CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN IRAN (1979-2009)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to discuss the effects of democratic civil society in moving towards democratic consolidation in Iran's democratization process. It studies three decades from 1979 to 2009, focusing on institutionalized party system as an indicator for democratic civil society. First, features which characterize an institutionalized party system and then its existence in different decades using historical comparative method are studied. Our findings show democratization in Iran ceased in the democratic transition phase and moving towards democratic consolidation did not occur and since the given era, the democratic civil society in Iran has not realized completely.

Keywords: Democratization, Democratic consolidation, Democratic civil society, Institutionalized party system

INTRODUCTION

Iran has experienced revolutions and civil social movements on the road to democratization in its contemporary history. After the Constitutional Revolution in 1905-6, in the early twentieth century, the National Democratic Movement of Mosadegh (1950s), 1979 Islamic Revolution, Reformist Movement (1990-2005), and Green Movement (2009), are instances of these democratic efforts, but all of them broke down and authoritarianism returned (Bashiriyeh, 2003; Abrahamian, 2008; Azimi, 2008; Yaghmaeian, 2002; Mirsepasi, 2010).

Since its first post-revolutionary elections in 1979, Iran held regular elections every four years but these elections couldn't fulfill one of the main criteria of democracy, that is, competition. Indeed the factors that affect democratization are numerous and are not reducible to one single variable or to some dramatic events (Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner & Philip Costopoulos Eds., 2010).Nonetheless institutionalized political parties are a major challenge for democratic consolidation.

Although political parties are allowed to form and contest on the base of legal structures, and despite the key role played by political parties in democratic consolidation process in new democracies, institutionalization of political parties is still a major challenge to democratic consolidation in Iran. This paper uses theoretical discussions of Diamond; Linz; Huntington; Mainwaring; Schedler & Morlino, on democratic consolidation, civil society, political parties and institutionalized party system, argues that to move towards democratic consolidation phase in Iran, institutionalized political parties are a crucial element. To this end, we applied historical comparative method for analyzing a three-decade period from 1979 to 2009.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

There are various definitions of democratic consolidation and scholars have used different conceptualizations based on their theoretical perspectives. Schedler notes the term *democratic consolidation* is meant to describe the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life prospect beyond the short term and of making them immune

against the threat of authoritarian regression (Schedler, 1998: 91). To Diamond, democratic consolidation means improving in the quality, depth and authenticity of democracy in its various dimensions: political competition, participation and representation, civil liberties and accountably (1995: 171). According to Linzin consolidated democracies, none of the main political actors (such as political parties, organized interests and institutions) have alternatives to democratic processes in order to achieve power. Thus no organization or political group can veto democratically elected decision makers. (Linz, 1978; 158). In such condition democracy would be 'the only game in town'.

 Among social factors pivotal to democracy and its consolidation, civil society seems to be the most significant. Civil society has some democracy building functions and as Diamond asserts can facilitate moving towards the democratic consolidation (Diamond, 1997; 1999). However it must be considered that not all kinds of civil society contribute in transition to democratic consolidation phase of democratization process. Only a democratic civil society could be expected to do this. In such a civil society, organizations and structures are well institutionalized, have autonomy from state or their founders/leaders, are democratic in goals and methods, and practice on the basis of democratic principles of cooperation, participation, toleration, compromise, trust and deliberation (Tocqueville, 1835; Putnam, 1993; Diamond, 1997& Paxton, 2002). They shape public participation, generate a more democratic political culture, a high level of political knowledge, and civil skills, which is democratic political socialization. They also restrict conditions which promote non civilian-political actors (e.g. military and paramilitary) and activities in politics (Diamond & Gunther, 2001;Mainwaring 1998 & Morlino, 1995).

Among various types of organizations and associative activities, it seems that political parties have much potential to do these functions. We, on the basis of theoretical discussions that emphasizes on the role of civil society and its organizations in democratic consolidation, compare the three decades from 1979 to 2009 by looking at the institutionalized political parties as a criteria for democratic civil society in Iran. Qualities such as Stability in Patterns of Interparty Competition, Party Rootedness in Society, Legitimacy of Parties and Elections and The Strong Party Organization are considered in this study as signs for an institutionalized party system.

METHOD AND DATA

Our research methodology is historical comparative. Focusing on presidential and parliamentary elections in Iran from 1979 to 2009, information and data about political parties' activities and their relationships with other forces, is gathered and applied in the comparison of three terms. Official websites like that of Ministry of Interior of Iran, political parties' sites and newspapers, and reference books[i]about parties, in addition to results of some researches on public opinion[ii] are used as complementary data.

In the following section, parties and their activities in the given period of time are pore over according to available documents and reports in order to assess existence and impact of democratic civil society on the consolidation process.

POLITICAL PARTIES INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN IRAN

Too many of scholars and observers there are no real political parties (according to its meaning in political literature) in Iran and we actually see factions' activities and quasi-party

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[i.] For example Saeid Barzin (1998); Mohammad Reza Nazeri (2003) and Ezzatollah Nozari (2008).
[ii]. World Values Survey (1999-2004) - Iran 2000, World Values Survey (2005-2009) - Iran 2005.

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organizations (Barzin, 1998; Zibakalam, 1999; Kamrava &Hassan-yari, 2004). Thus this institution is central to the study of how institutionalization indicators are realized.

STABILITY IN PATTERNS OF INTERPARTY COMPETITION

As noted above, when speaking of patterns of interparty competition in Iran, in fact, we are speaking of the interaction between factions. According to this assumption, over the three decades, there has been a stable pattern between two main factions on the basis of circulation of power; however, with regard to the lack of significant change in faction's votes or position stability, there has been intense vacillation in their votes and members.

In early 1980s the executive and legislative branches belonged to the Left and in late 1980s to 1997, the right-wing had hold. Following a short period of being in power positionby Leftists, from 1997 to 2005, a turn in votes for the Right wing took place which led to mass protests followed by the Green Movement. (Delforouz, 2014: 19), these signs indicate the instability in competition and thereby weakness in institutionalization of parties.

THE LEGITIMACY OF PARTIES AND ELECTIONS

If we consider participation of different parties in electoral competition, admission of other parties and groups as legitimate competitors, recognition of elections as the main circumstance of attaining power in governmental institutions, confirmation of the election results and conceding defeat, very few examples are witnessed. Some measures could be effective in institutionalization in the first round of presidential elections (1979-1990), the first parliamentary elections (1980), the second (1990-2000), the fifth (1996) and the sixth round of parliamentary elections (2000), the sixth (1994), the seventh (1997) the eighth, the ninth (2000-2009), and the tenth round of presidential elections (2009).

In the absence of Guardian Council approval supervision on candidates and their competence for candidacy for a short period, in the first parliamentary elections after 1979 revolution, Iran witnessed a context in which various parties,including political and critic parties, were active as components of a strong civil society with democratic features. The situation got more and more restricted in the following periods.

In terms of interactions between parties and parties' rights to compete in elections as well as submission to election results, the sixth and seventh presidential and the fifth and sixth parliamentary elections are counted as important(Kaviani, 1999: 208).

Organizations and structures such as Guardian Council make the process of free elections arduous and impose strict limits on the competition process.

In addition to parties, the development of other areas of civil society, including the media, press, intellectual circles, political meetings, and the prosperity of social activities and civic engagement in this period led to an increasing optimism about democratic transition of Iran. Nonetheless this optimism didn't last long and these developments did not lead to irreversible changes in democratization process of this period and democratization in Iran In total.

In the 8th presidential elections (2001), the number of active parties, opposition parties and political forces increased. Political campaigns between candidates and their fans and their competition showed a more coherent and systematic form. Furthermore party meetings, propagandistic films and videos, television debates, electoral trips, public opinion scurvies in sites and blogs and financial support all suggested a fertile ground for parties' activities. Despite these positive indicators, democratic civil society did not form over this decade (Poshe, 2009; Assayesh, 2010; Farahi, 2012 & Moghanizadeh, 2013).

PARTY ROOTEDNESS IN SOCIETY

If political parties succeed in winning the trust of citizens and establishing a viable relationship with them then it could be argued that political parties have social roots which help them to achieve institutionalization.

The lack of social roots keeps political parties unknown to people. This leads to a problematic situation in which it's difficult for citizens to distinguish between parties and determine whom they are representatives of. As a result, voting behavior changes from one election to another dramatically. Since people do not have sufficient information about political parties, they vote to individuals who nominate independently. Candidates resort to mass directly and as a result instability and weakness of political parties and populist behaviors and politics increases (Diamond & Gunther, 2001; Zittel & Fuchs, 2007; Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007).

The average of parties' life time and the continuity in parties' victories in elections show that save for some parties (e.g. Islamic Coalition Party: Mo'talefeh), other parties have not been successful in achieving this goal.

In Iran, although it seems that factions have rooted in society and between particular groups, it is said that the more traditional and religious groups tend to vote forthe Modern Right and more educated persons have a tendency towards the Left (Gheissari & Sananadaji, 2009; Khosrowkhavar 2009&Amini, 2010), but studying at the level of party membership or trust to parties, reveals that a great number of people have no sense of belonging to the parties and they may vote to candidates from different factions in two consecutive elections, or even vote to individuals from both factions in parliamentary elections in which more candidates must be elected. Indeed they vote for individuals rather than parties.

Also, candidates sometimes prefer to resort to their personal capacities to win the elections, and they campaign independently. For instance, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (President of Iran from 2005 to 2009 and from 2009 to 2013) introduced himself as non-partisan, even anti-party and did not try to gain support of political parties. However he enjoyed the support of the Right faction and military/paramilitary forces and institutions (Amini, 2010: 122; Assayesh et.al, 2010&Delforouz, 2014: 23).

STRONG PARTY ORGANIZATION

The lack of deep social roots results in the absence or weakness of the other institutionalized party indicator which is organizational strength. In institutionalized parties, there are human and material resources, a large number of members who have received specialized training and other means that help parties function properly. In spite of the importance of party leaders, the interests of the party have priority over individual's interest (especially over that of the leader's). In fact a party is not created by the leader and it's not their absolute property. Sub-branches of a party and its dependent organizations expand everywhere widely; spread the ideology and platform of the party, do recruitment and gather financial resources for the party.

In Iran, apart from few exceptions like Tudeh (communist) party (Abrahamian, 1982)political parties suffer from the absence of organizational strength factors. Since there is not much trend to formal membership in political parties, they don't have many members, parties focus on organizing supporters and adherents, especially at election times, rather than organizing a powerful structure. The importance of persons, not party as a whole, determines parties' 'policies and decisions'. Therefore, political parties lose democratic structure and have no impact on spreading democratic values.

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On the other hand, low level of party membership deprives parties from more financial resources such as membership fees. Since partisan culture and degree of trust to parties are not in a desirable condition (World Values Survey 1999-2004-Iran 2000), they don't get enough financial support. (Harsij, 2001; Pishgahifard, 2003& Fazeli et.al, 2009). This is a major challenge for parties which brings about parties' dependence on governmental organizations.

If we consider that establishing active branches in different cities and towns, training and enjoying professional staff require financial sources,then very few parties in Iran have benefited from this feature. In this condition parties resort to influential personalities (e.g. relation between leading members of Executives of Construction of Iran, (kargozaran-e sazandegi), with time the President Hashemi Rafsanjani and Islamic Iran Participation Front, (Jebheye Mosharekate Iran-e Eslaami, main member's relation with president Khatami) or centers of wealth and power as well as public sources for providing their expenses, especially during elections and electoral campaigns. As a result, it is detrimental to independency of political parties and public trust to them, which in turn, reduces trends to party membership and partisan activities.

To sum up, it seems that the weakness of parties' institutionalization indicator in post-revolutionary Iran prevented a democratic civil society from forming. Thus far parties have had very little or no impact on democratic transition in Iran.

CONCLUSION

Theoretically, a democratic civil society facilitates spreading of democratic values and principles such as tolerance, compromise, trust, collaboration and participation. It provides institutional and legal channels for civic and political activities, and therefore limits non-political and non-civil actors' actions and behavior. Participation in civil society organizations, which are democratic in structure and attitude, bring about promotion of members' democratic skills and informs them on practice of democracy and its functions. In this way, the capacity of individuals for more moderate, peaceful and cooperative interactions increases. Political parties as powerful parts of civil society have significant contribution in producing these results if they are institutionalized and democratic in terms of their structure.

Practically, to eliminate problem of democratic transition and consolidation in Iran, a new approach to civil society must be considered. Neither political parties nor other parts of the civil society are strong enough to undertake the responsibility of crossing the transition zone. To this end, they must strengthen in a democratic way, without state pressure or of military and paramilitary interference and without legal limitations such as approval supervising by the Guardian Council which are the main obstacles to forming a civil society. In order to facilitate the transition to democratic consolidation with respect to national interests and integrity Iran today needs to establish and strengthen the institutions of civil society.

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