

Middle East

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# New Social Movements in Iran

**The 1979 Iranian revolution ended up in a theocratic regime that mobilized an important part of urban youth for both the war against Iraq and the realization of a utopian Islam. Two decades later, a new type of cultural-political movement, with democratic tendencies, is emerging and is founded mainly on three groups: intellectuals, university students, and women.**

Throughout the 1990s, a post-Islamist intellectual movement has been developing in Iran that challenges the foundations of the Islamic Republic as conceived by Imam Khomeini in his theory of *velayat-e faqih* (The Guardianship of the doctor of the law) which legitimizes an Islamic theocracy within a closed political system, despite the existence of universal voting rights recognized by the Constitution.

## The intellectuals

Islamist intellectuals, such as Shari'ati and Khomeini, advocated a closed system in which politics and religion are directly linked, whereas the post-Islamist intellectuals try to dissociate religion from politics. These new intellectuals are by and large in their fifties. At the time of the Revolution, most of them were strong advocates of revolutionary Islam and some had extreme leftist tendencies. For example, Abdolkarim Soroush was a revolutionary who participated, at least initially, in the 'Cultural Revolution' which resulted in the closure of universities. The same holds for Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the filmmaker who had fought against the Shah and who, after the revolution, was a radical Islamist. These two, like many others, have now changed sides and advocate a tolerant vision of Islam in contrast to the closed political field imposed by radical Islamists. They contest the strongly advocated notion held by Islamist thinkers, above all by Shari'ati, of the close association between politics and religion that gave birth to the Islamic Revolution. In the 1990s, numerous Islamist intellectuals began to gradually change perspectives and to renounce the revolutionary Islamist ideology.

Lay or clerical intellectuals, such as Soroush, Mojtaba Shabestari, Ayatollah Montazeri, Mohsen Kadivar, and Eshkavari challenged the Islamic theocracy in the name of Islam itself. These intellectuals split into many groups: the first one consists of advocates of a purely spiritual Islam, who challenge the *velayat-e faqih* in the name of Islam. According to this group, the politicization of Islam only discredits the faith. The second group leans toward a limited, purely legislative, intervention of Islam in society. According to Kadivar and Montazeri, society must organize itself, without the intervention of the *faqih*. The latter has only the right of supervision (*nezarat*), and not of political domination (*velayat*) over society. The third group comprises secular intellectuals who reason in terms of modernity with no reference (or simply a purely instrumental one) to Islam. All three groups agree that the existing regime is breaking the Constitution (1979-80), and that the law should be respected by the state and all other groups. Despite their diversity, the post-Islamist intellectuals are also united in their implicit rejection of the *velayat-e faqih*, in the approval of 'civil society' (or what some of them call 'religious civil society'), and the will to assert the rule of law. This movement has access to journals and publications, most of which have been banned or attacked by violent pressure groups, and the judiciary.

These intellectuals have a deep influence on the young generation of university students, who read their writings and attend

their debates at universities, despite all repressive attempts at intimidation, including imprisonment and, in some cases, execution.

## The students' movement

The students, who form the second social movement in Iran, are largely inspired by the post-Islamist intellectuals, but their demands are not limited to those of the intellectuals. The latter demand the freedom of expression and the widening of social participation in the political sphere, a demand also shared by the young people. For example, a student association like the *Daftar-e Tahkimeh Vahdat*, which was a revolutionary and militant force representing the Islamist university students until the first half of the 1990s, has changed sides, defending Khatami and his reforms against the pressure groups and the conservatives.

The young generation comprises the numeric majority, more than 60% of the population being below 24 years of age. Most of the youth did not experience the Shah's reign. One of the fundamental demands of this movement is that of freedom in daily life – freedom of dress, freedom to meet those of the opposite sex in public space, and the freedom to participate in the modern world, especially in its diverse consumerist aspects – without being harassed by the special Islamic police who guard against overstepping the forbidden boundaries of proper Islamic conduct (such as the *Bassij*, *Komite*, *Monkerat*, etc.).

Before Khatami, young people were constantly pursued and harassed everywhere, in universities, classrooms, streets, and in their own cars by these repressive bodies and they suffered continuous humiliation at their hands. Since Khatami's election, there is some relaxation of this state of surveillance, but many feel that this is a precarious freedom as the vigilantes can harass them on certain days, while on other days they are left alone. And while there is still no guarantee of security, the most humiliating measures against them have been lifted.

The Islamic regime, which used to be the basis of the collective identity of the young revolutionary generation of the 1980s, has been transformed over time into a power opposed to the youth. It is now feared and despised for the violence and repressive rigour it imposes on the new generation.

## The women's movement

Finally, there is also a new women's movement, which can be best understood by referring back to the Revolution, when for the first time in Iranian history, women's presence was crucial in street demonstrations. (In the most massive of these, a third of the participants were women.) Nevertheless, at the time, the vast majority of these women had no specific demands based on their gender. Women intellectuals were mostly influenced by Marxism and maintained the corresponding notion that once the proletariat would come to rule, women's issues would be automatically resolved. As for Islamist women, they believed that Islam would adequately solve women's problems by re-establishing the communitarian harmony destroyed by the monarchy. Consequently, there were no specifically gender-based demands among the vast majority of women demonstrators in the 1978-1979 Revolution.

However, the onset of the Islamic regime brought with it serious restrictions on

women. Primarily, they were forbidden to occupy certain administrative positions, and those who worked for the state under a contract were laid off or did not have their contracts renewed. With the establishment of Islamic laws, numerous other obstacles were imposed on women, diminishing their equality of status: exclusion from certain jobs (such as being a judge); inequality of divorce (the man can divorce his wife, but not vice versa); inequality of guardianship of children after divorce (the man can keep male children after the age of 2, and female children after the age of 9); unequal laws of inheritance (women receive one-half of a man's share); and the inequality in the face of justice (a woman's testimony counts as half of a man's).

The women's movement in the 1990s began on the precept that the installation of the Islamic regime had led to the regression of women's rights on many levels. At the same time, in fields such as education and health, women's presence has improved. Literacy has increased among both sexes, and women's access to modernity, at least in the field of education, is approaching that of men. Much more than in the past, girls in rural areas have access to schools. There is thus an increasing equalization of access to modernity for women in schools and universities. However, once they enter the labour market, they find themselves excluded by social mores, by men, but also by Islamic legislation. Increasing modernization brings them intellectually and psychologically ever closer to men, making the legal denial of access to equality incomprehensible, even scandalous in their view. As long as women's social and cultural lives were different from those of men, this inequality was perceived as emanating from 'natural' differences. But now, the intellectual status and living conditions of women have changed, especially among the urban middle and lower middle classes, where many women work so as to maintain a decent standard of living in their household. The legal inequality becomes all the more intolerable with the increase in economic hardship faced by those in the urban areas, but also by the vast majority. Despite the difficulty in obtaining equal pay for equal work, women's incomes are vital and sometimes even necessary to pay for children's basic education.

Women's political rights of citizenship are theoretically almost equal to those of the men. On the one hand, a woman's vote in elections, or any other exercise in citizenship, counts the same as that of a man. In the parliament, their rights and voices count the same as any male deputy. However, when it comes to family law, the inequality becomes flagrant: a woman cannot travel without the explicit permission of her husband, she can be divorced without any convincing reason and can be denied the right of keeping her children after divorce. Nonetheless, some of these measures have changed recently due to women's intervention in the public sphere and in the Parliament.

Before the revolution, secular and Islamist women were opposed to one another, but now, facing similar disillusionment with legal inequalities, they are moving closer together.

## Towards a new civil society

These intellectuals', university students' and women's movements, while being distinct, do have several things in common. They renounce revolutionary violence and

are willing to construct a society based on dialogue and compromise. On the one hand, since Khatami's election in 1997, the absolute majority of the people support the democratic turn. On the other hand, a significant degree of political power remains in the hands of anti-democratic conservatives, including: the juridical branch and the important office of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, which is in the hands of Ayatollah Khomeini; the Revolutionary Foundations, which have access to significant sums of capital lying outside government control; the Counsel of the Guardians, who can veto all the laws that seem un-Islamic to them; and the Office of the Superior Interests of the Islamic Regime, which arbitrates between the Parliament and the Counsel of the Guardians in case of disagreement between them.

Thus, we are faced with a post-Islamist society, with a divided power structure whose essential instruments nevertheless continue to be in the hands of the conservatives, while all the groups fighting for the opening of Iranian society are losing patience as the promised reforms run into institutional obstacles. ◆