Chapter Four:

Changing Perspectives and Developments of Civil Society in Iran
4-1. Preface

The Iranian reform movement known as Second of Khordad Front which refers to the date of President Mohammad Khatami's 1997 landslide election victory was a political movement by a group of political parties and organizations in Iran that supported Mohammad Khatami's plans to change the system to include more freedom and democracy. Iran's "reform era" is sometimes said to have lasted from 1997-2005 - the period of President Khatami’s two terms in office.¹

Khatami served as the fifth President of Iran from August 2, 1997 to August 2, 2005, and was succeeded by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He also acted as Iran's Minister of Culture in the 1980s and 1990s.² Khatami supporters have been described as a "coalition of strange bedfellows, including traditional leftists, ... business leaders who wanted the state to open up the economy and allow more foreign investment" and "women and younger voters."
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The day of his election, the Second of Khordad, 1376 (May 23rd, 1997), in the Iranian calendar, is regarded as the starting date of "reforms" in Iran. His followers are therefore usually known as the "Second of Khordad Movement."

Khatami was regarded as Iran's first reformist president, since the focus of his campaign was on the rule of law, democracy and the inclusion of all Iranians in the political decision-making process. However, his policies of reform led to repeated clashes with the hardline and conservative Islamists in the Iranian government, who
control powerful governmental organizations like the Guardian Council, whose members are appointed by the Supreme Leader.

4-2. Change in Political System’s Attitude to Civil Society

To understand the dynamics of changes and reforms under Khatami in Iran, we should first emphasize the main turning points of the political history of the revolution. Without detaching them from their historical context, the dynamics of change and the emergence of different political positions need to be seen as mechanisms of transformation that have been in operation for nearly three decades. In this way, it would be possible to analyze the transformation of the Iranian political system along with its broader political implications.

It is useful to look at the political history of the Islamic revolution as divided into three distinct periods. The first period might be referred to as the "first republic" or the period of revolutionary Islam, from 1979 to 1988. The second period, from 1988 to 1997, might be referred to as the second republic or the reconstruction period. The third republic or the period of searching for a more open society began with the election of Mohammed Khatami in 1997.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini assigned Mehdi Bazargan the task of establishing an interim government in Iran following the Islamic revolution of 1979. Prime Minister Bazargan adopted a cautious approach, defending gradual, step-by-step change, opposing the use of any domestic violence so as to mobilize support for the new
regime. He closed the revolutionary courts that had been founded following the Islamic revolution and sought to provide and strengthen the rule of law in Iran. He resigned, however, after the student attack on the U.S. embassy on November 4, 1979. The Iranian people voted for Abulhassan Banisadr for the presidency; but, he was soon dismissed by Khomeini. The next president, Mohammed Ali Rejaee, was assassinated by the opposition Mojahedeen-i Khalq organization.4

After 1981, control of the Iranian political system shifted to pro-revolutionary elites who closely followed Khomeini's line of thinking. Throughout this period, the state attempted to maintain society in a state of emergency with the help of radical religious factions, declaring that their goal was not only to "free" Iranian society, but the whole Third World countries as well. All resources were mobilized to conduct this "war" and to provide the world with a more happy future founded upon religious principles. These elites sought to mobilize mass support for their cause of establishing a permanent Islamic regime in Iran.5

This period was characterized by an attempt to stifle all divergent opinions, declaring all opposition to be "anti-revolutionary" and "agents of imperialism." Other salient characteristics of this period were a belief in a charismatic velayet-i faqih (the guardianship of the jurisprudent) and an overtly ideological character of the state machinery. This period continued until the end of the Iran-Iraqi war in 1988. The end of the war, however, along with Khomeini's death, laid the foundation for a political restructuring of society.
The second republic began with Khamanei in a position of religious authority and the assumption of Rafsanjani to the presidency. In this era, the rights that accompanied religious leadership were extended by legal amendments and the office of the premier was merged with that of the presidency. The subsequent erosion of the legitimacy of the religious regime, the economic demands of the people, coupled with the collapse of the Soviet bloc led to a search for a new economic order in Iran. These attempts at economic reconstruction and political liberalization created great excitement throughout the society and the debate over passing from a religious to a more modern or secular administration dominated discussions in intellectual circles. Cornerstone premises of the revolution, such as the hegemony of religious values, came to be seen by many as obstacles to reconstruction.

The ruling elite failed, however, to accept fully the extension of economic liberalization into the cultural and political realms. The resistance of the religious leadership restricted progressive development to economic considerations. The gains made during this period, therefore, were very limited. Conservative attitudes remained dominant, especially in the cultural sphere and success in economic reconstruction was limited as well. Attempts at political and economic reconstruction and liberalization, for the most part, only served to facilitate the emergence of a new class of wealthy people who prospered on the basis of state resources. Poverty among the common people increased even further.
The period of second republic, though on a limited scale, led to an opening of space in which the main premises of the revolution came to be questioned and a more open and civilian style of government was first imagined and then slowly put into place. These developments came to be called the "intellectual religious movement"—it was fostered, in particular, by the writings of Aldulkarim Soroush. Reformist intellectuals became increasingly alienated from the state and organized privately. Much of this activity took place in the universities. Probably the most important aspect of this era was the emergence of a variety of political demands, supported by various institutions and organizations. The emergence of new politico-economic demands, the increasing search for a more open society and rich intellectual debates constituted the main source of "Khordad 2," (May 23, the day Khatami was elected) as the new Iranian revolution came to be called. Nevertheless, the conservative bloc of religious leadership, although faced with a profound legitimacy and authority crisis, continued to dominate developments throughout this period.

Demands for continued reform became united under the umbrella movement led by Mohammed Khatami, who the Iranian people selected as their third president on May 23, 1997. At least in theory, there was a shift from a system based on a charismatic leader to a system inspired by the will of the people. This opened up new horizons and provided greater opportunity for the representation of popular demands in the administration. It also meant that, for the first time, the Iranian people were able to constitute a serious challenge to
the dominant minority, which had heretofore ruled the country with an iron hand. Most of the basic premises of the revolution came to be seen as outmoded and a new social contract became both a necessity and a reality.

Khatami gave priority to civil society, the rule of law, greater political freedom, respect for pluralism and a more open dialogue with the West. While he did not describe freedom as anti-religious, he emphasized that institutions that did not appreciate the importance of freedom were destined to fail and disappear. Khatami sought to establish an institutionalized freedom in the public sphere and attempted to draw boundaries that would allow for necessary constitutional amendments.

The Khordad 2 movement was the result of differences among powerful factions, the crystallization of new ideological tendencies, and the demands of the people. Iranian society is still in search of a new social contract based on openness, civil society, pluralism, and freedom. In accord with these demands, important positive developments came to life: there was greater (though still very limited) freedom of the press and an increasing acknowledgment of the civil and human rights of opposition groups.

Khatami’s ascendancy to the presidency represented a profound turning point and created a system of two powerful political blocs, conservatives and reformists, and a third bloc that consisted of relatively weaker groups. Those political factions that give precedence to defending the status quo and opposing reformist
demands represent the conservative camp. The main point of reference for conservative groups is the institution of *Velayet-i Faqih* and they consider it as the bastion of all laws and norms. Other references are the call for continued Islamization of the state and the reflection of this religious character in all matters of state, absolute obedience to state authority, and absolute state hegemony in the political realm. The foremost groups in this camp are the Hizballah along with more moderate conservative groups.

Conservative groups asserted that religious leaders should govern the state based on *shari’a* (Islamic law). These groups have accepted the leadership of the *Velayet-i Faqih* and have stood opposed to the development of democracy and civil society as Western inventions. *Jame-e Ruhaniyete Mobarez* (Community of Struggling Mullahs), *Jemiyete Motelefe-e Eslami* (United Islamic Community) and *Peyrevan-e Khatte Emam ve Rehberi* (Followers of the Line of Imam and Religious Leader) may be considered to be the forerunners of this ideological front.

The reformist bloc consists primarily of those groups which are in favor of reforming the Iranian political system and institutionalizing these reforms through constitutional amendments. The groups gathered in this bloc were among those responsible for the revolution, but, over time, they gradually became alienated from the regime. This bloc demonstrated quite dramatically, in the 1997 presidential elections, that it had greatly increased support among the Iranian people. The reformist bloc argues that democratic principles are or can be compatible with an Islamic order. They see tolerance and
consensus as integral parts of social life and civil society as a positive project that is necessary for the respect of human rights and political freedoms. In contrast to conservatives, they seek to restrict the role of *Velayet-i Faqih* and to create a legal framework for this position. The reformist bloc can be classified into two different groups: moderate reformists and leftist reformists.

For reformists, once the republic—as it is defined in the constitution—has been established in Iran, then the political system will be improved to a considerable extent. The influential Iranian thinker, Abdul Karim Soroush, known as intellectual architect of Khatami revolution, is in favor of keeping religion aside when it comes to ruling the state. He argues that shari’a may be basis of modern legislation but it should be flexible and adaptable rather than being static. The power of the intellectuals in Iran, and in other areas with a Muslim majority or minority, is increasing and also gaining transnational status since their publications are rapidly translated to other languages.

Following the elections of 1999, a two-bloc political model emerged within the Iranian political system. Executive and legislative offices, along with the presidency, remained in the control of the reformists, while the economy, the intelligence, the military and the judiciary remained under the hegemony of the conservative bloc. While traditional institutions established after the revolution—including the *Velayet-i Faqih*—have stayed in the hands of conservative groups; they have lost much of their influence over the Iranian political system.
4-3. Khatami's Reforms

Running on a reform agenda, Khatami was elected president on May 23, 1997 in what many have described as a remarkable election. Voter turnout was nearly 80%. Despite limited television airtime, most of which went to conservative Speaker of Parliament and favored candidate Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, Khatami received 70 percent of the vote. "Even in Qom, the center of theological training in Iran and a conservative stronghold, 70% of voters cast their ballots for Khatami." He was re-elected on June 8, 2001, for a second term.

President Khatami's overwhelming victory in the June 2001 presidential elections was, however, the manifestation of continuing popular support for his campaign for the rule of law, civil society and democracy. President Khatami won 21,659,053 out of 28,160,405 votes cast in the elections, breaking his own record of the May 1997 presidential elections. Khatami scored 77 per cent of the votes, up from 70 per cent he got in the 1997 race. The huge turn out of some six million first-time voters was a major factor explaining the incumbent president's huge victory margin.

Although at least one-third of the 42 million in the electorate did not take part in the exercise, against a mere 5 million in the previous elections, Khatami has become the first Iranian president to increase his votes from earlier elections, against both Ayatollah Ali Khameneh'i and Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani who got much less votes in winning a second term. So, as Hamid Reza Jalayipour, publisher of several influential and mass circulation reformists dailies, all banned
by the Islamic Judiciary, has commented: "If by voting for Khatami in the May 1997 elections, people wanted to reject the candidate of the conservatives and by the same token, express their opposition to the present theocracy, in [May 2000's presidential] elections, they showed great maturity by insisting on the continuation of reforms, notwithstanding the blows the conservatives dealt to the process."^{12}

Khatami based his campaign on a reform program promising implementation of a democratic and more tolerant society, the rule of law and improvement of social rights. After taking office, Khatami faced fierce opposition from his powerful opponents within the unelected institutions of the state which he had no legal power over, and this led to repeated clashed between his government and these institutions (including the Guardian Council, the state radio and television, the police, the armed forces, the judiciary, the prisons, etc.). After 8 years of presidency, he was widely considered to have lost the power struggle with his opponents. Many of his supporters have grown disillusioned with him and the reform programs that he was associated with.

The promotion of civil society and the rule of law are the key elements in Khatami’s reform program.

- Initiating Iran’s city council elections
- Voicing the idea of civil society and the rule of law
- Full commitment to Iranian constitution of the time (any revision in the law must be done through legal routes)
• Giving permission to newspapers by people of a wide range of political views
• Reopening the embassies of all European countries
• Reorganizing the ministry of intelligence of Iran; after the Iran's Chain Murders of Intellectuals
• Initiating a dialogue between people of different faith inside and outside Iran

Many Iranian intellectuals were involved in establishing a foundation for the movement. Perhaps the most influential figure was Abdolkarim Soroush. For many years his was the only voice that publicly criticized the regime's policies. His regular lectures at Tehran University used to enjoy the attendance of many Iranian students who later generated the Second of Khordad movement. Many famous figures of the movement belong to the Soroush circle. However, at the rise of Second of Khordad movement, Saeed Hajjarian acted as the main theorist behind the movement and the main strategist in Khatami's camp.

The "core" of the reform movement is said to be made up of Islamic leftists who were "disempowered" by Islamic conservatives following the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989. Islamic leftists turned reformists include Abdolkarim Soroush, Saeed Hajjarian, Akbar Ganji, Ali Akbar Mohtashami-Pur and the Anjoman-e-Eslami (Islamic Association) and Office for Strengthening Unity student groups.
The size and broadness of the movement was reflected in the fact that even some Basij members voted for its presidential candidate, Mohammad Khatami.

In his "letter for the future" President Khatami himself defended his government and his achievements. He wrote:

There have been changes of such an extent in social, cultural and political relations that it is impossible to return to the period of before the reforms.  

In his "Letter for Tomorrow", he wrote: "This government is proud to announce that it heralded the era where the sanctity of power has been turned into the legitimacy of critique and criticism of that power, which is in the trust of the people who have been delegated with power to function as representatives through franchise. So such power, once considered Divine Grace has now been reduced to an earthly power that can be criticized and evaluated by earthly beings. Instances show that although due to some traces of despotic mode of background we have not even been a fair critique of those in power, however, it is deemed upon the society, and the elite and the intellectuals in particular, not to remain indifferent at the dawn of democracy and allow freedom to be hijacked."

During his two terms in office, Khatami was able to introduce some reforms to the Iranian political system, however all in all, he is widely considered to have lost the power struggle with his opponents. The root cause for his failures is widely considered to be the limited
powers of the President in the Iranian political system. As President, Khatami had little or no authority over many key state institutions such as the judiciary, the state radio and television, the armed forces including the police, the military, etc.

In his last speech as president, Khatami said that one of his biggest achievements was granting the Iranian people the power to protest. He said the more his government was criticized, the more it was successful in realizing the idea of democracy in Iran. Khatami also said that the Iranian people are the best judges of his achievements. “The final judgment about the success of the government, which was moving on the difficult and long path of democracy in Iran, is with the nation,” Khatami said.

The charismatic Khatami -- who was seen by many reformists as the best hope for democracy in the Islamic Republic -- was not able to implement his idea of “Islamic democracy” in Iran. Many of his reform plans were blocked by hardliners. His government's granting of scores of licenses for new, liberal publications was quickly rolled back by the hard-line judiciary. Judges closed more than 100 newspapers and magazines and summoned twice that number of journalists to court. Many intellectuals, human right activists, and students were jailed.

Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, a member of the Tehran-based Center of Human Rights Advocacy, said Khatami did not use his power and did not confront the hard-liners. Dadkhah claimed: “In many cases he didn’t remain faithful to his slogans and goals. One of
the most evident examples is [last year's] parliamentary elections when [more than 1,000] candidates trusted by people were disqualified by the Guardians Council without any logical reasons. Khatami did not take any practical measures and did not come among the protesters who held a sit in, and he abstained from directly taking sides.”

Despite the setbacks, most observers agree that under Khatami’s two terms modest reforms were achieved, some freedom was gained, and the political arena opened somewhat. Dadkhah says that as a result Iranian citizens now have greater awareness of their rights and enjoy more self-confidence. “He created this political atmosphere where people see themselves as capable of pursuing their rights,” Dadkhah said. "We also had many advances in literature, culture, and art.”

Mohammad Sadegh Javadi Hessar, a former legislator and a journalist in Mashad, said Khatami changed the relationship between citizens and the government by encouraging criticism. “Khatami’s critics would criticize him and he would accept it and he would work to make this dialogue work. Another major achievement of Khatami’s term was preparing the ground for the people’s participation in the decision-making sphere.” Javadi Hessar adds that Khatami’s presidency led to some transparency and accountability in the Iranian establishment. “We had [political] prisoners under Khatami, but their whereabouts were known. Before Khatami, some people would be jailed without their location being known, without being granted visits but Khatami’s government has been following the cases of prisoners,"
Javadi Hessar said. "This has led to changes in a way that now officials slowly start to feel they're living in rooms made of glass."  

Some observers also believe that Khatami had a great influence on Iranian political discourse. He spoke of fostering human rights, civil society, and democracy -- terms that are now being used even by some conservative politicians. Most observers believe that the changes that have taken place in Iranian society are irreversible. For instance, Dadkhah said: “Without any doubt, the tree planted by Mr. Khatami will give its fruit in the coming years and, without any doubt, many forces will try to eradicate it, but [the society] will not let it happen and I hope the results of Khatami’s actions will appear in future generations so that...law, democracy, lack of discrimination, and equality will rule in society.”

Khatami’s presidency probably will be remembered best for its political impact. But his efforts to achieve reform within a constitutional framework were not entirely successfully, not least because they were countered by unelected institutions, such as the Guardians Council. Furthermore, hard-line institutions managed to violate citizens’ rights without having to account for their activities. Therefore, Khatami's presidency has received mixed reviews from many observers.

One perspective is that the new open discourse on issues such as civil rights, democracy, and social freedom created a new and unprecedented environment in Iran. Majid Tavalai, editor of the monthly "Nameh," said that this environment boosted Iranians' courage. "The official discourse on human rights and democracy
created an umbrella for people under which they felt secure to express their opinions and demand," Tavalai said. He went on to say that this was not a stable or consistent trend, referring to the reduction in social and political activities after the crackdown on student demonstrators at Tehran University in 1999, the mass closure of the reformist press from 2000 onward, the trials of participants in a conference in Berlin in 2000, and the continuous arrests of political activists.¹⁸

4-4. Women’s Movement and Change in Women’s Situation

Khatami’s landslide election victory owed a great deal to support from female voters. Women make up about half of Iran’s eligible voters, and Khatami actively courted their backing. Khatami appeared to recognize this constituency’s backing when, following his election, he appointed a woman, Masumeh Ebtekar, as his vice president for environmental protection and appointed Zahra Shojai as his women's affairs adviser. Despite the demands of women in 2001, when he was re-elected, Khatami did not select any women for his cabinet, although he chose Zahra Rahnavard as his senior adviser on cultural affairs. Khatami did not need approval of the fifth conservative parliament for the appointment of these two women.

Women serve in the legislature, and they are eligible to serve in municipal councils. However, no females serve in the Assembly of Experts, an elected body that is restricted to clergymen. In the last
two presidential elections, women have registered as candidates, but have not passed through the vetting process. That is because the law uses a vague Arabic term -- rejal -- that is interpreted in such a way that the chief executive must be a man.

The situation of women in Iran during the past three decades can best be described by a statement from a women's rights activist, Haleh Esfandiari, who said that the change in the situation of women in Iran has been one step forward and two steps back, or two steps forward, one step back. The most significant changes in the status of women in Iran after the Islamic Revolution have taken place since the early 1990s under former President Hashemi Rafsanjani and more notably since 1997, under former President Mohammad Khatami. Among all the steps that these two presidents took to promote the condition of women, the most important one was bringing to the forefront once again the woman question as well as the issue of women's rights. This issue had seemed to go underground in the previous years because of the revolutionary conditions and the lengthy Iran-Iraq war.

Former President Hashemi appointed Shahla Habibi a moderate woman turned conservative as his advisor on women's affairs in 1991. She had an office in the presidential institution. Khatami gave the advisor's post a stronger voice by including the position in his cabinet. In 1997, Khatami created the Center for Women's Participation, which became the main institution responsible for handling women's affairs in the country and was affiliated to the presidency. President Khatami appointed Zahra Shojaei, an
outspoken advocate of women's rights within a religious context, as his advisor on women's affairs and the head of the Center. Therefore, two women sat in on the cabinet meetings, Masoumeh Ebtekar, the vice-president and head of the Environmental Protection Organization, and Shojaei.

In the second term of Khatami's presidency, many expected him to appoint one or two women in the cabinet, but Khatami once again proved his inability to put his words into action because of conservative opposition. This caused certain criticisms among women activists, who argued that after 22 years of the Islamic Revolution, women were still not able to find their real social and civil positions, given the patriarchal perspective that dominated the society. They argue that true civil society will always be imperfect and improper without the women's true presence; the women who constitute half of the social body. No society will be able to underpin the foundations of a strong civilization, if it has made itself deprived of the presence, participation and activities of half of its potentially capable population in the public sphere.

It was too difficult to predict what direction the women's movement would take under President Mahmood Ahmadinejad in 2005 because he did not talk about women's issues in his campaign. Most speculations, however, were based on the ideas held by his advocates who mainly belonged to the conservative camp. Initially, there were rumors that the Center for Women's Participation may be closed down because it lacks a legalized status according to Iran's administrative laws. The Center, however, survived and was renamed as the Center for Women and Family Affairs that sounded a bit
conservative to some observers. The first director, Nasrin Soltankhah, kept the position just for some months in order to take up her seat in Tehran’s city council. The second director, Zohreh Tabibzadeh, is a dentist with little prior experience on women’s issues. She has adopted a low-key approach toward the Center’s activities.

In the Middle East including Iran, as Nadereh Chamlou suggests, gender roles and dynamics within the household are shaped by a traditional gender paradigm. This paradigm presumes that a woman will marry early, that her most important contribution to the family and society will be as a homemaker and mother, that the household will be headed by a man who has a job that will allow him to provide for his family, that the woman will depend on the man for support, and that the man’s responsibility for supporting and protecting his wife and family justifies his authority regarding and control over his wife’s interactions in the public sphere.\(^{20}\)

In order to achieve the goal of women’s full participation in the social affairs, women need to be more active in political life. Greater participation of women in the political process will be key to achieving change. The traditional gender paradigm makes itself felt not only in important aspects of law, but also in women’s low representation in political life and at all levels of public decision-making. Although many countries accord women equal rights as citizens and voters through their national constitutions and laws, women’s participation in politics and governance is far from widespread.

Despite some shortcoming, there is no doubt that women continue to remain at the heart of Iranian political debates. The visibility of women in Iran's social, economic, educational and cultural
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spheres leaves no doubt that women are entering many areas that were previously closed to them. The fact that more than 60 percent of university entrants every year are women shows that women have chosen to conquer the domains that are open to them and provoke less opposition and then to capitalize on these achievements in order to realize their rights in other aspects of social life. The fact that Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian women's rights activist, was granted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 demonstrates that the international community appreciated the efforts by Iranian women in fighting for their rights and bringing a more humane aspect to the process of development underway in Iran.

In spite of women's presence in higher education in large numbers, their employment situation is not compatible with their educational levels. Only around 25 percent of women are in the labor force and most of them cannot find any jobs because of the lack of government support. Women constitute around 4 percent of managerial positions within the country, and around 4 percent of the parliament members are women. In other words, 12 out of 290 members of parliament are women in Iran. There is no doubt that the entire society in Iran wants more women to be elected for the Parliament, because they think that in this way the Parliament can represent the entire society in a better way. But the problem in Iran like in Turkey is that we don't have a quota system, so it becomes very difficult for female candidates to find a seat in the Parliament. Even in Afghanistan and Iraq, now they have this 25 percent quota for women in their parliaments. But I expect that all political parties and groups
will include more women in their elections lists that will be held in March 2008.

In Iran's civil society, the situation for women is much better. The number of women's non-governmental organizations has risen from 130 to 450, showing a 4-fold increase during the past ten years. The reformist sixth parliament introduced many reforms within the existing laws to improve women's conditions and to remove some of the worst cases of discrimination against them. However, a number of these initiatives could not be enforced due to some opposition by the conservative-minded people. The most important example has been the rejection of Iran's accession to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Iran is one of the few Muslim countries that has yet to ratify the Convention, whereas the adoption of this Convention can provide suitable grounds for the promotion of women's position in the country. The conservative-dominated seventh parliament has not been much willing to introduce such initiatives and has kept a low-key approach towards women's question.

As an expert of women's situation in the Middle East Haleh Esfandiari, argues, it is frustrating for women that their cause may take one or two steps forward only to take one step back. But it is certain that the struggle for women's rights in Iran and the entire Middle East can no longer be stopped. Women in the region know this - and so do their governments.21

Women have also experienced a great transformation in their status and self-image in society. Before and during the revolution, "Women had thought of each other either as archaic and non-
intelligent (the arrogant attitude of Westernized middle class women toward the popular ones) or as selfish, immodest and dehumanized (the attitude of women in the lower classes in popular districts of Tehran toward those living in the Westernized residential neighborhoods in the northern parts of the city).”

The ideological foundation of the state itself has been instrumental in the mobilization of women and the population in general. Despite the wide range of interpretations on the role of women in Islam, most religious and political leaders have not objected to women’s participation in politics, in the market and in social activities.

The wider access to education for women and the intermingling of women from different socioeconomic stratum and cultural groups, because of the eight-year war and internal migration and rapid urbanization, have helped the mobilization of women in society. Thus, "Women are much better educated than before, and they are by far more conscious of their unjust situation.... In comparison to the Shah’s times when they were accorded a partial juridical equality with men, they are now more mature in terms of human agency. Before the Revolution, the great majority of women had no clear consciousness of their rights; now, they are much more aware of the necessity to engage in social action to convince public opinion (particularly men) to change the laws in the name of social justice.”

The achievements by women in creating a social space for themselves have not been due solely to opportunities granted to them
by men in power. Women, when possible, have proved themselves very apt to mobilization and statement of their views. They extended their support behind presidential candidate Muhammad Khatami in 1997 and again in 2001 and have been among his strongest supporters.

The leadership of the women's movement itself is divided between secular women like Mehrangiz Kar (a prominent lawyer and women’s rights activist), Shirin Ebadi (a prominent women’s rights activist who won the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize) and Islamist ones like Faezeh Hashemi (a former member of Parliament) and Shahla Sherkat (publisher a well-known women’s magazine entitled Zanan), among others. But both groups have in common their dedication to the cause of women in Iran. Women have learned:

To respect each other in spite of their differences and not to demonize each other for their divergent views on religion.... The Islamist feminists, for example, defend women's rights in the name of the complementarities of men and women in Islam; they ask for separate swimming pools, duplication of the facilities for women whenever possible, defense of women in the name of Islamic justice, and interpretations of religious law in a way that is favorable to women. Secular feminists try to show the equality of men and women in modern institutions and international treaties to which Iranian government adhered long ago.\textsuperscript{24}
Khatami’s attitude on gender issues was summarized in his 4th July 2005 statement in Tehran, when he said, "We should have a comprehensive view of the role of women and before anything else, should not regard women as second-class citizens," Fars News Agency reported. "We should all believe that both men and women have the capability to be active in all fields, and I emphasize, in all fields."

Khatami spokesman Abdullah Ramezanzadeh has suggested: "We had not claimed that we would be able to bring about sexual justice. Nobody should expect us to bring about that kind of sexual justice in a matter of 10 or 15 years. What Khatami's government did in a democratic society was to turn the issue of sexual justice into an issue of the day, rather than allowing it to be confined to intellectual circles, to the extent that today no politician can easily ignore that issue."\textsuperscript{25}

Generally speaking, female activism has been on the rise during the Khatami presidency. Marzieh Mortazi-Langarudi, a reformist women’s rights activist believes: "In general, the women's movement grew relatively well during the reformists' [leadership]," said. "I think women's most urgent claim has been equality in human rights and gender rights. Steps have been taken. Women have more self-confidence in seeking their rights. I think that during [the reign of] Khatami, there was no stagnation. Stagnation was before Khatami, when no one could challenge the laws that appeared holy."\textsuperscript{26}

In brief, it can be predicted that the situation of women in Iran will not see a huge change in terms of the achievements Iranian
women have gained during the past two decades. At the same time, it is also unlikely that a major breakthrough will happen in their situation or that serious initiatives will be undertaken in order to improve women's conditions. Therefore, at best, the current state of affairs will persist for the foreseeable future.

4-5. Obstacles to the Reforms

According to a famous statement made by Khatami, his government survived an average of one national crisis every nine days during his term of office. Highlights of important crises (related to his domestic reform plans) during his presidency include:

- The serial murders of Iranian political dissidents by rogue elements in the Intelligence Ministry.
- The beating of two of his closest allies and key cabinet ministers (Ataollah Mohajerani and Abdollah Noori) by Islamist pressure groups after a Friday prayer in Tehran.
- An unsuccessful attempt to impeach Khatami’s culture minister (Ataollah Mohajerani) by the conservative-dominated 5th Majlis.
- The impeachment of Khatami’s interior minister (Abdollah Noori) by the 5th Majlis which led to Noori’s removal from office.
- Noori’s trial and imprisonment on the grounds of insulting Islamic values.
- Iran student riots, July 1999. This was the largest anti-regime street demonstrations in the history of the Islamic Republic. At
the time, students were considered to be the most important supporters of Khatami's government. Demonstrations continued for a few days in most cities in Iran and in more than ninety-five countries worldwide. The demonstration ended in violence and the death of a young Iranian citizen along with many casualties. It was Iran's biggest anti-government demonstrations since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

- The attempted assassination of Saeed Hajjarian, one of Khatami's closest allies and considered by many to be the mastermind strategist of the reform movement.
- The judiciary's verdict resulting in the closure of over 20 reformist newspapers in one day. This was considered by many to be the starting point of the reform movement's demise and was described by some political activists as the silent coup d'état against Khatami's government
- The failure of the "Twin Bills". The bills were presented by Khatami to the 6th Majlis but after a long struggle they were eventually disapproved by the Guardian Council. These two pieces of proposed legislation would have introduced small but key changes to the national election laws of Iran and also presented a clear definition of the president's power to prevent constitutional violations by state institutions. Khatami himself described the "twin bills" as the key to the progress of reforms in Iran
- The imprisonment of some prominent figures of the reform movement and some of Khatami's key allies during his presidency by the judiciary on the grounds of insulting Islamic
values. Some of these individuals are: Dr. Mohsen Kadivar, Gholamhossein Karbaschi, Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, Mohsen Sazegara, Abbas Abdi, investigative journalists Akbar Ganji and Emadedin Baghi, etc.

- The trial and death sentence of Dr. Hashem Aghajari, a university professor and political activist accused of insulting Islamic values during one of his speeches. The death sentence was reversed after widespread protests by students and reformist parties. Dr. Aghajari was released after a brief stay in prison.\(^{27}\)

In September 2002 Khatami presented the so-called twin bills to Parliament. The twin bills addresses two issues: the first would curb the powers of the Council of Guardians, while the second would enhance presidential powers. The bills were rejected by Guardian council and Khatami withdrew them from the parliament eventually.

In January 2004 shortly before the 2004 Iranian legislative elections (the 7th Parliament), the conservative Council of Guardians put a stop to the problem of Iranian voters continued support for reformists by taking the unprecedented step of banning about 2500 candidates -- nearly half of the total -- including 80 sitting Parliament deputies. More than 100 MPs resigned in protest and critics complained the move "shattered any pretense of Iranian democracy."\(^{28}\)

The leftist reformists argued that the most important obstacle to the development of Iranian society is the failure to broaden
participation in the political realm and provide more freedom in this sphere. They see this as necessary to overcome what they see as a bottleneck in the Iranian political system. They argue that the minority which holds political power in Iran is not open to popular accountability and that their performance leaves a great deal to be desired. This, they argue, is why the dominant group has lost support and is no longer seen as legitimate by the Iranian people. Mejme-e Ruhaniyon Mobarez (Community of Struggling Mullahs), Sazman-e Mojahedin Engelab Eslami Iran (Combatants of Islamic Revolution), Khizb Khembrastegi-e Iran-e Eslami (Islamic Solidarity Party of Iran), Jebhe-e Moshaareket-e Iran-e Eslami (Islamic Participation Party of Iran), Khizb-e Kare Eslami Iran (Islamic Labor Party of Iran) are the principal parties that comprise this bloc.

Other institutions like Council of Islamic Consultancy, Council of Supervision, Higher Council of National Security, Expediency Council and Council of Experts have also been dominated by conservatives. Ironically, this has meant, in a sense, that the country’s president is also the leader of the opposition, because he could just criticize other government authorities for obstructing his reformist agenda. Yet while reformists have not won this conflict among government institutions, the very existence of a continuous debate paved the way for the creation of a civil society or, in Fariba Adelkhah’s formulation, "religious public space." However, the intense rivalry between the two opposing political blocs has also demolished the sense of national harmony within the state bureaucracy and created an atmosphere of instability characterized by a profound lack of confidence.
In June 17, 2005 presidential election Mostafa Moin and Mehdi Karroubi were the main candidates of the Second of Khordad movement. However neither made it to the second round of the election (the final runoff) - Moin came in fifth and Karroubi third in the first round. As a result many supporters of the reform movement lost hope and did not participate in the election.

Indeed, dozens of newspapers opened during the Khatami period, only for many to be shut down on one pretext or another by the judiciary. Clerics who took advantage of the new atmosphere to question the doctrine of velayat-e faqih (rule of jurisprudent) were imprisoned or otherwise cowed. Even as political debate blossomed, Iran's security services cracked down on religious and ethnic minorities. A number of the regime's critics fell victim to murders traced later to the interior ministry. In 1999 police reacted to a peaceful demonstration for freer speech by invading Tehran University, beating and arresting hundreds of students and killing at least one. In the majlis (parliament) much of the president's reforming legislation was vetoed by the Council of Guardians, a committee of clerics appointed by the supreme leader to ensure that laws conform to Islamic precepts.29

In February, the newspaper Jameah started to publish articles critical of the government, color photographs of smiling women harvesting wheat, and an interview with a former prisoner. By June 1998 a court revoked their license.30 Also, police filed charges against Zanan, a monthly women’s magazine, for "insulting" the police force.
by publishing an article on the problems women face with the authorities on Iranian beaches, which are segregated by sex.\textsuperscript{31}

Saeed Hajjarian, who was the main theorist behind the movement declared in 2003 that: "The reform movement is dead. Long live the reform movement". Iranian American journalist Afshin Molavi reports that "as Khatami’s star faded, so did his ideas of Islamic democracy. Today, secular democratic thinkers are more popular" in Iran. He quotes a leader of the "leading pro-democracy student group", Office for Strengthening Unity (\textit{Daftar-e-Tahkim-e-Vahdat}), as saying ‘We want democracy without a prefix or a suffix. Just democracy.’\textsuperscript{32}

The political constellation led to the emergence of increasing strife in public life. Particularly following the assassination attempt on Saeed Hajjarian, a near civil war-like atmosphere emerged. Unsolved murders, increasing political pressures, and arrests served to maintain high levels of tension between the two groups. Conservatives not only escalated the tension but also compelled the other bloc to respond in kind. Although coming to office on a platform of reform, Khatami was indecisive in his tactics and approaches to emerging problems. The climate of increasing political tension is especially detrimental to the reform movement, its cadres, tools and aims. Khatami’s vague policies created great disappointment and a sense of loneliness among the Iranian people. The cyclical, political repercussions of mass political events in the big cities were a result of this general frustration.\textsuperscript{33}
Khatami and his reformist colleagues were trying to change the system without being perceived as threatening to the state's security. The conservative bloc, on the other hand, tried its best to paint the reformists as a threat to the future of Iranian society by provoking them to radical alternatives. Their aim is to force them to give up any serious attempts at meaningful reform. This situation resulted in increasing levels of political violence, as has been the case before when political institutions failed to answer to the increasing demands of the people.

For instance, the Islamic revolution tribunal of Tehran on April 8, 2001, arrested 40 members of the Iran Freedom Movement (IFM) and personalities affiliated to the nationalist-religious current. The judiciary officially banned activities of the IFM and the nationalist-religious on the eve of Norouz when, in similar operation, 21 prominent personalities belonging to these movements were detained during a night raid on the house of Muhammad Basteh-Negar, an IFM activist." In July 2001, Tehran's Revolutionary Court issued a warrant for the arrest of IFM Secretary-General Ebrahim Yazdi, who had failed to meet a court order issued in April to return to Iran by May 1. Dr. Yazdi has been residing in the US, undergoing cancer treatments.

Continuing with harassing their opponents, Iranian conservatives have also taken aim at the reformist-dominated Majles (parliament). Mrs. Haqiqatjoo, an outspoken MM (Member of the Majles) was detained in late March for six hours before being released on bail. She had already been summoned by a court on charges of inciting public opinion and insulting the judiciary after she
openly criticized the judiciary over the arrest of Mrs. Fariba Davoudi-Mohajer, a journalist affiliated with the Islamist-nationalists. Mrs. Haqiqatjoo further had revealed that "Mr. Ali Afshari, a student leader who was sentenced to a five-year jail term for his participation at the now famous Berlin Conference of April 2000, has been made to confess under duress."\textsuperscript{35}

In a March 20 Norouz address, President Khatami himself suggested that "opponents of reform are threatening the country's future: Those who do not understand the nation's genuine and historical demands for freedom, independence, and progress, those who sow the seeds of hatred and violence have chosen an ill-fated journey.... The Iranian nation will say no to them all."\textsuperscript{36}

Despite popular support for Khatami's mandate, the conservatives continued their assault on the media and religious and nationalist reformists. A month after Khatami's victory, the Paris-based international press watchdog Reporters Sans Frontieres (Reporters without Borders, RSF) warned that the situation of press freedom in Iran was "getting worse." RSF reported that 27 journalists were behind bars, with twenty-one of them in an unknown place. The organization also called on the Islamic republic Judiciary Head Ayatollah Mahmood Hashemi-Shahroodi to order the release of the detained journalists.

The closure of more than 20 reformist papers in 2000 was no doubt a serious blow to Khatami and the reformists' position. But it seems nothing short of open, violent suppression of the general
population by the security forces could stop the process of democratization. The oscillation between oppression and relative freedom cannot last indefinitely, especially since socioeconomic problems continued to be serious for the majority of the population. In other words, Iran's revolution seems to be at a crossroads. It has declared that Islamic government is the solution to all social, economic and political ills. Yet if this is true, the leaders must deliver tangible benefits, ranging from prosperity to stability. The reformists argue that this can be done, but only in connection with a more open and democratic society. The conservatives, however, associate such changes not with implementing the revolution's promises but as steps which could destroy the whole system. Some of them are now advocating economic reforms without political change, which is what they perceive China as having done successfully.

Conservatives in Iran generally supported the "Chinese" model: combining a relatively open economic system with limits on human rights and democracy. But public allegiance to that strategy had been limited in the face of economic problems, elite factional rivalries, and the ideological exhaustion of Islam as a unifying force. The solution adopted by Ayatollah Khamene'i and his conservative colleagues was to give President Khatami expanded responsibility but not complete authority. Khatami's appeal for the rule of law and expanded political rights was tolerated but closely watched.37

The last year of Khatami’s term in office turned to be an unforgottably displeasing one, mainly because his executive power was crippled by conservatives. The succession of upsetting events
against Khatami was pioneered by the disqualification of more than 2,200 reformist candidates by the hardliners-dominated Guardian Council in the Majlis (Parliament) election. The disqualification deprived the reformist camp of an opportunity to defend its majority in the Majlis. Naturally, the conservatives swept into victory and then into power.

Apart from the Majlis, the Armed Forces, a faction controlled by hardliners, also lost no chance to make troubles for the Khatami government. To make things worse, the turn-about of his former supporters, mostly youths and students, dealt even a heavier blow to the philosopher politician. No matter how unbearable the conservatives' pressure was, it could not disappoint Khatami as much as the boos from his dissatisfied followers did. Depending on enthusiastic support from the open-minded youths and students, Khatami, preaching reforms, won overwhelmingly in the presidential elections in 1997 and 2001. However, it is widely believed that he has failed his supporters by his weakness in promoting the promised democracy and freedom. Additionally, Khatami even had no muscles to protect his supporters when the hardliners took advantage of their control of the judiciary system to launch disastrous crackdowns on reformist activities as well as in press and educational areas.

Some scholars even reject the very notion of enhancing civil society within Iran's political system. They suggest that in a country where a strong centralized authoritarian state has predominated for a century, the eruption of the idea of civil society in the public debate does not automatically lead to its empowerment. The development of
civil society in a theocracy is, so to speak, a contradiction in terms, since regardless of their differences, theories of civil society are based on the autonomy of individuals and that of associations. The prerequisite for such autonomy is the ideological and religious neutrality of the state. A recent study on the situation of Iranian NGOs draws attention to the difficulties hampering the development of civil society's structures in a theocracy that lacks basic institutional transparency and accountability. For the time being, Iranian civil society does not have the power to press the state through its representatives. That is why the current public debate pertains essentially to the ideological preconditions for the establishment of civil society.\(^{39}\)

### 4-6. Public Opinion of Khatami’s Actions

Khatami’s two terms as president were widely regarded as unsuccessful in achieving their goals of making Iran more free and democratic,\(^ {40}\) and he has been criticized by conservatives, reformers, and opposition groups for various policies and viewpoints.

Khatami came under attack from philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, who accused him of failing to push for reforms since his May, 1997, election. "The peaceful and democratic uprising of the Iranian people against religious dictatorship in May 1997 was a sweet experience," Soroush said in a letter addressed to Khatami. "But your failure to keep the vote and your wasting of opportunities put an end
to it and disappointed the nation. Now, failures have turned into unrest."\(^{41}\)

Khatami's definition of civil society and freedom has been also subject to criticisms. Khatami raised the idea of civil society when he came to power. That encouraged many thinkers and scholars to write about the issue extensively. But suddenly Khatami said in one of his speeches: "what I meant by civil society was the Prophet's Medina". His statement disappointed many Iranian scholars. Referring to this point Abdolkarim Soroush said:

"That poured cold water on everyone. Either this was the understanding that he had of civil society from the start or he later changed his mind for particular political and theoretical reasons and replaced civil society with the Prophet's Medina. This was clear vacillation in his thinking. We witnessed this same vacillation when he spoke about freedom."\(^{42}\)

In a speech in November 18 1998, Khatami said: "the right to political activity and existence in Iran [is reserved for those] who have faith in Islam and the leadership."\(^{43}\)

Despite the fact that President Khatami declared himself a supporter of free expression and human rights, he responded to Iranian Shirin Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize by waiting several days and then tempering his congratulations by saying "The Nobel prize for peace is not that important, as it is usually bestowed on political considerations."\(^{44}\) Defenders of Human Rights Center, an
organization Ebadi founded and heads also did not succeed in
obtaining official registration and approval for its qualification after
three years of sending requests during the Khatami administration.\textsuperscript{45}

Some observers criticize Khatami for he refrained from
criticizing the fundamental principle of velayat-e-faqih, of rule by the
religious scholar, the governmental principle imposed by Ruhollah
Khomeini and the basic ideology of the state.\textsuperscript{46} After taking the office
Khatami said: "We declare to the world that we will continue to tread
along Imam Khomeini’s path...We will persevere to do so". He also
added: "Imam Khomeini’s notion of velayat-e faqih is the main pillar of
the Islamic Republic. All citizens of the Islamic Republic have a
practical commitment to velayat-e faqih. This means that all those
who live under this system must abide by this principle and regulate
their conduct within the framework of the constitution."\textsuperscript{47}

In 2001, Some 78 Iranian lawmakers have called on President
Mohammad Khatami to allocate an appropriate share to the Sunni
minority of the country. However Khatami did not appoint any one
from the Sunni minority to cabinet posts in his 8 years of presidency.\textsuperscript{48}
He did however appoint Shia Kurds to his cabinet, a first in post-
Revolutionary Iran.

Overall, it can be argued that, as Bashirieh observes, the
democratic discourse of civil society has arisen as a reaction against
the dominant political discourse, especially traditional partimonialism
and ideological traditionalism in Iran. Within it, a new pattern of
political practice and participation was emerging.\textsuperscript{49} For this reason,
what happened under Khatami’s eight years in office was deepening crisis of charismatic and traditional authority, paving the way for legal-democratic authority and emergence of a democratic discourse of civil society.
Notes and References:

2. Second of Khordad Movement is a term that usually refers not only to the coalition of 18 groups and political parties of the reforms front, reform programs of Khatami. The ideology of Khatami and the movement is based on Islamic Democracy.
7. Aras, op. cit., p. 43.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.


23. Ibid., p. 23.

24. Ibid., p. 22.


