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'Precarize' and divide: Iranian workers from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement

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CHAPTER 7

Lagging Behind:

Labor Precarization, Civil Society and the Khāneh-ye-Kārgar's Discourses during the Reformist Era (1997-2005)

M. Stella Morgana, "Labour Rights in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *The Rule of Law and the Politics of the Judiciary in Contemporary Iran*, edited by Hadi Enayat and Mirjam Künkler, (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2021).



Disputes over the Labor Law discussed in *Kār-o-Kārgar* (May 2000-Khordād 1379).

Introduction

To what extent did the Khatami government's top-down discourse on labor stimulate hegemonic labor-related projects? How far were counter-hegemonic plans able to develop? This chapter addresses these questions by exploring the encounters between the top-down and bottom-up realms within what Gramsci calls "civil society."

Chapter 4 discussed the strategies of constructing consent among workers, and chapter 5 followed the trajectories of resistance of the labor force. This chapter navigates the connections and disconnections between these two dimensions, through the Gramscian prism of civil society, as

developed and understood during Khatami's presidency (1997-2005). In particular, it examines the role of a key actor, the Workers' House (*Khāneh-ye Kārgar*), which represented a potential bridge between the Islamic Republic government and workers. The analysis of both primary and secondary sources in Persian and English (such as labor regulations, newspapers, official statements, and interviews with labor experts and workers conducted by the author in Iran) proposes a two-fold argument. 1) Under the reformist government, the IRI, while promoting the formation of civil society, kept pursuing the path of labor precarization processes. These processes had already started during the Rafsanjani presidency, through liberalization policies and the glamorization of success, as detailed in chapter 6. 2) The Workers' House acted ambiguously. On the one hand, it challenged Khatami's reforms of the Labor Law and criticized practices that exploited and discriminated against workers, claiming to be an independent organization. On the other hand, it operated alongside the state apparatus, as a complicit actor in maintaining the status quo and curtailing independent workers' attempts to exert their influence and utilize their bargaining power. Furthermore, discourses on civil society and participation that spread during this period developed beyond the control of the IRI's apparatus, producing unintended consequences that will be explored in chapter 8. As chapter 5 has already shown, precarious workers took advantage of the opening of new political spaces and managed to build networks of collective solidarity. Most of these transformations occurred beyond the umbrella of the Workers' House.

Developing these arguments, this chapter first delves into Gramsci's conception and critique of civil society, by unfolding its dual meaning and potential. Second, it progresses from the theory to the Iranian context, introducing how the reformists in power overlooked workers in their civil society rhetoric, reduced the space for workers' legal protection, and were unsuccessful in bringing about change with regard to the legalization of independent labor unions. Third, it reflects on the attitude of the Workers' House towards the government and the workers by carefully analyzing its discourses in the early 2000s about the battle for small enterprises to be exempt from the Labor Law, as expressed in the *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*'s newspaper *Kār-o-Kārgar*.

The multifunctional arena of civil society in a Gramscian understanding

Discourses expose the connections between domination and the production of consensus. As noted throughout the previous chapters, these imaginary bridges are revealed through language. Words are useful tools of power. They involve hegemony. This chapter is about the arena where these conjunctions of coercion and consent are created, a place where relations of power and domination manifest, a site where conflict and counter-hegemonic trajectories develop. Gramsci calls it “civil society.”⁶³⁶ Before proceeding to the exploration of the reformist era in Iran, it is worth dwelling on how the concept of civil society is understood here.

In Gramsci’s analysis, civil society is linked to what he terms “political society.” The state –which is hegemonic in nature–⁶³⁷ is “a balance between political society and civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through so-called private organizations, such as the church, trade unions, schools.”⁶³⁸ Each fortifies the other, even though both apparatuses’ inner dynamics might diverge from time to time. They are woven together. They both correspond to “the function of hegemony that leading groups exercise over the whole society and the ruling classes express through State domination.”⁶³⁹ Politics represents the ground where relations between the state and civil society unfold, as the first intervenes “to educate” the latter, which should educate the society.⁶⁴⁰ The active and positive moment of historical developments, as Gramsci reflects throughout his *Prison Notebooks*, is situated in civil society.⁶⁴¹ Therefore, on the one hand, political society dominates, and civil society creates the cultural-hegemonic conditions for its power to be accepted. On the other hand, beyond a “balance based on compromise”⁶⁴²

⁶³⁶ Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q13, §18, 1590; Q 26, §6, 2302

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Antonio Gramsci, “Lettera a Tania del 7 Settembre 1931,” [Letter to Tania, September 7, 1931,] in A. Gramsci, T. Schucht, *Lettere 1926-1935 [Letters 1926-1935]*, A. Natoli e C. Daniele eds., (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), 791.

⁶³⁹ See Antonio Gramsci, *Gli intellettuali e l’organizzazione della cultura, [Intellectuals and Organization of Culture]*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1949), and Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere [Letters from Prison]*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1947), 481.

⁶⁴⁰ Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q7, §19, 868

⁶⁴¹ The concept of civil society, strictly related to that of hegemony, is scattered across the three volumes of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

⁶⁴² Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q10, §61, 1359-1360.

between the two, civil society could pave the way for both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles. In other words, civil society is the arena where knowledge can be disseminated, intellectuals can develop, and ties of solidarity can potentially be built. When Gramsci questions the ideological structure of a ruling class, and how it is actually organized, he links it to cultural hegemony, referring to “the material organization meant to preserve, defend, and develop the ideological front.”⁶⁴³ Therefore, the tools for deactivating relations of domination potentially lie in civil society, as well as in access to political power. Civil society represents the first stage in the struggle for hegemony, as, initially, it carries the values of the dominant classes and contributes to the formation of its hegemonic discourse.

Going back to the questions opening this chapter, the horizon where top-down discursive projects and counter-hegemonic plans meet is precisely civil society. This encounter – Gramsci argues – occurs in hegemony, as civil society can produce both hegemony and counter-hegemony. Civil society is both the site where consent is constructed in the service of the ruling apparatus and potentially the channel for the expression of the masses’ dissatisfaction. For this reason, the state apparatus (here understood as its coercive dimension) can act ambiguously. It might decide to legally empower civil society, in order to de facto co-opt it. Concurrently, it can opt for direct encroachments into the space of civil society, through repression. When conflict arises, Gramsci argues, “some tools of civil society might resemble defense systems in a war of position.”⁶⁴⁴ A war of position is carried out into the sphere of civil society. At that point, a crisis of hegemony occurs, as political society and civil society separate. “The most acute phase of the struggle against the despotism of career intellectuals and against those who exercise authority by divine right consists in the effort to enrich culture and heighten consciousness. Moreover, this effort cannot be postponed until tomorrow or until such time as when we are politically free. It is itself freedom, it is itself the stimulus and the condition for action,” Gramsci writes.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴³ Ibid. Q3, §49, 332-333.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid Q7, §10, 860.

⁶⁴⁵ Gramsci-Leonetti, “Prima Liberi” [*Free first*] in *Il Grido del Popolo*, August 31, 1918.

For workers, in a Gramscian understanding, this would mean: first, becoming conscious of their class potential; and second, overcoming the economic determinism of corporativism. Civil society is a mediator of private and economic interests, at least in a first stage. It can act only for the benefit of the dominant classes. However, the struggle goes beyond the narrow economic space. It is an ideological competition for hegemony, where all spheres are involved. For this reason, Gramsci rejects the limited concept of economic determinism. Likewise, his critique addresses the unions in particular, when they act to maintain the status quo. Regarding corporativism and unionism, he notes: “It is the form that labor-force as a commodity can take, when a regime manages to dominate the market [...] it forces the entrepreneur to accept legality when dealing with the worker, and this legality is conditioned by the trust that the entrepreneur has in the solvency of the union to obtain the respect of the obligations contracted by the working masses.”⁶⁴⁶ Therefore, when in this form, unionism can hinder workers in their struggle to “become dominant and to develop beyond the economic-corporativist phase in order to elevate itself to a phase of hegemony, which is political in the civil society.”⁶⁴⁷

How will looking at the reformist period in Iran through a Gramscian lens enhance the analysis? In the context of this chapter, Gramsci’s reflections provide the theoretical tools to avoid the risk of situating workers exclusively within an economic context and its direct expressions (unionism). How the concept of civil society, in its dual meaning and role, developed under Khatami, both for the president and for the Workers’ House, is at the core of the following sections. The aim here is to elaborate the connections and disconnections between the IRI government’s legal/economic apparatus and civil society – understood in all its nuances, as Gramsci reflected. Specifically, the next section will proceed in this direction by delving into the historical context. It will look in more depth at the Khatami government’s understanding of civil society, that they

⁶⁴⁶ Gramsci, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 15 June 2020.

⁶⁴⁷ Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q13, §18, 1589-1590.

combined with the concept of the rule of law, before analyzing the labor transformations that took place during his presidency.

Khatami's quest for the rule of law and civil society

How were civil society and the rule of law understood by the reformists led by Khatami? What “participants” in the public arena were missing in his narrative? This section seeks to answer these questions by looking closely at and contextualizing the words and imagery used by Khatami in his vision for Iranian society.

When the newly elected president gave his inaugural speech as President in front of the Iranian parliament, the words “rule of law,” “rights,” “civil society,” “freedoms of individuals,” and “participation” resonated several times around the room.⁶⁴⁸ In calling for the support of “political institutions and organizations, associations, the media, scholars and researchers, academicians and educators, experts and specialists, all men and women of science, letters, culture and art, and all citizens in all walks of life,” and by claiming to address the “people’s most fundamental right, [as] the right to determine their own destiny,” the newly elected president of the Islamic Republic did not mention workers specifically.⁶⁴⁹ He presented his plan of action by founding it on three pillars: the rule of law, justice, and civil society’s participation. He declared: “The overall policies of the executive branch will be based on institutionalizing the rule of law; vigorous pursuit of justice as an exalted religious value and the pivotal factor for social trust, stability, progress and prosperity [...] empowering the people in order to achieve and ensure an ever-increasing level of their discerning participation.”⁶⁵⁰ Furthermore, he referred to the establishment of the rule of law as “an Islamic, revolutionary and national obligation, which requires a conducive and enabling environment as well as legal means and instruments coupled with public involvement and assistance.”⁶⁵¹ Khatami

⁶⁴⁸ Mohammad Khatami, Inaugural speech at the Iranian Majles, 4 August 1997. Full transcription in Mohammad Khatami, *Hope and Challenge: The Iranian President speaks*, (Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global and Cultural Studies, 1997), 70-86.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid, 76.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, 76-77.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, 77.

envisaged the future of the Islamic Republic under his rule by specifically addressing “a morally and materially prosperous individual,” “the freedom of individuals and the rights of the nation,” in order to provide “the necessary conditions for the realization of constitutionally guaranteed liberties, strengthening and expanding the institutions of the civil society.”⁶⁵² If, on the one hand, his government project was meant to “strengthen the culture of dialogue, discourse, appraisal and critique,” on the other hand, his reform-oriented speech situated the concepts of law and justice and narrowed the framework of social justice, by increasing the focus on the progress of individuals within the context of civil society.⁶⁵³ During his campaign, his emphasis on civil society boosted women’s and the youth’s participation and engagement in what was defined as “healthy competition” and “collective cooperation.”⁶⁵⁴ As Khatami had gained about 80 percent of the vote in the May 1997 turnout, analysts stressed that his victory had only been made possible by the crucial support of women, young people, and the middle class, who had not participated in previous elections.⁶⁵⁵ Those who went to the polls followed the president’s program and hopes, which were oriented towards “a more legal society with more clearly defined rights and duties for citizens.”⁶⁵⁶ In this perspective, the ideal “citizen” was a “participant,” “empowered,” mastering his/her own “destiny.” Thus, in the expected confrontation with the representatives of the state, citizens – according to Khatami’s nationalist narrative and understanding – had to embody specific features: being critical, yet obedient and loyal. Hence, the modalities for accessing participation, and the future lay in the encounter between the citizen and the state.

Therefore, the connecting link between the rule of law and civil society in Khatami’s discourse is to be interpreted as the cooperation between the government and organizations from civil society. This bond represented a critical stimulus for the opening up of political space and participation, as

⁶⁵² Ibid, 77-80.

⁶⁵³ Ibid, 81.

⁶⁵⁴ *Iran News Daily*, 5 April 1997.

⁶⁵⁵ Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami’s Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 54-55.

⁶⁵⁶ Khatami, *Hope, and Challenge: The Iranian President speaks*, 89.

mentioned in chapter 4. At the same time, the administration could benefit from its move in terms of legitimacy and consent.^{657 658} As the previous section highlighted discussing the Gramscian theoretical foundations of civil society, during the reformist era the ruling apparatus used this concept instrumentally in order to solidify its consent.

Before this chapter proceeds to the exploration of labor policies and the implementation of the rule of law, it is worth reflecting on the relation between addresser and addressee. What did consent mean? Consent by whom? As chapter 4 argued, a shift in focus was taking place: the top-down discourse began to address the educated middle classes, leaving the masses and workers out of the spotlight. Nevertheless, it was a slow process. The myth of the winner and success – which was glamorized throughout Rafsanjani’s presidency, as chapter 6 showed – had provided fertile ground for Khatami’s policies to bloom, especially among the youth. In the new president’s conception, the legal and civil society approach lacked de facto a definite awareness of the heterogeneity of Iranian society. Indeed, in its realization of cultural and political “development” and “prosperity,” it largely overlooked the structural and legal obstacles hindering workers’ participation in particular, such as class, economic, and bargaining power.⁶⁵⁹ Economic and labor issues were not at the center of the public debate stimulated by Khatami, as a clear economic agenda did not capture the slogans or make the headlines throughout his presidency.⁶⁶⁰ In the words of a leading reformist member of the Majles, Mohsen Armin, the reformists were pursuing the objective of improving the economic situation in Iran by turning “the attention to the political structure” and creating, in the first instance, the “mechanisms of political control.”⁶⁶¹ In this regard, before moving on to the next section that will delve into these obstacles in more depth, tackling the legal reforms relating to the

⁶⁵⁷ See Paola Rivetti, *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 113.

⁶⁵⁸ For an overview of the broader debate on the concept of civil society in Khatami’s Iran, see Mehran Kamrava, The Civil Society Discourse in Iran, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 28:2 (2001), 165-185 and Said Amir Arjomand, “Civil Society and the Rule of Law in the Constitutional Politics of Iran under Khatami,” *Social Research*, Summer 2000, Vol.67(2), 283-301.

⁶⁵⁹ Khatami, *Hope, and Challenge: The Iranian President speaks*, 70-86.

⁶⁶⁰ See Farhad Nomani & Sohrab Behdad, “The Rise and Fall of Iranian Classes in the Post-Revolutionary Decades,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 44:3(2008), 377-396.

⁶⁶¹ Interview with *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 20 September 2000 (30 Shahrivar 1379).

labor realm, it is essential to provide at least a glimpse of the complexities of the context. Once at the helm of his government, the road ahead for Khatami was full of pitfalls, both political and economic. He was under pressure from hardliners who were, firstly fearful of, and latterly opposed to his attempts at reform, labeling them “Western” or anti-Islamic, as well as threats “to security and order” in the country.⁶⁶² The factional struggle reached its peak in February 2004, when the conservatives gained control of two-thirds of the parliament: a harsh setback for what had by then been termed the “Tehran Spring.”⁶⁶³ In terms of the economy, part of the Second Development Plan (1995-1999) – approved during Rafsanjani’s term and advocating stabilization along with economic liberalization and privatization – coincided with the initial phase of Khatami’s administration. By then, he had inherited high inflation, increasing social inequalities, rising youth unemployment, a substantial budget deficit, low crude oil prices, and declining non-oil exports.⁶⁶⁴ Thus, the expectations in terms of GDP growth remained unfulfilled. When Khatami’s administration launched the Third Development Plan (2000-2005), it was in the spirit of “progress” and, de facto, rapid growth, aiming to privatize several industries, reorganize bureaucracy and subsidies, and reduce poverty, along with the creation of an Oil Stabilization Fund.⁶⁶⁵ Hence, boosted by external factors (such as the oil boom and the rising oil prices during his second term), Iran’s economy enjoyed a growth phase. Indeed, the overall situation in terms of real wages and unemployment partly improved.⁶⁶⁶ However, not for all strata of Iranian society, and not for all “participants” in the arena of civil society.

The next section will start from this state of neglect.

⁶⁶² See Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, 257-265 and Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 94-99.

⁶⁶³ Morad Saghafi, “The New Landscape of Iranian Politics,” *Middle East Report*, 233 (Winter 2004), 16-23.

⁶⁶⁴ See Jahangir Amuzegar, “Khatami’s Legacies: Dashed Hopes,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 2006), 57-74.

⁶⁶⁵ *Hamshahri*, 2 November 2004; *Donya-e Eqtesad*, 24 May 2005.

⁶⁶⁶ See Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Oil Wealth and Economic Growth in Iran,” in eds. Ali Gheissari, *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 3-37. See also Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Population, Human Capital and Economic Growth in Iran,” in *Human Capital: Population Economics in the Middle East*, eds. Ismail Sirageldin, (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2002), 142-157.

Unprotected ergo invisible: cornering workers while seeking to reform the Labor Law

Capturing the disjuncture between Khatami's discourse around participation and the effects of it on workers would be not an easy task without investigating the boundary between *de jure* and *de facto* realms. What has remained unwritten so far in the analysis of the reformist period is, indeed, two-fold. First, it concerns the mechanisms by which the reform-oriented presidency narrowed workers' space for legal protection. Second, Khatami's administration failed in its attempts to enhance the confrontation between the IRI and wage earners, through the (unfulfilled promise of) the legalization of independent trade unions. In fact, it was at the legal level that the reforms did not succeed in turning workers into participant citizens.

As a result of the Labor Law amendments approved by Khatami's administration between 1999 and 2003 – amid much criticism from the Workers' House, as the next section will discuss – approximately 3 million wage earners remained legally unprotected and mostly unrepresented.⁶⁶⁷

The *Majles* passed the provisions that exempted small enterprises and workshops with five or fewer workers from part of the labor law's coverage. Initially, it approved the measure on a temporary basis, in the context of the administration's efforts to reduce bureaucracy in order to boost the private sector.⁶⁶⁸ The Labor Law amendments should have lasted for three years. Nevertheless, they were extended beyond this date: in 2003, small firms with ten or fewer workers were allowed – *de jure* and *de facto* – to operate outside of 37 articles of the Labor Law.⁶⁶⁹ The formulation was vague because it referred to "particular circumstances" and "exceptional cases," subject to the consideration of the Council of Ministers.⁶⁷⁰ The temporary basis of the measure was renewed after

⁶⁶⁷ As reported by ILO in a document on Convention no. 111 on Labor discrimination, citing a worker member of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Available here: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100_COMMENT_ID,P13100_LANG_CODE:2555743,en

⁶⁶⁸ See International Labour Organization, "An Employment Strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran" (ILO, 2003), 31-37.

⁶⁶⁹ See *Majles*, amendments of Labor Law as approved on 27 January 2003 [7 Bahman 1381]. Available here: <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/122666>

⁶⁷⁰ Iran Labor Law, miscellaneous provisions. English translation is available here: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/21843/64830/E90IRN01.HTM#c12>. In Persian: Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, available here <https://rkj.mcls.gov.ir/fa/moghararaat/ghavanin/ghanoonkar>

two years and became widely adopted.⁶⁷¹ For workers, it constituted a considerable loss in terms of working conditions and contractual guarantees, as it was officially incorporated in article 191. This limitation of legal labor protection paved the way for the deregulation of working conditions and workers' precarization. It impacted overtime pay, additional remuneration for nightshifts, paid leave, and employers' duties related to job classification or severance pay. The relation between employers and employees began to detach from its initial definition in the 1990 Labor Law, shifting in favor of employers. Larger enterprises began to benefit from these new measures to bypass the law through the use of different contractors.⁶⁷² In June 2003, when the International Labour Organization assessed the employment situation in Iran, it recommended that Iran "improve compliance of the labor laws by micro and small enterprises since the growth of small enterprises is often constrained by their inability to comply."⁶⁷³

The provision, which exempted small workshops from compliance with part of the Labor Law, fitted a context where a plethora of temporary contracts was expanding. These contracts had been made legal during Rafsanjani's second term and codified into article 7 of the Labor Law. This states: "A labor contract is composed of a written or oral contract according to which the worker will provide labor on a temporary or non-temporary duration for the employer, in exchange for receiving compensation for his efforts."⁶⁷⁴ The maximum temporary duration was not determined. As note 1 to the same article clarifies, "it will be determined by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and confirmed by the Cabinet."⁶⁷⁵ A second note was added to minimize abuse by employers, stating that "in jobs which by nature have a continuous duration, should the duration not

⁶⁷¹ The widespread diffusion and the strategies for circumnavigating the new regulation have been discussed and confirmed to the author during several interviews with workers between January 2018 and October 2019, as well as interviews with a lawyer and employment law expert (Tehran, 6 June 2019), and a labor economist (Tehran, 18 January 2018 and 11 June 2018).

⁶⁷² Legal expert, interview with the author. Tehran, 11 May 2019.

⁶⁷³ International Labour Organization, "An Employment Strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran," 74.

⁶⁷⁴ Labor Law, 1990, Chapter two. In Persian: Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, available here <https://rkj.mcls.gov.ir/fa/moghararaat/ghavanin/ghanoonkar>. English translation, *Iran Data Portal*, Syracuse University, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/labor-contracts>

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

be mentioned in the contract, the contract will be considered permanent.” Nevertheless, the consequences of the erosion of workers’ rights proved to be disruptive.

At the start of Khatami’s presidency, unemployment and discontent among the jobless population were severe issues to cope with, as mentioned in chapter 5. At the same time, supporters of economic liberalization continued to press for the relaxation of legal regulations to achieve a more private enterprise-friendly framework. The reformists were more concerned with removing any obstacles in their way in their pursuit of the accumulation of human capital, firmly convinced that Iran’s regulations were written only to protect jobs rather than facilitate their creation.⁶⁷⁶ Therefore, temporary contracts became tools to contain criticism, at least in the short term. However, events did not go this way. Looking back at the phenomenon over time can help us understand the impact of such a legal basis to the casualization of labor in the country. In 1990 only 6 percent of workers were on temporary contracts. By the end of the 2000s, they represented 90 percent of all contracts.⁶⁷⁷ Short-term contracts narrowed wage earners’ space for labor protection further, as they excluded workers from rights enshrined in the law, such as severance benefits, paid sick or maternity leave, etc. Moreover, they contributed to fragmenting the process of solidarity building among workers, thus hindering collective bargaining, despite – as chapter 5 discussed– the continual eruption of labor protests against the widespread use of these measures.

From a legal point of view, Khatami sought to facilitate workers’ articulation of their collective requests. He attempted to make their voices heard, through the establishment of independent institutions. Nevertheless, it was a lost battle. Drafting the legal conditions for the “empowerment” of workers as citizens represented a crucial step for the reformist president. In 2003, the

⁶⁷⁶ See Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Human resources in Iran: potentials and challenges,” *Iranian Studies*, 38:1 (2005): 117-147.

⁶⁷⁷ *Iranian Student News Agency* (ISNA), 20 July 2010, <https://www.isna.ir/news/8904-16059/%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%83%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D8%AA-%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%87-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86>.

negotiations lasted for seven months. Indeed, by cooperating with the International Labour Organization, and paving the way for Iran to join the World Trade Organization, Khatami considered new changes in the Labor Law. In particular, he attempted to reform Chapter 6 of the Code on labor organization, freedom of association, and collective bargaining. As in the ILO's report, the existent regulation provided by the Islamic Republic was deemed "deficient," and "undermining confidence in collective bargaining," the organization made a series of recommendations to the Islamic Republic. It advised reforming the law to: first, "respect freedom of association and facilitation of collective bargaining;" and second, strengthen workers and employers' organizations "to fully participate in social dialogue."⁶⁷⁸ Editing note 4 of article 131 was the option on the table. It could represent the first brick in the wall to allow the establishment of unions that would be beyond state control and intervention, thus without any subordination to the IRI. Additionally, the reformist administration would have had to ratify the Freedom of Association and Protection of the right to organize Convention 1948 (no. 87). In article 2, it stipulates that "Workers and employers, without distinction whatsoever, shall have the right to establish and, subject only to the rules of the organization concerned, to join organizations of their choosing without previous authorization."⁶⁷⁹ In May 2003 Bernard Jernigan, Director General of the liberalization department of the ILO, reported on the meeting with Iranian officials from the Ministry of Labor in triumphalist tones. "From now on, the syndicates are authorized to represent laborers, while the Islamic Labor Councils will act as consultants in the welfare affairs of guild units (...) guild associations will be registered by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, while this does not mean that the ministry has the right to interfere with their affairs," he said.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁸ International Labour Organization, "An Employment Strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran," 60 and 72.

⁶⁷⁹ ILO, Freedom of Association and Protection of the right to organize Convention 1948 (no. 87). Available here https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312232

⁶⁸⁰ *IRNA*, 24 Ordibehesht 1382 (14 May 2003). English translation available via *Payvand*, 15 May 2003 <http://www.payvand.com/news/03/may/1084.html>

Nevertheless, free and independent unions became victims of deadlocked negotiations and factional struggles. The Guild Union Act of May 2004 did not bring about the expected results.⁶⁸¹ Stumbling blocks brought Khatami's endeavor to a political impasse. The Workers' House proved a determined and decisive opponent of these reforms. The next section will investigate its complex role, as a *trait-d'union* between the IRI and labor, and as a tool of control over workers. It will show how the Workers' House acted as a member of civil society according to the two-fold notion discussed by Gramsci: working in the interests of the status quo, while at the same time challenging it.

The Workers' House under the magnifying glass

The *Khāneh-ye kārgar* has a unique status in Iran. Its name is not mentioned in the Labor Law. It is not a fully independent trade union or a workers' council; it does not represent an NGO; it is not recognized as a party.⁶⁸² However, it is supported by the Islamic Republic, financially, logistically, and politically. Self-defined as “an organization believing in the concept of *velāyat-e-faqih*⁶⁸³ and adhering to the Constitution [...] defending the rights of the deprived and the oppressed,”⁶⁸⁴ it constitutes de facto the most influential workers' organization in Iran, and it operates as a confederation. Articles 130 and 131 of the Labor Law's chapter VI stipulates that workers can be represented by 1) Islamic Labor Councils (that can exist in any workplace with more than 35 employees) along with Islamic Societies, 2) Guild Societies (*anjomān-e senfi*); or 3) they can nominate their own representatives (*namayandegān-e azād*). These institutions are explicitly conceived to “propagate and spread Islamic culture and defend the Islamic Revolution's

⁶⁸¹ *Majles*, 24 Esfand 1382 (14 March 2004). See ILO, in Persian <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/91489/106120/F2053865805/IRN91489.pdf>

⁶⁸² Alireza Kheirollahi defines it as an “ideological party that has a not clear and not democratic legal and political structure.” See Alireza *Kargaran bi Tabaqeh: Tavān-e Chānezani Kārgarān dar Iran pas az Enqelab*, Workers Without Class: Bargaining Power in Iran after the Revolution (Tehran: Agah, 1398). Abbas Khalegi defines it a “party organization.” See Abbas Khaleji, “Tahavvol Māhiat va Kārkard Tashakkol-hā ye Kārgari dar Irān pas az Enqelāb-e Eslāmi,” *Motāl'āt-e tārikhi nezāmi*, 1389 (no.8-9), 99-22.

⁶⁸³ The doctrine of guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, as expounded by Khomeini.

⁶⁸⁴ Khāneh-ye kārgar, “Dar bāreh-ye mā,” <http://workerhouse.ir/subject.aspx?groupid=18>

achievement" in the workplace.⁶⁸⁵ Their right to existence is enshrined in Article 26 of the Iranian Constitution's framework, thus on the condition that they do "not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, Islamic standards, and the foundation of the Islamic Republic."⁶⁸⁶ Procedures, duties, and powers, as well as their activities, must be supervised by the Ministries of the Interior and Labor and Social Affairs and the Organization of Islamic Propaganda. They are controlled by the IRI, as the law requires "a representative on behalf of the Velayat-e Faqih" to be present.⁶⁸⁷ Therefore, the modalities of access and participation belong to the top-down sphere, as they do not directly involve workers in these processes. Within this power vacuum from a bottom-up perspective, the Workers' House managed to expand its room for *manoeuvre*, claiming to be independent from the government. Islamic Labor Councils, Guild societies, and workers' representatives all function de facto under the Workers' House umbrella, although there is no record of this in the Labor Law. Therefore, this section will proceed driven by the following questions. Where did this status as an umbrella organization originate? Moreover, how did it impact Khatami's quest for civil society in the context of labor relations?

The *Khāne-ye kārgar* was formed in the 1960s⁶⁸⁸ During the period of revolutionary momentum, as a secular entity, it played a crucial role in fostering workers' collective demands. It became a point of reference for the working poor and unemployed, influenced by the Leftist group Peykār.⁶⁸⁹ In the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, following a struggle for hegemony with Leftist groups that had been purged by the newly created Islamic Republic apparatus, the Workers' House came under the influence of the Islamic Republican Party. After the IRP's dissolution in 1987, it was considered close to the faction of Rafsanjani, which it openly supported during the Fifth Majles vote.⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁵ Labor Law, chapter 6.

⁶⁸⁶ The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. English translation available via *Iran Chamber* http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch03.php

⁶⁸⁷ See Labor Law, Article 138.

⁶⁸⁸ Afshin Habibzadeh, *Moshārekāt Siyāsi Tabaqeh-ye Kārgar dar Irān*, [Political Participation of the Working Class in Iran,] (Tehran: Enteshārat Kavir, 1387), 90-92.

⁶⁸⁹ As noted by Asef Bayat, "Workless revolutionaries. The Unemployed Movement in Revolutionary Iran," in Stephanie Cronin eds, *Subalterns and Social Protest. History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 104-106.

⁶⁹⁰ See Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran*, 54-55.

Khatami could not enjoy the same support, as towards the end of his presidential campaign in May 1997, the Workers' House announced that it would not be endorsing any candidates.⁶⁹¹ Although gravitating towards the Islamic Left orbit, the Workers' House distanced itself from Khatami since the beginning of the reformist mandate. Nevertheless, its leadership started early on to benefit from the open-door policy towards parties promoted by Khatami, which between 1997 and the late 2000s resulted in the number of parties in Iran increasing from 35 to 95.⁶⁹² In fact, in October 1998, the Islamic Labor Party was officially registered in Tehran. Among its key members were Alireza Mahjoub, the secretary-general of the *Khāne-ye Kārgar*, as well as Hossein Kamali, who was already Minister of Labor in Rafsanjani's cabinet. In the words of another of its members, Abdolqasem Sarhadizadeh, the party's aims were to boost "workers' participation" in public life, and protect their rights.⁶⁹³ On the one hand, these details provide a benchmark for evaluating the actual connections between the Workers' House and the political sphere of the state apparatus, despite their claims of being independent and non-governmental. On the other hand, they allow us to grasp the disconnection points through the lens of the discursive – as well as instrumental – use of "participation." Indeed, on several levels, participation [*mosharekat*] represented a key notion for the encounters between the top-down and bottom-up realms during the Khatami era. First, the Workers' House appropriated the terminology that was closely associated with the reformists. At the same time, it exploited the more extensive – although still limited – political space for criticism, to engage in a campaign against Khatami's government. It took a critical stance on its provisions regarding labor precarization through the newspaper *Kār-o-Kārgar*, waving the flag of workers' rights and participation, as the next section will reveal.

It acted ambiguously when Khatami's team, in cooperation with the ILO, proposed to reform chapter VII of the Labor Law on collective bargaining. It fiercely opposed the changes regarding

⁶⁹¹ *Iran News*, 8 May 1997.

⁶⁹² Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 109.

⁶⁹³ *Iran*, 19 Bahman 1377 (8 February 1999).

the establishment of free unions in order to maintain the status quo. It can be argued that independent workers' organizations would have threatened the powerful position of the Workers' House as a self-appointed labor stronghold with a dual role that could be expressed as follows: 1) advocating for workers' justice and challenging the government's decisions, while 2) contributing to investigating activities in the workplace, isolating potential conflicts as they arose and stepping in to quell further outbreaks of protest – as the workers and labor experts interviewed for this research critically reported.

Rights and participation in *Kār-o-Kārgar*

Top-down discourses may produce unexpected consequences. They cannot determine whether or to what extent outcomes will develop into counter-hegemonic projects. Navigating the complexity of the role of the Workers' House entails taking these considerations into account to avoid the risk of stigmatizing an actor as being either for or against the IRI tout-court, as well as for or against workers. A closer look at how the discourses about rights and participation that emanated from Khatami's administration were conveyed by the Workers' House, can shed light upon its objectives and achievements. Analysis of the *Kār-o-Kārgar* newspaper headlines criticizing the government's economic policies, as well as the amendments to the Labor Law in 2000, leaves one grappling to identify what ideas of legality the Workers' House embodied during the reformist era. It can be argued that it acted within the IRI framework, both against the government and for workers' job security, while operating to defuse social conflict. This behavior, on the one hand, stimulated the internal debate about labor protection and job security. On the other hand, it reinforced the role of the Workers' House as a political yet not independent organization,⁶⁹⁴ with no interest in campaigning for the establishment of free unions, beyond its own sphere of interest. These explorations allow us to grasp the discursive and political trajectories that eventually provided a

⁶⁹⁴ For more details on the Workers' House's claims to be independent and a critical discussion, see the answers to the following interview provided by Alireza Mahjoub (*Khāneh-ye Kārgar*) and Farshad Esmaili, lawyer and labor expert, *Zamaneh*, "Khaneh-ye kargar dar yek negah," *The Workers' House at a glance*, 6 May 2019. <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/444886>

fertile breeding ground for workers' alienation and distance from other classes, as chapter 8 will reveal more in detail.

Alienation was a widespread condition in workplaces in Iran by the early 2000s. About 53 percent of workers spent more than 12 hours per day working.⁶⁹⁵ Thousands of workers in state-run factories were still waiting to be paid.⁶⁹⁶ Those in the factories who were receiving their wages were complaining that the amount was not enough to live on. *Kār-o-Kārgar* described the situation as the “tragedy of wages.”⁶⁹⁷ The official unemployment rate reached 11 percent, even though some suspected it had in fact climbed to 20 percent.⁶⁹⁸ In this context, the discursive campaign of the Workers’ House targeted the Khatami government’s attempts at liberalization and its moves to reform the Labor Law. For months during 2000, the main headlines ignored the president’s declarations. At the beginning of April, *Kār-o-Kārgar* headlined its front page with Rafsanjani’s sermon on Friday prayer: “Unemployment, particularly for the youth, is a matter of national security.”⁶⁹⁹ According to the former president, “workers and young people without a job are a time bomb, as they can represent a problem and a danger.”⁷⁰⁰ The solution – he continued – “is an investment that does not lie in unsafe working spaces.” The endorsement to the Rafsanjani bloc was evident, making the position of the Workers’ House in the political arena clear. The following day, a significant quote, stating, “we are ready to legalize workers’ strikes,” stood out on the newspaper’s front page. The Islamic labor councils were declaring war on the decision by Khatami’s government to exclude workshops with less than five people from legal protection, as regulated by the Labor Law.⁷⁰¹ Reporting protests while announcing new initiatives against the measure, *Kār-o-Kārgar*, made its call to action for May Day. Soheila Jelodarzadeh, a member of the Islamic Labor Party and supporter of both workers’ rights and a more significant role for

⁶⁹⁵ *Kār-o-kārgar*, 23 May 2000 (3 Khordad 1379).

⁶⁹⁶ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 4 May 2000 (15 Ordibehesht 1379)

⁶⁹⁷ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 5 April 2000 (17 Farvardin 1379)

⁶⁹⁸ Interview with the author. Worker and labor activist, 29 April 2019.

⁶⁹⁹ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 2 April 2000 (14 Farvardin 1379).

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 3 April 2000 (15 Farvardin 1379).

women in key positions, was quoted as saying “the exemption of small workshops from Labor Law is cruel.”⁷⁰² In this relatively open space for criticism, to which Khatami had given rise, the Workers’ House was sharpening its words, and trying to build consensus among the workers and the working poor, while conducting its political struggle within the IRI’s factional system. For months, workers took their battle over the impact of the recent regulation on small enterprises to the International Labour Organization. As the ILO’s documents reported, they urged for help in pressuring the government, labeling its provisions as “discriminating against workers” and highlighting that “it was unprecedented in the history of this country for a law to be adopted to provide for the non-application of law to one part of the working population. This new law was against the essence of the Islamic Constitution and principles of social justice and would usher in an era of exploitation,” endangering 3 million people.⁷⁰³ In the discourse conveyed through *Kār-o-Kārgar*’s pages in the months leading up to and after May Day 2000, when a fierce and lively debate raged on the Labor Law, three elements catch the eye. First, the use of terms evoking suffering and disorder, as well as a sense of insecurity, such as “cruelty,” “threatening,” “danger,” and “problems.” Second, the language used in the headlines and articles prompted mobilization by projecting it into the future, as a tool for negotiation with the government: “ready to strike,” “workers will protest,” “demonstrations.” Third, the front page headlines were rarely devoted to the president’s words and speeches, or connected to workers’ or economic issues. In some cases, the discursive picture constructed by *Kār-o-Kārgar* purposely expressed the disconnection between labor-related news and Khatami’s quotes, such as: “Our culture should be out to date.”⁷⁰⁴ The following page represents a meaningful example. The first headline, quoting the president, reads:

⁷⁰² *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 8 April 2000 (20 Farvardin 1379).

⁷⁰³ ILO, Discussion on Convention 111 on discrimination in the workplace. Available here https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/fr/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100_COMMENT_ID,P13100_LANG_CO DE:2555743,en

⁷⁰⁴ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 6 April 2000, (18 Farvardin 1379).

“Young people need guidance and education.”⁷⁰⁵ Lower down on the page, a statement attributed to Jelodarzadeh, read: “The removal of small workshops from the Labor Law is cruel.”



Kār-o-Kārgar, 6 April 2000, (18 Farvardin 1379).

Accusations about the government’s economic choices impacted on the discursive reshaping of power relations. Headlines embodying this dissatisfaction found their place in *Kār-o-Kārgar*: “Wrong policies caused factories closures and unemployment,” “Workers are waiting for the president,” “Workers defend their rights until the end.”⁷⁰⁶ Thus, the problems of the labor realm were framed as originating from misguided choices. Workers were described using the language of siege, thus developing the idea of the need for defense. What is worth noting here is that Khatami’s economic policies, as already mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, were not harsher than those of the Rafsanjani era. Furthermore – as chapter 4 and chapter 6 explored, through May Day speeches, market-oriented measures, business-friendly narratives, and the rhetoric of the myth of the winner – workers and the masses had already become the victim of processes of marginalization during Rafsanjani’s presidency. Nevertheless, Alireza Mahjoub, the Workers’ House secretary-general, provided a different picture. From his perspective, “Mr. Hashemi’s government paid special attention to the workers (...) Thanks to Mr. Kamali [Labor Minister] who constantly opposed privatization policies, the privatization debate was delayed. Mr. Hashemi

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 10 April 2000 (22 Farvardin 1379), 18 May 2000 (29 Ordibehesht 1379), 22 June 2000 (2 Tir 1379).

[Rafsanjani] wanted his words to end and agreed.”⁷⁰⁷ According to Mahjoub, although “the Workers’ House did not take a specific position in 1376,” “most of the workers voted for Mr. Khatami.” He defined Khatami as “the bridge between what was done and what was to be done, as necessary for economic and political development (...) We were the backbone of the reformists.”⁷⁰⁸ However, within the bloc supporting the reformists, there was no shortage of confrontations. As *Kār-o-Kārgar* pages show, workers became tools of negotiation: their protests were cast as instruments of pressure, and their possible strikes were used to threaten the government. As an example, the following headlines opened the national news section in mid-May 2000: “Workers of Khuzestan will strike,” with the caveat “If workers’ protests are not taken seriously” only appearing in the subheading.⁷⁰⁹ Once again, the battleground represented in the article concerned the exemption of small workshops from the Labor Law. A newspaper editorial on the issue constructed it as a binary opposition between the government’s quest for job creation and the demolition of workers’ legal protection. Titled “Job creation or elimination of workers’ rights,” it argued that the new provisions paved the way “to unjust, illegal developments and will lead to chaos.”⁷¹⁰ The metaphor of chaos evoked a blurred vision of disorder and confusion. Without any further detail, it mirrored a sense of discomfort caused by perceived lawlessness. The editorial piece continued with a bitter equation projecting the workers as victimized: “It is interesting that they say that workers and their low wages were an obstacle to job creation, in other words, workers caused the unemployment.” Hence, it formulated explicit accusations, targeting the government and referring to “the weakness of strategic planning, lack of organization and incapacity of realization.”

⁷⁰⁷ *ILNA (Iranian Labor News Agency)*, 4 August 2014 (13 Mordad 1393.) Also available at *Tarikh Irani* <http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/4626/%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D9%88%DB%8C%DA%98%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B5%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85>

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid*

⁷⁰⁹ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 10 May 2000 (21 Ordibehesht 1379).

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid*.

Moreover, by rhetorically questioning the government, the editorial reinforced its bond with its readers: “Establishing law in support of the capitalists, and reducing legal support to workers where do they want to go? Doesn’t this expand illegality?”. Within this framework, threatening strike action beyond mere protests represented a way of upping the ante. However, using the word “strike” (*e’tesāb*) as a useful scarecrow did not mean that the Workers’ House, in its columns, was campaigning for the right to strike. Headlines such as “strikes are the last option for workers” or “strike: understanding its legal connotation,” introduced commentaries that delved into the formulations (and omissions) in the Labor Law, and ultimately discouraged workers from stopping their work activities.⁷¹¹ In this regard, it is fundamental to clarify two aspects. The first one is legal: there is no mention in the Labor Law of the word “strike.” Chapter VII (article 142) refers to “cessation of work with the presence of workers in the workshop or any deliberate cut in output by the workers.”⁷¹² Specifically, this is discussed as a potential scenario relating to any cessation of contract. It does not concern the right to organize a strike.⁷¹³ Moreover, as in the legal formulation that lists Islamic Labor Councils’ role and duties, it can be deduced that they represent the first official filter for any disagreements that arise in the workplace.⁷¹⁴ Therefore, there is no legal recognition of the right to strike. The second point concerns control and the use of force. As emerged from the author’s interviews with workers, labor activists, and labor experts, any action potentially leading to “work stoppage” could be monitored, reported to the Ministry of Intelligence, and repressed. Therefore, the idea of legality and bargaining conveyed by the Workers’ House considered the articulation of labor grievances as a defensive struggle against employment policies, wages, and the lack of job protection. Moreover, protests were not promoted against employers, as a closer look at the combination between the headlines and iconography shows. For instance, *Kār-o-*

⁷¹¹ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 9-10 April 2000 (20-21 Farvardin 1379), 13 May 2000 (23 Ordibehesht 1379).

⁷¹² Labor Law, Chapter VII on Collective Bargaining and contracts. ILO https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=21843

⁷¹³ For a broader discussion on the legal formulation of work stoppage in the Iranian Labor Law see Kheirollahi, *Kārgarān bi Tabaqeh: Tavān-e Chānezani Kārgarān dar Iran pas az Enqelāb*, [Workers Without Class: Bargaining Power in Iran after the Revolution], (Tehran: Agah, 1398), 73-74.

⁷¹⁴ Islamic Labor Councils Law, *Majles*. Available <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91022>

Kārgar defused the potential for class struggle that existed in the Iranian factories, going on sale with the following headlines: “Most of the problems in the factories did not lie in the disagreements between employers and workers,” reporting a meeting between the Supreme Council of Labor and the Employers’ Guild Society.⁷¹⁵ Furthermore, in the articles discussing legal disputes workers appeared closer to the authorities.

The limits of the Workers’ House rhetoric and its effective role in protecting workers and representing their grievances and pushing their demands forward, became a subject of debate among workers and labor activists in Iran. As Khatami’s open-door strategies towards civil society and participation had produced spaces for critique, especially in his first term, publications such as *Andisheh Jām ‘eh* or *Iran Fardā* critically discussed the needs and shortcomings surrounding labor and workers’ lives. The system of the Islamic Council and its historical role of gate-keeper, as well as its ties with the controlling state apparatus, emerged, for example, in a three-page essay written by a worker, Reza Kangarāni.⁷¹⁶ A worker and activist for union rights, Hossein Akbari, had the chance to publicly shed light on the Workers’ House activities “and real foundation.” He urged it towards a more radical attitude, while exposing the weakness of its methods of understanding workers’ slogans and demands, and the dynamics and difficulties of organizing protests under the IRI’s umbrella.⁷¹⁷ Karim Maniri argued for an independent workers’ movement.⁷¹⁸ An editorial of *Iran Fardā* argued that “through participation and social activities, the economic wheels will start to spin.”⁷¹⁹

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a critical analysis of labor transformations under Khatami’s reformist government. It has reflected on the connections between the discourses of civil society and

⁷¹⁵ *Kār-o-Kārgar*, 1 June 2000 (12 Khordad 1379).

⁷¹⁶ *Andisheh-ye Jām ‘eh*, May 2001 (16), Ordibehesht 1380, 10-12.

⁷¹⁷ *Andisheh-ye Jām ‘eh*, December 2001, Dey 1380, 48-52.

⁷¹⁸ *Andisheh-ye Jām ‘eh*, October-November 2001 (20), Abān 1380, 48-51.

⁷¹⁹ *Iran Fardā*, August 1998, 3-4.

participation spreading from the top down, and the narratives that reached workers, through the mediation of a key actor, the Workers' House. Following a Gramscian conceptualization of civil society, it has shown how hegemonic relations unfolded within this arena. On the one hand, the ruling apparatus appropriated the concept to stimulate citizens' participation while broadening consensus even further. On the other hand, the Workers' House took advantage of this broader – although still limited – space and acted both as part of the IRI's apparatus and as a distinct actor. However, overall the interests of the dominant classes were protected. In this sense, the reformist era saw the evolution of civil society in the first stage of its struggle for hegemony. In this phase, as Gramsci conceptualized, civil society carries the values of the dominant classes and contributes to the formation of its hegemonic discourse.

This chapter has demonstrated that the reformists in power did not succeed in improving workers' conditions. First, because under their rule the exemption of small enterprises from the Labor Law was approved, depriving workers of labor protection. Second, because their attempts to legalize independent and free trade unions were politically not strong enough to challenge the harsh opposition they received. And the Workers' House actively participated in the struggle against the government plan. Even though it had the opportunity to push for the improvement of workers' rights and tools of collective bargaining, the *Khāne-ye Kārgar* preferred to maintain the status quo. This does not mean that it did not fight for workers' conditions. In fact, this chapter has demonstrated that it effectively fought for labor protection and to secure workers' contracts, in a context where it represented the only legal connection between the IRI and the labor force. Nonetheless, the Workers' House did not operate as a fully independent entity and, in the broader picture, continued to work for the state system, by controlling workers, monitoring potential conflict and hindering the establishment of other unions. These mechanisms fostered the processes of labor casualization that the Workers' House itself claimed to fight against. Beyond the precarity connected to short-term contracts and low wages, workers remained precarious and afraid of repression. They could not build strong networks of solidarity with other groups in the public arena,

because this was dominated by the Workers' House unidirectional discourse. However, as already mentioned in chapter 5, a unique mushrooming of ideas, and flourishing of critical thought during the reformist era accompanied the workers' alienation and separation. It was about to reach its peak when Khatami left office. As the next chapter will discuss, it exploded during Ahmadinejad's first term. Whereas this chapter has explored connections and disconnections, chapter 8 will investigate the breaking points.