

The Incomplete Project of Civil Society in Iran

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Abstract

It has been a while since such terminology as civil society has become common and its application has permeated through the realm of the press as well as social communities from the realm of theoretical university discussions. The amazing point is that the background for its formation throughout the contemporary history of Iran has been faced with tough obstacles and has even reinforced its implacability with developing history in a way that today the Iranian society is having a hard time establishing a civil society. This paper aims to study the pathology of the formation of a civil society in contemporary Iran. After giving a specific definition for civil society and dividing it into pre- and post-modernism, this paper attends to the Iranian structure. Then, mentioning the gravest obstacles on the way to reach and develop a civil society in Iran, the existing opportunities and bases on the way to develop a civil society have been discussed.

Keywords: Civil society, Iran, modernist, ruling ideology

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1 – 1. Introduction

Today the concept of civil society is enjoying a special position in modern political thought. In addition to enjoying a special position in the history of political thought, this concept helps the researcher of political sciences to set himself free from the limited horizon of ‘the science of politics equals the science of government’ and achieve a more profound understanding of social correlations and the way self-ruling social institutions tick. To this end, in the last few centuries the concept of civil society has entered various discourses as an idea according to which the society is constituted by popular independent institutions and parties.

But why this trend has been slow in Iran? Some consider Iran as a closed society due to climatic and historic conditions and the regional, geopolitical and strategic atmosphere. The Iranian history has alternatively experienced concentration non-concentration periods. The implications of such concentration are governance and the concentration of resources in the hands of the state. This problem is counted as a major obstacle on the way to achieve a civil society. In other words, governance and the expansion of governmental possession in contrast to private possession, the huge economic power of the state (resulting from petroleum monopoly) and the concentration of vital resources in the hands of the state, and also the low level of citizenship trust and culture have left no impetus for social work and activities out of the state circle (i.e. civil society). Thus, since the diagnosis and prognosis of the disease and knowing what have brought about it are prior to its remedy, by introducing the factors contributing to the disease in terms of “structural-historic” and “political-cultural” obstacles, some remedies have been put forward so as to be upbeat about the realization of a civil society in the future.

1 – 2. The Word “Civil Society” from Vision to Reality

The concept of civil society in western political thought has been faced with revolutions and convolutions. Various deductions given about civil society conceptually can be divided into two temporal frameworks: pre-modernism and post-modernism² (Afroogh, 2002).

a) The pre-modernist concept of civil society: The main feature of this period is that it does not recognize it as confronting the state, but the solidity of the civic society depends on the state and the state is its inalienable component. This sense of civil society is clearly notable in the works of John Locke, Jean Jacques Roseau, and Immanuel Kant.

b) The post-modernist concept of civil society: The most important theories in this period about civil society have recognized it as independent from the state which can be classified as follows (Bashirieh, 1998):

1. A civil society is a social community comprising numerous groups which intermingle with one another, but they do not become one, and together form a symbiotic social unit. This interpretation which still does not recognize the state as the solidifying element of the civil society, does not count the civil society synonymous with civilization, but regards civilization presented by the formation of civic society.

2. Civil society is the intermediary institution between the family and the state.

3. Civil society is the territory of material and economic relations or the underlying relations and the relations between individuals and strata collectively which lie outside the apparent territory of the state. This view, which can be seen in «Marx»’s philosophy, believes that the civil society is the state’s natural base, and its main features are individuality, competition and contention.

² There is a difference between *modernity* and *modernism*. Modernism, by its general definition, means reconstruction, progress and development. It is a kind of ideology that seeks to replace the old with the new and recognizes the new as better than the old. Modernism is the expression and manifestation of modern thought. In more precise words, modernism is modernity on the outside, and modernity is the identity and soul of modernism. In Persian translation of modernity, such terms as newness, novel thought and being up-to-date are used, and modernism has been translated as contemporaneity, contemporaneousness and renaissance.

4. Civil society in the sense of the intermediary institution between people and the state views it as a collection comprising individuals who form groups and communities with their intentions and options independently from the state, and considers it as a host of institutions and unions which exist independent from the interference of the dominant political power³. In this view, the institutions of the civil society are in fact non-government organizations which can appear in the forms of associations, clubs, unions, guilds, parties, cultural institutes and non-government organizations (Molana, 2003).

Based on the fourth definition, we define the civil society as the interface between the main four parts of society in which voluntary associations play pivotal roles in political, societal, economic and cultural dimensions (Chalabi, M, 1996, pp. 288). But why did this concept not come true in Iran?

1 – 2. Iran and Civil Society

To answer the above question, it is necessary to study the historical background of this trend – the civil society - in Iran.

***The Pre-Constitutionalism Period**

From the point of view of historical sociology, the main difference between governments in the western and eastern worlds was the non-reliance of the eastern world's states on the strata and the concentration of power in the state. Regardless of the reasons for the formation of such a situation, the concentration of power in the state in the eastern world led to the theory of eastern totalitarianism by the eastern world's history and politics researchers (AzadArmaki, 2012).

In Iran, too, before the formation of the modern state, due to the eastern totalitarianism, non-government institutions in its new sense did not play any roles, although certain traditional institutions such as guilds, the clergy, bazaar, and mystic groups were active in society and played the intermediary role between people and the state.

In his analysis of Iran in the medieval centuries, Lambton mentions this group and writes:

States were so dependent on the economic power that in some cases some marketeers took up positions as a minister using their influence and nepotism. Thus, bazaar and the clergy can be considered as the two main pillars of the Iranian civil society before Constitutionalism (Khaniki, 1997). However, none of these was the main features of the civil society.

***From the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution**

The establishment of Constitutionalism in Iran in 1906, the compilation of the constitution, the recognition of individuals' rights and liberties along with the right to form associations in it put a suitable opportunity at the intellectuals and laborers' disposal to establish the civil society in its modern sense. Along with this end the intellectuals have taken steps to establish parties (Bahar, 1942), and workers also formed the first labor union in Iran (Lajvardi, 1990). Consequently the civil society in Iran was born together with Constitutionalism.

With the appearance of Reza Shah and the formation of his new and absolutist government and with the dominance of the royal court and the army, however, civil life began to go down the drain. Despite the growth of the two major layers of bureaucrats and intermediate groups and laborers, Reza Shah's reign weakened and belittled the civil society a lot with pressures on and measures against such traditional civil groups as the clergy and traditional bazaars, and also by restricting new associations. With the dethronement of Reza Shah the social aura opened up and the civil society was stepped up again, but again disorder and chaos and the contention of civil groups paved the way for the appearance of a absolutist state.

³ This interpretation of civil society, which emphasizes the limitation of the governing power by popular institutions, is a novel inference deduced from it.

*The Islamic Revolution Period

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the civil society enjoyed a remarkable development similar to the past few periods. Nonetheless, increasing conflicts and clashes between political groups and streams led the political and social atmosphere to gridlock. After the Imposed War was over and Rafsanjani's government swept to power with open economic policies, there seemed to be a hope of the development and headway of a civil society. But this hope did not bear any noticeable fruit. Increasing political contentions for power and a stronger propensity on the part of the system to a higher concentration, and also drastic measures in the Second Five Years Plan and the decline in economic balance policies deterred the remarkable growth of the civil society.

With the Elections of Second of Khordad and the discourse of the civil society and its victory over other discourses a new hope emerged. During these years civil associations enjoyed a remarkable growth, but the conflicts among the political groups and the new resistances of the power structure endangered the development of the civil society. This is why this concept was not put into action even during the later states.

Perhaps it is because the essence of the Iranian political history in the twentieth century has been the conflict between the constitutionalist government theory and the absolutist government theory. The historical weakness of civil society in Iran on the one hand, and the justification of an absolutist state for such reasons as the need for economic development on the other, has brought about the victory of absolutism over constitutionalism. This has caused the civil society to have the following features:

A) Limitation: As it was seen, the civil society has had multitudinous ups and downs throughout the history, especially throughout the Iranian contemporary history, but what has lingered throughout all these years has been the limitation and peripheral role of the civil institutions in a way that this has been the political society which has subjugated the civil society.

B) Strict Supervision and Control by the State: Many of the so-called civil institutions formed in contemporary Iran have basically been made by the state or have been under strict supervision and control by the central government. They were like instruments in the hands of politicians and rulers and could not help the growth of the civil society in their turns (Ashraf, 1998).

1 – 3. Obstacles to Civic Society in Iran

To discuss which factors deter the development of a civil society in Iran, the following four factors can be mentioned:

a) **Concentrated political power:** The first assumption is that the increase in the government's reign over such power resources as the obligatory and non-obligatory ones decreases feasibility and institutionalization of the civil society. Many politicians and theoreticians have counted the «accumulation of wealth» as the condition for economic development, ignorant of the fact that the experience of many countries shows that the accumulation of power can have dire consequences for the political development and the genesis of a civil society (Lipst, 2004).

Throughout the history of Iran, especially the Iranian contemporary history, the ruling political power has always had a tendency for concentration, and the concentration of political power has been faced with an intruder called the civil society. Thus, the ruling powers have always taken steps to confront and exterminate the civil society. But it must be said that the viability of the extermination of the civil society is difficult if not impossible. In today's situation also the political aura is moving toward the more concentration of power which is a big obstacle on the way of the development of a civil society .

b) Non-civic political culture: Almond has mentioned the civil political culture while discussing different political cultures (Almond, 1978). This culture which is specific to democratic societies suitably paves the way for the development of a civil society, but the civil political culture does not enjoy a notable position in the Iranian culture. The Iranian spirits have had a proclivity for infiltration, non-cooperation and distrust, and this has shown itself off at the level of political culture, too.

With the existence of proper religious and historic backgrounds, Iranians have not enjoyed appropriate cultural conditions in terms of team/group work and especially in non-profitable activities. This political culture that orbits around the pivot of power brings about sociability and a deep distrust in human relationships in the first few stages on the one hand, and wants individuals to show obedience to and a belief in the rulers and political institutions on the pretext of opportunism and individual security on the other. Therefore, if some organizations and associations emerge in conditions of distrust, they themselves will be based on a bossy relation (Parliament Research Center, 2002). These challenges are rooted in the realities ruling the traditional obstacles in the society. Perhaps the positive emphasis on and deduction about the word I rather than we in the society are due to this fact.

c) The ruling ideology: Generally speaking, political life takes form in the context of political discourse, and each discourse realizes various facilities for political symbiosis in a particular form and gives the state, society and individuals a specific identity. The way political discourses emerge, stabilize and break down is a complicated process whose discussion cannot be contained in this paper. But generally, each discourse contains a set of decrees, conceptions and rules which form the political life. The ideology and culture of the ruling groups are rooted in discourses, and their revolution depends on the revolution in those discourses. This is why the emergence of the civil society is necessary for the emergence of the discourse of the civil society. Each discourse preserves certain arguments, concepts, manners, groups and political procedures while expunging certain others. In Iran three political discourses have generally been dominant (Azad Armaki, 2012). The first is the 'Traditional Patrimonial Discourse'. In a patrimonial regime, because the government is an individualistic one, so it is far from meritocracy, and obedience replaces capability and connection replaces merit (Hajjarian, 1999: 91-92). Lambton (2000) holds that political thought in Iran could not answer the question of who watches the watchman. Theoretically, the ruler followed the religion, but practically no means was thought of as to force him to obey, which is why it was vastly more theoretical. This type has been the discourse of the Iranian traditional regime before the Constitutionalist Revolution which consisted of the two main theories of «the Iranian king theory» and «the Shiite political theory». In other words, either in its pre-Islamic form or in its form which was realized during the permeation of Islam to Iran, it depends on the following principles: political patriarchy, bossiness, sheer obedience, the connection between politics and myth and religion, the relation between God and the king, the sacredness of power and its being irreprehensible, the deletion of competition and cooperation, political opportunism, passivity, clandestine objection, terror and submission, silence, negative individualism, etc.

The second major political discourse in Iran can be described as the Iranian Modernism which prevailed in the absolutist Pahlavi era. This discourse was also a collection convoluted elements. The kingdom theory in ancient Iran, the patrimonial theory in its historic framework, and the absolutist state theory were its prevailing elements. The main features of this political discourse were centralism, nationalism, anti-traditionalism, rationalism in its modernist theory, and power-seeking.

The third political discourse in Iran took form since the end of the Pahlavi period and prevailed in the period after the Islamic Revolution. This discourse is called Traditionalism. The social background for the emergence of this discourse was the breakdown of the traditional community as a result of the reconstruction in the Pahlavi era and the emergence of

a mass society in this period. In such a situation the need for correlation paved the road for the recourse to traditions and the idealization of tradition and religion. This tradition has also sought a specific identity for the individual which has particularly been different from the identity-making of the patrimonial discourse. The traditionalist discourse in Iran consists of the elements of the Shiite political theory, some aspects of the Iranian patrimonial tradition and some aspects of modernism (at least at institutional and instrumental levels). Like the modernist discourse, this discourse has also punched out certain conceptions, decrees and groups. In other words, the traditionalist discourse has negated the deletions of the modernist discourse.

If we consider these three discourses or ideologies, i.e. the traditional patrimonial one, modernism and traditionalism as the three dominant discourses on the structure of power in contemporary Iran we have to say that these ideologies never allow a civil society in themselves (Bashirieh, 2002).

d) The Rentier State

Rentier states are states who constantly receive foreign rents (i.e., bribery) where payers are foreign governments or institutions.

These states can be identified with four features: 1. Rents constitute the bulk of the state's revenue; 2. Rents must have a foreign resource, i.e. it must not have any dependence on production processes inside the country; 3) In a rentier state, only a minute percentage of the labor force are busy producing rents and therefore the majority play the roles of the distributors or receivers of rents within the society; 4) A rentier state alone receives and expends the rents (Mahdavy, 1970; Beblaw, 1987; Ross, 2004).

Now regarding the features of a rentier state it is clear that the Iranian state has been a rentier one, especially in the last 50 years. Many experts recognize the existence of such a state as a deterring factor on the way of the development of a civic society. Of course certain other experts believe that in case of financial crises will open the doors to the development of a civic society (Newtonm & Norris, 2000).

Legal Barriers

The realization of a civil society warrants an institutional law. But rules fall short in Iran. Lon Fuller enumerates some features for laws in his prominent book *Modernity of Law*, which he calls "the internal politeness of law." He believes: "Each law has two kinds of politeness, which means that it has to have two ethical aspects one of which is called internal politeness and the other external politeness. By internal politeness of the law he means the procedures and orders which have to be observed independent of the content of the law so that the law becomes the law, even though it should be prejudiced. And external politeness points to the content of the law which can or cannot be fairer depending on the social status. Thus, unlike those who do not basically consider an unfair law as the law, he believes that if the legislative format is met and the law has internal politeness, it is enough to be called the law."

To this end, he enumerated eight features as the internal politeness of the law and basically any rule through the deletion of one of which the law or rule will fall short of credit. These eight features are: 1. the law must be generic and inclusive; 2. firstly, the law will not refer or turn around to precedents, and secondary, the implementation of some certain rules is entailed in temporal gradualness; 3. the law must be public; 4. the law must be clear and understandable; 5. the collection of laws must have internal compatibility; 6. the law must not assign homework; 7. the law must not change frequently; 8. there must not exist any contradiction or discrepancy between the proclaimed rules and their real implementation. But the internal and, to some extent, the external politeness in the Iranian law do not hold which is why a disorder has been formed.

The existence of notes in the law(s) reminded me unintentionally of a book which I had read when I was a student: *Language, dignity and power in Iran* by William Beeman. The author

had satirically compared the Iranian administrative system in Iran during the Pahlavi period with that of his own country in one part of the book in such a text: “When I went to the Iranian offices, I found something strange – when the client is told that their work is administratively impossible, they have such a pet phrase as «do something about it»!!! And strangely enough, this expression does wonders, on the condition that that official is willing to do something for the client!! Since the Iranian law has so many notes and NB’s that they can do something without being convicted. But in my country, when we say this is impossible, it is really impossible unless we circumvent the law (cf. Beeman: 2016)”.

Ways to Achieve a Civil Society

Now considering the mentioned barriers, we pay attention to the question as whether to be upbeat about the development of a civil society or not. To this end, the enumeration of the existing opportunities and backgrounds to develop a civil society seems necessary:

A) The International Conditions: With the crisis occurring in the welfare governments in the 1970s and the formation of neoliberalism and the end of the servant economy, the third modernist wave took form with the minimal government and the maximal civil society pivots. This wave first was formed in western countries and then, especially with the fall of communism in the global scene, in the whole world. The incidents of September 11th gave further impetus to this procedure. The Middle East has been imbued with this wave more. Today, majority of the states in the Middle East have abandoned the centralist policies and are moving toward the development of a civil society, thanks to the pressure from the existing situations (Bashirieh, 1392: 690). These changes in the global and regional scenes have undoubtedly impressed Iran and will weaken the centralist essence of political power.

B) Economic Reconstruction and the New Middle Class: Reconstruction and structural revolutions in social and economic realms in developing countries usually pave the way for the formation of a civil society (698) and the numerous reconstructive plans in Iran have led to the formation and development of the new middle class in the society. This class, which has been regarded as the moving engine of the civil society and democracy in various analyses, will do its best in forming the political civil culture and limiting the power, hence the development of a civil society (Ahmadi, 1998: 247).

C) The Growth of the Public Media and the Extensive Communicative Network: These days, new spaces have been formed in communication areas which are not at the disposal of the government and are managed independently. The influence of globalization on Iran, the remarkable growth in using the Internet and cyberspaces, the expansion of group clubs and personal weblogs in these spaces, as well as the universality of the media, the emergence of satellites and the development of land and air communications have all paved the road for the failure of the ideologies which oppose to the development of a civil society, hence its development.

●The Expansion of the Concept of Citizenship

In the arena of citizenship culture, some parameters and variables must be mentioned which are among the main keywords. These key concepts are «urban responsibility, the lawfulness of the citizens, accepting norms from city-dwelling models». In an urban society the culture of citizenship will not take place unless these concepts, which are derived from an urban culture, are institutionalized, and each of the citizens gets familiar with their rights and duties (Fokouhi, 2003).

In contrast to the duties which we enumerated for the citizens of a civil society from a cultural view, the government, which is the representative of the civil power of the society and the citizens of the society have delegated their power to it, has responsibilities.

«In contrast to the responsibilities and duties which are on the shoulders of the citizens, the government and official organizations are mandated to observe the rights defined in the

Constitution for the citizens. Some of these rights have emerged through the human identity which the citizens enjoy, and the other rights are considered as have taken form through social contracts in the frame of the Constitution and its related laws. No state is allowed to violate individuals' civil and political rights, even through enacting laws. The necessity of observing laws on the part of the states is in a way that today they are regarded as welfare states. The states in which people play their role in electing not only the rulers, but also the city council members and mayors, the responsibility of the government and the elected ones to provide people with their desires and demands is more intense, for supporting them and the continuation of their position depends on people's satisfaction. This is why they find themselves more responsible to people and public credence than to the political and administrative system of the nation» (Kousha, 2008, p. 30).

To sum up, the cultural identity of the citizens is formed as an acquired identity through a bilateral interaction between the citizens and the official organizations of the city and the civil institutions. Both sides of this interaction have rights and duties without the continuation of and particularity about which the expectations of the civil society and democracy will not take place. Thus, citizenship, in all its dimensions, includes a system of values and manners which require a special civil behavior whose main feature is a sense of belonging and commitment to the society. This is where the citizens cross the rudimentary stage and turn into a social capital.

As a result, despite the existence of serious obstacles on way of developing a civil society and regarding the mentioned opportunities and backgrounds, one can be upbeat about the development and expansion of a civil society in Iran.

1 – 4. Final Comments

Now according to “A little on that scale, a little in this harmony, be a little on your own scale to be in your own harmony”, the features of a civil society are high political and social attendance of the masses, a high level of the society's political understanding, lawfulness, social and political ebullience, the existence of an open political atmosphere, non-concentration of power, criticizability of power center, a healthy political competition, the existence of a democratic atmosphere, pluralism, and certain other components.

The formation of these components warrants the existence of suitable backgrounds in the society. Meanwhile social and political forces, layers and strata, civil institutions and the state have key and fundamental roles in the formation of such backgrounds. Other wise the existence of a civil society is practically impossible. This relation must change into a bilateral relation so that power is distributed equally at all levels of the society. A revolution in the political culture, common discourses and a shift of the state from a dictatorial and traditional one to a lawful and democrat one paves the way for this relation. The transition from a traditional society to a civil one also warrants a shift of social forces and people's features. They must achieve self-reliance instead of waiting for a redeemer and hero and seek wisdom and knowledge. Considering the above-mentioned forces and the interaction and influences among them in contemporary Iran, the hoped-for civil society in Iran is within optimistic reach.

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