

Making Sense of Contemporary Iranian Politics

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I. Introduction

Given the prodigious amount of scholarship about factional dynamics in Iran, another attempt at making sense of contemporary Iranian politics may seem superfluous. What more can be said about Iranian politics beyond the fact that it is dominated by mounting competition and conflict among contending elite factions? Despite significant divisions within each group, the factions can be identified as conservatives and reformists. Whereas the goal of conservatives is to preserve the existing institutional power structures, reformists seek to alter the institutional paralysis that has resulted from factional disputes. This situation has contributed to popular dissatisfaction and has made the Islamic system prone to crisis, both in terms of day-to-day politics and at the discursive level.¹

While recent analyses have pointed out some of the stark realities of contemporary Iranian politics, they tend to obscure trends that have emerged over the last century, especially since the revolution and end of Iran-Iraq War. In the pages that follow, I shall make the case that another look at Iran is necessary. Indeed, a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the political interactions is necessary to accurately capture the dynamic nature of Iranian politics.

A less partisan approach has to take into account the two clusters of issues that have remained fundamental and intricately interrelated in Iranian politics: the tension between autocracy/theocracy and democracy, and Iran's relationship to the outside world. While

¹ In other words, both inside and outside of Iran, the need for fundamental change continues to dominate public conversations about Iran. Some in the outside, such as the intractable Michael Ledeen ("The Iranian Revolution, 2003." *National Review Online*, June 16, 2003), have confidently predicted the impending revolution spurred by the 90 percent of the Iranian population that "want democratic change and 70 percent that want drastic change. While others have dwelt on ways in which internal contradictions, conflicts, and systemic blockages can be overcome or at least lessened through preferably non-violent and gradual means.

both of these relationships were redefined by the Iranian revolution a quarter of century ago, they have been fundamental to Iranian politics for more than a century. The way they manifest themselves at any given historical moment, however, has varied. For instance, in recent months, the question of Iran's relationship to the outside world has served as the context or crucial backdrop for a discussion of whether or not Iran should sign the 93+2 additional protocols to the NPT. The fundamental question about the proper relationship between democracy and autocracy has also served as fuel for almost every confrontation that has occurred between non-elected and elected bodies in the past few years. But this is nothing new.

Having experienced two revolutions, two dynasties, the exile of several kings, periods of popular mobilization, attempts at igniting lasting parliamentary democracy, and two rounds of international sanctions, Iranians have been quite preoccupied with the relationships between autocracy/theory and democracy, and its relations with the outside world. Indeed, Iranians have tried every conceivable means to resolve the difficult issues of democracy and national sovereignty. Despite a turbulent century, resolution of key concerns via spectacular grand events has not been forthcoming. One of the main points of this paper, hence, is that political developments in Iran should not be seen as simply an endeavor to resolve tensions between the two main political groups. Rather, these events are part of a process of gradual reform. To make sense of today's Iran, it is necessary to examine how the idea of gradual reform has taken hold of popular and elite imagination against the backdrop of a century of revolutions. Time will tell if the coming decade will afford Iran the chance to experiment with quieter times to resolve the tensions.

The second point of this paper is that the emergence of gradual reform as the dominant paradigm for change is not merely a turn away from ideological thinking; rather, it's the result of elite competition that has become a permanent feature of Iranian political landscape. While political competition is undoubtedly paralyzing at times, it is also a dynamic that encourages piecemeal rather than grand changes. This is a noteworthy, even if counter-intuitive, point to make as we approach the 2004 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections. Many are declaring the end of reform and predicting either the dawn of Iran's next revolution or a conservative ascendance, creating a "pragmatic center." The emergence of a pragmatic center, it is argued, would follow the authoritarian "China Model," and bring order to the paralyzing competition that has marked Iranian politics.

To the contrary, this paper argues, no matter what happens in the next few years election-wise, competitive politics has become a permanent feature of Iran, with no one set of players able to dominate or, more importantly, eliminate other players in order to pursue its agenda unhindered. Signs of such permanence are evident in the preparations for the February parliamentary elections. This process includes the extensive debate in the media about electoral participation and the maneuvering by all political forces. Confrontations among various government institutions controlled by different political forces over the way elections should be run, threats about boycotting elections in the light of widespread disqualification of candidates (and even actual boycott of elections), and non-voting itself have been recurring patterns in Iran's post-revolution electioneering. These features have

become an integral part of Iran's *peculiar* form of election politics.² Moreover, the competition has become so intense that it is difficult to predict the results of the upcoming election, including the extent to which the candidates will be ultimately vetted, the level of electoral participation, and the result of the election. As I complete this paper, the Interior Ministry and provincial governors have threatened to resign in response to the Guardian Council's widespread disqualification of the reformist candidates. Regardless of the outcome, there is no reason to think that this period of heightened conflict over the latest election will put an end to post-revolutionary Iran's political competition, at least in the short-term.³ Therefore, to make some sense of Iranian politics it is best to understand the nature of the competition, the social and political forces sustaining the competition, and the direction of the competition itself.

The final point I shall make relates to the differentiation and organization of the increasingly urban Iranian civil society. The imposition of an authoritarian solution to overcome the political stalemate is no longer possible. In a sense, a much deeper and less acknowledged process of social and political reform has already won. A corollary to this point, however, is that societal differentiation and organization assures that politics in Iran will remain messy, so to speak, with a fractured state attempting to negotiate its way among varied interests. Interestingly, it is through this very gradual process of the state "stumbling through the mess" that Iran's democratic processes and institutions will be shaped, unless of course it is aborted, as it has occasionally been in the past century, by overt or covert foreign interventions. This does not mean the hardliners cannot temporarily gain control of all branches of the government and give the appearance of unity at the top layers of the government. It simply means that their dominance will still be contested by different layers of the state institutions they control as well as forces outside the state.

The possibility of major constitutional revisions in the direction of more democratic religious participation in politics is also possible for Iran.⁴ Major revisions could very

² Even non-voting and public discussions and debates about whether to vote or not are integral parts of the election process in Iran because in recent years the possibility of non-voting has become an issue and is seen as a reflection of what the citizens of Iran think of their government. The contrast with the United States, where electoral participation rates are lower than Iran, is revealing since in the US the rate of non-participation is generally taken for granted and is not part of the public conversation about any given election.

³ The upcoming seventh parliamentary elections to be held in February 2004 will be the 20th election held for elective bodies since the inception of the Islamic republic.

⁴ My words are chosen carefully here. Democratic participation of religion in the public sphere and political competition is the objective of most organized players agitating for reform inside Iran. By this, it is meant the rejection of special privileges to religious persons, including the clerics, in the political arena, and giving permanent legitimacy to only one reading of religion. It does not mean the rejection of the influence of religious values and concerns on the policy-making processes and outcomes. This is an important distinction that should be noted between reformers inside Iran and those calling for the creation of a "secular government," the immediate meaning and implications of which in terms of the whole range of Iranian laws are never made clear, outside of Iran. Almost by definition, the approach espoused by reformists inside Iran offers a more gradual way of changing laws, which to them must correspond to the gradually changing religious and cultural sentiments.

well come about in the next few years through the much-discussed process of referendum within the confines of the Iranian constitution. This development would certainly be a dramatic turn of events, but my point is that the revisions have to work their way through a very contentious political system and end up in the hands of permanent political players.

In the pages that will follow, I shall make a case for the above points by focusing on the basic changes the Iranian state and society have experienced in the past quarter of century. The essay will then move to an analysis of the implications of these changes for contemporary Iranian politics, particularly the upcoming parliamentary elections on 20 February 2004. It will conclude with a discussion of the impact external actors and policies that can have in hastening the pace of change in Iran.

II. Revolutionary Dynamics, the State, and Rise of Contentious Politics

The 1979 Iranian revolution was made possible by the disintegration of a monarch-dominated state in the face of a broad coalition of forces that at the beginning publicly, agreed on some form of republicanism. Being ‘republican’ was to be against a personal, lifelong, hereditary, and arbitrarily defined rule. Indeed, the complex negotiations that led to popular support for the establishment of the provisional revolutionary government boiled down to two concrete political rejections: neither monarchy nor dictatorship.⁵ It was only after the departure of the shah that revolutionary consensus began to fall apart. However, important elements of dictatorship were reinstated with the consolidation of the new state in the name of Islamic republicanism. According to Asghar Schirazi, this outcome embodies two fundamental contradictions: the Constitution’s Islamic legalist and non-Islamic secular elements, and the contradiction between its democratic and non-democratic element arising essentially from two notions of sovereignty, one of the people and one of the Islamic jurists.⁶

Despite these basic contradictions, however, political consolidation came rather swiftly in terms of the state’s control of the society.⁷ At the same time, this early and effective consolidation of power was not necessarily accompanied with coordinated and centralized institutionalization. It is this combination of rapid consolidation and yet

⁵ The point about the historical rejection of monarchy is something usually ignored by those, mainly in exile, agitating for the restoration of monarchy. It is important to note that the 1979 rejection of monarchy came after several attempts in the twentieth century to make the institution of monarchy constitutional or bound by certain rule. All attempts failed and these failures ultimately became part of the historical memory in the argument for the rejection of monarchy as an institution.

⁶ Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, translated by John O’Kane (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997).

⁷ For detailed discussion of the immediate political and ideological struggles see Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1989). Also see Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

decentralized institutionalization that has made post-revolutionary contentious politics possible in Iran.

With the rapid collapse of the *ancien régime*, institutions were seized through a series of purges. Parallel security and military institutions were erected to defend against a revolt of both the *ancien régime* institutions and the legal system. Heavy religious direction was further buttressed in the immediate post-revolutionary period by a process, pursued in full force, to "Islamicize" the society and social institutions. This ideologically driven policy effectively confirmed the supremacy of a loose coalition of Islamic revolutionaries that had come to accept the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, and initially the institutional medium of the Islamic Republican party (IRP). The civil restrictions imposed on women, such as forced veiling and the right to divorce, combined with the highly charged takeover of American Embassy in Tehran contributed to the downfall of the moderate Provisional Government of Mehdi Bazargan. These events facilitated a successful mobilization to defend against an "imposed" war initiated by the Iraqi incursion inside Iran in 1980.

The central role the Islamic Republican Guards played during the Iran-Iraq war had important political implications. Because of the heroic sacrifices made in the name of "Sacred Defense," this military institution formed the basis of a new political milieu. To crush its opponents, this milieu could invoke its proven record which included its emphasis on war and courage, worship, control of passions, avoidance of fame and material interests, and the unconditional adherence to the leadership.⁸ Speed and efficiency characterized the consolidation of power in the post-revolutionary period. The opposition was systematically eliminated or exiled.⁹ Facing limited resistance, the regime found it relatively easy to dispense with its early revolutionary partners, including the liberals, socialists, and Stalinists. More importantly, this elimination was accompanied with ideological zeal.

There was a large potential for the fragmentation of the coalition once the counter-revolutionary or opposition movements was eliminated. Composed of a variety of social groups (bazaari merchants, clerical, intermediate classes, workers, rural and urban poor) and political/ideological forces (conservative, traditionalist, leftist, and liberal), the ruling coalition competed for the state's vast economic resources, such as oil. Other conflicts of interest between leftist forces and the bazaari merchants, who had initially aligned themselves with the clerics, manifested themselves in the battle over of the state's social welfare.

To be sure, despite the potential for fragmentation, Ayatollah Khomeini's forceful presence during the Iran-Iraq War kept the loose coalition together. Eventually, the

⁸ For a discussion of the war and war generation and their impact on Iranian politics see Farideh Farhi, "The Antinomies of the War Generation in Iran," in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* edited by Larry Potter and Gary Sick (Palgrave, forthcoming).

⁹ For the extent of the physical elimination of opponent see Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

differences over economic issues, foreign policy, and social policies became too great and the IRP coalition split into right and left camps. This split ultimately led to the abandonment of the idea of one revolutionary party.¹⁰ The existence of a number of powerful political leaders helped to undermine the IRP. Most of these powerful political leaders were clerics who sustained their political careers through back door negotiations and the promotion of clients financed through the access to resources of an oil-rich state. The multitude of cliques, acting more like fiefdoms competing over state resources, was both the reason for the IRP's breakup and its replacement.

Ultimately, democratic centralism, Iranian style, was made possible not through ideological justification or institutional guidance of the Islamic Republican Party but through the forceful personality and charisma of the central commander, Ayatollah Khomeini. Although Ayatollah Khomeini tried to stay away from much of the political infighting, he could not keep the party from disintegrating. The IRC was declared dead in 1986.

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 marked the disappearance of a highly organized ideological party and its charismatic leader. The stage was set for an increasingly competitive political system. Thus, the Islamic revolutionaries were able to consolidate their hold over society but not the state institutions and structures. The following paragraphs will detail the Islamic revolutionaries' struggle for institutional power.

The Islamic revolutionaries increased the size of the state apparatus.¹¹ The Islamic revolutionaries looked saw the state as an instrument of power and income. The state had continued to be the most important source of income as the center of oil production and distribution. But competing cliques simply began to disassemble the state and turn it into a series of multi-layered and competing fiefdoms. New institutions were built to check institutions with similar objectives.

¹⁰ For a thorough analysis of ideological disputes among factions see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, 2002). Moslem succinctly explains how such conflicts as the ones between various provincial IRP branches and Friday Prayers leaders ultimately doomed the IRP as an organizational effort. For a discussion of how these differences worked their way into the parliament see Bahman Bakhtiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran: The Institutionalization of Factional Politics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).

¹¹ By able I mean the ability to increase the size of the state. The numbers regarding the increase in the size of the state are difficult to ascertain and depend on categories of employment included. For instance, some include teachers in public education while others do not. In the latest reporting of the increase in the size of the state, Massoud Shokrolahi, the general director for the Office of Improvement in Organization and Planning at the Organization for Management and Planning, suggests that the number of people working for the Iranian state increased from 550,000 in 1979 to the current 2,300,000, more that a four-fold increase and constituting one out of every three employed person. In the same period, he suggests that the number of government ministries and firms increased from 421 to 1,000. Reported in http://www.radiofarda.com/transcripts/iran/2004/01/20040112_0330_1122_1344_FA.asp.

Institutions involved in the social welfare aspects of the state were not immune to the inefficiency created by a growing bureaucracy. For instance, the Foundation for the Disabled and Oppressed (*Bonyad-e Janbazan va Mostaz'afan*), consisting of some 40 economic and religious charity foundations, originated in the property confiscated from the extended royal family and other elite groups.¹² Originally intended to serve a particular clientele, some of these organizations have developed into giant business conglomerates, benefiting from favorable government exchange rates, regulations and contacts without much government oversight. These conglomerates own and operate firms in agriculture, industry, commerce, transportation, and construction, with little connection to each other. Most of them produce only a fraction of the expected returns proportional to their assets. They are also said to bankroll various clerical fiefdoms, or specific non-governmental activities, which are immune from state encroachment.

Amidst all this, how has post-revolutionary authority has been maintained? It has been maintained through a divided state structure that entrenches political and economic competition among social groups. This competition takes place between traditional trade-centered interests located in the bazaars, or modern professional middle classes, and the more service-oriented interests of the new Iranian political economy. Rather than becoming the medium through which competition is regulated, the state has developed into an arena in which multiple claims over various parts of the state are constantly negotiated rather than resolved. Meanwhile, the heavy-hand of the state's ideological and repressive apparatus is used, with decreasing effectiveness, to legitimize the clergy's power.

The term "clerics" should be used delicately here. The idea of clerical guardianship, or rule of Islamic jurists, does not connote that all clerics should be politically involved or that it was through their unanimity that clerical rule is made possible. The decentralized nature of Shi'i Islam as practiced in Iran, allows for several sources of religious emulation and has always encouraged plurality of voices and practices. The idea of clerical guardianship posited that there was first a will to rule at any cost.¹³ The second

¹² Not all of these foundations are post-revolutionary institutions. Some religious foundations, such as *Astan-e Qods-e Razavi* that operates the Imam Reza Shrine in Khorasan Province (a major pilgrimage destination for world Shi'ites), are very rich pre-revolutionary religious endowments. The Islamic Revolution, however, afforded these religious endowments much leeway to expand its economic, political and social service activities. Although information is sketchy, some argue that *Astan-e Qods* may be the wealthiest economic foundation in Iran with more than \$20 billion in land assets in Khorasan alone. See Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* Op. cit., p. 76. For a history and structure of *Astan-e Qods* see Ahmad H. Mawlawi, Mohammad T. Mostafawi, and Ali Shakurzadah, "Astane Qods-e Razawi," in *Encyclopedia Iranica* edited by Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1987): 826-37.

¹³ The story of how this will to rule developed historically is an important one. As far as I can tell the best and perhaps only explanation for this has been forwarded in a short of article by Hamid Enayat entitled "Revolution in Iran 1979: Religion as Political Ideology," in *Revolutionary Theory and Political Reality*, ed. Noel Sullivan (New York, St. Martin's Press 1983), pp. 197-200. Enayat argues that throughout the twentieth century all episodes of opposition to autocratic rule required an alliance among the main social and political forces in the country (the clerics, the indigenous propertied class and secular nationalists) and they all depended on the active encouragement of the religious leaders to mobilize the masses. On each occasion, Enayat argues, while the religious leaders emerged as the immediate beneficiaries, ultimately either the government or the semi-secular nationalists soon managed to gain the upper hand, and excluded

idea proposed that there were certain interpersonal and nontransparent dynamics among the revolutionary clerics that would allow them to negotiate their way out of political conflict and crisis. In short, the notion of clerical guardianship portrayed the revolutionary clerics as deliberate, determined, and flexible in their claim to power. This characterization was an important source of political legitimacy in a society searching for stability in the midst of revolution and war.

Ayatollah Khomeini was undoubtedly the most important figure in the construction of the idea of clerical guardianship. He not only resurrected the idea as a purely political formulation, but also personally epitomized the idea. He was deliberate, determined, and flexible. He was a political man who could rise above all the factional disputes and be the final arbiter. Yet, Ayatollah Khomeini's dominant presence should not overshadow the ideological dimension of clerical rule. Even without him, the Iranian revolutionary leadership always strove to derive legitimacy from an invincible authority. This legitimacy could come from individuals, institutions, or behind the scenes negotiation processes, which could rise above the everyday scenes of partisan politics and define the parameters of accepted public speech and actions. The idea was that a tacit, unofficial agreement among the clerics would always prevent policy disagreements. More importantly, this agreement would prevent power struggles from getting out of control.

Iran's institutional structure affirms the role of this tacit agreement and the importance of a political process for reaching it. The presence of clerics in all branches of government, such as the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, the Council of Experts, allows them multiple forums to debate and negotiate over policy disagreements without much public scrutiny.

At the same time, the fact that these multiple, yet exclusive forums proved insufficient as a means for resolving policy and ideological disagreements is testament to the plurality of voices and interests in Iranian politics. This publicly exposed the divisions in the main source of clerical authority and set the stage for the development of more openly competitive politics in Iran. The election of both Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997 and a reformist parliament in 2000 marks the peak of this trend.¹⁴

But competition among clerics and their organizations is only one aspect of Iran's complex political landscape. Clerical organizations have links and alliances with secular organizations. Indeed, there are also influential personalities that attempt to navigate between the two main clerical organizations. The clerical organizations are by no means the only groups in the Iranian political landscape. Even within their own loosely coordinated alliances, they are constantly engaged in negotiation and bargaining over strategy and policy. What is significant, however, is that by the early 1990's, open elite

their religious partners from power. The previous political experience, therefore, set the stage for the reevaluation of the goals of the religious movement and opened the way for the ascent of the radical position in favor of direct clerical rule.

¹⁴ For detailed discussion of the dynamics that led to the disagreements and splits within the ruling coalition since the end of the Iran-Iraq War see Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy; The Politics of Managing Change* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000).

competition had not only become a feature of the Iranian polity, it had developed an institutional base within the state itself.

The 1997 presidential election can be considered the last serious attempt by a political force -- the conservative faction tied to powerful bazaar classes -- to monopolize all political institutions of the Islamic republic.¹⁵ It failed precisely because forces fearful of elimination allied to fight against the monopoly (*enhessar*) of the political system. In this process, the presidential candidate who framed the anti-monopoly slogan as something broader and more appealing to the population aided these classes. This message was the need to reform the rules of the political game and make the practice of Islamic ideas more inclusive, tolerant, and democratic. Political development (*tose'eye siasi*), it was said, was a requisite for economic health and long-term political stability.

The new slogan struck a chord with a variety of elite and popular forces that had come to face an increasingly exclusive elite in the political and economic arenas. The idea of creating a more democratic understanding of religious governance based on rule of law was in many ways a natural slogan for an elite faction facing the possibility of political elimination. But it is also important to note that even Khatami and his embattled faction had thoroughly underestimated the extent to which the general public was ready for this.¹⁶ The public, weary of years of intrusions in their daily lives through various Islamic edicts, began to watch the fluid and delicate political game unfold. Through an incredibly vibrant and continuously expanding print media as well as a number of municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections, this "public" repeatedly stated its desire for the state to pull back and to allow society to live. But it also did something more basic. It established itself as a player, or more accurately a set of players, that competitors for power could no longer take for granted.

Meanwhile, the political elites on the verge of extinction came to life. Identifying the 23 May 1997 election of President Khatami as a historic moment, they created the *Jebhe-ye Dovom-e Khordad*.¹⁷ Consisting of eighteen organizations, this reformist alliance found strength in its diversity. It included personalities and groups ranging from the center to the left of the political spectrum, coalescing around the idea of political and institutional reform. This diversity, however, was also a source of weakness. Subject to behind the scenes negotiations among key players, coordinated action was difficult. Ultimately, the strength of the reformists was based on the popularity of their ideas and the hope they inspired, rather than the organization itself.

This is why the overwhelming reformists' victory in the 2000 parliamentary election did not precipitate the rise of reformists. Most people expected that the reformists, having

¹⁵ We will of course see if yet another try at monopolizing all political institutions will bear fruit in the upcoming parliamentary elections, capped with the presidential election of 2005.

¹⁶ As some of Khatami's key advisors, such as Saeed Hajjarian, have pointed out, Khatami's candidacy in 1997 was not envisaged to result in presidency. The idea was to float his candidacy to gain support for his ideas and set the stage for beginning the process of organizing around the idea of political reform, in the hope of creating the conditions for victory of those ideas in later presidential and parliamentary elections.

¹⁷ The second Khordad Front is named after the Persian Calendar's equivalent for May 23

won control of both executive and legislative branches, could now pursue their objectives with greater ease. But as it turned out, popular rejection did not weaken the will of those who lost successive elections but in fact spurred them to increase their efforts and, in turn, organize their narrow base as a means to avert extinction. Before the newly elected parliament took over, for instance, they used their clout in the outgoing parliament to pass a draconian law that forced news reporters to reveal their sources. It also barred anyone involved in "anti-establishment" activities from holding a position in the press. Most importantly, they continued to use the non-elected institutions to block proposals that could facilitate political competition and open discourse. The conservatives reacted by undermining reformist legislation, forcing Khatami's key ministers out of office, closing newspapers and arresting journalists. Some conservatives also used violence to repress the reformist agenda by sending militia forces to disrupt student rallies and meetings, and by murdering government officials.

But not all of the reformist misfortunes can be blamed on conservative resistance. The reformist coalition also suffered from its own disorganization and lack of support from a solid social base. For instance, in the 2002 municipal elections the constitutive parties of the reformist front were unable to reach agreement on a common list of candidates in large cities. A more striking example of reformist disorganization is the May 2003 election in the House of Parties (*Khane-ye Ahzab-e Iran*).¹⁸ Although seventy percent of the House of Parties can be considered reformists, they did nothing to consolidate their power base and reduce conflict among themselves. As a result, the conservatives wrested control of the governing board from the reformists, winning a majority of seats in the governing board. Today, two prominent conservative figures, Hassan Ghafuri-fard and Assadollah Badamchian, head the House of Parties.¹⁹

Several years of intense institutional and political conflict in combination with these elections meant that neither the conservatives nor the reformists are capable of pushing their programs unhindered. More importantly, the intense conflict has revealed that the political system lacks institutions and processes to resolve factional conflicts before the public sees them as crises of the political system.

This gridlock has created the potential for the Iranian electorate to trade its patience for indifference. This situation did not occur in the 2001 presidential election in which 67 percent of the electorate voted.²⁰ But it did happen during the 2002 municipal elections in large cities. In Tehran, for instance, the turnout was as low as 10 to 15 percent. The low voter turnout translated to electoral success for the conservatives.

¹⁸ This organization now has 114 members, all political parties certified by the Ministry of Interior.

¹⁹ For a discussion of House of Parties election see a piece by Nargess Ebrahimi in *Shargh*, 31 December 2003. <http://www.sharghnewspaper.com/821010/polit.htm>.

²⁰ 79 percent voted for Khatami. The turnout was lower than the almost 80 percent turnout in Khatami's first run at the office but still much higher (almost 67 percent) than expected for a second run at the presidency. The turnout for the Rafsanjani's first and second term in 1989 and 1993 was respectively less than 55 and 51 percent. In the first (64%) and second (64%) and third (74%) presidential elections the turnout was higher. For participation rates of all elections held since the inception of the Islamic republic see the Ministry of Interior's Website. www.moi.gov.ir.

Some Iranian observers maintain that this is a desirable situation for the anti-reform forces. Despite the low voter turnout, the elections provide a veneer of political legitimacy for their dominance. Some even argue that as a "power Mafia" (a term openly used in the Iranian press), a core group anti-reform forces encourages low participation rate. These anti-reformists are not concerned about possible repercussions of this strategy because it allows them to thrive and maintain power.²¹ Regardless of the validity of this claim, political competition has now reached a point at which no single political force can even make a decision on a controversial policy (such as the decision to sign the Additional Protocol to NPT) without some sort of agreement among the key political players. This agreement must include core members of both camps as well as their supporters. More significantly, the competition has spread beyond state institutions into organizations that have links to the civil society as well. For instance, competition has penetrated the preeminent organization representing the interests of businesspeople in Iran, the Chamber of Commerce and Industries. Until recently, this organization was completely dominated by individuals connected to conservative bazaar political forces who prevented contested elections. Today, through elections, the leadership is divided by conflicts. This situation means that a number of political actors and groups in Iran have enough political muscle to obstruct the progress of their opponents.

The intense political maneuvering among various actors and groups has been carried out relatively peacefully and within the state's constitutional boundaries with a few exceptions. In 1998, students and the security forces clashed in Tehran. In late 2001, a rally for the Iranian national football team took an anti-conservative political tone and led to violent clashes with the security forces. Two years later, student objections to changes in university tuition policies quickly turned into wider demonstrations against the regime. These demonstrations were crushed in a heavy-handed manner. If a small number of people who occupy key non-elective institutions continue to block all aspects of the populist pro-reform agenda, then there is a growing likelihood that frustration with the gridlock and slow pace of reform will show itself in public protests. These protests are likely to involve paramilitary forces and right-wing street groups, resulting in increased public cynicism and apathy in large cities.

But public protest beyond periodic outbreaks is unlikely. Iranians have recently experienced a revolution and seem to be in no mood to go through major social turbulence again. Furthermore, existing social cleavages do not buttress the kind of chasms that exist in the political arena. Iranian society is now fairly removed from the social divisions that existed in the early post-revolutionary era between the traditionally

²¹ The term *mafia-ye qodrat* (power Mafia) is openly used in Iran to identify an extreme group within the anti-reform camp that does not shy away from extra-legal, extra-judicial, and even violent acts to guard the economic and political leverage they have gained since the Revolution. This so-called extreme group, sometimes also identified as "supporters of authoritarianism" are distinguished from the more moderate/traditional "conservatives" that do not necessarily feel comfortable with the tactics used by the extremists but nevertheless ascent to them for lack of initiative of their own or for political reasons.

minded immigrants to the cities and the more established and modern urbanites.²² Hence, the development of an indifferent or antagonistic relationship between the government and the Iranian people is not necessarily the harbinger of social forces engaged in revolutionary collective action against the state. However, this trend does illustrate the development of highly inefficient and even counter-productive relations. Ironically, this possibility has become enhanced by the changes the reform process has made.

As reported by the media, the public confrontation between elected and non-elected leaders has revealed how and by whom democratic processes are being thwarted.²³ The inability of democratically elected institutions of the presidency and parliament to overcome the opposition has also revealed constitutional improprieties and the ineffectiveness of democratic institutions to correct them. This situation has contributed to the cynicism of the majority of the populace who voted for the reformists.

The key to reducing public cynicism and overcoming counter-productive state/society relations is to establish a constitutional framework, or a set of agreed upon political rules, to regulate and stabilize political competition. This could be achieved by ensuring the survival of political actors so they could promote their own particular programs and agenda. In this way, the regulated competition itself can act as an important source for assuring political stability, civil rights, rule of law, transparency, accountability, voice, participation, and equitable access to public services. This regulative capability of competitive processes may have to be developed gradually through the continuation of non-regulated competition. This means that for now conflict among various political contenders will continue to create tension. This tension will dominate the interactions in the public sphere and hinder the formation of alliances around important policy issues.²⁴

²² At the time of the revolution the society was not only split almost 50-50 between urban and rural, many of the urban residents were recent immigrant still with a rural traditionalist ideology easily tapped by religious revolutionaries. Two decades after the revolution, Iran is much more deeply urban not only in terms of percentages (approximately 65 percent urban) but also in terms of length of stay and the impact the urban environment has on people's values and orientations.

²³ For a discussion of the Iranian press see Farideh Farhi, "Improvising in Public: Transgressive politics of Reformist Press in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Intellectual Trends in Twentieth-Century Iran: A Critical Survey* edited by Negin Nabavi (Gainesville: University of south Florida Press, 2003). It is true that the Iranian press has been under attack by the judiciary in the past few years, with many well-known journalists and publishers arrested, but even gagged today's Iranian press is very different than a decade ago, able to discuss and debate many topics that were considered taboo before.

²⁴ Many democratic theorists argue that stalemates over long-standing political conflicts in society may pave the way the acceptance of democratic rules by competing factions. Adam Przeworski, for instance, goes as far as to posit persistent stalemate as a precondition for enduring democracy. To be more precise, he argues that enduring democratic checks and balances will emerge only if the future balance of forces under democratic rules is unknown when the institutions are being designed. Adam Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts," in *Constitutionalism and Democracy* edited by Adam Przeworski and Rune Stagstad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter also argue, "democracy is produced by stalemate and dissensus rather than prior unity and consensus." *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1986). Indeed, what seems to be the most interesting aspect of the contemporary Iranian politics is the juxtaposition of post-revolutionary dynamics and democratic processes generated out of a political stalemate. Whether full-fledged agreement over democratic rules of the game

III. Iranian Society and Entrenched Elite Competition

The complexities of the Iranian political institutions and their embedded pluralism reveal only one aspect of Iranian politics. A closer look at the evolving nature of Iranian society and polity is necessary to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of this political system.

There are two sets of arguments that try to explain why Iranian society seems prone to social and political upheaval. The first argument is a demographic one: Iran has a high percentage of youth and the populace is in need of cultural and economic amenities that the Islamic government cannot provide. The second argument is cultural: the “people of Iran” want fundamental change. Both of these arguments do contain some elements of truth, but they must be investigated further.

While it is true that demographic factors do influence the political inclinations of young people, it is important to understand the dynamic nature of these trends. In other words, the population distribution, which has contributed to the crisis-ridden environment, does not mean youth simply want freedoms and jobs. It is important to understand, that having a young population is not a significant variable by itself. For instance, a young population is a universal phenomenon throughout the Middle East, which has an average age of under 20. What makes Iran’s demographic trend significant is its special characteristics. Iran’s population is not only young; it is also highly educated in a non-gender specific manner²⁵ (a legacy of the 1979 revolution whether we like to admit or not). As such, it is quite aware of public debates about the inadequacies of the Islamic political system. At the same time, it may also be quite weary of promises of immediate solutions. After all, people remember that similar promises were made and went unfulfilled two decades ago.

But for our purposes, the youth of the population is a demographic bottleneck and will pass by the end of the decade. According to *Iran Statistical Yearbook 1378/1999* (Tehran: Statistical Center of Iran, Winter 2001), approximately 60% of the Iranian population in 1996 was under the age of 24 (the U.S. Census Bureau's International Programs Center predicts that in 2004, approximately 56 percent will be under 25 in comparison to 60 percent in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia). A person born in 1981, at the beginning of the war, was eligible to vote in the 1997 presidential election. According to the same source, in 1986 there were a little more than 9 million people (out of the population of 49.5 million) that were under four years of age (7.5 million were between 5 and 9 years of age). This was the height of population explosion in Iran as the numbers began to taper

will be generated out of the Iranian stalemate is to be seen, making Iran a very interesting contemporary test case for democratic theory.

²⁵ For instance, in the past five years 60 percent or more of university entrants have been women. See RFE/RL, 19 November 2003.

off after 1986. This group, between 15 and 19 years old in 2001, constitutes the largest voting bloc among the Iranian population. The next group of eligible voters, those under four years old in 1991, number slightly more than 8.1 million. A third group, less than four years old in 1996, consists of approximately 6.1 million future voters. In a purely deterministic fashion, these figures suggest social and political volatility in the next few years. But these figures also suggest an amelioration of social pressures by the end of the decade as the state begins to better deal with this overload on the system. For instance the infrastructure built for primary level schooling has already improved. The transformation of this demographic bloc during what some have called a “demographic transition”—a shift from high rates, to low rates, of fertility and mortality — will have a varying impact on public opinion as well as state policies. This transition will occur as the group moves from being agitators to shapers of change under relatively less strenuous circumstances.

The second argument that seeks to explain Iranian’s turbulent political history identifies the “people of Iran” as the cause. But there is no such thing as a “people of Iran” which has a unified stance on issues. This needs to be pointed out because there has been a tendency to talk about the “people” of Iran as a unified actor. They are all revolutionaries, fundamentalists, reformists, dissatisfied reformists, and now revolutionaries again. Even when people are categorized as youth, women, and students, they are discussed as though they are unified actors with no dividing lines among them. When evidence is presented that reveals divisions and differences, it is simply ignored.²⁶

Like every other society, Iran is multi-layered, including the often forgotten rural-urban divide.²⁷ Even in the low turnout council elections, 11 out of 28 provinces registered higher than 60%. There were five provinces with 70-80% voter turnout. Two provinces (Qom and Isfahan) registered in the 30s and only one province, Tehran, registered less than 30%.²⁸

²⁶ In the municipal elections of 2002, the areas outside of large cities clearly experienced a much higher voter turnout than big cities bringing the total voter turnout to about 50% (which incidentally is way higher than voter turnout in US congressional elections but 14.5 percent lower than the first municipal elections in 1998). The lowest recorded turnout for Iranian elections (37%) was for the Second Assembly of Expert in 1991. This was the first election in which extensive wetting of well-known politicians by the Guardian Council occurred and in time led to the eventual withdrawal of one of the major clerical organization, Majma’ e Rohaniyun-e Mobarez, in which President Khatami and the current parliament speaker Mehdi Karrubi are members, from electoral politics for a few years.

²⁷ According to the latest 1996 census still 38% rural even if some rural areas are moving in the direction of becoming suburbs

²⁸ For detailed results for council elections in provinces see www.moi.gov.ir. Kian Tajbaksh, who has done the most extensive studies of local elections, while acknowledging the drop in vote as a result of fading hope in reform, not only admonishes against generalizations from election results in large cities but also questions the argument that the reformists faced defeat across the board. He argues, “Based on figures given by the country’s leading reformist faction, reformers are a majority in over 50% of city councils; at the level of the council of provinces (ostan) the reformers and conservatives are balanced; and out of the 28 members of the supreme council of provincial

The division between the “people of Iran” and the Islamic regime is also disregarded in discussions of Iran. Opponents of reform in Iran are just in control of non-elected government institutions. They also have many resources, including the mass media, and public institutions. They possess unlimited budgets for shaping public opinion, and engage in patron-client relationships. On the other hand, the majority cannot be counted on to act in unison for reform. Even if there are agreements among the majority about objectives, this does not translate to a consensus about how to achieve those objectives and even exactly what those objectives mean. In my own extended family, a solidly secular middle class clan, none of the past elections has elicited unified responses. The range of responses has varied from non-voting to voting for the former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Public opinion remains in flux in Iran, subject to public debates and shaped by conversations inside homes and offices.

The desire for political and social reform in an inefficient theocratic state may have created many religious cynics. In a survey done by Mansoor Moaddel,²⁹ for instance, Iranians were found to place less emphasis on religion and more emphasis on nationalism than Egyptians or Jordanians).³⁰ Iranians were also more critical of religious authorities than they were concerned with the “threat” of Western culture. Whereas, in Iran, 47% of the public indicated that religious authorities adequately responded to social problems, comparable figures for Jordan and Egypt are 60% and 70%, respectively. A lower percentage of Iranians (12%) were found to participate in weekly or more frequent religious services than did Egyptians (22%) or Jordanians (28%). And a lower percentage of Iranians (55%) than Egyptians (64%) or Jordanians (85%) considered Western cultural

councils (one from each province) reformers make up 21 members. The head of the Tehran city council, who would normally be elected as chair of the executive committee of this body, came third with only 7 votes. In Isfahan province, apart from Isfahan city, out of 463 elected councilors, 201 (43%) were reformists, 150 (32%) conservatives and 112 (25%) independents. In Golestan province, 18 cities were carried by reformists, 2 by conservatives. This is apparently the pattern elsewhere. (I have not been able to independently verify these figures but have no real reason to question them.) And in the three big cities of Tabriz, Karaj and Ahvaz reformists are in a majority. Further putting in question the interpretation of the low turnout as a no-confidence vote in the reformists, is the fact that even cities such as Isfahan (which was a relatively effective city council and which enjoyed relatively high ratings from citizens) and Qom which was dominated by conservatives in the first round, also experienced big drops in turnout.” Kian Tajbakhsh, “The Fate of Local Democracy in the Islamic Republic: Local Elections and Reform in Iran.” n.d.

²⁹ <http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/jan03/indexthree.html>. For more detailed data on the values and perspectives of Iranians see the results of surveys conducted in Iran’s 28 provinces by a team of sociologists organized by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance collected in a book entitled *Arzesh-ha va Negaresh-ha-ye Iranian* (Values and Perspectives of Iranians) published in 2002.

³⁰ In Egypt, 79% of the respondents said that they were Muslims above all, while 10% said they were Egyptians above all. The comparable figures were 70% versus 14% in Jordan and 61% versus 34% in Iran

invasion to be a very important problem.³¹ But even these comparative numbers suggest that Iran is fairly divided about the role of religion in daily life and politics. In any case, given the lack of comparative longitudinal data, it is difficult to speculate about trends. It is, for instance, conceivable that Egyptians and Jordanians have become more religious in the past ten years while Iranians have become less. The only certainty here is the fluidity and multiple voices found in the political contexts.

There is no reason to doubt that many Iranians are exhausted by the current political deadlock and by and large disgusted with most of the leaders running the country. However, the analysis of collective actions, including voting, requires more attention to detail. As mentioned above, the analysis of 2002 local council elections suggests a more complicated picture of voter behavior, differentiated by provinces and size of the cities. Furthermore, behavior in local council elections cannot be considered the basis for understanding all elections. The stakes are simply much higher in parliamentary and presidential elections and it is for this reason that they require closer attention.

IV. 2004 Parliamentary Elections

Parliamentary elections have a different logic altogether. Voter turnout will be low in major cities, given the general ineffectiveness of the reformers, whether or not the Guardian Council eventually vets their candidates. But provincial and small town politics are entirely different. Provincial Majles deputies are often the only local elected officials who provide real bargaining power for their constituents.³² This power is different from the power to pass national legislation. It stems from the ability to engage in a variety of informal and formal negotiations over local bureaucratic and political appointments as well as the allocation of resources. This form of power is not something the electorate in the provinces will relinquish easily by not voting.

³¹ Moaddel's data also suggests variations on social issues such as the ideal number of children in the family, attitudes toward marriage, and women working outside the home. In Egypt, 82% considered two or three children to be the ideal number. In Jordan, 71% considered four or more to be the ideal number. In Iran, by contrast, 76% felt that two or less was the ideal number of children in the family. While there is strong support for marriage among Egyptians (95%), Jordanians (87%), and Iranians (67%), a considerably higher percentage of Iranians (17%) agreed with the statement that marriage has become an outdated institution. The corresponding figures for Jordan and Egypt are 12% and 4%, respectively. Finally, a larger percentage of Iranians (40%) than Jordanians (23%) or Egyptians (19%) strongly agreed with the statement that a working mother, just like a non-working mother, could develop an intimate relationship with her children. Along the same line, in a study overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance entitled "Values and Views and Iranians," 67.7 percent of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that a man's responsibility is to work and a woman's responsibility is to take care of home.

³² Less than a quarter of Iran's population lives in big cities and is represented by less than a quarter of parliamentary deputies. According to the Ministry of Interior data, only 98 (34%) seats in the parliament out of the total of 290 belong to districts in the capital of various provinces. Even among the capitals, only Tabriz (with 6 seats), Orumieh (3), Ardebil (3), Esfahan (5), Tehran (30), Shiraz (4), Mashad (5), Ahwaz (3), Qom (3), Rasht, Bandar Abbas (3) and Kermanshah (3) have three or more seats for a total of 71 seats.

There are other local channels of access to central power. The political leaders and their religious, political, and economic networks directly appoint the Friday prayer leaders. But the power these leaders and the institutions command is being eroded. They have become increasingly discredited, due to their perceived corruption, and, as a result, their resources have shrunk. Part of the reason why this has happened relates to the increased secularization of society even in the smaller cities. Another contributing factor of this trend is the result of competition at the presidential level since 1997. For instance, one of Khatami's first acts was to staff the Interior Ministry, provincial and sub-provincial governors with his supporters. As a result, local Friday Prayer leaders have lost quite a bit of power over the appointment or the actions of governors, mayors, and other executive appointees of the central government. For people in smaller cities, this means that their elected Majles deputy is an important and sympathetic channel of negotiation to local and central authorities. Undoubtedly, Friday prayer leaders still have the power of the pulpit but even this is no longer uncontested. In a recent speech, for instance, the parliament speaker Mehdi Karrubi warned the prominent anti-reform Friday prayer leaders that their partisan use of the pulpit would be exposed and matched by the use of the parliament pulpit that is "broadcast everyday in the radio."³³

These trends suggest that conflicts and tensions are bound to exist before, during, and even after elections. These election-oriented conflicts include clashes between the Ministry of Interior and the Guardian Council over candidates, negotiations among key players about disqualifications, threats and even actual boycotts, and conflicts over the certification of votes in particular districts. A sign of the intensity of the upcoming political campaign can be found in the negotiation over who should be in the provincial executive boards. These boards, which constitute the first layer of the vetting process for the candidates, consist of the "trusted" members of the community (*mo'tamedin*). The *Mo'tamedin* are nominated by provincial and sub-provincial authorities (selected by the Interior Ministry) and approved by the provincial supervisory boards of the Guardian Council. In this election, the provincial supervisory boards appointed by the Guardian Council rejected approximately 40% (10,000 thousand nominees) of those introduced. This occurred in provinces where the reformists were deemed to have a good chance of winning (Khorasan and Fars). The Ministry of Interior, in turn, insisted on making an issue of this. The Ministry announced the names of the rejected delegates, many of whom were well-known members of their respective communities with outstanding revolutionary credentials. Ultimately, the conservatives were unable to achieve their intended results—slightly more than five percent were disqualified.³⁴

³³ In a speech to Majles on December 10, 2003, Karrubi said, "With the permission of the leader I ask all Friday prayer leaders, instead of slander of people's representatives and accusing them of lack of religiosity and treason, to officially support their desired candidates... I state clearly here that I am not in support of tension but declare with conviction that if canon fire they have started to direct towards Majles continues, we will not stay quiet either... Those attacking should know that Majles' canon fire is also heavy and along this power, it also has a missile range with much destructive power and if necessary we will start as well... If your speeches are broadcast with delay and at most in the capital of provinces, the radio is in the hands of Majles everyday. If necessary we will increase the number of Majles sessions to five days a week and we will allow representatives to speak and respond to your charges." Reported in *Shargh*, December 11, 2003.

³⁴ According to the Ministry of Interior, the percentage of disqualified candidates for the whole country by the executive boards of various electoral districts was 5.34% with another 1.77% withdrawing on their own

By altering the membership of the executive boards, the hardliners had hoped to place the responsibility of massive disqualifications on these bodies. But the responsibility fell on provincial supervisory boards appointed by the Guardian Council. The result, called a “bloodless” or “quiet coup”, was the unprecedented rejection of 44.2 percent of candidates throughout the country (over 51 percent in Tehran and as high as 61 percent in Hormozgan province).³⁵ Some were rejected through outright disqualification and others through the newly added process of “failure to acquire qualification.”³⁶ The rejections included some 82 incumbents running for reelection. A number of the rejected were conservatives but the overwhelming majority was reformist. As a way to create a split in the reformist front, members of the main clerical organization, *Majma’e Rohaniyun-e Mobarez*, were not disqualified.

Naturally, massive disqualifications created an uproar. Reformist members of the parliament, even those were not rejected by the supervisory boards, immediately began a sit-in in the parliament. They claimed that they will continue to do so until the question of vetting is resolved to their satisfaction. The Interior Ministry stated that it will not consider disqualifications without the approval of the proper legal authorities. The Ministry also stated it would not accept disqualifications on the basis of the “failure to acquire qualification” to be legal, hinting that it may not honor the list of approved candidates on Election Day. The deputy interior minister in charge of elections, Morteza Mobalegh, even suggested that he will not conduct an “illegal election” and will resign if there is no reconsideration of disqualifications.³⁷ In a letter to the president, 27 provincial governors out of the total of 28, appointed by the Interior Ministry, threatened resignation, raising the specter of not holding elections in provinces and the resignation

(434 disqualified out of a total of 8132 with 144 voluntary withdrawals). It is interesting to note that the percentage of disqualifications was varied throughout the country, with Zanzan and Kordestan registering around 12% disqualification and Tehran, Qazvin, Khuzestan, Kerman, and Kermanshah registering between 8 to 10 percent. In Semnan and among religious minorities no one was disqualified. <http://www.moi.gov.ir/news/rr.htm>. Executive boards constitute the first leg of the wetting process. The other three steps are the provincial supervisory boards, the Central Supervisory Board, and the Guardian Council whose decision is final. In each step, rejections can be contested and the number of initially wetted candidates can be increased or reduced.

³⁵ Again the variety among provinces is interesting to note. Hormozgan and Kordestan had over 60 percent rejection rates. Kermanshah, Qazvin, Ilam, and Tehran over 50 percent while disqualifications were in teens in Yazd and Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari. The very high disqualification rates in provinces with high numbers of ethnic minorities such as Kordestan and Kermanshah has raised the specter of ethnic tensions. It was nine times more than the candidates rejected by the executive boards

³⁶ This new criteria has been the most contested aspect of the new wetting procedures added by the supervisory board. It allows for the rejection of candidates without an explanation for why they were rejected since the criteria is the nebulous failure to qualify and not past activities that are causes for qualifications. Out of those disqualified, 1370 or 33 percent were rejected for failure to acquire qualification. Complete numbers and percentages up to disqualifications by the provincial supervisory boards and comparisons to the Sixth parliamentary elections can be found at <http://www.moi.gov.ir/news.aspx?id=2040>.

³⁷ *Yas-e-no*, 18 January, 2004

of Khatami and his cabinet. Finally, important players from the reformist front, such as the parliament speaker Mehdi Karrubi, triggered speculation that a behind-the-scenes deal was struck among the leading clerics.

The tactical move by the supervisory boards was not unexpected and should be considered part and parcel of election politics in Iran. The hardliners, knowing that negotiations would ultimately reduce the number of people disqualified, have several objectives in their disqualification drive. They pursue these objectives to gain a majority in the Seventh parliament irrespective of the perceived short-term costs. They have assessed these costs to be less than the longer term costs of yet another four years of a reformist controlled parliament. Their first objective is to reduce the number of as many big name reformist candidates as possible. Presumably, negotiations will also allow them to insist on the disqualification of at least a few well-known leaders of the reformist front such as Mohsen Mirdamadi, Behzad Nabavi, and Reza Khatami. In other words, they will permit some to run but not others, making the negotiating process beneficial for hardliners no matter what. Secondly, they hope that the process of negotiation will cast a dark cloud over those candidates who will ultimately be approved. The hardliners have already created suspicion by approving some reformist candidates. By continuing this process through negotiation, they hope to create more “suspicious” candidates, leading a higher number of reformist-inclined people not to vote. Finally, they hope intervention by the leader Ali Khamenei will further make the power of non-elected institutions in comparison to elected ones, evident. This is a point they do not mind making public in order to deter extensive political participation.

But like all competitive games, tactical maneuvers do not necessarily assure victory because opponents have countermoves that are difficult to predict. At the time of writing of this paper, the parliamentary deputies’ decision to stage a sit-in has created dilemmas for a number of conservative and reformist players.³⁸ The sit-in, has initiated a process of behind-the-scenes negotiations between President Khatami and Majles Speaker Karrubi on the reformist side, and Khamenei on the conservative side. But given the dramatic sweep of disqualifications by the Guardian Council and the election difficulties the reformist deputies will face if they accept a compromise, it is no longer clear that the parliamentary deputies can afford a compromise. This is why they have resisted calls by both Khatami and Karrubi for a quick end to the sit-in. Even Khatami and his clerical cohorts are faced with a dilemma because their insistence on a compromise under these circumstances will completely destroy their credibility as reformers. This is particularly clear given the apparent willingness and desire of some of the key cabinet ministers, provincial appointees, and even high ranking and middle level government managers to resign.

³⁸ The symbolic importance of the sit-in in the parliament should be noted here given Iran’s century old struggle to create a parliamentary democracy. Skipping 1979 revolutionary symbols, the act of a parliamentary sit-in itself, designed as a powerful symbolic antidote to the conservative maneuver, clearly and intentionally harks back to the constitutional struggles over the creation and maintenance of an independent parliament. The issue is not, it is said, the fate of a few deputies but between an elected parliament and a hand picked one; or, in the words of Mostafa Tajzadeh, between an Islamic republic and an Islamic monarchy. <http://www.emrooz.ws/ShowItem.aspx?Serial=4630&s=1>.

In this unpredictable situation, any move on the part of the Guardian Council and Khamenei to bring about a compromise that goes beyond the qualification of a few deputies will be seen as a sign of weakness. Meanwhile, the reformist deputies, with little to lose, have every reason to continue their sit-in. The process is slowly attracting the support of some civil society organizations, including those associated with students, journalists, and lawyers. Their sit-in is now situated within a broader context that favors civil resistance (or *istadegi-ye madani* as described in reformist newspapers) and not compromise. Discussions of the need for civil resistance had already been initiated among various circles of reformers throughout the society as the parliament's lack of success in changing laws became evident. Non-governmental reformers and some reformists in the parliament even began experimenting, somewhat timidly and reluctantly, with some aspects of it through what was called "political fasts" to object to the continued incarceration of political prisoners. In this context, the extensive disqualifications by hardliners have served to turn a reluctantly used maneuver into a necessity. As mentioned above, the circumstances have also made the use of the maneuver relatively cost-free. The use of force will, of course, dramatically change the situation and, more importantly, reveal the extent of hardliners' power. But that move will also further risk the resignation of Khatami, his cabinet ministers, and managers. This scenario is something that Khamenei and the Guardian Council would like to avoid, evidenced by their constant referral to the legality of their moves.

Under these extremely fluid conditions, the only constant is the continuation of the competition. If a compromise, which allows some candidates to run for reelection is reached, the turnout will be slightly lower than the last two parliamentary elections. The coalition of reformers will probably lose their absolute majority, including some of its well-known leaders from larger cities. But the reformers will not be silenced. Even as a minority bloc, the reformers will be one of several blocs of powerful voices. No matter which political forces control the presidency, the Iranian parliament will remain an important arena for voicing dissatisfaction and for putting pressure on the executive branch. This pressure could include a human rights agenda in support of increased openness of the political system, both internally and externally, and a reformed judicial process. Outside the parliament, a short period of relative quiet will undoubtedly be interrupted with preparation for the next election for the presidency.

If the Guardian Council retreats, the fortunes of the coalition of reformists will certainly be enhanced. But this scenario would neither end discord within the coalition nor lessen opposition from the hardliners. It is only through the direct intervention of armed forces in favor of one side that the competition can be laid to rest temporarily. This scenario, however, is highly unlikely for two reasons: the lack of such a tradition in Iran and the fractured nature of the armed forces in the post-revolutionary period.

V. Union of Internal Democracy and External Opening

This paper has demonstrated that Iran is undergoing democratic change gradually. Having emphasized the significance of internal political competition in shaping the future of Iran, I would like to end the paper with a short discussion of the impact of the international environment in the post-Saddam era. The question I will address is: to what extent do external pressures hasten democratic change within Iran?

The international environment and policies of external actors impact Iran's internal dynamics. In fact, as astute Iran observers have pointed out, Iran's experience of revolution, war, sanctions, and international isolation has allowed the Iranian hardliners to portray themselves as the "true" guardians of Iranian security. Thus, the hardliners are able to stifle debate on foreign policy and security issues under the guise of protecting Iran's national security. This control has adversely affected Iranians' aspirations for political change.³⁹ In addition, hardliners have been strengthened by the punishment-oriented strategies of powerful external actors. These external pressures have allowed the hardliners to accuse proponents of reform as being weak on security.

However, recent events indicate that external actors have begun to impact Iranian politics in a different way. This impact goes beyond the usual claims about the difficulty of avoiding the impact of the Internet and satellite television. Large sectors of the post-revolutionary elite and general population want Iran to become a "legitimate" member of the international community. These groups debate about information produced outside Iran.

In addition, Iran's neighborhood has been rather turbulent in recent years. Bellicose statements against Iran from external actors are on the rise. For example, the axis of evil terminology lent itself to the question, "what does the US have in store for us" after the first of the axis trio was attacked. The labeling of Iran as part of the axis of evil came as a shock, particularly after Iran's cooperation in Afghanistan. Furthermore, this posture caused many to ask whether or not a US invasion of Iran is desired. The mere fact that the question was asked in Iran, not in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, was the result of an external impact. As such, the response to the question remained significant only so long as the external variable remained present. With the difficulties in Iraq and the revelation that the US may not have the appetite for further invasions, the question has become less important in Iranian political discourse.

The issue of Iran's nuclear program is particularly interesting. It offers a good case for understanding how international pressures now work their way into Iranian domestic politics. European and American policy makers have responded to Iran's nuclear programs as well as human rights issues in various ways. A different kind of discussion about the impact of external actors on Iranian politics centers on how external forces can foster change in Iran. Initially, external pressures strengthened the hand of hardliners and weakened Iran's diplomatic apparatus because of the punishment-oriented strategy and the lack of specific demands, which Iran could consider legitimate. However, the voices pushing for greater international engagement urged the signing of the Additional Protocol

³⁹ On this point see Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litvak, "Debating Iran's Nuclear Aspirations." *The Washington Quarterly* 26, 4 (Autumn 2003), 99-114.

as “a step in confidence building.” These calls became more assertive and urged Iran to pursue this end. Their position was bolstered by the possibility of improved relations with Western Europe and a realistic assessment of the necessity to work with countries that do not necessarily accept the “axis of evil.”

The agreement reached with the European foreign ministers on October 21, 2003 was stunning both in terms of content as well as the manner in which it came about. Indeed, many thought this decision was too difficult for Iran’s contentious political system and predicted the Iranian leadership would ultimately “buckle under.” Very few expected the agreement to come about in such a dramatic manner.

The agreement reached with Europe followed a long period of national debate. It was unusual because of its frankness about Iran’s difficult international position.⁴⁰ But the decision to take initiative and enter into an agreement was won by those who argued that the signing of the Additional Protocol was a necessary affirmation of Iran’s commitment to international obligations and not an infringement on its sovereignty. The reformists, including the Islamic Iran’s Participation Front and Mojahedin of Islamic Revolution, unanimously celebrated the final decision. At the same time, they acknowledged that this is just the beginning of long road. Similarly, improved relations with Egypt were achieved through the public isolation of a vocal group of hardliners and the assent of other hardliners.

The events of the past few months have had a positive impact on internal debates in Iran. This change has occurred as a result of the external players’ desire for engagement with Iran. The recent American actions regarding the Bam earthquake, including the suspension of some sanctions and financial aid, confirm this trend. Once considered taboo, discussions of relations with the United States are now commonplace. These discussions have even raised the issue of direct relations with the US. Public discussions on relations with the United States no longer ask whether to begin formal relations, but how to begin them.

The debate about relations with the United States has occurred within the context of discussions about the costs of foreign and security policy choices Iran has made in the past two decades. The debate has included discussion about the extent to which its foreign policy has adversely affected Iran’s economic and political well-being. Many Iranians no longer see external forces and as an impediment to democratization. In other words, engagement with the world and promotion of democracy at home has become intertwined in the Iranian political discourse. The two key concerns of the Iranian polity in the past century – national sovereignty and democracy – do not seem to be at odds. This important change has occurred gradually, allowing many Iranians to abandon their distrust of foreign powers.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the internal debates that led to the agreement with the three European powers see Farideh Farhi, “To Sign or Not to Sign? Iran’s National Conversation on Nuclear Options.” Paper written for the Nixon Center (2003).

There are concerns and discussions inside Iran regarding the possibility of the hardliners maneuvering to strike a “grand deal” with powerful external players, particularly the US. This deal would allow the hardliners to placate external hostility to their rule and at the same time, crush internal dissent. But internal and external forces would prevent such a deal from materializing. These forces include Iran’s domestic political environment and the internal politics of other countries.

Despite dreams of a Velvet revolution, neither democracy nor harmonious relations with the outside world will come to Iran overnight. But a coordinated international approach will strengthen Iran’s internal push for democracy at the state level and within society. An approach that encourages Iran to honor its international commitments, including human rights and nuclear proliferation, is bound to have a lasting effect on Iran’s foreign and promote democratization.