Chapter Seven:

Conclusion
Khatami entered the 1997 presidential election and won nearly 70 percent of the popular vote on the strength of his promises to initiate social reforms, create a civil society, and promote a dialogue of civilizations. His victory launched the reform movement, the most notable characteristic of which was the proliferation of newspapers that championed accountable government and launched investigations of political institutions and politicians suspected of abusing civil rights. The activities of the reformists prompted a backlash from conservatives, who felt threatened by the reforms. By 2000, the conservatives had proven adept at using the judicial system to stymie many reform policies and even to send some reform politicians to prison on charges of slander. Khatami, who disliked confrontations, publicly expressed frustration with his office's limited authority to counteract judicial decisions. Nevertheless, he agreed to run for a second term in 2001 and was reelected with 70 percent of the vote. During his second term, although Khatami remained the titular head of the reform movement, many reformist politicians openly criticized him for failing to actively support them and for effectively allowing the opponents of reform to gain the political initiative.

Iranian civil society’s heyday was the late 1990s and early years of this century under former President Khatami, whose government provided subsidies to help develop an NGO sector but failed to put in place safeguards to prevent its dismantlement. Under Khatami, civil society really went through a renaissance and its development was one of the most valuable outcomes of Khatami’s reform movement.
After Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005, he refused to renew many of these groups’ licenses and his intelligence ministry had several NGOs shut down. Instead of jailing independent journalists using the judiciary system, as hard-line elements within the Khatami regime were wont to do, Ahmadinejad targeted bloggers and civil society groups. Mostly he has sought to prevent Iranian NGOs from networking together too closely or from corresponding with foreigners.

Nonetheless, Iran enjoys one of the region’s most robust civil societies, partly as a result of the brief openness that blossomed during the tenure of reformist President Mohammed Khatami (1999-2005). Yet his hard-line successor, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has rolled back those reforms, as evidenced by the recent arrests of four Iranian-American scholars and journalists on dubious charges of espionage and plotting to carry out a “velvet revolution” in Iran. His government has curtailed academic and cultural exchanges and stifled the independent media.

Three principal positions have emerged in the civil society debate now raging in Iran. First, there are those who regard the whole concept as antithetical to the basic values and ideals of an Islamic society and state. These are the hard-line conservatives, who occupy the most powerful positions within Iran’s political establishment. They control all the means of violence in Iranian society (the Revolutionary Guards, the security services), and they hold much of the economic power as well.
Second, there are those who want to Islamicize the idea of civil society, to make it compatible with the existing norms and values of the present order. They advocate an “Islamic civil society” that would be clearly distinguishable from its secular, Western counterparts.

Third, there are those who view the concept as ideologically neutral in terms of the ultimate goals and values of society, but useful as a basis for structuring state-society relations, protecting the relative autonomy and freedom of citizens and their associations, and promoting a more tolerant, pluralistic and democratic order. For the most part, these were the aspirations that inspired the supporters of Khatami’s so-called “May 3rd [1997] Movement.” Their overwhelming victory in that presidential election, and in many subsequent polls until Ahmadinejad’s victory in 2005 presidential elections, showed them to command a clear majority among the electorate.

The battle lines were drawn. The powerful opponents of Khatami and civil society, with their monopoly over all means of violence and with full control of the judiciary, were engaged in all kinds of mischief: assassinations of writers; vigilante attacks on cabinet members, politicians, and political meetings; intimidation by the “revolutionary courts.” Khatami’s supporters refrained from using violent tactics in their counter-attacks. Like Khatami himself, they had extolled the virtues of political toleration, the compatibility between Islam and democracy, the normalization of the country’s foreign policy, and above all, the vital importance of the rule of law.
On the whole, the changes wrought by Khatami bode fairly well for the prospects of a more democratic polity in Iran in the years to come. But it could be wrong; the forces of reaction may yet prevail. But such a reversal is certain to provoke widespread resistance and plunge the country into a protracted turmoil.

Iranians created a revolution, called the Constitutional Revolution, in 1906 in order to attain democracy, social justice and independence from foreign interventions and to some observers, they still talk about how to complete these ideals. There are several explanations for why the Constitutional Revolution failed to realize its bourgeois-democratic ideals and Iran proceeded with dictatorships in all possible forms throughout the 20th century. The most common explanation is that the Iranian society had not undergone the same changes which occurred in the West since the Renaissance, thus it was not socially, economically, and politically ready to embrace the idea of a Constitutional government as understood in the West. For this reason, after the advent of the Constitutional Revolution, the structural conditions prevalent in the society prevented it from developing into a genuinely democratic political system. Another explanation argues that the Iranian political elites during the Constitutional Revolution failed to reach consensus on their desired type of government in a way that some of them sought an Islamic government, others a Constitutional monarchy with limited power for the monarch, and a minority of them wanted to install an entirely democratic government like a republican system with indeed no power left for the monarch. These internal conflicts and discrepancies
led the political elites not to reach a consensus on how to construct a new political order. Some argued that if the political elites had not failed to achieve a consensus, they might have designed a governmental system agreed upon by most of the political figures active in the Constitutional movement. Therefore, it is argued that the failures of Constitutionalism in Iran have to be analyzed according to elite differences rather than structural obstacles to democratize the Iranian society in the early 20th century. For many reasons, this problem persisted in the remaining periods of the 20th century and deprived Iran of a democratic political system until the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Since the 1980s and particularly since the 1990s, when the process of democratization began in the developing world, notably in Latin America, Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, the Middle East has gained a reputation for its exceptionalism. This is because the Middle East has been unable to experience the same democratization process that has been underway throughout the developing world. There is no doubt that the entire Middle East has lagged behind in terms of political development, and the promises for constitutional government have never been realized in most of these countries. In order to escape from this situation, the Middle East has experienced a kind of “transition” away from authoritarianism during the past two decades. In most instances, the changes, however, have been reversed, and most of the achievements have been nullified.

There are also various explanations about why this has been the case in the Middle East, ranging from the structuralist to agency schools. The experiences of a number of Middle Eastern countries
demonstrate that these countries have pursued different trajectories on their way to the realization of democracy, constitutionalism, human rights and political development in the 20th century, particularly since the 1990s onward.

But why is it the case in this region? First of all, society has little meaning in this region, and state is everything, particularly in the rentier states. In societies where institutions are not paramount and individuals in their interactions determine the spirit of politics, analyses should focus on elite characteristics. Second, in every society, as experiences show, democratization has been initiated by political elites, despite the strength or weakness of the society. When political elites fail to make necessary changes towards extended public political participation, the process of democratization will either not begin or at least will face serious impediments.

Therefore, it is not true to say that a segment of the world population is doomed to live under authoritarianism forever and that democracy can be realized in only certain societies. The successful experience of the Third World’s newly democratic countries reveals that democracy can be established in any country where there are political elites willing to pursue the objective of democracy and where a civil society exists that assumes a degree of responsibility.

What happened in Iran during Khatami’s eight-year presidency demonstrates how political elites -- rather than a constitution, political structures, and the civil society -- could hinder the pace of more profound democratic reforms and roll back what was achieved earlier. From the beginning of President Khatami’s second term in power, Iran witnessed a surge of obstacles in the way of democratic reforms,
which resulted in the loss of most of Khatami’s achievements in his first term in office.

The discussion of democracy and religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s constitution demonstrates that this issue cannot be largely dealt with theoretically, and it cannot be, at least theoretically, claimed whether or not these two are contradictory or compatible. In principle, the same is true with respect to many other countries’ constitutions. For instance, the extensive powers held by the president in the United States could easily lead to dictatorship, but it has never occurred there because the institutionalization of democratic foundations does not allow the president to abuse power. However, this had caused dictatorship in certain other countries like some Latin American nations.

Hence, in merely constitutional terms, no specific contradiction may be observed between democracy and Islam in the Islamic Republic system. However, what largely determines the system’s nature here includes how the principles of the Constitution are executed and to what extent democracy has been institutionalized in the system. The same is also true with respect to many other Third World countries where no manifestation of republicanism and democracy is found, despite having the best and most democratic constitutions, and the countries are fully run with dictatorship. Unlike them, a country like Britain is run democratically even without having a written constitution. For instance, despite the unambiguous undemocratic provisions in Turkey’s constitution, since they had strong democratic value commitments, the Islamist elites in the
Justice and Development Party have been able to bring numerous democratic changes into the system. Therefore, in Turkey’s case, the often-claimed inconsistency between Islam and democracy cannot be verified, while most of the country’s secular elites had fallen behind in removing the authoritarian nature of the political system within the past eight decades.

Similarly, in Iran the balance of social forces supporting democracy opposite to the forces advocating the limitation of national sovereignty decides the existence. What can largely show the conflict or consistency of Islam and democracy involves the political system’s performance. The institutionalization of democratic ideas can extensively contribute to the compatibility of these two concepts, and conversely the rise in absolutist notions may lead to contradictions between these two concepts.

It is exactly for this reason that it is occasionally suggested that the presence or absence of democracy in Iran depends on the performance of important bodies like the Guardian Council. It may be also stated that apart from all theoretical discussions and debates, the contradiction or compatibility of Islam and democracy in Iran depends on the Guardian Council’s interpretations, performance and viewpoints.

Regarding the prospects for democratization in Iran, as Homa Katouzian suggested in 1998, “In a society as ungovernable and unpredictable as Iran, it would require a biblical prophet to predict the future with a degree of certainty, and even he might be cheated by events. Yet, although the means of both formal and informal coercion
are still largely in the hands of the traditionalists, there is no mistaking that the country’s young electorate, men as well as women, are massively in favor of political development in the direction of law, democracy and civil society.” But since that time, the performance of Iran’s powerful political elites has shown that as they have not developed democratic value commitments and do not wish to believe in and act according to the democratic rules of game, there will be little likelihood for any lasting fundamental change towards democratization, even though the society at large demands such a transition. I think the same argument applies to other Muslim countries in the Middle East.

The real dilemma of democratization in the Middle East can be solved simply in the following way: No evidence for a change in the orientations and attitudes of a political system is more reliable than the change in the carriers of those orientations and attitudes themselves. In other words, we need a real functioning of elites in this region. With the existing political elites in the Middle East which perpetuate the leadership styles of their predecessors and simply modernize and reproduce the same old ideological justifications for their absolute rule, the prospects for democratization will remain obscure or even impossible to imagine.

With reference to Iran, it should be said that Iran’s politics is very complicated and difficult to understand especially for the Western observers. That is because that there are many political institutions which do not have a counterpart in Western political systems. From among these institutions, the Guardian Council, Assembly of Experts, and Expediency Council can be mentioned.
Even there is an election every seven year for the Assembly of Experts for which just the jurisprudents, namely Shia ulema, can run. The reason is the combination of three sources of legitimacy and political institutions in Iran including Islamic, republican, and revolutionary sources. These three sources have led to the creation of three distinct kinds of political institutions arising from each of the aforementioned sources of legitimacy.

The reform movement began in Iran in 1997 since Mohammad Khatami came to power. But for many reasons, he failed to realize most of his promises. In this period, Mohammad Khatami aimed for turning Iran into a model of a religious democracy, putting this issue at the center of a heated internal debate in which people participated to interpret it, criticize it, or call for it. Also, the issues of human rights, the role of the civil society, and the importance of civil and political liberties attracted much attention from government, society, and even external powers.

President Khatami has been pushing for social and cultural reforms since he defeated his conservative opponent in 1997. His policies of relaxing religious restrictions on individual behavior and encouraging participation of the common people in politics have won strong support from the people, but also annoyed the conservative hardliners who feel the Islamic system is threatened. Because of Khatami's liberal policies, the country's reformist campaign has become stronger and stronger, which resulted in the overwhelming victory of reformers in February's sixth parliamentary election, ending the long-time conservative majority in the legislative body. But the
hardliners, who are still in control of most of the powerful state organs, have taken tough measures to undermine the reform campaign, including jailing reformist journalists, closing most of the reformist newspapers as well as annulling election results in certain constituencies. The conservative crackdown has pushed the country into a "sensitive period." There were even speculations that the conservative Islamic Revolution Guards Corps might stage a coup to overthrow Khatami’s government.

However, Conservatives continued to be in command of the real sources of power, allowing the Reformists only to play the role of the second-powerful political force. Yet, the 2004 elections have introduced major changes to the Iranian political scene, with the Conservatives making a comeback by restoring direct control over the decision-making process. The 2008 elections could be considered not only a continuation of this trend, but also an upsurge in it, with more limitations being imposed on competitors who did not belong to the Conservative bloc, particularly its Fundamentalist faction. Thus, there are setbacks in some Iranians’ plan for establishing a model of an Islamic democracy in Iran, namely the serious challenges on the ground that hinder any positive steps towards democracy.

Though Iranian intellectuals and politicians stressed the importance of indigenizing the concept, they still sought to establish institutions and organizations based on Western standards. A thorough examination of Iranian civil society in the years following the revolution makes it clear that the development of institution- and organization-building can be divided into three phases.
The first phase included the years of the war with Iraq (1980-1988) during which the Iranian regime adopted a policy of mass and united society behind the political leadership. At that time, there was no room for Western-style organizations, given the hostility directed towards the imperialists (those who are arrogant) and their culture. The Iranian constitution gave room for the establishment of political parties whose programs did not contradict with the main values adopted by the Islamic political system.

The new political elite formed what was known as the Islamic Republic Political Party (IRP), which was the main political force and forefront of the religious establishment. However, political players other than the IRP, which suffered from major structural problems, were not tolerated by the political establishment; it was the case especially with those who were politically active before the revolution.

Accusations of collaborating with the West and working against the Islamic revolution and the faqih (scholar of Islamic jurisprudence) were ready to be thrown at all political organizations, including those that contributed to the success of the revolution. Many people known for their hard defense of freedom, justice, and democracy were banned from working in politics or running for public offices. Only those who were willing to declare their full and unconditioned commitment to the new political system were allowed to function within the new framework.

The second phase was marked by the attempts of President Rafsanjani, who served as President from 1989 to 1997, to rebuild the Iranian economy after the prolonged war with Iraq, which consumed the Iranian resources. Under President Rafsanjani, a new trend
flourished within Iranian society: There was a great emphasis on the role of society, in general, and the individual, in particular, in the reconstruction efforts. The process of reconstruction required a high level of cooperation between the government and the society at large, which marked the beginning of creating a real civil society, particularly on the level of printed media.

On the political level, President Rafsanjani called for the formation of a political front under the name of Servants of Reconstruction. Acting as an umbrella for the activities of the supporters of Rafsanjani’s economic and social policies, Servants of Reconstruction contained the first seeds of what later became known as the Reformers' Camp.

The increasing and overwhelming zeal of Iranian youth marked the beginning of the third phase, which started with the election of President Muhammad Khatami, who became a symbol of civil society. Throughout his years in office, the interest in civil society was increasing, given the emphasis he put on the concept during his two electoral campaigns of 1997 and 2001. The boom in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attempting to push the limits of social and political freedoms further provoked a harsh reaction from the conservative camp, whose members believed that they were the true defenders of the Islamic revolution and its values.

A large number of journalists, intellectuals, human right activists, and opposition leaders were subjected to harassment, persecution, jail, and in some cases death. The tension that characterized the years of Khatami's presidency led to a stalemate on
both the economic and political levels. Civil society organizations were the main victims of such a crackdown.

Thus, Khatami's failure to fulfill his promises of a better life at the economic, social, and political levels led to a backlash against so-called forces of democratization. The election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005 marked a new phase of development in Iranian civil society. The new president came to power with political rhetoric that reemphasized revolutionary slogans, resorting to mass society ideology rather than promoting a more diversified one.

The limited social freedoms acquired during Muhammad Khatami's presidency are now diminishing as part of a new cycle of harassment of human rights activists and reformists. Ahmadinejad is adopting a new political discourse that addresses the economic grievances of the masses rather than their political aspirations.

Though the experience of Iranian civil society had a starting point different from those of other Middle Eastern countries, which have reached the same end. They were weak, inactive, paralyzed, and with ineffective civil society from Western viewpoint. Civil society as organizations and institutions in the region suffer from structural and functional deformations. Among other reasons, such deformations are the results of colonial experiences and unsuitability of imported forms to social and political conditions in the region.

Furthermore, civil society is dealt with from a top-bottom approach, that is, from government to society. Such an approach will always color civil society with a governmental touch and will negatively affect the trust of the people. It is possible, however, to
suggest a different approach based on the successful experience of the religious institution in Iran prior to the 1979 revolution? The historical development of the religious institution in pre-revolutionary Iran reveals a large degree of independence from the government. The religious institution was able to secure its financial and hierarchical independence from the state, and on the other hand it worked as a protector of the people against the tyranny of the state. Hence, Iran witnessed a huge change in the directions of the government by election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad to presidency. The presidential elections in Iran in June 2005 astonished all Iranian and international observers. Indeed, Iranians once again behaved in the political arena in a way that was not predictable even to those who were close to the political scene and power structure. During the elections, a candidate won that even his most optimistic advocates did not expect him such a landslide victory in the polls.

The explanation for his election is that the agenda that Ahmadinejad put forth, which focused on increased social justice, removing very large class differences and improving the fair distribution of oil revenues among the people attracted large numbers of Iranians who live in poverty, are entangled in economic hardships on a daily basis. The vast majority of Iranians have been adversely affected by first the economic policies of Hashemi Rafsanjani since 1989 and later by Khatami’s failure to bring any significant improvement to their subsistence. Ahmadinejad was able to capitalize on those failures and masterfully attract the votes of this class, while Hashemi Rafsanjani’s agenda attracted only the intellectuals or the
highly educated people. For this reason, while Rafsanjani enjoyed the support of the majority of highly-educated people, the masses revolted against all vestiges of the existing order and voted for someone who claimed to belong to the poorest strata of people. The fact is that Ahmadinejad’s populist economic agenda was the main reason behind his success in the elections, nevertheless this does not mean that he came up with a well-orchestrated economic plan for the country’s development. All factions and parties in Iran agree that extended corruption in governmental departments on the one hand and widespread poverty on the other have made people pessimistic about the government’s efficiency.

For this reason, Ahmadinejad promised people to struggle against this corruption and to give them a better share of the oil revenues. However, in the opinion of his opponents, his plan to wage a war on corruption has only destabilized the country’s economy because this program had become indeed a political revenge on the high-ranking managers working with the governments of Rafsanjani and Khatami. At the same time, giving further subsidies to the deprived strata of the society has made Iran's largely state-run economy even more dependent on state directives -- a step that is contrary to the world trend of privatization. The rise in oil prices has further consolidated the structure of rentier state, thus making more problems in the way of achieving political development and democracy.

Unlike Turkey where the incentive of joining the European Union has encouraged the Turkish political elites to initiate a process of democratization, Iran's foreign connections do not bring about such
an incentive. The major regional organizations to which Iran is a member state is Economic Cooperation Organization, Organization of Islamic Conference, and Developing Eight Muslim Countries. None of these regional and international organizations is comprised of mainly undemocratic countries and they do not impose such standards as democratic government for their members.

The political forces and middle-class members in Iran were worried about the likelihood of the loss of social freedoms and political openness that were achieved under the reform movement. Indeed, the middle class strata feared that government might seek to establish a full-fledged religious society as understood by the conservatives, leading to the loss of their social freedoms. At the same time, political forces advocating democracy were fearful that by resorting to mass participation and restricting the space for civil society, the government might close the country’s political space and deny opposition parties and groups of their rights to play a role in decision-making. However, with internal disputes in the conservative camp which led to the vote of no-confidence for some of Ahmadinejad's proposed cabinet ministers, and other opposition parties found a chance to participate in the political process. They even gained some minor victory in the Parliamentary elections in March 2008.

The successful experience of the Third World’s newly democratic countries reveals that democracy can be established in any country where there are powerful middle class and political elites willing to pursue the objective of democracy and where a civil society exists.
In the long run, conservatives and reformists alike may realize that the very survival of the Islamic government with republicanism and democracy requires discourse and open dialogue at the national level. In the end, the formation of independent political parties, associations, and labor unions are responsible factors in Iran's civil society.

It appears that Iran will not see a huge opening in its path to development of civil society in near future and at best the status quo will be maintained in one way or another. Recent developments in the Iranian political arena did not bring any hope for further progress of institution-building within the realm of civil society. Therefore, it is more appropriate to focus on the importance of civil society and culture. Intellectuals and policy makers, thus, should work with the people to strengthen the culture and values of civility and civic sense instead of working on the level of institutions and organizations.