qum (some 100 km to the south of Tehran), played a major role in the symbolic and material mobilization of the population. The capital – previously a small city, much less influential than Tabriz – had been made the political as well as economic and cultural centre of the country by the Pahlavis in the 1920s.

The revolution was deeply influenced by the modern media: the cassettes of speeches by Imam Khomeini circulated widely from home to home and were distributed and reproduced by people throughout the country. The BBC as an international radio chain also played a seminal role in informing the population in different parts of Iran during the revolution. On the whole, the revolutionary movement was a highly unexpected event which swept through Iran in less than a year and overthrew the shah's regime, considered by the West as the most stable in the Middle East. The social actors who took part in the Islamic revolution were not democratically minded. They were mostly influenced by radical movements in the Islamic world: the Fedayin Islam (the Shi'i counterpart of the Muslim Brotherhood); the Mojahedeen Khalq (the mixture of Marxism and Islam propagated by disciples of Shariati,

the most important Iranian representative of the 'Third Worldism' of the 1960s and 1970s); and in part by the leftist movements of that time (communist movements as well as the guerrillas of South America).

The majority of the population was emerging from a rural, tribal or ethnic background and had little knowledge of democracy. The agrarian reform of the first half of the 1960s had totally destabilized the balance between the rural and urban zones, and the elimination of the large land-owners, whose political influence was destroyed by the shah through the redistribution of land to the peasants, had opened the way to the arbitrary and totally autocratic regime of the shah which was no longer faced with any countervailing power. The mass of the non-landowning peasants (the so-called *khosh neshin*) who fled to the towns and cities was marked by a deep resentment towards the shah, who had made their economic existence impossible in the rural zones. (Before the agrarian reform, they worked within the close-knit village communities; after it, the individualization of the parcels made it impossible for them to survive anymore in the village, and they migrated to the cities, to be treated as underdogs in menial and totally unstable jobs.) Different social groups came to share an attitude of radical rejection towards the shah, and this antagonistic attitude was the only common ground for the different actors who took part in the revolution.

### **THE REVOLUTION AND ITS AFTERMATH**

The revolution destabilized a whole complex of power structures within Iran. Its main feature was, at the beginning, the revival of ethnic claims in those parts of Iran where autonomist movements had been active, such as the Kurdish regions in the west and some Arab movements in the south of the country. These movements were crushed by the central power in the first months of the revolution, with the help of the still largely intact army which was the legacy of the shah. The leftist movements (especially the Mojahedeen of the People movement) were also put down after the clashes with the new revolutionary regime. The weak and inarticulated movement for democracy represented by the remnants of the National Front (a movement going back to the 1950s, originally led by Mossadegh, which advocated democratic rule within an Islamic society) was also neutralized by the revolutionary regime after its principal actor, Mehdi Bazargan, was forced to give up his premiership some eight months after he was appointed by Khomeini (see Abrahamian, 1982; Khosrokhava, 1993, 1997). The competition for power among the revolutionary groups made it impossible to stabilize a situation in which democratic claims to power could have been articulated. The revolution itself created an 'effervescent' atmosphere which contributed, in turn, to strengthening the 'charismatic' figure of Khomeini as the only legitimate power holder in the political system. The destabilization of the region after the overthrow of the imperial regime in Iran had two consequences: one was the attack on

Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, the other was the attack on Iran by the Saddam regime in Iraq. Had the shah's regime not been deposed by the revolutionaries, those two events would have been highly improbable.

The long war set off by the Iraqi invasion of Iran (1980–88) brought a series of unintended consequences. First of all, it strengthened the revolutionary regime by uniting Iranian society around it; the invasion was seen as an external threat to a vital region (Khouzistan in the southwest of Iran, where the oil reserves are). The Iraqi army faced the Iranian one, disorganized by the revolution; many of its hierarchy had either fled the country or been jailed or executed. The national response was reinforced by a religious one: in the eyes of many Iranians Saddam Hussein was fighting Islam at the behest of the Western powers. He was considered to be not only a national enemy but also a religious one, instrumentalized by the West to bring down the Islamic revolution. The 'nationalist reflex' and the religious feeling of threat by the West through the Iraqi intervention in Iran made it much easier for the revolutionary regime to repress all the movements against the hegemony of the new power structure embodied by Khomeini and the informal group called the Hezbollah. The latter was made up of revolutionary youth and the 'lumpen' people of the cities who intervened to crush any opposition to the new regime in the name of Islam and the emergency situation created by the war.

On the whole, the war – much in the same way as the French revolution – strengthened the revolutionary grip on the state and opened up the way for the repression of the opposition (be it from the left or from the Islamic moderates). The war put the economy under strain: production was disrupted by the departure of engineers and technicians, and the organization of the industrial system by mismanagement and lack of resources after the revolution. The war initiated by Iraq caused the deaths of many hundred thousands, and it led to mass mobilization of youth for the defense of the 'Islamic home'. During the war a new kind of revolutionary actor emerged who would have a very significant role in the future within Islamic societies in acute crisis: the seminal figure of the martyr.

In the Islamic world in general and most particularly in the Shi'ite one, martyrdom (*shahadat*) played a very important role in Islam, often in close connection with the notion of holy war (*jihad*). But the martyr was, up to the 19th century, an exceptional figure, a role almost entirely reserved for revered people, saints (the so-called Imam in the Shiite tradition, the descendants of the Prophet via his son-in-law and cousin Ali or those who accepted death in their service). With the advent of Western imperialism, the ideas of *jihad* and martyrdom were revived against the invaders (for instance against the French army in Algeria by Emir Abdelkader; see Peters, 1979), but until the Iranian revolution of 1979 and especially the war with Iraq in 1980, martyrdom had never been such a widespread social and symbolic phenomenon in the Muslim world. The war against Iraq was led mainly by the Bassiji (the young

volunteers who fought in the Pasdaran army) who were used as cannon fodder by the military. Many thousands died as martyrs, and this large scale martyrdom was the beginning of a process which was to have a very important sequel in the 1990s and later in many regions of the Islamic world, in particular in the Palestinian territories, in the Kashmir and in parts of Muslim Africa.

The idea of martyrdom was also taken up by the Al-Qaeda organization and used to promote an all-out war against the West. In all these parts of the world martyrdom – first experienced on a large scale as a mass phenomenon by many young people of the modernized new generation in the struggle against the shah and then against the Iraqi army – became a defining feature of a new type of actor who accepted the validity of dying for a holy cause in the name of a militant version of Islam. The martyr, as a main figure of Islamic youth, believed that dying for the holy cause of Islam was part of a religious struggle against injustice (see Khosrokhavar, 1995, 2002). During most of the war against Iraq, the Bassij martyrs – inspired by devotion to the charismatic figure of Khomeini – defended Iran and pushed back the much better organized army of Saddam Hussein. This somber figure of the revolutionary, motivated by the lofty ideals of Islam, did not last more than a few years, but during that time, within Iranian society and in the war zones, many were led to sacrifice their lives for the holy cause of Islam in Iran.

This new figure of revolutionary youth was doomed to gradually disappear, first and foremost with the decline of the effervescent atmosphere prevailing in the revolutionary ranks on the eve of the revolution, then, as a result of the protracted war, and finally with the death of Khomeini – the main protagonist of the revolutionary movement – in 1989. The new Leader of the revolution, Khamenei, did not have the charisma of Khomeini, and during his rule Iranian society changed in many ways. The main break with the revolutionary ideology (although not with the Islamic framework) happened in the second half of the 1990s, with the election of Khatami as the President of the Iranian Republic. He took office in 1997, and this created a new momentum within Iran. New forces, contesting the legitimacy of the old hierarchs, were unleashed in the political arena. The Islamic regime, a theocracy with a tinge of populism under Khomeini, had been gradually transformed into a new oligarchy in which a few central institutions dominated the political apparatus. As for political divisions, the so-called Islamic Left was dominated by the Mujahideen of the Islamic People (not to be confused with the Mujahedeen Khalq, in rupture with the Islamic regime); prominent among their leaders were political figures like Musawi (Prime Minister) and Nabavi (Minister of Industry). The clergy was divided into two main political groups, the Group of the Combatant Clergymen (*Ruhaniyoun e mobares: Left*) and the Group of the Combatant Clergy (*Ruhaniyat e mobarez: Right*). But the political system was, on the whole, without any firm structuring and was not rooted in real society where patron/client relationships were still prevalent.

In the 1990s, with the growth of a new generation which did not take part in the revolution, more fundamental changes began to unfold within the Iranian polity. This new generation, which was on average much better educated than the previous one, was no longer moved by any lofty revolutionary ideology. Its main concerns were personal accomplishments and personal freedom in the most concrete sense of the word: freedom to live one's life without undue restrictions of the Islamic law, to have formal relations with the opposite sex without the interference of the Islamic guards in the city, the longing for a society where morality would no longer be defined in opposition to the ideals of self-realization and self-assertion, the urge to consume without guilt, the urge to put an end to any holistic ideology.

Last but not least, the new generation demanded the end of the charismatic regime set up by Khomeini and its replacement by a new one in which political leadership would no longer mean total subservience to the ideas of the Leader. Khatami, the new president of the republic, did not propose a clean-cut alternative to Khomeini's state, but his policies opened up a new era of cultural democracy in which all those underlying ideas that legitimized Khomeini's transcendent figure were put into question. Khomeini embodied the uncontested charisma of a great father figure. He was symbolically at the same time the holy man and the orthodox authoritative scholar. In other words, he united in himself two divergent figures of the Islamic cultural elite – the guardian of sacred law and the charismatic mystic. Khatami is, on the contrary, the Brother who is praised as much as criticized in an egalitarian fashion. In his case, the charisma has never been transcendent, but immanent. During his first mandate, some opening up of the Islamic regime was achieved, against the wishes of the conservative powerholders. The new generation could no longer identify with rigid religious figures. The dismaying experience of politicizing religion during the last decade was more and more being put into question by Islamic intellectuals and artists, many of whom had been Islamic radicals during the heroic period of the revolution (for example Makhmalbaf, a film director who rejected Islamic radicalism after 1990). Culture became very important as a new field in which intellectuals could try to question the rigid definition of revolutionary Islam.

### **THE NEW SOCIAL ACTORS**

The four types of new actors who emerged in the 1990s did not come into prominence at the same time. Intellectuals, women and students asserted their presence almost simultaneously, at the beginning of the 1990s. The ethnic actors manifested themselves much later, almost a decade later. The revolutionary government gradually extended the educational facilities to many rural zones, as well as tribal ones. Electricity and telephones became available in remote parts of the country. Roads connected towns and villages, often for military reasons during the war with Iraq. The newly founded Azad

University, semi-private, set up branches in many small towns, and although the quality of its teaching was lower than at the state universities, it enabled many young people in those areas to gain access to culture and science, much in the same way as many low level colleges in the United States. In this process the number of pupils increased at a high rate<sup>1</sup> and girls went to school, even in traditional zones like the religious city of Qom, and in those rural areas where, before the Islamic revolution, they were not allowed to go to school, their parents refusing to let them go lest they would become depraved by the non-religious Pahlavi institution.<sup>2</sup> With the Islamic regime, some of those fears became groundless, the more so as the scarf became compulsory and the segregation of girls and boys neutralized the fear of promiscuity between males and females within the school.

The results of the new policies became obvious after two decades: A high proportion of the young population, boys and girls, had gone to school, the rate of illiteracy was much lower than before (see Khosrokhavar and Roy, 1999) and in cities the girls could claim the same results as boys, in many cases surpassing them, as was the case in the entrance examinations to the state university where the number of girls admitted has – during the last five years – been higher than the number of boys. The access to higher education for the younger generation (more than a million and a half go to the university) has radically changed their views. In terms of secularization, they have changed tremendously. The concern for personal freedom in daily life has become paramount. The feeling of injustice because of unequal treatment of girls and boys is acutely shared by the new generation of girls, who are more and more suspicious of the so-called Islamic rules.<sup>3</sup> The revolutionary intolerance and the utopian way of building up the world are discredited by the younger generation, who are confronted with the scarcity of goods and the lack of access to modern life. The logic of conviction has given way to the clientelism of the new ruling elite whose members ‘buy’ allegiance through financial means rather than the dedication of their followers.

In this situation, the students began during the 1990s to demand the democratization of political life. They have been at the root of new social movements which do not demand the utopian world of a classless society as was the case in the 1970s, under the influence of leftist ideals. They do not ask for the Islamization of society as the activists of the 1980s did, under the influence of Khomeini. The new mottos are freedom of speech and political freedom, and this has been the major claim of a students’ association, the Bureau for the Reinforcement of Unity (*daftar tabkim vahdat*), which changed radically in the 1990s. From a radical Islamist association, it changed into one with democratic motives. In the summer of 1999, the students’ movement was crushed by the paramilitary groups of the Islamic regime, but they did not disappear from the scene, and they are still defending political rights in a society where the major institutions are in the hands of the conservative forces. For the first time in the last 80 years, since the foundation

of Tehran University in the late 1920s, the students have supported the demand for democracy in a massive way.

The women's movement is partly the result of the modernization of girls through their access to modern education. But its leaders are predominantly women in their 50s, with a middle class background, who were educated during the shah's rule, like Shirin Ebadi and Mehranguiz Kar (see Ebadi, 1994–5; Kar, 1997). This movement has had a large influence not so much in political terms, but in cultural ones: it opened up many jobs in new fields for women, like journalism, theatre, movies, writing, and in those areas which were exclusively male like engineering and related professions. Iran is a society in which women's rights are inferior to those of men as defined in Islamic terms, but in the economic and cultural domains women have changed the concrete situation by breaking down old barriers and putting into question the male rights of exclusivity outside the confined space of the home. This conquest has been gradual but irreversible, and although the old patterns of inferiority still prevail in many parts of society, the presence of women in daily life outside their homes has changed the behaviour patterns and defeated the plans of the conservative clergymen to put women back in their traditional and 'natural' places, mainly their homes. The patriarchal rules still have the upper hand in the judiciary domain, but in daily life, particularly in the cities, women's presence is now an irreversible phenomenon. This situation has gone hand in hand with a deep sentiment of social injustice on their part (see Afkhami and Friedl, 1994; Chafiq and Khosrokhavar, 1995; d'Hellencourt, 1998).

The intellectuals have, during the last decade, played a major part in opening up the cultural domains of Iranian society. The major push towards modernization has come mainly from the religious intellectuals. They have proposed new readings of religion by reinterpreting the origin of Islamic laws or by revisiting the mystical tradition of Islam (Sufism), and by adapting it to the new cultural setting. These two major trends (the reinterpretation of the *fiqh*, Islamic law, and the new hermeneutics of Islamic mysticism) have been promoted by some major intellectuals, among them Abdolkarim Soroush, Mojtahed Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi Eshkavari, most of whom are clergymen or from a clerical background.

A phenomenon known from other historical settings keeps repeating itself: in the same way as those educated in Jesuit colleges turned against the official version of religion during the French revolution, writers like Kadivar, Eshkavari, Shabestari and even Malekian have been vocal in denouncing the 'ideologized' religion and its weaknesses. The Islamic radicalism of the 1970s and 1980s has been called into question by the new religious interpretation of the *sharia* and by laying the foundations of a new interpretation of the religion, through which the latter cuts its ties with politics and returns back to its solely spiritual calling. This movement, as has been said, has found expression in two distinct currents. The first promotes a new interpretation



of *fiqh* by showing that the keystone of the Islamic theocracy, namely the *Velayat Faqih* or the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, is based on shaky theological grounds. The notion was used by Ayatollah Khomeini as the Islamic principle legitimizing power in the hands of an Islamic ruler who should be competent in Islamic jurisprudence and at the same time well versed in worldly affairs. This seminal notion makes the Leader the supreme commander in a society where faith defines the major patterns of conduct among the Muslim community. The people vote for a parliament and the head of the executive, the president of the republic, but in this 'imperfect democracy', the last word is with the Leader, who is divinely ordained and whose sentence in the name of Islam transcends the popular vote. Mohsen Kadivar argued that the *Velayat Faqih* was not on firm ground in reference to the traditional sources (*hadith*) and that within this religious tradition the main reference has not been to politics, but only to the judiciary. The clergyman Mohsen Saeedzadeh asserted that the *fiqh*, with its assertions about the private rights of men and women, was not a divinely ordained set of laws, but a historical achievement and, as such, it could not lay claim to sanctity. In this way, the *fiqh* could change through the *ijma'* (the collective dialogue and consensus of the ulama), and nothing in it could be called sacred. Thus he opened the way for full equality of men and women.

Saeedzadeh, Kadivar and many other Islamic intellectuals have been sentenced to prison terms, and Saeedzadeh has been denied the right to wear the clergymen's dress. The same thing happened with Eshkavari, who took part in a conference organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin in 2000, where Iranian intellectuals were invited to discuss Islam, freedom and religion (several participants were severely punished). Eshkavari contested the sanctity of the rules governing the situation of apostasy (*ertedad*, with the death sentence as a result) or many other traditional Islamic norms. On the whole, the battle for opening up Islam to pluralism and putting into question the traditional *fiqh* has been a movement as much within the clergy as without it. The dynamics of conflict do not oppose a unified clergy to the other intellectuals, but many clergymen to those who rule in the name of Islam. Those who are being condemned to prison cannot be treated by the ruling religious authorities as 'Westernized' people who are external to the Islamic world, since they are the very product of the Islamic schools and civilization. Their opposition to the dominant power opens up new dynamics within the religious institution and contributes to its diversification. Secularization happens in this way not only outside the religious institutions (as is the case with most of the younger generation) but also within them, among those who are supposed to preserve religion from the nefarious influence of the outside world.

The other way of secularizing Islam is through the reinterpretation of Sufism, the Islamic tradition of mysticism. Soroush and Eshkavari put forward a modernized version of the deviant tradition of Sufism within Islam,

characterized by internalizing Islam as a spiritual faith and rejecting its involvement in politics and worldly affairs. The religion confined to the realm of the spiritual life is revisited by reference to the major works of Mowlana and Hafiz, among others. This trend is less critical of the Islamic *fiqh* than of the foundations upon which the 'ideologization' of religion has been based. The mixing up of religion and worldly affairs is denounced as an undue extension of religion to the realm of the outer world (*zaber*) in which spirituality founders. The longing for a religion unified with politics in a grandiose project of creating a virtuous society marked by equality and authenticity – as dreamt of by Shariati and, in a different way, Khomeini – has been challenged by these new intellectuals, who consider the extension of the religious realm into politics as an illegitimate act with detrimental results for religion. This opens up the way for the dissociation of Islam from political power.

While the momentum gained in intellectual life is most conspicuous in the religious field, the other major cultural figures who have contributed to the opening of society are of secular background. Iranian cinema, theatre, painting, novel writing and poetry are dominated by people who define their field in a radically non-religious way. The themes of Iranian cinema, which has won many prizes in festivals in Europe, are by no means religious. Even when religious subjects or people are shown on the screen, they are motivated by non-religious goals. On the whole, there are two sides to Iranian society: the philosophical and theological hermeneutics are rooted in Islam and more particularly in Shiism, whereas other cultural fields are almost exclusively dominated by non-Islamic subjects and themes. Islamic thought itself is in constant interaction with secular currents through the numerous translations of major contemporary Western philosophical and sociological figures like Habermas, Derrida, Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Heidegger and many others. In a way, reference to these thinkers is as important as to the Islamic forefathers.

The Islamic intellectuals and artists have played a major role in opening the cultural world to modernity. They have brought new ideas into Iranian society and undermined the sacred foundations of the legitimacy of Islamic theocracy in Iran. Their major contribution is, on the side of the Islamic intellectuals, to secularize religion and to widen the scope of human intervention by questioning the claims of the conservatives to represent an intangible political order ordained by God. The artists and the secular intellectuals have shown the way to a society where religion is an activity among others and cannot claim any supremacy over other kinds of activity. Particularly Iranian cinema has brought into the open the secular, non-religious side to Iranian life in its stories, mostly based on scenes of daily life among ordinary people.

## THE ETHNIC ACTORS

Iran is a multiethnic country. During the whole process of despotic modernization of the country from the 1920s onward, the ethnic groups were oppressed in the name of national unity, embodied by a Jacobin state. Many ethnic groups are scattered all over Iran, the most important, numerically, being the Turks, who make up more than 40 per cent of the Iranian population; they are most numerous in the northwestern province of Azerbaijan, but many Turkish-speaking tribal people live in different parts of the country. The Kurds, who live mainly in the province of Kurdistan in western Iran have since, the beginning of the 20th century, been active in movements claiming autonomy and sometimes even independence. During the Pahlavi regime, they were repressed by the state. At the beginning of the Islamic revolution they claimed autonomy, as did some Arabic-speaking people in southern Iran, but their movement was once again crushed by the revolutionary central government. It was not until the election of Khatami in 1997 that their movement could claim legitimacy within the institutional framework of Islamic government.

Two new types of mobilization are now visible among the ethnic groups in Iran. The first one is classic: in the ethnic regions, people have used the new liberty promoted by Khatami's reformist movement to support him, and in exchange have asked for public recognition of their linguistic and – more broadly – cultural specificity. In this movement, the Kurds, the Arabs and the Turks are at the forefront.

A second type of mobilization has taken shape in Tehran during the last decade. The Kurds, the Turks, the Arabs and even some other ethnic groups like the Belouchis (in the southeast) have tried to understand each others' problems and establish relations among themselves, so that their demands might gain a new impetus through their joint efforts. In Tehran, the Khatami government opened the so-called 'house of the ethnic groups' (*khane ye aqvam*) in the summer of 2002; within this framework, authorized ethnic associations discuss their problems with the government authorities. In this way, they also find opportunities to talk to each other and discuss their claims, based on articles 15 and 19 of the Constitution, which recognize the linguistic and institutional autonomy of the ethnic regions. These articles have been systematically ignored by successive governments since the Islamic revolution. With the advent of Khatami, these claims have gained momentum and some legitimacy because they are defended by those groups who support Khatami's reformist government against the conservatives. A major change has taken place as well among the new actors who form the 'ethnic groups staying in the Centre (Capital)' (*jam'iyat haye moqem e markaz*) or the 'institutes of ethnic research' (*anstitu haye tabqeeqati ye aqvam*), with the conditional and reluctant approval of the government (although in some cases they meet with blunt refusal).

The new ethnic actors have mastered the Persian language and the manners of the people of the capital.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to their brothers in the provinces, they have acquired the culture of the 'Persians' and are bicultural. They are aware of the intricacy of the capital's politics and the cultural features of the 'Persians', and so they can play on both grounds, their ethnic culture and the national one. Students of ethnic origin in the main Iranian cities, particularly in Tehran, also play a gradually more and more important role in making ethnic groups conscious of their specificity. They create student newspapers which are bilingual – Turkish and Persian or Kurdish and Persian – and they put their demands for cultural autonomy in both languages. The more they acquire 'Persian' culture, the more acutely they become conscious of their own peculiarity. In this way, the gap widens between them and the traditional ethnic leaders in their province. These new groups have a twofold aim: they try to replace the traditional elites who do not understand what is going on in the capital and, more generally, on the Iranian side; they also compete with radicalized actors whose claim for independence curbs the more reasonable demands for cultural and political autonomy. They have had some minor successes: in some cases, their demand for local governors with ethnic backgrounds has been satisfied by the central government (like the governor in Belouchistan or in Kurdistan in western Iran). In the same fashion, their demands for some teaching of their native languages in school have in part been met; the same applies to publication of media in their own language. Cultural exhibitions in Tehran and in the provinces about the customs and traditions of the regions have been permitted.

Many political tendencies are visible among these new ethnic actors in Iran. Some make radical demands: political autonomy, ending up with independence. Many others ask for a federal system in which they would have a say within their region. Some ask for more autonomy within the prevailing polity. The bilingual daily paper *Mahd e azadi* (The Birthplace of Freedom) defends the idea of a federal political system in Iran. Some ethnic actors have deliberately opted for emigration to the West. Among them, the *Tabrir* party (Liberty) or the *Nebzat arabi* (The Arab Movement) have chosen the United States as the place of their activity and ask for independence. The Arabic daily newspaper *Sowt ol shaab* (The Voice of the People) is published in Iran and has a moderate political stance. A voluntary association, The Iranian Graduates of Arabic Culture, provides ideological and written material for it.

One of the factors making life more difficult for the ethnic movement in Iran was the attack on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. The Iranian government has, since then, adopted a less conciliatory attitude towards any movement considered as a centrifugal one. The ethnic actors, on the contrary, believe that they can ask for more in exchange for their loyalty.

One fact remains irreversible: Iran can no longer ignore the ethnic diversity of its citizens, and any movement towards the democratization of the country has to cope with these groups of people who will no longer put up with repression by a central government in the name of national unity.

### **THE NEW CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE DIVIDED STATE**

The new generation in Iran is marked by scepticism in regard to the revolutionary and utopian slogans, as a result of two decades of revolution and war. Ideology is increasingly rejected, and a new attitude is developing among the second and third generation after the revolution, asking for more concrete freedom in daily life, less ideology and more social and economic development. Up to now, culture has been the main battleground for the new social actors, claiming emancipation from rigid and ideologized religion and promoting this demand as the main topic of the social debate. The idea of civil society and of individual and spiritual religion, in contrast to the politicized and ideologized Islam of the revolutionary period, has been gaining ground in Iranian society. Many intellectuals, secular like Hossein Bashiriyeh (see Bashiriyeh, 2002–3) or Islamic like Mojtabeh Shabestari, Abdelkarim Soroush or Mostafa Malekian, have promoted the idea of a society where religion should be confined to the spiritual realm, leaving the social and political one to themselves. This view of a voluntary withdrawal of religion from the political scene is the result of a new hermeneutics in which the absolute realm (the spiritual) resists alignment with the conflict-ridden political sphere, in order to preserve its own purity and sanctity.<sup>5</sup> This trend scored a notable success with the election of Khatami as president of the republic in 1997. But the slow pace of reforms since then and the fierce opposition of the conservatives to the reform movement have disappointed many, particularly the students and the new social groups claiming more freedom, less clientelism and corruption, and a more transparent civil society.

The state has been divided. The reformists hold elected offices: the presidency, a large majority in Parliament, and the absolute majority in major municipalities. But their power is very limited vis-à-vis the decisive power centres, which are largely independent of the people's vote: the Council of the Guardians (*shouraye negabban*) supervises the laws voted by Parliament and refuses to ratify them if it considers them 'un-Islamic'. The Group for the Defense of the Higher Interests of the Islamic Republic (*majma'e tashkhis e maslebat*) is the body that settles the dispute between Parliament and the Council of the Guardians. Both these institutions are highly conservative, and the supreme office of the Leader of the Islamic Republic (*rahbar*) is held by the Ayatollah Khamenei, who is also a conservative. The reform bills never pass the threshold of Parliament, and systematic intimidation by pressure groups and paramilitary ones, paid by the conservatives, has up to now curbed the social demands for substantial reforms. The division of the state

has resulted in a stalemate, and the new nomenclature which gets wealthier within a society where the middle classes were impoverished by the long war of the 1980s, as well as the disorder and brain drain of the last two decades, presides over an even more unegalitarian urban society than under the shah's rule. A deep feeling of frustration pervades society, and the reform movement seems to have ended in a stalemate.

The prevailing power structure discredits the reformists, who are more and more openly accused – by various social forces – of playing into the hands of the conservatives by accepting the repressive state of affairs. The new dualized power structure is in a crisis that might provoke social unrest and a new cycle of violence if concrete proposals for the political opening of society are not put forward. The new generation rejects the type of society promoted by the revolution and is turning towards a more pluralistic model.

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### Notes

1. The number of pupils increased from 8 million in 1978–9, on the eve of the Islamic revolution, to 18.5 million in 1998–9 (a rate of increase of 5.5% per year). Since then the number of students has risen by 1.5 million a year, a rate of growth of 900 per cent! See Paivandi (1999–2000).
2. The percentage of girls to boys within the educational system in Iran has increased from 38 per cent on the eve of the Islamic revolution of 1979 to 47 per cent 20 years later. See Paivandi (1999–2000) and Khosrokhavar and Roy (1999).
3. This is a general problem in the Muslim world: see Haddad and Esposito (1998); for the Iranian case see Mir-Hosseini (1999).
4. See Abdi and Goodarzi (1999–2000); Hourcade (2002), and a PhD thesis in progress by Fahimeh Hosseinzadeh. For extensive surveys on these topics see The Islamic Ministry of Culture and Guidance (2002)
5. For a more extensive development of this topic see Khosrokhavar (2002).

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