

‘The importance of being civil society:’ student politics and the reformist movement in Khatami’s Iran.

Through a non-conventional understanding of civil society activism, the article provides an explanation of the relationship between the student movement and Khatami’s governments in Iran. This study approaches ‘civil society’ as a space where we may observe the dynamics and the exercise of power. The case study of the interactions between the Daftar-e Tabkīm-e Vahdat and Khatami’s governments illustrates how civil society is not a fixed concept, but a contested one. By analysing the conflicts and interactions between these two actors, the article examines the continuous negotiations that reinvent the meaning of civil society and produce political inclusion or exclusion.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, civil society has re-gained an important place in national and international politics. In its mainstream liberal-democratic interpretation it has become a synonym of counter-power against authoritarianism, engine of fair and sustainable development, and mark of transparency in political processes. In this tradition, the concept of ‘civil society’ is also an alternative to corruption, rigidity and slowness of the public sector, mobilizing a sphere of society independent from the market and the state that would contribute to improve the workings of both. The political transformations in Eastern Europe and Latin America coupled with studies that confirmed the significant role of civil society in strengthening democratic institutions in established democracies generated new interest in the positive role that civil society supposedly plays¹. It follows that academic studies and policy-making conceived of

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¹ On the role of civil society in authoritarian countries see D. Olsen, ‘Democratization and political participation: the experience of the Czech Republic’, in K. Dawisha, B. Parrott (ed.), *The Consolidation of Democracy in East-Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); P. Oxhorn,

civil society as a virtuous concept both in theory and practice. While this has been the dominant interpretation of civil society with all the normative consequences that this has, there are also other definitions of it that derive from different political traditions such as Marxism. In particular, Gramscian thought generated a narrative of civil society as a sphere of antagonism where the mainstream dominant principles of how a society should be governed are played out against the less central emancipatory ones. This view has however over time become very marginal. In any case, there is very little doubt that civil society activism has been for a long time equated with positive norms such as democracy, human rights and development.² However, during the late 1990s and increasingly in the 2000s, a number of studies emerged questioning its positive contribution in challenging authoritarianism and promoting sustainable development. In the workings of scholars such as Tempest,³ Jamal,⁴ Encarnacion⁵ and Liverani⁶ civil society, once rid of its inherent positive normativity, can be easily co-opted and/or created from the top in order to strengthen authoritarian political rule and promote uneven development. All this is usually compounded by the observation that the use of this concept when transported in non-Western national political cultures might not work. In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the workings and impact of civil society on national politics, both approaches to civil society have to be questioned. On the one hand, there is the need to move away from the simplistic acceptance of civil society as counter-power to authoritarianism because there is

Organizing Civil Society (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). On the role of civil society in democracies see R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

² J. Entelis, 'Civil Society and the Authoritarian Temptation in Algerian Politics: Islamic Democracy Vs. the Centralized State', in A.R. Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and C. Taylor, 'Modes of Civil society', *Public Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1990), pp. 95-118.

³ C. Tempest, 'Myths from Eastern Europe and the Legends of the West', *Democratization*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1997), pp. 132-44.

⁴ A. Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁵ O. Encarnacion, 'Civil Society Reconsidered', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2006), pp. 357-376.

⁶ A. Liverani, *Civil society in Algeria. The political functions of associational life* (London: Routledge, 2008).

significant evidence demonstrating that in many contexts this is simply not the case.⁷ On the other, the mere idea of civil society as an instrument of the state does not describe fully the reality in authoritarian regimes as the case of Eastern Europe in the 1980s indicated.⁸ It follows that relations between the state and civil society are not black or white, but work themselves out in a much more complex and nuanced manner.

Building on the necessity to go beyond the dichotomous nature of the two previous theoretical and practical uses of civil society, the aim of this article is to describe the evolution of the narrative of civil activism in Iran, through the analysis of the relationship between the regime and the student organization *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat* (DTV) since its establishment in 1980 until the end of the reformist era in 2005. The starting point is the move away from a traditional conceptualization of civil society as a sphere of engagement by focusing instead on the use of its rhetoric to explain how the concept may offer a justification tool for activism and/or oppression. How was it used by the social and political actors that claimed to be “civil society actors”? Has the rhetoric of civil society been used to de-legitimize political competitors, for instance, or as a sort of bargaining chip to suit partisan interests? All this is important because the concept of civil society in its traditional understandings needs to be problematized if it is going to aptly explain why different actors with conflicting interests and objectives all utilize it in their practices and discourses.

An innovative understanding of civil society

Starting in the late 1980s with the democratization of Latin America and Eastern Europe, civil society returned to centre stage in international and national politics. Hailed as a major contributing factor to the collapse of authoritarianism, the actors

⁷ See S. Berman, ‘Islamism, Revolution and Civil Society’, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2003), pp. 257-272 and F. Cavatorta, V. Durac, *Civil society and democratization in the Arab world* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁸ Z. Rau, *The Re-emergence of civil society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*. (Boulder. Colorado: Westview Press, 1991).

(associations and non-governmental organizations) representing civil society in its liberal-democratic conceptualization became both an important tool of analysis and a crucial pillar of democratization policies. The Polish case of *Solidarnosc* has become the intellectual point of reference of ‘liberation’ of society from an authoritarian and bureaucratic state through civil activism. Building on this, in 2000 Laith Kubba argued that civil society, understood and practiced in this manner, would bring democracy to the Arab world as well.⁹

A similar trend occurred in the field of developmental economics with development NGOs increasingly perceived as being extremely important for the success of market reforms and therefore progressively associated to policy-making. The Post Washington Consensus Era is indeed characterized by a critical view on previous structural adjustments policies which did not pay sufficient attention to human needs.¹⁰ In this new view, the focus shifted from economic adjustment plans to the necessity of a democratic management of politics and development. The main protagonist of such a vision of how development should be done is ‘civil society,’ whose *pars constituens*, namely NGOs, are deemed to favor a democratic, balanced and fair development.¹¹ This refashioning of economic developmental policies has transformed the exercise of power and the relationships among the actors, generating new forms of governance and new borders for political inclusion or exclusion.¹² Consequently, the shift from government to what is termed ‘good governance’ implied a change not only in the economic realm. The preference for cooperative relations over top-down approaches to policy and

⁹ L. Kubba, ‘The Awakening of civil society’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2000), pp. 84-90. See also S. Akbarzadeh, “Democracy promotion versus engagement in Iran,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2011), pp. 470-482.

¹⁰ G. Rist, *The History of Development. From Western Origins to Global Faith*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2006).

¹¹ A. Cornia, R. Jolly, F. Stewart (eds.), *Adjustments with a human face. Country Case Studies* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹² L. Salamon, *The Global Associational Revolution: The Rise of the Third Sector on the World Scene*, Occasional Paper 15, The Institute for Policy Studies (Washington: 1993), and J.F. Bayart, *Global Subjects. A Political Critique of Globalization* (London/New York: Polity Press, 2008). See also H. Anheier, W. Seibel, *The Third sector: comparative studies of nonprofit organizations* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1990).

decision making became a widespread notion in the political sphere as well, collapsing the idea of good administration with that of participation, as a way of limiting ‘from below’ the exercise of power by the elites.¹³ Even if the definition of ‘governance’ is far from being consensual and precise, what is clear is that the concept is centered on the involvement of a growing number of actors in the definition of priorities, objectives and strategies states pursue. Its affirmation deeply reshaped relations among actors, and especially between state and non-institutional actors:¹⁴ civil activists *in primis*.

Almost inevitably, the concept of civil society gained a strong symbolic meaning associated with the so-called ‘feel good terms’¹⁵ such as ‘democracy,’ ‘participation,’ and ‘development from below.’ Due to these normative references, civil society has become a sort of ‘institutional myth,’ whose meaning is highly recognized, shared and symbolic. These symbolic meanings are generally seen as a boundary to state authoritarianism and centralism, sustaining a wider and more democratic access to resources and information. However, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of a scholarly trend that attempted to counter this narrative and the feel-good terms associated with it. In these studies civil society became an instrument available to the state, whether authoritarian or democratic, to support its own vision of both political and economic development. Thus, states attempted and often succeeded in articulating through ‘civil society’ their own preferences and masked the pursuit of their objectives by acting ostensibly in the name of civil society even when this was blatantly not the case.¹⁶ In this approach, the emergence, for instance, of thousands of NGOs across the

¹³ J. Clark, ‘The State, popular participation and the voluntary sector’, *World Development*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1995), pp. 593-601, and B. Fine (ed.), *The New Development Economics: Post Washington Consensus Neoliberal Thinking* (London: Zed Books, 2005).

¹⁴ R. Rhodes, ‘The New Governance: Governing without government’, *Political Studies*, Vol. XLIV (1996), pp. 652-667. See also W. Fisher, ‘Doing good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGOs Practices’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26 (1997), pp. 439-64.

¹⁵ A. Cornwall, K. Brock, *Beyond Buzzwords: ‘Poverty Reduction’, ‘Participation’ and ‘Empowerment’ in Development Studies*, Program Paper no. 10, Overarching Paper Series, UNRISD (Geneva, 2005) and B. Cooke, U. Kothary (eds.), *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

¹⁶ Q. Wiktorowicz, ‘Civil society as social control. State power in Jordan’, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2000), pp. 43-61.

Arab world and Iran did not demonstrate a progressive liberalization of the state, but its authoritarian upgrading.¹⁷ In this context, civil society becomes the opposite of counter-power.

There are two main problems with the literature on civil society and how it interacts with the State. First is that there is a high degree of fixity attached to the concept of civil society. On the one hand civil activism is perceived to be inherently good for improving the quality of democracy or, in authoritarian contexts, for undermining authoritarian structures of power. On the other, the same activism is treated as either meaningless or even detrimental to the success of democracy with civil society being used by authoritarian regimes to strengthen their grip on society. Both conceptualizations, while diverging widely in their assessment of civil society, do not leave any room for the possibility that the rhetoric of civil activism and the concept itself could shift and change according to time and space. Thus it could be hypothesized that the meaning and content of civil society vary depending on the perception and self-perception of the actors involved at different points in time. While in a specific historical moment, the label civil society is attached to a particular organization, at a different point such label could be withdrawn. This means that civil society is not only a normatively neutral category, but that the very rhetoric of it can change widely.

The second problem is that the mainstream literature on civil society conceives of it as a group of actors, namely NGOs, associations and other non-state and non-market actors, but it might be better to think of it as a space of contestation where such actors operate. Civil society should be conceived not as an actor or a group of actors which may act, resist, dissent or collaborate, but as an arena where we can observe political dynamics and the exercise of power at work whereby the very definition of civil society is the outcome of such political struggles. This is the case of the inclusion/exclusion cleavage, as some actors may be eligible for the label 'civil society' only at a specific

¹⁷ S. Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, The Brookings Institution, Analysis Paper, 13 (2007), pp. 1–37.

point in time in their history. For instance, governments may indeed use that label as a political tool to legitimize some social or political actors or may use it as a ‘stick’ against those actors it wants to repress. Conversely, a social actor can self-select as ‘civil society’ actor and claim to be part of it, depending on its relationship with the governmental authorities.¹⁸ It follows that concrete political inclusion/exclusion and symbolic meanings associated to ‘civil society’ are two interacting aspects because of the presence of external sanctioning.

The meaning of ‘civil society’ is thus the outcome of an ongoing negotiation, and not simply a-historical or de-contextualized: in order to illustrate this process, the relations between the Iranian student organization *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat* (DTV) and the Iranian regime are examined. The reason for this choice resides in the fact that the two Khatami’s reformist governments (1997-2005) often used the concept of civil society in conjunction with political liberalization, and, by doing so, re-shaped the meaning and nature of civil society itself. In fact this ‘governmental take-over’ led to unforeseen consequences that impacted on all actors that had the self-perception of being civil society, creating at the same time new areas of conflict with it. The case of DTV highlights how some groups that had initially enthusiastically adhered to the governmental ‘civil society project’ ended up moving away from Khatami’s governments, thus re-shaping the concept of civil society too.

Civil society during the reform era

In Iran, the rhetoric of liberal-democratic civil society entered the public debate in the 1990s. At the time, some intellectuals and militants (called *roushanfekran-e nou*, new intellectuals or alternative thinkers) used the concept to denounce state authoritarianism. The people who first employed it belonged to the generation of early revolutionaries and Khomeini supporters, generally excluded from power since the early

¹⁸ R. Suddaby, R. Greenwood, ‘Rhetorical strategies of legitimacy’, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2005), pp. 35-67.

1990s.¹⁹ In 1996-1997 these former khomeinists supported Mohammad Khatami's candidacy and the reformist governments (1997-2005) with their political discourse emphasizing civil society, political democratization and participation as antidotes to authoritarianism and the corruption of the original revolutionary ideals. The supremacy of the people's will against the mismanagement of power by the *rahbar* (the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei) and the Council of Guardians was the core of their thinking. Criticizing their own past, these former khomeinists – now turned reformists – denounced the transformation of revolutionary ideals into the defense of privileges acquired by certain social groups since the revolution²⁰ and worked to change that. It follows that the rhetoric of civil society was given the role of counter-power intended to reflect an antithesis between separate entities: state and society. This is the case of intellectuals such as Majid Mohammadi or Alireza Alavitabar, for instance, who outlined a 'confrontational' interpretation of civil society, whose growth is conceived in opposition to state apparatus and as a form of protection from it.²¹ The scholar Hooshang Amirahmadi proposes a similar definition as well, stating that

[c]ivil society thus can be defined as the sphere of social discourses, trends, and autonomous social movements that attempt to regulate society. The goal of such activities is to bolster citizens' capabilities and protect them from the arbitrary exercise of power by the state or any other organized group. While civil society is a political concept, it must be distinguished from the political sphere where actors are preoccupied with access to, or the exercise of, power.²²

¹⁹ F. Burgat, B. Olav Utvik, 'Violence and Power: Iranian lessons', *The Muslim World*, Vol. 101 (2011), p. 258.

²⁰ M. Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

²¹ M. Kamrava, 'The Civil Society Discourse in Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2001), pp. 175-176.

²² H. Amirahmadi, 'Emerging Civil Society in Iran', *SAIS Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1996), p. 88.

Another author who adheres to this perspective is the well-known dissident Akbar Ganji, who defends the separation between state and civil society as a milestone of freedom and democracy.²³

After Mohammad Khatami's electoral victory in 1997, these supporters of this particular rhetoric of civil society re-entered the political scene as members of the government and Parliament, or as intellectuals, scholars, and journalists. From these new positions of relative power, they became the promoters of an embedded and collaborative project of 'civil society,' which was asked to support the government's activities and to converge on its political programme.²⁴ Khatami himself asked all the actors that he identified as civil society such as professional associations, students' organizations, trade unions, charitable associations, media, researchers, scholars and experts to supervise his mandate and work, and to voice their demands. Khatami also stated very clearly that involving experts drawn from civil society in policy-making was an advantage for the government allowing it to discharge its duties more effectively.²⁵ In sum, Khatami's view of civil society coincided with its liberal-democratic interpretation and the rhetoric of it had positive connotations linked to the feel good terms. By asking civil society to participate to governance under the tutelage of the government however, Khatami began to modify the nature and meaning of civil society.

If during the early 1990s the debate on civil society was confined to a counter-power discourse, during Khatami's government it shifted to the point that the rhetoric of civil society as counter-power was far from dominant because now most of its promoters

²³ A. Ganji, *Shamed by the Ghorme-Sabzi of Liberalism*, 2006. Available at: <http://freeganji.blogspot.com/2006/06/shamed-by-ghorme-sabzi-of-liberalism.html> (accessed on 10/24/2011).

²⁴ Kamrava, 'The Civil Society Discourse in Iran', p. 172. Kamrava writes that, after Khatami's victory, there has been 'an increasing tendency on the part of civil society writers to assume an oppositional posture and to adopt sides in the on-going factional struggle. In some ways, the political predicament has pushed the authors of the civil society discourse into the very position about which they have been theorizing: one of begrudging acceptance of the State while forming a socially aware and grounded front in support of grassroots democracy'.

²⁵ M. Khatami, 'Covenant with the Nation', in *Hope and Challenge. The Iranian President speaks* (Canberra: Institute of Global Cultural Studies Binghamton University, 1997), p. 76.

actually occupied positions of power, often in institutional roles. Generally speaking, many of them ended up embodying both the state and what they argued was the alternative to the state.²⁶ This situation led to numerous cases of governmental cooptation of ‘civil society organizations.’ In terms of NGOs, many of them survived economically and politically thanks to their proximity to the government, obtaining benefits but, at the same time, suffering pressure and conditioning from it. The increasing overlap between activism and government’s policies led to the intrusion of the latter in the former. For instance, Ziba Jalali-Naini, member of the governmental office that coordinated NGOs, asserted that non-governmental organizations didn’t prove themselves to be the proper instrument to satisfy the needs of Iranian women. This is because of their links and their dependence from the central government, whereby NGOs tried to flatten the needs of citizens on the vision and the goals of the executive.²⁷ Once the rhetoric of civil society becomes highly institutionalized and increases its consensus among actors, it ceases to be an exclusive instrument for counter-power. The result sometimes is that the same rhetoric that once celebrated civil society as counter-power becomes now the instrument through which the state legitimates its own power. By taking possession of the rhetoric on civil society, Mohammad Khatami’s governments asserted to represent it, and declared the will to empower it; this significantly diminished the potential of civil society’s rhetoric as alternative and opposition.

What is also interesting to note is that the shifting of the borders between power and counter-power, and between inclusion and exclusion in political processes does not

²⁶ This is the case of many reformists. Hamid Reza Jalaeipour, for instance, was among the most important heads of the *sepah-e pasdaran* and in the Nineties he became a scholar at the University of Tehran and a journalist. Abbas Abdi has a similar background: politician with a long experience, he served in the Central Committee of the Mosharekat Party (Khatami’s party, headed by Mohammad Reza Khatami, the president’s brother), and as journalist and scholar as well.

²⁷ Z. Jalali-Naini, ‘Doulati ia gheir-e doulati? Negah be tajrobe-ye daftar-e hamhangi sazmanha-ye gheir-e doulati zanan dar Iran (Governmental or non-governmental? A look at the experience of the office coordinating women’s NGOs in Iran)’, *Goftogu*, Vol. 10 (1997, pp. 97-108 and see also D. Abrahamson, ‘A Critical Look at NGOs and Civil Society as Means to an End in Uzbekistan’, *Human Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (1999), pp. 240-50.

entail a complete disappearance of civil society's role as an antagonist to 'power from above.' More precisely, the model of civil society determined by the passage from government to governance creates new conflicts and cleavages. Thus, while the opposition between state and civil society may disappear from the official discourse of the actors, it can re-emerge in different spheres, taking place in more informal political settings. There are unintended consequences to the collapsing of civil activism with governmental activities.

The rhetoric of 'civil society' meets student politics

The relation between the Khatami's administrations and the main student umbrella organization in Iran, *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat-e Howze va Daneshgah* (the office for the consolidation of the unity between universities and religious schools - DTV) offers an example of how conflicts and cleavages move and shift without disappearing while the concept of civil society is constantly reshaped.

DTV was established after the revolution as a tool to Islamize universities and oppose Marxists and liberals on campuses. One of the founders stated: 'we received the order to establish the DTV directly from Khomeini.'²⁸ Student politics has historically been important to educate and select the political élite of the Islamic Republic, in particular for the Islamic left and the radical conservatives. Among the former students' leaders, we find Abbas Abdi, Mohsen Mirdamadi, Ebrahim Ashgarzadeh, Mohammad Musavi-Khoeiniha, Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh, Ali Larijani and Mahmud Ahmadinejad.²⁹ Historically, DTV was the only student organization present in Iran

²⁸ Personal interview with A.A., leading politicians, founder of DTV, current member of the Central Council of the Mosharekat Party, and former member of the editorial board of the newspaper *Salam*, Tehran, 2008. All interviewees are anonymised for security reasons. All interviews were conducted in Iran between 2005 and 2008.

²⁹ These are all important political and/or cultural personalities in Iran. Some of them are reformist today, and have faced imprisonment and trials. The last three names are well-known staunch conservatives. It is worth noting that at the dawn of the revolution there was no clear differentiation between reformists, conservatives and radicals. Within the DTV a general radical and anti-Western stance was shared among all the members. For an account of student politics before the revolution, see A. Matin-Asgari, *Iranian*

until early 1990s, clearly illustrating the revolutionary authorities' effort to create a politically homogeneous university population. Anti-imperialism, radical critique of materialism and a strong faith in Khomeini's religious and political leadership characterized the ideological position of DTV. The historical context contributed significantly to its leading position in universities, as Iran was engaged in a long war with Iraq and the Islamic Republic was struggling for its own survival: the need for unity was strong in all sectors of Iranian society. While all strands of Islamism were present within DTV, the dominant stream was the Islamic left which fed into DTV its anti-imperialist and redistributive creeds.

After the end of the war and Khomeini's death, the Rafsanjani's administration and Khamenei's leadership removed the Islamic left from power. As the latter was particularly active in universities through DTV, Rafsanjani promoted the establishment of another student group in order to create an alternative ideological hegemony: the *anjoman-e islami daneshju-ye bassiji* (the Islamic association of the *bassij* student), whose leader was Heshmatollah Tabarzadi.³⁰

The effort to challenge the ideological hegemony of the Islamic left within universities corresponded to the dismissal of leftists from important political posts with the new *rahbar*, Ali Khamenei, removing the main political figures heading a number of institutional or semi-institutional structures.³¹ Such a condition of growing marginality pushed the Islamic left to introduce a political discourse based on the idea of a more democratic access to politics and a critique of the authoritarian exercise of power. This change of political discourse and ideological reference was in part a sincere change of

Student Opposition to the Shah (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publ., 2002). For an account of student politics after the revolution, see R. Razavi, 'The Cultural Revolution in Iran, with Close Regard to the Universities, and its Impact on the Student Movement', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1-17.

³⁰ 'Jarian-e Daneshjuian. Chaleshha va rahkarha. Goftogu ba Ali Tajrania (Student movement, challenges and solutions. A discussion with Ali Tajrania)', *Cheshmandaz-e Iran*, Vol. 26 (2004), p. 109. See also A.A. Mahdi, 'The Student movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1999), p. 11.

³¹ W. Buchta, *Who rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Adenauer Stiftung 2000).

mind and in part due to the necessity of political survival given their progressive marginalization.³² Many of the dismissed figures re-entered the universities as professors and researchers, founded think-tanks or edited publications, and had very strong relations with the students of DTV. The most famous examples are Abdolkarim Soroush, Akbar Ganji, Abbas Abdi, Mohammad Khatami, and Hamid Reza Jalaeipour, who were involved in the establishment and growth of DTV.³³ They wrote books on the social and intellectual transformations of Iran and reflected on their past political experiences, adopting a more liberal perspective, and were engaged in the description of a ‘changing society.’³⁴ The cultural and scientific production on the issue of civil society increased significantly in the second half of the 1990s and it was mainly produced by these former radicals, who became a sort of ‘primary meaning makers,’ that is those who establish the epistemological platform which makes sense of expressions and words. Thus, the Islamic left ended up speaking the language of rights and of democratic access to politics, becoming the first interpreter of a renewed discourse on democracy as freedom for independent actors. This was subsumed under the label of civil society working to limit state power.

Two important factors contributed to the challenge that DTV had to deal with in universities. First of all, according to a leading member of DTV, in late 1992, one of Rafsanjani’s closest collaborators, Said Hajjarian promoted a plan of civil security

³² According to some politicians of the Islamic Republic, the 1996 Parliamentary election marked the beginning of the decline of conservatism and radicalism in the country (a leading reformist stated that ‘[i]n the 1996 election, the people said no to the Islamic left, to anti-imperialism and radicalism,’ Tehran, 2008). The election saw the fierce competition between the conservatives led by Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri and the moderates led by Rafsanjani in the Servant of the Reconstruction Party (Kargozaran-e Sazandegi). This was followed by the presidential election in 1997, when the conservative candidate Nateq-Nuri was defeated by Mohammad Khatami (moderate reformist close to Rafsanjani and the Islamic left).

³³ Abdolkarim Soroush, Akbar Ganji, Abbas Abdi, Mohammad Khatami, Hamid Reza Jalaeipour have both a political and cultural or intellectual profile. Soroush is a well-known philosopher who was appointed in the Council for Cultural Revolution from 1980 to 1984; Ganji served in the *pasdaran* Army (as Jalaeipour) and then became a journalist, Abdi was a politician who, though maintaining his political engagement, became a sociologist and writer. Khatami interrupted his political career when he became the director of the National Library in Tehran, and dedicated himself to philosophy. After that, he was elected President of the Republic.

³⁴ As the title of one of Abbas Abdi’s books shows: A. Abdi, M. Godarzi (eds.), *Tahavvolat-e Farhangi dar Iran (Cultural transformation in Iran)*, (Teheran: Ravesh, 1999).

(*amnyat-e madani*) which established *Niruha-ye moqavamat-e bassij* units within university campuses to challenge the influence of DTV³⁵ because across the universities DTV was very active against key Rafsanjani's policies.³⁶ The most important consequence of the civil security plan was that universities became heterogeneous places, where people with different ideological orientations met and struggled for hegemony. With the entrance of the *bassij* units in universities, the function of DTV changed. Second, in 1993 the electoral procedures of DTV was amended, allowing all students to cast their votes in the election and to run as candidates whereas previously only the ones who had gone through a screening process carried out by DTV itself could participate and be elected to the central committee. As one student put it, '[DTV] became a free harbor for any kind of activist.'³⁷ Until that moment, the political culture of DTV (and of the Islamic left in general) was deeply rooted in the revolutionary mobilization – just like *bassij* militias - but the continuous contacts between DTV and *bassiji* student units and the turnover of the organization's leaders meant that DTV quickly moved away from such political framework.

DTV maintained good relations with the Islamic left, opposing both Rafsanjani's government because of its liberal policies, which were considered dangerous for social cohesion and national independence³⁸ and the *bassij* units considered to be the *longa manu* of the conservatives and thus co-responsible of the marginalization of the Islamic left. The link with the Islamic left was so strong that

³⁵ Personal interview with F. H., former member of the Islamic Association at the University of Tehran, member of the Islamic democratic association of the university of Tehran and of the College of Medicine, Tehran, 2008.

³⁶ D. Menashri, *Revolution at a Crossroads. Iran's Domestic Politics and Regional Ambitions*, paper n. 43, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (Washington: 1997).

³⁷ Personal interview with F. H., Tehran 2008.

³⁸ Personal interview with F. H., former member of the Central Committee of the DTV and former member of the VI reformist Parliament elected as member of the Student Faction in the 2nd of Khordad Front, Montreal, 2007.

[DTV] had no independent political position, it was a sort of transmission belt between the intellectuals, the Islamic left and young people... for this reason, when the intellectuals started to advocate the need to develop civil society, DTV adopted that slogan too. There was no independent political evaluation on that.³⁹

In addition, DTV had kept the ideologues of the 1980s as its point of reference even if they were much older than students,⁴⁰ highlighting how heavily the organization depended from the discourse emanating from the Islamic left. Since Mohammad Khatami's electoral campaign in 1996-1997 was based principally on the concepts that the Islamic left had begun to endorse, Khatami was enthusiastically embraced by the students through DTV. In December 1997, few months after his election, Khatami met the students and members of DTV. On that occasion, the students showed appreciation for Khatami and his reform plan.⁴¹ In some ways, the government had to engage civil society actors such as the students' organization to foster its legitimacy and the legitimacy of its political discourse – based on the very idea of strengthening civil society. Thus students were called to participate, to get involved and to collaborate with the government.⁴²

DTV and the Khatami's administrations seemed to have a perfect coincidence of objectives and practices. Conflicts seemed non-existent and there were no signs of opposition to the point that DTV entered the political coalition supporting Khatami's election, the '2nd of Khordad Front'.⁴³ The rhetoric of civil society that had entered Iran as counter-power was progressively taken on board by sectors of the political

³⁹ Personal interview with H. K., former member of the central committee of DTV and member of the Mosharekat Party, Tehran, 2008.

⁴⁰ Personal interview with A. A., Tehran, 2008.

⁴¹ 'Iran News' and 'Kar-o Kargar,' 13 December 1998. This event was the occasion for the conservatives to criticise both the students and reformists because they applauded show their appreciation instead of reciting religious verses. For this quarrel, see the interview of the leftist daily "Salam" with the rightist MP Nateq-Nuri (cited in "Iran News", 13 December 1998). For an account of the students' enthusiasm toward Khatami, see D. Minoui, *Jeunesse d'Iran. Les voix du changement* (Paris: Autrement, 2001).

⁴² M. Mashayekhy, 'The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2001), p. 298.

⁴³ 'Iran News,' 14 December 1999.

establishment and with Khatami's election it became official discourse, illustrating how a counter-hegemonic concept was over time transformed into a discourse that an authoritarian state can legitimately hold, as one should not forget that despite Khatami's electoral victories, Iran remained an authoritarian state and Khatami himself had no intention of abandoning the original revolutionary framework.

In occasion of 2nd of khordad election [the 1997 presidential election], the *anjoman-ha islami* [the Islamic associations in universities which elect the central office of DTV] became the electoral headquarters of Khatami's campaign. Such an important role given to students caused a powerful expansion of student activism: many more got involved and we had a general feeling to be protected and on the right side of history. We felt strong. Until the events of 18 tir [the July 1999 student protests], the DTV recognized Khatami's leadership. [...] after those events, everything changed⁴⁴.

The July 1999 events brought conflict between state and society back on the agenda of DTV.

From cooperation to conflict: civil society “strikes back”

In July 1999, the students protested against the closing of the reformist newspaper *Salam*, and were violently repressed by the police and pro-Khamenei militias. The riots continued for some days, and deaths among the demonstrators were reported.⁴⁵ This event marked a turning point for the students, as Khatami did not come to their aid. On the contrary, the government called on the students and DTV to moderate their discourse, expressing an ambiguous condemnation of the violent repression enacted by the Ministry of Information and by the revolutionary guards. The students felt abandoned by the reformist government they were supporting, and started to look more

⁴⁴ Personal interview with M. B., member at the time of the central committee of DTV, Tehran, 2008.

⁴⁵ See Mahdi, 'The Student movement', pp. 17-27.

and more critically at their membership into the 2nd of Khordad Front, even though they still remained loyal to Khatami in the parliamentary elections of 2000.

After the 1999 event, DTV began to question the validity of Khatami's political programme and started thinking about the potential for reform in Iran outside the institutional arena because of the unsatisfactory answers that Khatami's reformism was providing. The students became determined to be a sort of 'watchdog' and counter-power for the government,⁴⁶ as the latter was deemed unable to design a path to democracy for Iran. A disengagement from Khatami was by now on the cards. These ideas were embodied in the theory of the *gozar az Khatami* (overtaking Khatami), which was presented at the 2000 DTV Annual Meeting in the city of Gorgan.⁴⁷ This stance became widely shared among the students: a majority of them indeed wanted DTV and the *jonbesh-e daneshjuy* (the student movement) to be independent from institutional politics and to act as an independent social movement. This was the position of the so called Allameh majority faction:⁴⁸

[our] faction supports the process of democratization through civil society, not through elections [...] we are part of the civil society and today we are united in supporting social movements before politics and institutions [for this reason] we have established different commissions which work on sensitive issues such as women and minorities' rights [...] in contact with social movements.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Personal interview with M. B., Tehran, 2008.

⁴⁷ Personal interview with A. N., member at the time of the central committee of DTV 2007-2008, Tehran, 2008, and A. Afshari, 'Radicalism and the Iranian Student Movement's Quest for Democracy', *Gozaar. A Journal on Democracy and Human Rights in Iran*, Vol. 11 (2007), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Allameh later established the Islamic Democratic Association of the Students of Tehran University and College of Medicine of Tehran University. See also *Asasnameh anjoman-e Eslami democrasi daneshgah-ye Tehran va Olum-e pezheshki-ye Tehran* (the Statute of the Islamic democratic association of the university of Tehran and of the College of Medicine, Tehran: N.p., 2005). See also "Jarian-e Daneshjuian. Chaleshha va rahkarha," p. 110.

⁴⁹ Personal interview with a female student member of the Special commission for women within the DTV, Tehran, 2008.

From then, conflicts emerged both in the public political discourse and in the political processes between government and the majority of students. Eventually, in 2003 DTV abandoned the 2nd of Khordad Front and did not back reformist candidates in the municipal elections; since then, internal voices calling for electoral boycott have become more and more powerful. The emergence of such conflict is due to the fact that students felt unappreciated for their efforts and contribution to Khatami's victories. In addition, many began to question the 'politics of active calm,' a theory elaborated in Khatami's circles on the need for patience and unconditional support for the government from 'civil society.' According to the reformists in power, the goal of DTV's activities was to assist the governmental implementation of reforms and to respect the theory of 'two steps forward, one step back.'⁵⁰ In particular there was the sentiment that students should not be too 'enthusiastic' in fighting for a democratic change that other sectors of the ruling elites did not even wish to contemplate. Contrary to the students, who advocated the need for action and even rupture with the anti-reform elements of the system of the Islamic republic, the government had to be mindful of the sustainability of the system as a whole, which it wanted to transform slowly and not abruptly for fear of a conservative backlash. This sense of duty towards the system is present in interviews with politicians, and it can be labeled a 'call for responsibility.' A common sentiment is that 'Khatami had no choice.'

Khatami had projected a civil society on his mind, which did not become a reality. Civil society meant parties, trade unions, and a free press. Khatami did not create such things, and at the end he found himself alone against a strong structure of power. Those who don't enjoy power are always oppressed, and thus Khatami started to step back. If he had social power and support, he would have resisted against the conservatives, but you know... if one day he said something, the day after he had to deny it for his own sake. In

⁵⁰ See FRE/RL, *Iran report*, Vol. 3, No. 46, 4 December 2000 (available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342905.html>), and ISNA, 7 July 2000.

2002 he sent two important laws to Parliament [these had the goal to foster Khatami's power at the expenses of the Council of Guardians, an un-elected body of supervision], and said: this is my red line! I won't accept you reject them! But the Council of Guardians did it, the Guardians rejected the laws. So, what should he do? Nothing. He had to remain in his place till the end of the mandate, and work within the legal framework of the regime. He had no choice.⁵¹

Similar reflections often bring to the conclusion that 'it is easy to play radical politics if you don't have to manage a country.'

I have always thought that the student movement had to remain close to a political group. But the students decided to leave the institutional stage of politics. They said they worked for democracy, but they didn't help a democratic popular awareness.⁵²

Moreover, the reformists had a long and successful political history, as most of them took part in the revolution and held important political post during the 1980s. They felt legitimated in approaching the students as 'noble fathers' because of this history. Above all, many among the reformist elite had been student leaders and were directly engaged in the foundation of DTV just after the revolution.⁵³ Even years later, they kept a strong link with the DTV and its leadership. The reformists kept leading important student celebrations and to be seen as a sort of historical leaders by the students, even if years had passed. In such a situation, the personal linkages often assumed great importance, even influencing the political credibility of actors. These prominent reformists felt that the students should trust their commitment and political outlook based on patience, but the majority of students over time refused to accept it.

⁵¹ Personal interview with M. A., former member of the Central Committee of the DTV, 2005-2006 and former Head of the Administrative Section of the Center for the Dialogue among Civilizations, Tehran, 2008.

⁵² Personal interview with A. A., Tehran, 2008.

⁵³ Ibidem. Some of the founders' names have already been quoted in this article.

Given the outlook reformists had on how to best proceed to reform the Iranian political system, it is not surprising that many students often complained about the government keeping them in a condition of dependence and intellectual infancy. A shared comment among them was that ‘we are more than arms to distribute flyers, contrary to the government’s opinion,’ as one said.⁵⁴ DTV criticized the reformist political class as too moderate and compromised and students accused Khatami and his government to be too soft in opposing the conservatives. The reformist political élite was perceived to be too embedded in the institutional politics of an authoritarian regime and they felt that ‘Khatami and his allies can’t reform the Islamic Republic: they *are* the Islamic Republic, how could they be willing to change the system of power which allows them to be in charge?’⁵⁵

A return to civil society as counter-power took place and was embedded in the ‘global mythology’ that students naturally are the ‘democratic consciousness of society,’ a sort of natural vanguard for the awakening and political awareness of societies. The received wisdom is that students must criticize the government and its institutions, and call for democracy to demonstrate that they are intellectually engaged and alive. This idea is promoted not only by Iranian militant students, but also by scholars and sociologists, who emphasize it in the case of non-Western countries.⁵⁶ Thus, students have acted according to this (self)-representation: as vanguard of change, progress and democracy. The students and DTV criticized the government for not doing enough to establish a democratic government in Iran. They acted following their

⁵⁴ Interview with a DTV member (28 years old), Tehran, 2007.

⁵⁵ Personal interview with M. H., former member of the central committee of the DTV 2006-2007, Tehran, 2007. See also K. Ehsani, ‘Our letter to Khatami was a farewell: A Conversation with Said Razavi-Faqih’, *MERIP On Line*, 15 July 2003 (<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero071503>).

⁵⁶ See P.G. Altbach (ed.), *Student Political Activism* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), pp. 1-15; more recently, G. De Groot (ed.), *Student Protest: The Sixties and After* (New York: Longman, 1998) and Yousaf Ibrahim, ‘Between Revolution and Defeat: Student Protest Cycles and Networks’, *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 4, No. 7 (2010), pp. 497-504. See also the quoted articles by Ali Akbar Mehdi and Mehrdad Mashayekhy, and M. Saghafi ‘Daneshjoo, Dowlat va Enqelab (Students, Government and Revolution)’, *Goftogu*, Vol. 5 (1994), pp. 9-26.

supposed nature; that is mobilizing and criticizing the established and institutional power. In the words of one of them:

Political parties have been tried to infiltrate the student movement [...] This has been an obstacle. Reform parties have always wanted the student movement to be following them so that they would devise the strategy for the students. But the student movement gradually became independent [...] distancing itself from power. So today it is in a completely different position, which is closer to its natural point and where it should be. [...] Now that it is separated from power (i.e. the regime) and does not participate in elections, it must have a new strategy.⁵⁷

Thus, the interpretation of civil society the students put forth as a result of their frustration with Khatami's reformists linked back to its original meaning. But this is not simply a return to what was imported into Iran a decade before. Indeed, this last meaning of "civil society" is the outcome of an ongoing process of reinvention of the concept through the political struggle between DTV and Khatami's government. Both have forged a new meaning for 'civil society' according to their political priorities. Before 1999, being a 'civil society actor' entailed a relationship with the governmental authority, namely a collaborative attitude in the name of shared objectives that made Iran, paradoxically, a model of good governance with state and society closely cooperating for the common good. After that date, 'civil society membership' implied a more conflictual relationship. For example, in 2003, a new round of student protests was organized to oppose a plan of tuition hikes for some university services. The reaction of governmental representatives was harsh. Mehdi Karubi declared that 'Iran is united in the rejection of foreign pressure' and called on families to prevent their

⁵⁷ D. Shahsavari, 'Student Movement Continuation of 1997 Movement', *Rooz On Line*, 12 July 2006. This idea is widespread among the students. They describe themselves as a very important actor in Iranian domestic politics, underlining that university has always been a place of mobilization.

children from taking part in the protests and ‘being tricked by some people abroad.’⁵⁸ Abdolvahed Mussavi-Lari, Interior Minister and leading member of the League of Militant Clerics – the Islamic leftist political group- accused the students of being ‘hooligans’ and holding ‘illegal gatherings.’⁵⁹ These declarations by reformist leaders were not dissimilar to the Intelligence Minister Ali Yunesi’s, a conservative, who declared that the riots were ‘organized by foreign medias and satellite channels.’⁶⁰ They all accused the students to be foreign agents, or to be manipulated by foreigners. Such public accusations had the explicit goal of delegitimizing the DTV and its political activism. Paradoxically, those events were used by Khatami and Hamid Reza Asefi, the Foreign Ministry’s spokesperson, as evidence that the regime was democratic. The possibility students enjoyed of organizing protests, according to Khatami, was the proof that they were treated democratically, and could protest in order to make their demands, as it happens in a democratic country, as Asefi also underlined.⁶¹ Although they have been identified as a national threat by some reformists, the students and their activism were used as some sort of ‘insurance’ by Khatami to prove his government democratic and liberal enough to allow a degree of political contestation.

This turn of events demonstrates that civil society membership does not change *per se*, but depends on the type of sanctioning, whether positive or negative, it receives from other actors playing the game. In the case of Iran, Khatami and the reformists ditched the students when they began to voice their criticism of the government they used to support and labeled them ‘hooligans’ and therefore outside the bounds of civil society. As a prominent reformist politician put it, students were ‘swept away as grain of sand, no longer protected by the desert.’⁶² On their part, students claimed they had returned to

⁵⁸ ‘Iran News,’ 16 June 2003.

⁵⁹ IRNA, 12 June 2003 (cited in ‘Iran News,’ 12 June 2003), and S. Peterson, ‘Iran's angry young adults erupt in political protest’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 June 2003.

⁶⁰ ISNA (Iranian Student News Agency), 12 June 2003 (cited in ‘Iran News,’ 12 June 2003).

⁶¹ G. Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran. The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), p. 111.

⁶² Personal interview with A. A., Tehran, 2008.

fulfill the genuine role of a civil society actor while the government had betrayed the very reason why they had encouraged and engaged with civil society in the first place.

Conclusion

For a considerable amount of time, civil society activism was considered a necessary ingredient for the consolidation of democracy and for the undermining of authoritarian political systems. The problematisation of the concept of civil society away from the dominant liberal-democratic conception of it is certainly a welcome development, but it does not end discussions about the role and nature of civil society. In fact, even those who argue that civil society activism might strengthen authoritarian rule and reinforce patterns of underdevelopment usually call for the creation of a ‘genuine, true civil society.’⁶³ This study goes beyond discussions relating to the ‘real’ nature of civil society and focuses on the rhetoric of civil society in which the label that different political actors use in order to achieve their political objectives shifts in time and space. The case-study of the relations between DTV and Khatami’s government shows indeed that in different historical contexts, the same actors have used a cultural instrument such as “civil society” in opposite ways: as counter-power and as an ally of governmental institutions.

This contribution offers a picture of civil society as a space where we observe some complex phenomena such as the reinvention of meaning of a shared concept and the development of legitimacy patterns, which engender new conflicts and new room for political action. Indeed, the dominant rhetoric has concrete effects on political processes. The hegemonic culture is not merely ‘the discourse spoken by the power,’⁶⁴

⁶³ See for instance M. Naím, ‘What is a GONGO? How government-sponsored groups masquerade as civil society,’ *Foreign Policy* (April 2007), and Id., ‘Democracy dangerous impostors,’ *The Washington Post*, 21 April 2007. See also P. Ho, R.L. Edmond, *China’s embedded activism. Opportunities and Constraints for a social movement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

⁶⁴ F. Vairel, ‘La transitologie, langage du pouvoir au Maroc,’ *Politix*, Vol. 20, No. 80 (2007), pp. 109-28. See also J. Meyer, B. Rowan, ‘Institutionalized organizations. Formal structure as myth and ceremony,’ *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 2 (1977), pp. 340-363.

yet it is something which may determine the legitimacy of actors' demands or undermine it. This is evident in the case of DTV when it refused to conform to the way 'civil society' should act according to the government. This exclusion is a warning for other organizations too in so far as they have to conform and accept the model of integration between state and civil society-, even if it means abandoning the role of counter-power. However, this process of 'taming civil society' through governance finds powerful limits because the consensus between civil society and the state, as occurred in the early years of Khatami, can also generate new conflicts. In the case of DTV, the limit was the self-representation of students. Political and social actors have a very specific tradition and tend to act according to it. It follows that students generally are represented as critics of institutional power and believe themselves to be the 'democratic consciousness' of society. This means that they keep on acting according to that self-representation. State institutions generally have a tradition in conflict management, compromise and government, and thus act according to these self-representations. Khatami's governments have done precisely this.

If we use the spatial metaphor of civil society as an arena where we observe political phenomena, we also see that actors can enter or leave such a space. For instance, we have seen that the students were considered civil society actors under specific political conditions, while later they were deprived of such a label. Rhetoric and related concrete dynamics of power create labels for selected actors, which satisfy precise criteria. In this sense civil society looks like a culturally defined space, whose membership is defined through both the actors' features and their relation with power. This defines the very

concept of civil society through a distribution of ‘civil society memberships,’ which allows the entrance in the realm of civil society to those actors who accept the governance and the collaborative model of state-civil society relation. In this sense, the very concept of civil society makes boundaries and conflicts shift, engendering new spaces for political confrontation among some selected actors, re-fashioning both the idea of civil society as resistant to the central power and the image of civil society as a co-opted collaborator.