

Political Decentralization  
and the Creation of Local  
Government in Iran:  
Consolidation or  
Transformation of the  
Theocratic State?\*

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*Introduction*

**I**N February 1999, Iranians went to polls for the first time in their history in competitive elections for over 200,000 local government posts. Notwithstanding fears that the elections would be delayed or even canceled by those threatened by the possibility of another reformist victory, they went smoothly. Although detailed results are not yet available, reformists or reformist-minded independents won many if not a majority of the council seats, including those in major cities. The process was just as important as the results—the local elections were very popular and entirely new groups of people participated in the elections as candidates: young professionals, many women, and many technocrats, ran ads in newspapers, and put up wall posters with their qualifications and experience prominently displayed. A significant proportion of women were elected to local council seats; in some cities they form a majority of the council (Tajbakhsh, 2000). The councils have been in operation for a little over a year, and are now an important aspect of the evolving form of the Iranian polity as it struggles to redefine itself. (Due to limitations of space, I have not presented an analysis of the elections themselves and of the preliminary results, which I have provided elsewhere.)

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Part of a broader set of decentralization reforms, these elections brought into being a new tier of local government. While the germ of the idea of local democratic institutions can be traced to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, in terms of both scale and form these reforms are unprecedented in Iranian history. Legal provisions for elected local government institutions have existed in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) since 1979, but it is only now, twenty years after the Islamic Revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy, that this constitutional requirement has been put into effect. Although Iranian national and international politics has been the focus of a substantial amount of analysis, much less attention has been given to local politics. As Chehabi has observed, "this neglect vitiates our understanding of contemporary Iran, as it is at the local level that state policies are carried out, contested, reshaped, resisted, or revised" (1997, 235).

Clearly, it is too early to judge whether the new structures of local governance will lead to a more differentiated polity, contribute to the growth of civil society institutions, create an effective and responsive urban politics and policy arena, and thereby contribute to the democratization of Iranian society—all ambitious goals articulated by supporters of the reforms (see *Khordad* 12/29/98). Given this proviso, the central question I address in this paper is the extent to which the continuing political development and institutionalization of political democracy in Iran represents a consolidation or a potential transformation of the Iranian theocratic regime twenty years after its founding. In this paper, therefore, I analyze the debates within Iran. I do this to better understand the nature and scope of political discourse in contemporary Iran with respect to the reform of political institutions, efforts at decentralization of state power, and the dilemmas and controversies surrounding the notion of civil society in an Islamic context.<sup>1</sup>

*Historical Background*

In 1978, the year before the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy and the inauguration of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Moussavi Ardebili, a senior cleric and supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini, visited the future leader of the Islamic Republic in his exile home in Paris to discuss the shape of the future Constitution (Saghafi, 1998). One of the issues discussed was the role and place of “councils” (*showra* in Persian). According to Ardebili, Khomeini supported the notion and said that as soon as the new regime was established the regional and local councils should be given their appropriate responsibilities and authority. A draft of the articles regarding the councils was worked up in Paris and sent to Tehran. It subsequently became the subject of some of the most controversial debates within the special assembly charged with drafting the new constitution. (Ardebili was one of the 70 members of this body.) Although written into the founding document, the idea of local councils or local self-government (*khod-mokhtari*) was ultimately subordinated to other conceptions of authority, principally that of *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the clergy) and parliamentarism and presidentialism at the national level.

In 1980, several months after the ratification of the Constitution, Khomeini again urged the implementation of the regional and local councils. A bill outlining the scope of authority and responsibilities of these local councils and their electoral procedures was developed and sent to the Majles (parliament). The bill was quickly approved, and a first round of elections were hastily held in 150 cities in October 1980 (*Mehr 1358*), indicating that the question of the councils was important for the revolutionaries. For several reasons, the idea of locally elected municipal, village, and provincial councils was put on hold for almost twenty years. Chief among these were the war with Iraq, the centralizing requirements of a new state, and perhaps most significantly, the eruptions of armed ethnic conflict in the provinces in 1980 and 1981—it was feared that devolving even limited autonomy to local institutions would stoke the flames of separatist aspirations. In

the mid-1980's, when the issue of the councils made one of its periodic appearances, Ardebili commented, "This issue of the councils, which today has become popular and controversial, is not a new one for us. The question of the councils is an Islamic matter and the foundations of this Revolution should be built from this Islamic and far-reaching principle" (*Proceedings*, 1365 (1986), 991, cited in Saghafi, 1998, 7).<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the matter of councils or local self-government in Iran has a longer history and more varied precedence than that suggested by Ardebili. As is well known to students of modern Iran, popular political associations (*anjomans*), and municipal and provincial associations, played a critical role in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. "The Constitutionalist considered representative participation in official *anjomans* in the form of provincial assemblies and municipal councils an essential aspect of democratic government... Popular political societies and provincial assemblies must be considered an important component of the constitutionalist movement and one of its primary goals" (Arjomand, 1988, 38-9).<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the Constitutional movement, both the *anjomans* and the nascent political parties declined, finally to be eclipsed by the centralized state building of the democratic Constitutionalist and then by the authoritarian centralism of Reza Khan Pahlavi.

This earlier impulse left its legacy in the articles of the Constitution of 1907 and called for local self-government. Weak and unsuccessful attempts were made to activate this policy a few times during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Yet not until ninety years after they were written into the first Constitution were they put into effect. Today, the sense of having taken up the unfinished tasks of history, a kind of teleology of democratization, can be gleaned from reformers' attitudes. As the influential Deputy Minister of the Interior, Mostafa Tajzadeh, remarked of the council elections, "If participation and competition are the two fundamental requirements of political development, the councils are the pinnacle [*owj*] of this process, and taking it to the remotest villages and points of the country" (quoted in *SE* 2/24/99).<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it would be too polemical to view the creation of local government as a continuation of the democratic experiments of the first decades of this century. Not only is the current new local government law more far-reaching than that envisioned in the earlier period, but it is also taking place under circumstances substantially different from that at the turn of the century. Nonetheless, both episodes are part of a larger process of democratization.

*The 1997 Decentralization Law*

The constitutional and legal basis of the current reforms are contained in Chapter 7 (Articles 100-106) of the Constitution of the IRI adopted in 1979-80 and in the Formation of Councils and the Election of Mayors Law of 1997-8. The current decentralization policy is contained in the Local Council Law, ratified by the Majles (Parliament) in 1997-8.<sup>5</sup> The primary objective of the creation of the councils is described as follows: "In order to expedite social, economic, development, public health, cultural, and educational programs and facilitate other affairs relating to public welfare with the cooperation of the people according to local needs, the administration of each village, division, city, municipality, and province will be superseded by a council to be named the Village, Division, City, Municipality, or Provincial Council. Members of each of these councils will be elected by the people of the locality in question." The city councils have a term of four years. The size of the councils range between five and eleven depending on population, with Tehran as the national capital having a 15-member council. Other articles stipulate that the elected bodies will have precedence in decision-making over the corresponding appointees of the central government bureaucracy, emphasizing that local democratic institutions should possess a degree of autonomy and that the democratic principle has precedence over other forms of authority.

Chapter 3 of the law describes the responsibilities of the city councils, a series of functions and responsibilities that is for the

most part familiar to students of local government (see Clark, 1998; Baldersheim et al., 1996, Heper 1998). Three areas will be crucial for the evolution of local governance, civil society, and urban policy in Iran. The first is the extent to which the election of the mayor becomes an expression of political autonomy of the local councils from local elites, from national political influences, and from central government pressures. A further aspect is the degree to which the Mayors and the local councils have cooperative rather than opposed agendas. Second, is the degree and manner in which fiscal autonomy is exercised by the councils—for example, how extensively they use the discretion the law allows them to raise local taxes with the goal of strengthening local organizational capacity. This, of course, will depend partially upon the strength of the local economic base from which revenue can be derived.<sup>6</sup> The third area of interest is the significance and role of the non-state sector in local governance, and whether this is promoted, resisted, or ignored by the local councils. By non-state I mean both non-profit organizations as well as locally-based private sector interests, such as guilds, merchants associations, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Debates and Discourses on the Local Council Reform*

An analysis of the debates in the months preceding the local council elections reveals at least five principal dimensions of controversy and debate: different justifications for the councils; arguments for and against their adoption within the current conjuncture; the role of, and impact upon, civil society; the role of political competition; and finally, centralization versus federalist tendencies within conceptions of the Iranian state.

#### *Justifications for Local Councils*

Three types of discourse characterized the debate around local councils: religious, technocratic, and socio-political (civil society). Each of these perspectives advances different justifications for

local councils. How these different elements will combine in practice and the relative weights among them will be crucial to the evolution of local government in the coming years.

*Religious and Doctrinal Discourses.* The idea that governmental authority derives its legitimacy from popular participation and decision-making is not very surprising from the perspective of Western democratic theory. Despite the widespread perception of Islamic law as un-democratic and authoritarian *in principle*, many observers may be surprised by the extent to which the principles of “democratic” or popular participation are invoked by the Islamic Constitution, with reference to explicitly Islamic sources. In fact, the word for councils, *showra*, expressing the necessity of consultation (*moshaverat*) and participation (*mosharekat*) of all community members in the organization of their society, has roots in early Islamic history. Proponents of what could be called the Islamic road to democracy cite several instances of the Prophet Muhammed and Imam Ali (the two principal exemplars within Shia tradition) explicitly taking into account popular opinion in their decision making as well as citing instances of these community leaders changing their minds over a course of action in face of popular opposition. For these writers these, albeit less dominant, traditions sanction the role of popular participation in an Islamic concept of government.

The emphasis on consultation within Islamic doctrine is reflected in the Constitution of the IRI. For example, Article 3 [“State Goals”] no. 8 states: “the participation of the entire people in determining their political, economic, social, and cultural destiny”; and Article 7 [“Consultative Bodies”] no. 1 states: “In accordance with the command of the Quran contained in the verse “Their affairs are by consultations among them” [42:38] and “Consult them in affairs” [3:159], consultative bodies—such as the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Provincial Councils, and the City, Region, District, and Village Councils and the likes of them—are the decision-making and administrative organs of the country.”

Of course, these provisions for popular self-determination sit side-by-side in the Constitution (as well as in the current practice) with the argument for the “guidance” and “guardianship” of the state and its laws by men who derive their legitimacy not solely from democratic assent, but also as a result of holy provenance and inspiration, and from religious training and knowledge (the principle of *velayat-e faqih*). The clash between the different social forces that are championing these two contradictory logics has led to the struggles and conflicts within the Iranian polity. This tension creates the political and ideological space for struggles over the meaning of Islam and democratic participation and how the two should be articulated. Thus debates over the creation of the local councils represent a further instance of the uneasy tension between hierocratic and democratic forms of government, between the religious and the republican/secular imagery in the realm of authority (Arkoun, 1994, 68-9).

These tensions stimulate several questions regarding the place of *showra* in the exercise of authority. First, is the consultation of the people (by the clerical leaders) necessary for the legitimacy of decisions regarding public policy? Second, are the results of consultation binding? Third, how is the constituency to be consulted? Fourth, does accepting consultation imply any decision-rule or procedure, such as majority rule? Fifth, what is distinctive about the *showra* form in contrast to other forms of representative government, for example parliamentarism?

As we have seen, the council form was defended by some senior clerics, as well as by Khomeini, on doctrinal grounds. There are several Quranic passages that are explicit injunctions to employ “consultation” as a means of arriving at binding collective decisions, such as in 42: 35-38 where Muslims are enjoined to do three things: to pray, to “conduct their affairs by mutual consent,” and to give alms (Quran, 1993, 342). As in all matters of interpretation of often ambiguous and contradictory statements, there is room for several different conclusions. In one view, the fact of divine legitimacy and authority bestowed upon the Prophet Muhammed through revelation and the Twelve Imams (in the Iranian Ja’fari

Shia tradition) is not incompatible with the requirement of religious leaders to seek counsel from the people. This view has been advanced by religious jurists such as Alame Tabataba'i, and Aya-tollah Mahmud Taleghani, perhaps the most prominent modern proponent of *showras*. On the other hand, authorities such as Tabarsi have argued that while consultation is admissible, the results are not binding on religious leaders (Eta'at nd, 3). Others reject consultation as a *source* of legitimacy—this most famously being spelled out in the theory of *velayat-e faqih* (Khomeini, 1981). For these writers, while consultation is permissible, it is not binding on the religious leaders. Moreover only the most populist have seen the constituents to be consulted as including the entire adult population; most have restricted the relevant persons to be consulted to the religious authorities. In the Shia orthodox maximalist interpretation, consultation in government is necessary only amongst the religious authorities not as a source of law-making or for the public use of reason to use Habermas' phrase, but as an extended commentary on the divine laws found in the founding religious texts. It is for this reason that the name of the national legislature was changed from *Majles-e Showra-ye Melli* (National Assembly) to *Majles Showra-ye Eslami*.

Thus, in the orthodox interpretation, the act of consultation (*moshaverat*), and the institutional forms within which these are to take place (*showra*) are properly understood as instruments for the proper *application* of divine laws, and not the source of the production of laws. It is concerned with means rather than ends, with giving answers rather than asking questions.<sup>8</sup> The "people" play a subsidiary role to the Immamate and in the theory of *velayat-e faqih*, to the religious jurists. This is reflected in the views of a commentator on the advocates of the councils during the drafting of the constitution (which included senior clerics) that they "either did not firmly believe in Islam or were contaminated with syncretic thinking, and were trying "to link the *showra* to the principle of national sovereignty" (Arjomand, 1988, 180).

A related theme found in the debates concerned the distinction between the institutional form of decision-making and the scope

of participation. For the more orthodox defenders of the *showra*, the council form of deliberation does not necessarily (and, in fact, infrequently) entails the conjoining of collective decision making with the democratic principle that this collective should be defined on the basis of citizenship and through representative government. In many, if not most, interpretations, the relevant unit of consultation is the clergy, since only they possess the requisite training to interpret divine law. This seems to have been often overlooked in the theoretical reflections of the reformist Islamists who advocated for the local councils as vehicles of democracy and civil society. For example, Seyed Ahmad Khomeini, the son of Ayatollah Khomeini, advanced a particularly “fundamentalist” or traditional position on the question of the local *showra*. He argued against the idea of a parliament as a western and foreign import, declaring in [1357] 1979 that the only appropriate institutional form (leaving aside the idea of multi-tiered government) of Islamic rule is the council form: “The country must be governed by councils (*showra*) and we must not submit to Presidential or Prime Ministerial forms” (Saghafi, 1998, 9). He argued that these local councils must be led by a *mojtahed* (a qualified Islamic jurist) and should consist only of Islamic specialists. Shia Islam is opposed to a Montesquian division of power because the former makes no provision for a parallel (non-religious) form of authority. This is not how the councils turned out, which now contain individuals from a wide range of social groups. But the reasons for this can at best be seen to be the result of ambiguities and inconclusiveness on the part of Islamic doctrines, rather than strong support within the clergy for widespread membership in the (local) *showra* on the basis of citizenship.

The religious conservatives were also ambiguous on the place of voting in legitimating the *showra*.<sup>9</sup> If criteria other than citizenship are used to qualify an individual for membership in a *showra*, why do they require the stamp of approval of the voters? The position against parliamentarism derives in part from the notion that voting is not really required, that all qualified members can be appointed on a *a priori* basis. On the other hand, cler-

ics such as Ayatollah Yusef Sane'i declared that it is religious duty to vote in the local elections. He argued that Islamic law and revelation hold that any social and legal matter not explicitly addressed in the Quran and the Hadith should be decided "on the basis of group consultation and majority opinion," and that the councils are the correct Islamic form of the decision-making body to be employed. Sana'i concluded that providing the most free and widespread access to elections and the councils is therefore a religious injunction (*Sobh-e Emrouz*, 2/24/99). That he drew democratic conclusions from this reasoning is clear from his declaration that "the Iranian people have been brought up by the Revolution and by Imam Khomeini and don't need people like me to tell them what their views should be" (*Sobh-e Emrouz*, 2/24/99).

These controversies are well known to students of Iranian political history and have been written about widely. What is important is that the debate over the councils in the few months before the elections replayed several long-standing historical controversies: over the proper interpretation of the "authority" verse in the Quran (Quran 4:59), the meaning of participation and democracy, and the appropriate institutional forms and mechanisms of Islamic government.<sup>10</sup> Although from a doctrinal point of view the proper resolution of these dilemmas is not completely opened, the paucity of Quranic references to the institutional mechanisms of government—the provenance of modern constitutional law—makes it unlikely that the debate over the place of participation and collective decision-making from an Islamic point of view will be resolved in the short term.

*Technocratic Discourse.* The second type of rationale for decentralization is derived from technocratic and administrative concerns. This is perhaps the most familiar to students of decentralization in a wide variety of cases. Over the last twenty years, the population of Iran has more than doubled to over 60 million and continues to grow at about 2% annually, with the urban population increasing from about 45% to 65% of the total population. In recent years, as a result of the decline in the inter-

national price of oil, a central source of national revenue has dropped. Rates of economic growth are negative one percent per year. There are numerous examples of infrastructure projects designed in Tehran for the provinces that have been inappropriate for local conditions and needs and which have failed due to poor planning, implementation, and management (see Sharifzadegan, 1999). Moreover Iran is not a small country, having an area larger than Germany, France, and Spain combined (Statistical Yearbook of Iran, 1375 [1996-7]).

At an urban level, the cities have clearly outgrown much of their infrastructure: public transportation system and public health systems lag behind population growth. To take one prominent example, the Tehran administration has been unable to effectively combat the serious air pollution problem caused by the growth in the number of private automobiles (Adele et Hourcade, 1992; Madinipour, 1998). Many other examples of the lack of urban mismanagement could be cited—they all demonstrate that similar to many other developing countries such as Turkey (see Heper 1987, Heper 1998, Duben 1992), as well as so-called developed countries, Iran's central state is currently unable to handle all the planning functions in every village, town, and city. In the words of the former Mayor of Mashhad, "The councils will lessen the burden of administration of the government" (quoted in *Sobh-e Emrouz* 12/29/98). Although residual as well as emerging forms of local planning and administration exist in Iran, there has been no attempt at providing a significant degree of autonomy to these local structures (see Goodell, 1986). In sum, the nature of the management problems, and the inadequacy of the current institutions add up to a call for administrative decentralization of functions (Interview with Mr. Qadimi-Zaker, Managing Director of Office of Elections, Ministry of Interior, *Zan* newspaper 17 Dey, 1377 [1998].)

Prior to the elections, the administration of provincial and municipal local affairs was entirely the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior provincial governors and mayors were directly appointed by and accountable to the Ministry. With the change

to directly elected councils, which in turn are charged with electing a mayor, the scope of responsibilities of the councils has expanded and the nature of accountability has been transformed. The Mayor and the councils have greater flexibility to pursue a wide set of opportunities. To take one example, the Provincial-governor of Fars pronounced that given the opportunity he would seek to “export” medical services to the Gulf States, since local needs have been met, but 50% of hospital beds remain empty, and Shiraz has advanced medical facilities and services (*Sobh-e Emrouz*, 12/29/98.)

As a way to increase competition and efficiency in local service provision, localities could delegate to non-profit groups or privatize to for-profit groups. While the ability to take advantage of these possibilities will be greatly shaped by economic and social factors, and will no doubt vary greatly across the country, these new options will play an important role in the emerging space of local governance.

Similarly, accountability has been transformed: in principle, the local councils and the mayor will be directly accountable to the local residents, and will therefore need to satisfy local constituents—both groups and individuals—so as to gain reelection. Of course, there are good reasons to expect that in many instances local governance will take on a clientistic as opposed to democratic character and that the democratic potentials will be by-passed by the domination of local elites (Roniger and Gunes-Ayata, 1994). But the new electoral mechanisms at least permit the possibility of insurgent needs and preferences to be expressed.

*Socio-Political Discourses.* The third discourse defining the debate over the councils and political decentralization has socio-political concerns. Amongst the most important themes are the discourse around civil society (*jame'eh-ye madani*), the necessity of political (multi-party) competition, and the importance of reversing the centralization of power.

Rather unexpectedly, civil society, a concept central to western political theory, has almost become a household term in Iran over

the last five years, especially after President Khatami employed it as a slogan defining his reformist and democratizing agenda. Hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles, and many scholarly journal articles have been published on this theme in the last few years.<sup>11</sup>

In these discussions, the councils are viewed as institutions necessary to realize the goals of popular democratic participation within the Iranian polity. The local councils are seen as a critical element in the expansion of civil society because they provide a check on centralized state power. Through these local institutions, which will bring government “closer to the people,” the citizens will have a greater and more direct role in the management of affairs affecting their everyday lives. A senior advisor to President Khatami commented that a major reason for the lack of success of their reform program has been the absence of what he called “oversight of the state by society.” The councils in his view will institutionalize the popular will (“the councils will be the collective conscience of the people”) and expand the organizational channels through which the social interests can be expressed and organized (*Sobh-e Emrouz*, 1/2/99). The association of the councils with civil society by key proponents reflects the appreciation of the limits of relying solely upon electoralism as a guarantor of democracy. In the words of the reformist Deputy Minister of the Interior, “we believe the complete realization of a republican [*jomhuri*] regime is the self-management of the country by the people, and not only in an electoral representative sense” (*Sobh-e Emrouz*, 2/24/99).

Another widespread sentiment concerned the NGO sector; the local councils could help promote these non-profit, non-state organizations. One commentator perceptively argued that the long-term success of the local councils in transforming society-state relations would depend upon a robust non-state sector (or civil society) without which the local councils will wither, and will be reduced to mere administrative arms of the central government (*Khordad* 12/29/98).

The local councils have also been interpreted as potentially creating a new type of political space in Iran, in which one can be critical of, but not in opposition to, the central state.<sup>12</sup> This is an extremely significant possibility (and subtle insight) for a polity in which any criticism of central state power, either clerical or monarchical, has been viewed as a direct threat to that power. And it is clearly linked to the hope that local elections will lead to greater organized competition between plural social interests. While it is possible that the opposite could be the case (as a result of the dominance of local elites, or the lack of fiscal autonomy and organizational capacity on the part of the councils), the three themes of an expanding civil society sector, greater local political competition, and a reversal of the centralization of power are seen explicitly as possible outcomes of the decentralization reforms.

There exists, though, a persistent ambiguity in the majority of discussions between an interpretation of the local councils as representing civil society institutions or alternatively as local government institutions. For example, Ibrahim Asgharzadeh, a prominent member of the Tehran City Council, has claimed that the local councils “are not the extension or an arm of the government but rather an institution for the formation of the wants and needs of the people” (*Sobh-e Emrouz*, 2/22/99; Interview with author July 99). In another instance, Saïd Hajjarian, the deputy Head of the Tehran City Council, editor of the outspoken *Sobh-e Emrouz* newspaper and an astute political observer, argues that the central/local distinction in Iran parallels the state and civil society distinction. The councils represent civil as opposed to political society. In response to the question whether the councils (including yet to be instituted provincial councils) will have directly political functions, Hajjarian’s response is that “they will have limited and weak ones, with the main role to advance [*pishbord*] policies and programs developed through the national parliament and focusing mainly on welfare and social programs” (Interview with Hajjarian, *Sobh-e Emrouz*, 2/24/99). However, this appears incon-

sistent with other views advanced by Hajjarian: first, that the local councils and the mayors represent the legislative and executive aspects of local governance, and second, that the National parliament [*majles*] represents political society and the councils reflect civil society (Ibid). It is unclear in this analysis what other than scale distinguishes locally elected bodies from national ones.

Despite these inconsistencies, most of the actors involved in these debates display a sophisticated appreciation of the interplay between civil and political dimensions of public life. A typical view expressed by several actors, for example, is that although the councils' domain is civil, this does not mean that civil matters are distinct from politics. By providing public services and effectively managing the process of urban change, councils can promote the legitimacy of the political regime and encourage future political participation.

In a marked departure from traditional notions of rule in Iran, it is also widely held by reformers and proponents of the local councils that a strong state implies not a weak society but a strong society. Several commentators have observed that for councils to work properly requires robust civil society organizations. In this view, the councils will help channel and refine [*tasfieh, palayesh*] people's needs and preferences and modify populist pressure on the government. Institutions of local governance can contribute to the process of transforming people into claimants [*porsesh-gar*] and in this way make government accountable [*pasokh-gar*]. For reformers therefore the councils represent a deepening of the democratic aspect of the Islamic Republic (however, shallow it might appear at present).

If we adopt a simplified definition of civil society as an institutional space outside both the direct influence of the state and the private economic sphere (see Arato, 1992; Pérez-Díaz, 1993), then one would have to argue that the local councils *do not* directly represent the establishment of civil society institutions. Rather, they represent the creation of *local government*, which of course may influence the growth (or even retardation) of civil society at the local urban or village level.

However, it is also necessary to acknowledge the interpretation by actors of their situation. In this regard, it might be suggested that this ambiguity arises from the conjunction of the novelty of local democratic institutions (by which I specifically refer to the presence of electoral procedures) with the persistent strong communal basis of collective action that exists in many neighborhoods and towns in the historical context of highly centralized and authoritarian rule. That is, as democratic processes are brought to the local level they are interpreted, in the current political conjuncture, as alternative spaces of governance to the central state, not as extensions of that state. Actor's interpretations can influence the future shape of governance to the extent that this understanding is acted upon to create a pluralistic urban politics. Of course whether this happens or not does not depend solely upon people's understanding; the outcomes will be a combination of structural limitations and opportunities and specifically local meanings that institutions of local governance acquire.

Taken as a constellation of discourses on some of the fundamental questions of political life, these three perspectives—clerical, technocratic, and political—to a large degree conform to the three main socio-political forces in Iran: the conservative “Right,” the professional technocrats, and the reformist “Left.” Each of these are semi-organized tendencies with their own quasi-parties (e.g., *Rohaniat-e Mobarez*, *Kargozaran-e Sazandegi*, *Jephe-ye Mosharekat Iran-e Islami*, respectively), newspapers (e.g., *Resalat*, *Hamshahri*, *Sobh-e Emrouz*, respectively), legitimating principles (charismatic and hierocratic authority, technocratic elitism and oligarchy, democracy and liberalism), social bases (traditional middle class and merchants, middle class and public sector employees, new middle and lower class) and representative personalities (e.g., Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami). Finally, as was mentioned above, there was a substantial presence of independent candidates in the local elections. Whether this represents a new socio-political force or is primarily due to the absence of political organization outside of the major cities is unclear (Tajbakhsh, 2000). It seems plausible

that the three debates gleaned from the debates within Iran possess a relative internal coherence (Barzin, 1998; Alavi-Tabar, 1999).

*Criticisms of the Local Councils*

The decentralization reforms were not without critics. While some objections are now moot given the fact that the elections have taken place, others remain useful in pointing to potentially significant challenges facing the councils. These criticisms were articulated extensively in magazines, journals, and especially newspapers of all political persuasions. First, some critics on the reformist Left and as well as on the independent non-Islamic Left argued that the potential of the councils in furthering democracy in Iran is wholly vitiated by the absence of multi-party competition at the national and local levels (*Khordad* 12/29/98). (This is an example of what Hirschman (1991) has called the “futility” argument.) They point out that countries that have had a high degree of participation in local politics, such as Turkey, allow for party competition. In its absence, the Iranian councils will simply become arms of the central state with limited political influence (Mussavi-Khuzestani, in *Iran-e Farda*, 1377 [1999]).

A second criticism holds that contrary to the hopes of progressive reformers that the councils will decentralize and democratize power, the councils will have the opposite effect. (The “perversity” argument.) In the view of these critics, the dominant (clerical) elite has accurately concluded that these institutions can be absorbed into the state apparatus like other associations and social organizations such as the rural community councils, and educational and professional associations. The result will be a greater penetration of civil society by an authoritarian regime, indeed a penetration of dimensions of society (such as urban neighborhoods) that are currently partly autonomous of the state (the jeopardy argument).<sup>13</sup>

Third, other critics point out that the councils will be scapegoated for economic and social problems that are beyond their

control. From this political economy perspective, the main problems facing the nation are the concentration of power of the conservative faction at the national level, as well as their local agents of mobilization such as the Friday prayer leaders; the concentration of economic power in the hands of the State and in a number of secretive and unaccountable foundations; high inflation, low national economic growth, unemployment, and lack of affordable housing. The councils will not be able to solve these problems, but they will be held responsible and will become a target of popular discontent, deflecting attention from the real sources of power and the underlying causes of these problems.

A fourth critique concerns the limits of local councils in making effective urban policy. The influence of local elites will prevent councils from raising adequate taxes from real estate, will skew land-use to benefit property owners. Local regimes, combining informal arrangements between social, economic, and political elites, will shape urban policy to serve only particularistic interests (Hajjarian *op. cit.*).<sup>14</sup>

The councils are also critiqued from the Right. In addition to the religious doctrinal objections already touched on above, the main objection here is that the councils will become too politicized. As we have seen, critics on the Right interpret the proper role of the councils to be solely administrative, that is, carrying out of service-related functions that concern the localities within their jurisdiction. From this perspective, the danger is that the councils will be treated as a terrain for partisan interests, rather than as a vehicle for the common good; as a result, they will become ineffective, thereby reducing their popular appeal, as citizens come to see them as just another arena for partisanship and divisiveness (*Keyhan*, Jan 30, 1999 [10 Bahman], and *Keyhan* Jan 4, 1999). While this critique appears to have some popular resonance, available evidence (through public opinion surveys and interviews) suggest that many people recognize this objection as a cynical attempt by the Right to dominate these new institutions. They argue that the Right in fact does support partisanship, but

only in cases which benefit them, for example, where progressive candidates are disqualified from political activity.

The conservative critics rarely articulate adequately what is wrong with “partisanship” in the context of competition over political office. To the extent that there is an implicit rationale, it rests upon a communitarian conception of the pre-political unity of the Iranian nation in which any division is interpreted as reflecting not genuine interest diversity but the presence of an alien or disturbing influence that must be eliminated to safeguard the identity of the community, often referred to as the *Umma*, the Islamic family or community.

A final objection is that expanding the scope of local politics will aggravate regional and ethnic tensions, thereby threatening national unity. There is some plausibility to this concern. While dominated by the Persian ethnic group, Iran consists of several ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities occupying the outer regions of the country and which constitute more than fifty percent of the total population (see Hourcade, 1998). These include the Kurds in Kurdistan, Azeri Turks in Azerbaijan, Sunni Turkomans in the north-eastern Provinces, Baluchis on the south eastern border with Pakistan, and Arabs in the South. The Kurds and Turkomans, for example, have at various points advocated autonomist policies; and since the independence of former Soviet Azerbaijan, Tehran has consistently worried about the possibility of Tabriz or Ardabilis (the two main cities in the north west) looking to the new oil rich republics of the Caspian rather than Tehran for their cultural and political loyalties. While this remains a concern, the economic incentives appear to be lacking for a genuine push toward separatism. In its place, limited calls for cultural autonomy (such as minority language in the schools) within a federated structure are the dominant mode of current ethnic politics. The local councils of course play a crucial role here. When the Provincial-Governor of Kurdistan, Ramazanzadeh, himself an Iranian Kurd states that “the difference between the local council elections and other elections in Iran is that in the former the

elected will be within reach of constituents and this will deepen accountability,"<sup>15</sup> and his Deputy for Security declares that "the greatest pre-requisite for security is consideration of people's wishes," (quoted in *Hamshahri*, Bahman 14, 1378) it is not difficult to see that the issue of ethnic pluralism is at stake. Indeed, the reason why fears of ethnic separatism have not been more influential is that several other provincial governors, which one could expect to be most concerned with potential unrest in their territories, support the decentralization measures. They view a measure of local autonomy as a prerequisite to maintaining national unity.<sup>16</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The foregoing analysis suggests several possible outcomes for the prospect of urban politics and governance in Iran.

First, electoral competition has become a significant factor in the political culture of Iran and is being extended to local arenas. Notwithstanding serious limitations on free association and the participation of individuals in elections, political authority increasingly is dependent upon legitimization through the electoral process. Unlike other Middle Eastern nations, which analysts have claimed hold elections as public relation events to ensure Western aid and business contracts, the Iranian case appears to be indigenous—that is, even while violating many aspects of liberal practice, there is an authentic sense of political contest. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to claim that Iranians are inventing an indigenous democratic discourse. The most compelling expressions of this are President Khatami's upset election, the apparent victory of the reformers and reform-minded independents in municipal elections, the landslide victory for the reformers in the February 2000 parliamentary elections, and the intense resonance of a democratic imagery alongside more traditional religious imagery.

If this assessment is correct, it is likely that local government will become a part of a democratic culture. Local governance will thus

take on a political as well as an administrative or bureaucratic form. This suggests that local politics *may* play a role in transforming national politics. Three elements are of particular interest: First, the introduction into the national political discourse of the distinction between legal and administrative supervision within intergovernmental relations is a necessary element in any future debate over the nature and degree of local autonomy. Second, the expansion of the types of persons and agendas participating in the elections, and third, the prominence of the print media as a vehicle for public opinion.

The second important implication is that the local political arena is becoming increasingly associated with civil society, and viewed as the natural locus for non-state organizations and community-based associations. While it is important not to exaggerate this aspect, especially given the absence of a tradition of organized neighborhood or community associations, it is nonetheless a significant innovation. The role of the NGOs in local governance will no doubt vary across cities and regions, and a central task of future research will be to explain these variations.

Third, the relative autonomy gained by urban areas and localities coupled with a reduction in transfers from the center could possibly introduce problems and issues in urban policy making familiar to students of urban political economy in the industrialized world. These include competition and conflict between local elites and other less organized social interests; dependence on the way funding is allocated from the center; constraints imposed upon local governments by the pressure to attract and retain economic resources; the need to forge urban "regimes" or coalitions of the dominant social and economic interests so as to achieve governing capacity; the increasingly pressure to trade-off between developmental, allocational and redistributive arenas; and the need to accommodate a community-based sector and non-profit organizations (including NGOs with ties to international development agencies) which may seek to influence local decision making.

Finally, it is best to be cautious about the degree to which local governance structures can be institutionalized in the short-term.

The reformer's ambitions notwithstanding, local councils will face significant barriers as they strive to balance the goals of responsiveness in representing local interests, effectiveness in service provisions (thus creating the conditions for more efficient market processes), and autonomy vis-a-vis central authority. The most important factors will be the absence of historical precedence of local collective action, lack of organizational capacity at the municipal level, low human resources, particularly public management skills, and a very limited number of non-state local institutions (such as neighborhood associations) that are accustomed to interacting with state agencies.<sup>17</sup> Such barriers can be overcome, but the reformers' ambitions must be tempered with a realization of the slow, tedious work required for institution-building (Elster, Offe, and Preuss, 1998) as well as by the cautionary experience of the 1990s in many parts of the developing which has not been encouraging in demonstrating a necessarily close link between civil society and local associational life on the one hand, and democratic and liberal outcomes on the other (Salem, 1998). The extent to which these features will actually shape urban policy and politics in Iran and to what degree is an open question. The experience of Eastern Europe, Turkey, Egypt, South Asian countries, and South Africa hints at what we might expect (Heper, 1998; Mayfield, 1996; Manor, 1998; Baldersheim, 1996; Aziz and Arnold, 1996). However, future research will be necessary to assess systematically these decentralization reforms and the experiment in local government in Iran.

One of the central questions of this ongoing assessment is the extent to which greater institutionalization and differentiation of the state represents a consolidation of the current regime, the deepening and broadening of what Arjomand has called the "integrative" function of the Islamic Republic (1988, 202); or alternatively, whether these innovations, forged through conflicting visions of modern Iran, represents a transformation of state-society relations, the institutional aspect of what Adelkhah sees as the rationalization and modernization of everyday life (Adelkhah, 2000). Perhaps this

question is unanswerable. Mention has already been made of an ambiguity within the public discourse regarding whether the local councils are seen as civil institutions or as part of the state. The significance of this lies in the way it moves us beyond a view of the councils as either (a) the greater penetration of a central authoritarian state into the grassroots or (b) as an alternative space in opposition to an intact central authority (either of which may characterize some instances), and illuminating the ways in which the creation of spaces of local governance transforms the nature of state power, and its relationship with civil society. The elected local councils have added a third political power center to the two that currently dominate localities: the social power of the local religious institutions (including the centrally appointed Friday prayer leaders) and the bureaucratic representatives of the central state ministries. The addition of a third power center, the possibility of sharing governance with non-state actors, and the greater capacity for regions to respond to ethnic and local interests are factors that could contribute to transformation of governance and distribution of power in the country. Whether they will or not will become clearer in the coming years.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The paper is based on field research in Iran conducted during three visits lasting over eight months in 1998 and 1999, including interviews with high- and middle-ranking officials in the Ministry of the Interior responsible for implementing the reforms; provincial and district governors; candidates for local council elections; data obtained from relevant ministries; socio-economic data from the Iranian Census Bureau; interviews with ordinary citizens; and the study of several Iranian newspapers, magazines, and journals published over the last two years.

<sup>2</sup>For more on the legislative history, see Eta'at, nd; Ministry of the Interior, 1997; and Schirazi, 1998, pp. 111-117. All translations from the Persian are mine.

<sup>3</sup>On the councils in the Constitutional Revolution also see Brown, 1910, and Afary, 1996.

<sup>4</sup>For example, more women now sit on local councils than in the national bodies (Ministry of Interior, Office of Election Data, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>The law is comprised of 94 articles, the majority of which concern the procedures for supervising and holding elections, defining violations and irregularities in the elections and the means of redressing them. This legislation supercedes an earlier version passed in 1983.

<sup>6</sup>See interviews with two economists, Dr. Ebrahim Razzaqi and Dr. Farshad Moo'meni, in *Sobh-e Emrouz*, 17 Dey, 1377.

<sup>7</sup>On NGO's in Iran see Namazi 1999.

<sup>8</sup>I have borrowed the latter phrase from Souroush, 1999.

<sup>9</sup>I use the adjectives "conservative" and "orthodox" to describe those supporting clerical rule as well as a literalist interpretation of religious texts. It should be noted, however, that this usage is of quite recent vintage, prior to which the "conservative" position within Shi'a Islam has been political quietism and support of monarchical rule. I would like to thank Dr. Charles Kurzman for clarifying this point.

<sup>10</sup>The "authority verse," the key religious source concerning power and authority in Islam, reads: "Believers, obey God and obey the Apostles and those in authority among you. Should you disagree about anything refer it to God and the Apostle..." (Quran [4:59], 1993, 67). Of course everything depends on how to define the third group, "and those in authority among you." A long-standing Shi'a position is that these are only the Twelve Imams. Khomeini extended this definition to include the clergy. See discussions of the "authority verse" in Kurzman, 1998; Arjomand, 1988, 177-79; Dabashi, 1993, 264-5, 309-12; Lewis, 1988, 91-116, Arkoun, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>There are several collected volumes published in Iran addressing this theme. For example Soroush et al., 1998. See also Kazemi, 1995].

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Fatemah Jalaipour, one of two female members of the Tehran City Council, quoted in *Sobh-e Emrouz*, 2/21/99.

<sup>13</sup>See interview with Dr. Azimi, *Khordad*, 26 Dey, 1377. I have adapted, loosely, the futility, perversity, and jeopardy arguments from Hirschman (1991).

<sup>14</sup>For more on the urban political economy and urban regime theory see inter alia, Logan and Molotch, 1987; Fainstein and Fainstein, 1983].

<sup>15</sup>Author's interview with Governor, Jan 7, 1998.

<sup>16</sup>Author's interview with the Provincial-Governor of Golestan (formerly Gorgan) 1/15/99.

<sup>17</sup>There is considerable uncertainty as to the extent of the NGO sector in Iran due to poor data. There is some evidence that there are significant numbers of neighborhood religious organizations especially those for women, but beyond this there appears to be little systematic data. For example, see articles in *Andisheh-ye Jame'eh* #5, no date, special issue on local religious organizations.

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