



**Political Opportunities for NGOs in
Hybrid Regimes: Systematic Variation
between Policy Networks**

The Cases of Women's-Rights and Environmental
Domains in Iran

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
June 2019

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Acknowledgement

My PhD study period at Dublin City University was a journey with hard times and obstacles. It would not be possible and completed without the support and companionship of the School of Law and Government, especially the supportive staff members of it, Prof. Iain McMenemy and Prof. Gary Murphy.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Iain McMenemy for his valuable support, patience, inspirations, and immense knowledge. His guidance from our very first meeting helped and inspired me to shape my thesis, and continued to all phases of my research. I could not have imagined having a better advisor for my PhD research project.

Also, I would like to thank Prof. Gary Murphy for his unforgettable support during the hard days of my research and fieldwork. Without any doubt, resuming my course after the unexpected barriers in Iran and obstacles in Ireland, and finishing my PhD, became possible with his support as the then Head of School.

At the end of my PhD journey, the viva voce became a fascinating meeting with the constructive challenges and arguments due to the stimulating critiques and viewpoints of Dr. Eoin O'Malley and Dr. Vincent Durac. I appreciate their presence and contribution. I thank Prof. Maura Conway for chairing the viva meeting fairly and well.

Also, my sincere thanks also go to those staff members of the School of Law and Government who provided me with feedback about my research project, including Dr. Walt Kilroy, Dr. Alex Baturo, Dr. Diarmuid Torney, and Dr Karl Murphy. Their comments and advice in relation to the research analysis and methods were always insightful and constructive. From the staff members, I also appreciate Michelle Brennan's administrative assistance and advice from registration time to submission.

I would like to have my wholehearted appreciation to my dear family for their life-time support: my lovely parents, Nasrin and Muhammad Hashem, who kindly stood with me and beside me during all hard days and tough times regardless their health and financial difficulties, particularly when the situation was politically so suppressive to me in Iran.

In the end, I appreciate Moign Khawaja's nice companionship during the last years of my PhD course. I thank Dr. Pooyan Jamshidi and Dr. Farzad Naghdali, who made memorable times for me in Dublin, as well as my lovely friends in Iran who helped me in getting out the unexpected political pressures and personal obstacles. Last but not least, I appreciate the technical recommendations of Paul O'Neill and Dr. Erika Biagini.

A Special word...

This research project brought me much positive and negative energies in 6 years. All those persons that either told me '*We are not going to allow you carry out this PhD project*' or '*You are not able to do a PhD*' helped me emerge stronger and gave me the determination to complete my PhD.

My special appreciation goes to my lovely parents and special friends that helped me finish this research project through their priceless companionship!

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Abstract

Political Opportunities for NGOs in Hybrid Regimes: Systematic Variation between Policy Networks

The Case of Women's-Rights and Environmental Domains in Iran

- Mohsen Moheimany

The hybrid political system of Iran creates political opportunities for advocacy NGOs depending on the political ideology of the ruling elite, the issue of a policy domain, and the level of government. Variations in these factors create fundamentally different types of policy networks, which dynamically function as sub-polities of the political regime. They provide advocacy NGOs with different constraints and opportunities regarding their different structures, which are characterised by the composition of actors, the interrelations between them, and the institutions.

In this study, the argument is that the public policy arena of Iran is differentiated, and accordingly, policy networks vary from one area to another, and therefore, the agency of advocacy NGOs in them vary. This argument is sustained by case studies of policy networks at provincial and national levels, in the women-rights and environmental policy domains, and across the politically liberal government of Khatami (1997-2005) and the conservative government of Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). The study suggests that other hybrid regimes should be considered like Iran as well: differentiated, rather than monoliths. Therefore, we might expect similar variations in the scope of advocacy NGOs within hybrid regimes.

Key words: political opportunity, public policy, democratisation, governance, policy network, agency, hybrid regime, Iran, civil society, advocacy NGO, women's rights, environmental protection

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Glossary

- **20-Year Vision:** the official comprehensive development plan in Iran, which sets the long-term strategies and purposes of the country in different policy domains. It also aims the international position of this country for 2025.
- **Agency of Actors:** the scope of freedoms of political actors in terms of their choices of actions and claims in public spheres.
- **Authoritarian Regime:** an undemocratic regime that, while accommodates electoral processes, constraints the constitutional rights of people. Authoritarian regimes make the decision-making processes systematically exclusive to the ruling elites.
- **Chastity:** a moral concept in the Islamic culture of Iran that defines the dignity of women in practising traditional roles and rules such as motherhood and Hijab.
- **Civil Society:** the sphere where the community-based organisations and citizens organise their interests, groups, and public activities versus government.
- **Decentralisation:** the process of transferring the authorities, discretion, resources, and administrative tasks of the central government to lower level organisations and bureaucracy.
- **Democratic Regime:** a political regime that rules based on popular sovereignty and has elected institutions for choosing policymakers and making public policies. In this type of regime, the constitutional rights of people are systematically respected fulfilled.
- **Democratisation:** the process of establishing a democratic political system with republican institutions and inclusive manner of governance.
- **Development Plan:** it is the mid-term plan of the government in Iran that is compiled by the cabinet and approved by Parliament every fifth year. It outlines the approach of the government in all policy domains.
- **Discourse:** a form of language, written or oral, that has a set of specific meanings and concepts as central elements, which expresses a purpose in public spheres.
- **Egalitarian:** a libertarian and equalitarian discourse related to women's rights that seek equal right and position with men.
- **Factional Politics:** a political system in which political contestations are institutionally between different political streams that correspond with social factions.
- **Family Law:** The Iranian specialised body of laws that determines the position and rights of people in the family based on Sharia.
- **Friday prayer sermon:** in Iran, it is a public lecturer that is given by a governmentally-appointed Mullah in all cities. The representatives of the Supreme Leader across cities deliver the sermon every week after the Friday Prayer.
- **Good Governance (also governance):** a modern paradigm of public policy making which recommends for including people in decisions and limited government.
- **Governance (see policymaking):** the process of making and implementing public policies.
- **Hijab:** in the context of Iran refers to the practice of covering women's head hairs and the whole body.
- **Homophily (also Isomorphism):** the status of harmony between policy actors regarding their political characters and policy behaviours.

- Hybrid Regime: a political regime that combines the character and structure of liberal democracy and authoritarian regimes.
- Institution: the established practices, rules, or laws that regulate the interactions and behaviours of actors in public policy making.
- IRIB TV: in Iran, it is the name of national TV and Radio broadcaster that is run by the government.
- Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC): the paramilitary force of Iran that also commits cultural and political activities in order to secure the values of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the conservative establishment.
- Islamic School: in Iran, they are religious schools that are run by government funds. Based on the entrance exam they accept students that live their lives in the schools and learn Islamic sources and interpretation.
- Macro Level: a level of analysis that studies large-scale social and political processes, including change and stability in the political systems.
- Meso Level: a mid-level of analysis that studies the coalitions and networks of actors, their relationships and interactions, as well as stability and change in their configuration.
- Micro Level: a level of analysis that studies the actions and interactions of individual actors, as well as public policies.
- Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO): a voluntary group of similar-minded people that have the same interest and cause. An NGO seeks to represent a specific set of interests in the public spheres and public policies.
- One Million Signature: a national campaign in Iran that was founded in 2006 by a large number of women activists and NGOs. It aimed at collecting 1 million signature to object to the discriminatory laws and policies, as well as demanding a revision.
- Parliament Commission: in Iran's Parliament, it is a legislative group of MPs that is legally tasked with studying agendas and propose alternatives in specific policy sectors.
- Parliament Committee: in Iran's Parliament, it is a parliamentary group that is created by some MPs in order to advocate an ideology, race, religion, or social interest/strata in the legislation. It has no official authority in legislation except organising and mobilising members and influencing MPs' vote.
- Patrimonialism: a type of relationships between the government and society where power-holders distribute public resources, such as funds, between citizens and social groups in order to sustain and develop loyal networks of people.
- Policy: any decision, practice, rule, or law that government makes in order to solve a public issue.
- Political Islam: an interpretation of Islamic ideology that advocates the rule of Sharia laws and practices in all social and governmental practices.
- Political Opportunity Structure: the systematic distribution of political opportunities and constraints in a political regime.
- Political Opportunity: the freedom of actors to choose their public actions, strategies, claims, and demands in their interaction with other actors and the government.
- Political Participation: the act of taking part in political processes in order to influence the processes of the setting of public agenda and policies.

- Policy Network (also sub-polity): a group of policy actors from both the state and the society, which interact with one another in a specific policy domain and seek to influence public decisions.
- Positive Discrimination: a discourse that advocates women in distributing public resources and setting laws and policies. This discourse believes sometimes women should be given more chances than men so that the historical discrimination against women is abandoned.
- Public Sphere: any space in the society where the citizens and social groups organise their interests and activities through rational debates.
- Rentier State: a government that relies on natural resources like oil and is dependent on it, instead of taxes.
- The Representative of the Supreme Leader: a religio-political post in Iran that is appointed by the Supreme Leader. The representatives advocate the discourse and interest of the Supreme Leader. The representatives are tasked with religious affairs such as interpreting Islamic rules, as well as doing the Friday prayers as imam.
- Social Movement: A large group of social actors, including citizens, NGOs, political parties, media, which has a shared sense of commitment to chase a common public cause.
- Transition Paradigm: a classic paradigm in the literature of political science that focuses on the process and destination of large-scale changes in political systems.

Abbreviations

- CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- CS: Civil Society
- CSO: Civil Society Organisation
- CSOs: Civil Society Organisations
- DGE: Director-General of Environment
- DOE: Department of Environment
- ENGO: Environmental NGOs
- EU: The European Union
- IR: Islamic Republic
- MENA: The Middle East and North Africa
- MP: Member of Parliament
- NGO: Non-governmental Organisation
- PN: Policy Network
- POS: Political Opportunity Structure
- UN: The United Nations
- WRNGO: Women's-Rights NGOs



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION



1. One Regime, Two Trajectories

On the 23rd of May 1997, the presidential elections changed the political trajectory of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In spite of the ruling Islamic establishment's massive investment in the electoral campaigns of the high-profile conservative MP, Ali Akbar Nateq, whose image and voice appeared on national TV channels constantly in the run-up to the election, 70 per cent of people surprisingly cast their vote for a lesser-known candidate, Muhammad Khatami. The result shook the establishment so much that some high-profile conservative figures asked the Supreme Leader and the then President to declare the election invalid.¹ Nevertheless, the following day, Rafsanjani's government confirmed the presidency of Khatami. Political observers saw this result as a firm rejection of the ruling conservative clerics by the people. However, conservatives maintained their position in the unelected Islamic organisations and security institutions.

Deploying the tactic of 'pressure from below whilst bargaining above', the reformist President Khatami invested both financially and politically in growing a vocal civil society as an ally in liberal reforms in order to push back fundamentalists in Islamic institutions. State offices received crowds of enthusiastic people requesting NGO licenses, with officials registering more than 10,000 NGOs from 1997 until 2005. The Cabinet granted NGOs the legal right to access and appeal official documents and policies. This political mood soon spread from the capital city to the rest of the country, for example, in the far-off town of Aliabad, located in northeast of Iran, environmental activists said that they sat in weekly meetings with county governors on the basis of their NGO affiliation. In Tehran, the capital city, competition and conflict arose between emerging NGOs and conservatives, feminist NGOs spoke openly about women's rights, everything from being allowed to ride a bike on the streets, to joining The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) at the international level. In the same period, in the northern province of Golestan, women activists demanded the appointment of women to local government. Although the conservative establishment contested and blocked many of the demands in Tehran and shut down progressive women's-rights NGOs; reformists in Golestan's local government gave a positive response to women's NGOs and appointed three female county-governors in 2003. During this period, despite the

¹ Ali Muhammad Besharati, the then Interior Minister of Iran (1993-1997), interview with Shargh Newspaper, 16 December 2015, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=3280508>

resistance of the establishment, NGOs became influential actors across different policy domains and established networks of relationships with policymakers.

Defeated conservatives re-grouped, this time bringing paramilitary forces and the working class into their coalition. They supported a left-wing populist politician, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who won the presidential election on the 17th of June 2005. The country shifted to the uniform rule of the hardline conservative camp in all elected and unelected institutions; they labelled NGOs as 'agents of Western countries'. Conservatives purged the state of liberals, pushed NGOs out of state offices, and limited their role in lawmaking. Vocal human-rights NGO members risked detention in larger cities. The conservatives' rule during 2005-2013 was dubbed 'the winter of civil society'. However, what has been overlooked in the eyes of scholars and political observers is that the state did not treat NGOs the same around the country, neither did so across different domains. In Golestan Province, for example, environmental NGOs were allowed to organise several protests directly in front of the Office of the Governor-General, in order to object to development projects in protected forests. During the same period in Tehran, however, security forces would not tolerate any public gatherings. In one incident, in a neighbourhood, police physically assaulted a small group of NGO members that had objected to the establishment of a drug rehabilitation camp in a park.

These two presidencies took place under the same political regime, and, more interestingly, the same conservative supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Although Islamic institutions and security forces have always obstructed electoral processes, in the two periods described above, the ballot box became the mechanism people used to decide the direction of policy: liberal democracy vs. Islamic authoritarianism. In fact, not only did the character and behaviour of the state shift significantly, the composition and role of NGOs changed. Nonetheless, in both presidencies, the freedom and scope of NGOs varied from one level of government to another, as well as across policy domains. This variation meant the situation was never black or white, but always grey. However, scholarship has usually accounted for NGO capacities in relation to changing the structure of the political regime or its leadership; it has thus far neglected other variables.

This thesis studies state and civil society interaction in the hybrid regime of Iran through an alternative paradigm. It aims to provide an intellectual tool to capture and explain the causes of the systematic variations concerning the scope of NGOs across government turnover, levels of government, and policy domains within the regime. In this regard, the query is concerned with

the dynamic resilience of Iran's hybrid regime while maintaining its relationship with civil society organisations within different contexts.

2. Democracy or Authoritarianism?

Recently, political science has remarked similarities between democratic and authoritarian regimes, especially concerning an ever-growing move towards NGOs (Forrest, 2009). Cavatorta (2010) notes the motives of this move in liberal democracies. According to him, citizens have been disillusioned and depoliticised due to the concentration of power in few hands with elites who in practice exclude ordinary people's interest from policies. Kubba (2000) notes the motives in authoritarian regimes: democratic opportunities and the resilience of regime, although limited, have allowed mobilisation for some political changes. In democratic regimes, people moved to NGOs in order to amplify their single-issue voice in policymaking, whilst in undemocratic regimes, people view NGOs as a mechanism to assert their suppressed political rights and push back against authoritarian leaders (Cavatorta, 2010; Kubba, 2000). Here, the matter is about public representation.

However, a question arises about the real scope of NGOs in representing people and achieving change. This is especially the case in hybrid regimes, such as Iran, that have combined authoritarianism with democracy, and demonstrated different capacities and contradictory behaviours across time. In this respect, as Cavatorta & Durac (2015) state, three streams of scholars expressed their views. One stream believes in the NGO as a potent force to limit authoritarianism; whereas a competing stream argues that NGOs cannot be independent entities in an authoritarian setting, as they become the tools of leaders. A third stream, however, remains agnostic between the two. This thesis approaches this controversy from a different perspective. It seeks to develop an analytical guide to the changes in the configurations of politics and systematic variation in the environment of public advocacy and activism of NGOs in different policy domains and government levels. After an introductory review of the significance of the issue, this chapter explains the reasons why, and through which perspective, political science should study this area.

3. The Significance of the Issue

Civil society after the Cold War was globally praised as a mechanism of democratisation, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Fowler, 1993). Whilst in Iran, elections and spontaneous social movements from below triggered change, in other undemocratic countries of the MENA, such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria, the growth of civil society was their reluctant leaders' decision in response to international pressure (Abootalebi, 1998; Korten, 1990; Hawthorne, 2004). These developments received two kinds of reaction from scholars. A number of scholars, such as Putnam (1998) and Owen (2004), accounted for international variables such as a region's historical trajectory and diplomacy in studying the political setting of authoritarian regimes. A number of other scholars, such as Heydemann (2007), critically questioned such reforms and called them an 'upgrade of authoritarianism', arguing that the real intention of authoritarian leaders was to improve their own reputation and prestige. Regardless of the incentives of leaders or international factors, the scholarship should take into account that reforms caused certain changes in the institutional and structural setting of the regimes that have implications concerning NGOs. Whilst the political structure of the regimes remained undemocratic, a shift in the distribution of power between the state and civil society took place (Clement, 2010; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). A decentralisation of power horizontally across policy domains and vertically across government levels can be observed as an effect of liberalising reforms (Bergh, 2012; Skelcher, 2000). This means another similarity of authoritarian regimes with liberal democracies. The policy arena has been differentiated, and the political setting has been disaggregated with separate networks of actors developing over time and who interrelate and compete with one another in different domains (Loader, 2000; Marinetto, 2003; Rhodes, 2007; Rivetti, 2015).

Also, the interaction and struggle between states and civil societies have become more complicated and sectoral (Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). NGOs seek to push back the state offices through their domain-specific advocacy role, but they have limited freedom and scope. Authoritarian leaders seek to bring the policymaking processes under their ultimate control, but they are constrained since the pressures of non-state actors. From one aspect, instead of a uniform and homogenous state, citizens and NGOs encounter different characters of the state across different policy fields (Jackson & Jackson, 1993). From another aspect, NGOs are specific actors that vary regarding behaviour, language, and demands (Jad, 2007; Alvarez, 1998). Thus, political participation has to be considered a sectoral process.

4. The Research Topic

This study focuses on the internal interactions and dynamism of hybrid regimes. The opening argument is that the limited electoral capacities and constitutional freedoms in the structure of hybrid regimes, such as Iran, have occasionally provided the chance for dynamic changes in relation to the scope of civil society. Moreover, the policy arena in hybrid regimes encompasses different networks of policy actors from state and civil society in various domains. These networks, as the sub-polities of a political regime, correspond to the political competitions and circulation of power, and feature with a particular structure and character. The structure of policy networks provides particular political opportunities and constraints for advocacy NGOs (Dassen, 2010).

This study is based on a sixteen-year period of Iran's contemporary political history, from 1997 to 2013, which demonstrated variations in this regime. The evidence from interviews with policymakers and NGO activists will demonstrate how government turnover, together with the vertical and horizontal distribution of power, influenced the political setting and policy networks within this time period. It will compare two different policy domains, namely environmental and women's rights, in order to show the differences between policy networks in the political and technical policy domains, as well as across the national and local levels of government.

5. The Structure of the Thesis

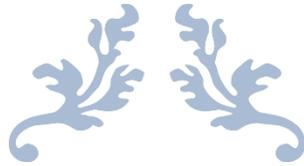
This thesis is structured into twelve chapters. Following this chapter, there will be a systematic literature review, which critically analyses the areas and levels of analysis in the current body of scholarships concerned with the political participation of civil society. It firms the ground for the argument that understanding the participatory scope of NGOs requires moving from macro and micro levels to a meso-level study.

The third chapter will develop a theoretical framework. This framework helps to identify the position of policy network in the structure of the political regime and explain the relation of a network's structure with the agency of advocacy NGOs. The fourth chapter maps the research design and methodology, while also justifying the selection of Iran. Chapter Five discusses the research methods used and the specific data of this research. Chapter Six introduces the

structure of the political regime of Iran and identifies the status of the independent variables of study within this structure.

Chapters Seven and Eight study the various cases of women's-rights policy domain in the national and provincial governments of Iran. Then, chapters Nine and Ten conduct case studies of environmental policy domain at the national and provincial government. These four case studies trace and narrate the trajectory of policy subsystems in these domains and government levels across the reformist (1997-2005) and conservative (2005-2013) periods.

Chapter Eleven encompasses the final discussion which reviews and evaluates the utility of the theoretical framework of the study and compares the findings in the respective case studies. Finally, chapter Twelve summarises the main findings and discusses the implications and contributions advanced within this study.



CHAPTER TWO

**CIVIL SOCIETY AND
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:
THE AREAS AND LEVELS OF
LITERATURE**



1. The Broad Area of Public Participation

The participation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), predominantly across several policy domains of liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, is widely discussed as a subject of interest amongst scholars of ‘group politics’ (Heywood, 2008). This chapter identifies the problem in the current literature to be concerning the level and areas of analysis and defines how this study can address these problems, and in doing so, make a contribution to existing knowledge within this specific area of research.

In this study, the issue of inquiry is centred on the scope and freedom of action of advocacy NGOs in political processes as a measure of democracy (Meyer, 2004). In theory, political science and public policy disciplines make a linkage between civil society and democracy, with scholars suggesting that the political participation of civil society is the ‘cornerstone of democracy’ (Callahan, 2002, p. 149). However, this chapter discusses that, in practice, this link is not necessarily evident across different regimes, and upon further analysis, it can be defined differently from various perspectives, ranging from regime change to policy change. Given this variation, this chapter reviews the main areas and levels of the current literature concerning the political participation of civil society. The organisation of this literature review is based around three levels of analysis, as utilised by scholars thus far: macro, meso, and micro. This structure demonstrates how the relationship between civil society and democracy varies across different scales of activism and different levels of analysis. Also, it shows that understanding the participation of NGOs requires accounting for all levels of analysis.

Before the literature review, the chapter will first discuss the concept of civil society, and locates the position of NGOs within it. Then, it distinguishes between the two distinct areas of participation of NGOs—political versus executive—in order to narrow and define the focus area of the study on advocacy NGOs whilst clarifying specifically the contribution of this research project.

2. Defining and Locating the Concept of Civil Society

Studying NGOs and non-state activism, in the first step, requires the scholar to define and locate the meaning of civil society. In the literature of political science, civil society is a broad and

contested concept. In the classic studies of non-state politics, inspired by the works of Roman and Greek philosophers, e.g. Cicero, the concept of civil society was usually regarded as a realm that fulfils the popular sovereignty and moderates the authoritative power of the state (Tocqueville, 1835; Carothers & Barndt, 1999-2000). In this regard, Gellner (1994) defines the concept as a sphere that not only includes clusters of non-governmental organisations but also with the fulfilment of pluralism, diversity, and liberties counterbalance the state, though, does not stop it as keeper of peace.

Despite the prominence of non-governmental aspect in the prevailing definitions, in the initial definitions, civil society was associated with, and even inclusive of, the state (Carothers & Barndt, 1999-2000). However, later in the works of some scholars such as Thomas Paine and George Hegel, civil society was distinguished from the state (McLaverty, 2002). By the emergence of the Enlightenment movement, civil society was gradually linked with the concept of democracy and grew in the democratic political discourses and thoughts, the next sections will elaborate on this. From the perspective of this study, civil society is defined as the venue for transforming and fulfilling political thoughts and interests into action, inspired by Gramsci (1971).

Despite the variation and diversity in the usage of the concept, civil society is originally perceived as a Western concept in the literature of political science. In the Western world, civil society has grown alongside the evolution of democracy, citizenship, human right, private property and rule of law (Mardin, 1995). In the modern context, civil activism has the characteristics of modern political participation that includes autonomous and spontaneous organisation, discipline, hierarchy, and professional advocacy institutionalised. At the heart of modern participation and civil society comes the concept of non-governmental organisation (NGO), as the agent of civil activism (McLaverty, 2002; Heywood, 2008). NGO is defined as an organised association of citizens that seeks to advance the voices and interests of members (Oxhorn, 1995). In Western meaning, NGOs come with some fundamental characteristics, including formal structure, autonomy, not-for-profit, and self-governing (Oxhorn, 1995; Tocqueville, 1955). In this meaning, NGO can be differentiated from other non-state actors, such as political party; while particular regulations rule their membership and relationships with others (Blau & Scott, 1970, p. 293).

Considering the context of this study, it should be said that the concepts of civil society and NGO have travelled to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially through liberalising

reforms and democratisations took place in the 20th century (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015; Aarts & Cavatorta, 2013). Though, the dissemination of these concepts took place with several shifts in its meaning, usage, and nature, despite the expectations of donors (Gray, 1999; Howell & Pearce, 2001; Cavatorta, 2013). Considering these shifts, scholars speak about Muslim society and Muslim civil society in the MENA (Zubaida, 1995).

In MENA, Islam is the significant ideology that drives the process of adapting civil society, along with the trajectories and histories of the region countries. The history and culture of Islam, with specific terms like Umma, have distinctively shaped the meaning of civil society in Arab countries and Iran (Mardin, 1995; Feirahi, 1999). In the Islamic meanings of civil society, the divine and rule of God's scripture are the central factors that unite and drives the traditional public sphere (Zubaida, 1995). This civil society has formed based on traditional and tribal social relations between volunteer groups that lack organisation, hierarchy, and structure, and revolve around religious functions such as charity, practising Sharia rules, and social collaboration (Feirahi, 1999). This indigenous civil society originates from the society of Prophet Muhammad's era, which replaces human rights with social justice and private property with Sharia laws. Unlike the Western world and instead of rationalism, modernity and secularism, in the traditional and Islamic societies, religious zeal and Islamic identity tie the traditional groups to each other (Feirahi, 1999; Arkoun, 2004). Moreover, it is said that there is a lack of pluralism and freedom in the Islamic civil society (Sajoo, 2004).

The concept of NGO has travelled to the MENA with a different meaning too. In the MENA, NGOs used to be volunteer associations and traditional social groups that had their roots in traditional market place, brotherhoods, neighbourhoods, and religious institutions (Feirahi, 1999). They are simple-structured groups of people that do not have professional membership, charter, and mostly act based on traditional social references and values that come from Islamic sources like Quran and tradition (Nabavi, 1998; Namazi, 2000). However, as Zubaida (1995) argues, simplifying the civil societies in the MENA as one-dimensional traditional and religious institutions is a mistake. This criticism makes sense when one takes into account the fact that during the recent decades of modernisation and liberalisation, civil society and NGOs in the MENA have upgraded in nature and function, inspired by the modern concepts and culture spread from the West. Advocacy NGOs in MENA countries are not older than four-decade in age, nonetheless, they seeking to open a new space for participation and improve their organisations. The concurrence of modern and traditional meanings and institutions has

diversified the civil society in the MENA countries, as they include the following (Kamali, 2003; Kamrava, 2001);

- Quasi-traditional groups; including Bazaar, Ulama, brotherhoods, neighbourhoods, local religious and voluntary assemblies etc.
- Quasi-modern groups; including modern assemblies, syndicates, and NGOs that include businessmen, students, government employees, journalists, etc.

In the struggle and interaction between the two aforementioned sections of civil society, the nature, functions, and meaning of civil society and NGOs form in Muslim countries. Whilst it is said to be more traditional than modern, and even more violent than peaceful; Arkoun argues that this is not exclusive to Islamic societies as it can be found in other religions and countries (2004, p.38). In this thesis, the civil society of MENA is considered as a compositional and hybrid, but a contextual phenomenon that comes with a particular composition, trajectory, and characteristics in each country.

3. The Political and Executive Areas of Activism

Research on NGO activism can be categorised into political and executive areas (Figure 2.1). This distinction relates to whether NGOs, as the policy actor, interact with political regimes, as the system, or engage with decision making in maintaining their functions.



Figure 2.1. The participatory areas of NGOs

In the political area, NGO participation pertains to advocacy, representation, and expression. This meaning of participation is also related to the policymaking process and the agency of NGO in terms of influencing the political system's outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Grant, 1989). This is where the participatory role of the NGO has been linked with democracy. The second area is executive and centres on activities related to implementing public policies and collaborating provisions and delivery of public services (Heywood, 2008; Vráblíková, 2014). In development studies, scholars focus on this executive engagement of NGOs as a force for socio-economic advancement (Bagci, 2007; Streeten, 1997; Baccaro, 2001).

NGOs have, in practice, shown more enthusiasm towards political areas during recent decades. However, this is outweighed by the scholarship on the executive areas of participation, in both volume and diversity (Mercer, 2002; Clark, 1995). This research project is concerned with the political role of NGOs, which studies them as pressure group (Grant, 1989; Rootes & College, 1999).

4. Regime Change versus Change within the Regime

Five components constitute a political regime, as Huntington (1996) defines. These are leadership, structure, culture, groups and policies. Any change in the value or content of these components denotes a political change. In the political area, whilst NGOs seek to influence a political system, reciprocally and dynamically, the system components also impose various constraints and opportunities on the agency of NGOs (Kriesi, 2007; Meyer, 2004).

Adopting Huntington's approach helps to ascertain different scopes of change in a regime that political actors can make depending on their agency. However, simultaneous inquiry arises within scholarship as to the extent of an NGO's influence on the system, or to what extent the system allows for change. In the area of this interaction, optimistic and pessimistic scholars have studied the reciprocal influence of NGOs on political regimes (Cavatorta, 2013). To do so, they have used three levels of analysis, namely macro, meso, and micro. This literature review analyses the significant studies at the three levels of analysis, which draws attention to specific implications in relation to the approach scholars should undertake when studying the agency of NGOs.

4.1. The Macro Level

A macro study focuses on the issue of change vs continuity of a political regime. On the one hand, macro-level studies involve the large-scale changes that civil society organisation causes in the regime, which can be in either all or almost all of the elements of the political system's structure. On the other hand, it involves the constraints that the political structure, with all its elements, imposes upon the NGOs' scope during stable periods (Bashirieh, 1995, p. 109; House *et al.*, 1995, p. 72).

The trend of the literature on the political participation of civil society organisations, particularly NGOs, at macro-level peaked in the second half of the 20th Century. This correlates with the waves of regime change across different regions of the world, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). Long after the establishment of the first group of democracies across the world in the 19th Century, the second and third waves, between the 1940s and 1960s, and between 1974 and 1990 respectively, brought more than 30 countries into democratisation process (Huntington, 1991). These waves of regime transition inspired academic studies in three significant ways. First, 'transitology' became the prevailing paradigm at the macro-level, with scholars normatively linking civil society with large changes in political regimes (Carothers, 2002). Consequently, not only did international investment in expanding civil society increase in the world of politics, but also scholars concentrated their research on the relation between civil society and the transition of political regimes. A considerable number of scholars attributed the fall of communist regimes to civil society (Kopecký, 2003). For instance, Liverani (2008) studied the role of NGOs in overthrowing the authoritarian regime in Algeria. Second, owing to a normative preference for democracy, scholars optimistically linked the political capacity of civil society and NGOs with democratisation in the sense of establishing republican institutions, i.e. regular elections (Schumpeter, 1947; Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). Kubba (2000, pp. 87-8) adopted the phrase 'promised land of democracy' in an effort to highlight this enthusiasm of scholars and simplification attached to the political role of civil society in the optimistic literature. Finally, during the second half of the 20th Century, a 'minimalist' meaning of democratisation prevailed, with scholars reducing democracy to regular elections and republican institutions (Schmitter & Karl, 1991).

However, critics pointed to transitional regimes where change was not genuine or had not attained a fully-fledged democracy (Rivetti, 2013; Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). From this

perspective, Levitsky and Way (2010) investigated 35 authoritarian regimes across the world which were seen to have stepped towards regime change between 1990 and 1995. They showed that transition replaced undemocratic regimes with a new authoritarian regime or an ambiguous type of hybrid system in several countries of Africa, Asia, former Soviet Union, America and Eastern Europe. In order to describe these type of regimes, some scholars combine contradictory terms in the classic literature, such as 'liberal autocracy' and 'illiberal democracy', or use the independent term of 'hybrid regime' that explains the peculiar coexistence of democracy and authoritarianism (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Zakaria, 2003; Cavatorta, 2013). The next chapter discusses the character of the hybrid regime, where although democracy constitutes the structure, power is exercised by the few.

The 1990s became the decade of the disappointment of scholars with Norton (1996, p. 6) stating, 'Societies do not take two tablets of civil society at bedtime and wake up the next morning undergoing democratisation'. Some pointed to the suppression and co-optation of civil society. Critics argue that the democratising capabilities of civil society have been oversold globally (Carothers, 2002). They also stated that more than regime change, fundamental principles like the rule of law are essential for democratisation (Zakaria, 2003). After all, civil society has survived as an integral concept in theories of democratisation and regime transition, even if its limitations in authoritarian contexts must be acknowledged (Cavatorta, 2013; Jamal, 2007).

Despite the developments at the macro-level of literature and its advantages, the criticisms against an overemphasis on substantial political changes in studies have directed attention to the importance of the political processes in the post-transition period. Carothers (2002) argued that the transition paradigm is out of date. This criticism has brought the focus of scholarship to another area of macro-level analysis, which looks at the scope of civil society organisations in the governance of successor regimes. Here the focus is on periods of continuity and stability. This means that scholars account for the scope and freedoms that undemocratic regimes provide for civil society instead of focusing on activism and its effects per se (Jamal, 2007). This perspective also emphasises how authoritarian leaders constrain activism instead of how they are replaced by them (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). Studies of social movements have contributed to this area by concentrating on the regime-level factors that contextualise the freedoms and activism of civil society (Meyer, 2004; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

In the 20th Century, linking the structure of political regime with the success of social movements developed initially in the area of anti-nuclear policy movements, and later extended to other social movements (Parkin, 1968). For example, Tarrow (1989) adopted a longitudinal study on the cycles of protest in Italy between 1965 and 1975. This study examined the impacts associated with the openness of the political environment, both institutionally and culturally, on the rise and decline of social actions, especially protests. Scholars also adopted a comparative case study methodology on the differences between political regimes in this area. A cross-national comparison between France, West Germany, Sweden, and the United States, showed that the structure of a political regime profoundly determines the success of social movements (Kitschelt, 1986). A number of similar academic works have acknowledged this relationship across different areas of political activism, such as civil rights (McAdam 1982; Costain 1992). Moreover, scholars have also argued that the degree of a system's openness determines the strategies of civil society actors and the level of their influence (Rootes & College, 1999).

In relation to the political contestation in undemocratic regimes, political science scholars would not object to the standpoint that undemocratic regimes restrict the agency and the political scope of NGOs. Nonetheless, fewer scholars in this area have focused on undemocratic regimes. This is the cause of a bias in the literature that highlights the dark side of undemocratic regimes. From another perspective, this literature has been mostly centred on the social movement as a collective entity that includes a range of various actors, but fewer scholars have focused on the NGO as a specific actor (Grant, 1989). The necessity of this focus is the mushrooming of advocacy NGOs that play a role with particular norms, language, and behaviours (Jad, 2007; Alvarez, 1998). Despite critiques, the literature on social movements presents advantages for this thesis in two ways. First, whilst scholars have pointed out a convergence between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes; the literature of social movements implies that considering a distinction between them is still necessary, even if the subject of study is concerned with a hybrid regime (Cavatorta, 2010). Second, this literature provides a theory, political opportunity structure, which connects the type of a regime to the distribution of political opportunities within it, this can help explain the variation in NGOs' scope at the country level. The next chapter explains this theory and its utility within the context of this research project.

In general, the macro study contributed to the literature of civil society and influenced it in several ways. First, optimistic and pessimistic streams surrounding the scope and participation

of civil society contributed to the approach of scholarship at both meso- and micro-levels of study, which the following sections will discuss in detail. Second, it enhanced the understanding of distinctions between regimes in relation to civil society and also developed the terminology around a 'hybrid regime', which benefits this research project in terms characterising political systems in undemocratic countries, particularly Iran. However, it is incapable of explaining all levels of political contestations and governance in the post-transition period. This means that scholars should focus on both day-to-day political life and the interaction between the state and civil society on smaller scales. If scholars want to know the freedoms and scope of NGOs on smaller scales, the minimalist definition of democracy is unsatisfactory (Schmitter & Karl, 1991; Diamond, 2002a; Clarke, 1998). Instead, political processes and interactions have been highlighted. There needs to be a move from 'regime change' towards 'changes within a regime' that are associated with micro and meso studies.

4.2. The Micro Level

State agencies and NGOs and their interaction over the public agenda and policy is the concern of the micro-level analysis (Bashirieh, 1995; House *et al.*, 1995; Koopmans, 1999). Corresponding to the worldwide rise of advocacy NGOs as actors with domain-oriented actions, micro-level theories have been developed. The research methodology at this level is a single or comparative case study on the political actors' behaviours and agency, or individual institutions and policies (Bashirieh, 1995).

In response to the minimalist definition of democracy at the macro-level, normative theories at the micro-level, such as deliberative democracy, emphasise the opportunity of citizens and social groups to garner stable access to the public sphere to accordingly influence agenda-setting and policymaking (Arblaster, 1987; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008; Hirst & Khilnani, 1996; Oberg & Svensson, 2012; Callahan, 2002). From this perspective, there are also optimistic and pessimistic streams.

Classic scholars associated the agency of NGOs with influence on policy. The study of Tocqueville (1835) on New England and Putnam's study (1993) on local governments in Italy highlighted the democratic capacities of NGOs in the political life of society and governance. Inspired by this, optimistic scholars argued that NGOs, as policy actors, protect citizens' rights and society's collective interests in policymaking (Clarke, 1998). Subsequent studies across the

world also considered NGOs as push back against the undemocratic tendencies of rulers (Brass, 2012).

However, critical scholars questioned this optimism. For example, Calhoun (2011) argues that NGOs can be democratic, but are not necessarily so. Several studies supported this type of agnostic standpoint, particularly in regards to the constraining influence of the structural factors in the political system on the scope of NGOs. African case studies suggest that undemocratic regimes, including the hybrid ones, while tolerating the agency of NGOs, do not allow substantial changes in policies and government (Fowler, 1993). Liverani (2008), for example, discussed the micro-mechanisms of engineering political contestations by government organisations in Algeria. These mechanisms included utilising laws, co-opting NGOs and appropriating their actions, favouring loyal NGOs, restricting and suppressing the critical groups. Moreover, adopting a formal ideology in policymaking processes is a common mechanism to justify the limiting of the agency of independent and vocal NGOs (Liverani 2008). From this perspective, a formal ideology, in particular when translated into a specific discourse, is a piece of multi-functional social and cultural machinery to control NGOs (Kamali, 2003; Kubba, 2000). In this vein, the role of Islam in the literature of MENA has been remarked with orientalist scholars often regarding it as a hurdle for democracy in this region, however, in practice, other religions have demonstrated capacities of normalising authoritarian practices (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015; Huntington, 1984; Cavatorta, 2013). This means that, regardless of being Islam or not, one should take into account how state institutions and power holders engineer opportunities or constraints whilst they endorse an ideology that can be interpreted in many different ways. In the pessimist stream of the literature, theories of 'patrimonialism' and 'rentier state' have also outlined the financial and practical capacities of authoritarian leaders to develop patron-client links that endow privileges and opportunities on particular citizens and social groups at the expense of others (Erdmann & Engel, 2006; Brownlee, 2002). Study on the MENA shows that authoritarian leaders learn their different techniques of controlling NGOs from each other (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011). Undemocratic regimes not only constrain the agency of NGOs but can also propel the way NGOs behave and act (Meyer, 2004). Nevertheless, Kubba (2000) pointed out the capacities of NGOs. He argued that NGOs have the capacity of taking advantage of loopholes in the existing laws and policies to create more space for action and mobilising democratic forces.

Several scholars have noted the effect of political constraints on the behaviours of NGOs. Boulding (2010), for example, suggest that NGOs in the contentious environment of Bolivia tended to adopt and spread radical actions, e.g. strikes and protests, against the government to break the political constraints. Also, based on research in Africa and Latin America, others have stated that the characteristics of NGOs in undemocratic countries could tend towards incivility, like the political regime itself (Diamond 2002; Payne 2000; Whitehead 1997). More specifically, they pointed to monopolising of public space, using violence in activities, escaping from a commitment to laws, and increasing individualist tendencies. This implies that the character of the political regime and civil society at the macro level are not disconnected from their characteristics and agency at the micro-level.

Beyond the pessimism and optimism surrounding the agency of NGOs, the fact seems to be that the civil society arena encompasses heterogeneous NGOs, just as the institutions of political regimes have varying degrees of democratic and undemocratic tendencies in policymaking (Mudde 2003). Based on examining post-communist countries, Mudde's study (2003) suggested that the ideology, goals, and actions of NGOs vary from one area to another. More than the differentiation of the sphere of civil society, the literature emphasises the macro-influence of the political regime on the position, opportunities, and the scope of action of NGOs at micro-level (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Howel & Pearce, 2001).

The micro-level study of the political participation and agency of NGOs has proposed various insights. However, it per se neglects the systematic constraints of the political regime and several implications that exogenous factors of the system impose on actors' strategies and actions at the micro-level (Meyer, 2004; Howel & Pearce, 2001). This perspective of looking at the bigger picture is often missing from the micro-level analysis.

Thus, the scholarship should contextualise the study of the political participation of NGOs with regards to the arrangement of institutions, actors, and relations, and the cultural system of a given political regime (Cornwall, 2002; Vrábílková, 2014). The analysis of the agency of NGOs at the micro-level is related to the analysis of the character of a political regime at the macro-level. Meso-level study can help connect these two.

4.3. The Meso Level

The meso-level literature concentrates on sub-systems, and is concerned with the position and agency of NGOs within a cluster of interrelated state and non-state actors that surround them (Dassen, 2010). This means looking at civil society organisations in relation to 'modes of engagement beyond formal institutions', which include individuals, media and political parties (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015; Bayat, 2009). This approach is capable of accounting for sets of different policy actors besides NGOs.

The shift from micro and macro to the meso-level has happened alongside the liberalising reforms and political developments in the policy arena and political settings of different regimes across the world, particularly in liberal democracies. Also, the emergence of the governance paradigm has underpinned scholarship at this mid-level. This paradigm emphasises the differentiated configuration of politics and power interdependence between civil society and the state (Skelcher, 2000; Stoker, 1998; Marinetto, 2003; Smith, 1999).

The governance paradigm has both normative and descriptive aspects. Regarding normative aspects, the paradigm implies a more inclusive style of policymaking, which is associated with the discourses of citizenship, human rights, and the active participation of citizens and NGOs (Cornwall, 2002; Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). The spread of this paradigm to the government of undemocratic regimes drove the liberalising reforms that have made their policy arenas disaggregated and differentiated, as discussed in the first chapter. The descriptive aspect of the governance paradigm centres the analysis on the systematic variation in the policy arena and, therefore, the agency and participatory role of non-state actors across different policy domains and government levels (Porta & Diani, 1999; Rhodes, 1986 & 1992).

The meso-level of analysis is the confluence point of political science and public policy at the mid-level study. On the one hand, by adopting the macro-level theories of political science concerning the structure and typology of political regimes, meso-level studies explain the institutional structure of a political regime and opportunities in relation to social movements and actions. On the other hand, it utilises network-based theories, such as the advocacy coalition framework and policy network, from public policy in order to explain the configuration of sub-polities of the regime and the power interdependence of different sets of state and non-state actors. In doing so, the meso-level takes into account both the character of

the political regime and the character of policy actors in a given policy sector (Dassen, 2010; Rhodes, 2006). Thus, the meso-level is a combination of macro and micro-level studies.

By using meso-level analysis, scholars have conducted single or comparative case studies of one or more policy domains, or on the same policy sectors in different countries. This enabled the exploration of their particularities as a sub-polity of a political regime (Meyer, 2004). Hecló (1978) and Marsh (1983) carried out the first empirical meso-level studies on the earlier democratic developments in liberal countries, namely US and UK, at the end of the 20th Century. They observed the formation of several policy networks with the growing role of interest groups in policymaking.

Similar to the above, Marshall (1995) examined the networks of government departments and pressure groups in the higher education domain in Australia and developed the literature on this area. He highlighted that, during a three-decade period, the systematic growth in interrelations between government departments and non-state actors, such as universities, colleges and schools, formed a defined polity with a specific structure. He suggested that both the style of policymaking and the outcomes of policy processes were consistent with the formation of these sub-polities, and vary from one domain-context to another. He named these sub-polities 'policy networks'. In this area, Howlett (2002) further developed the literature by finding a relationship between the structure of policy networks and regime-level politics, such as national strategies and policies. His study also suggests that the construction of a policy network influences the position and scope of actors in policymaking processes.

Policy network theory is an effort to explain policy continuity and change through analysing networks of relationships between policy actors within specific sub-polities of a regime. The study of different types of policy networks has also developed in an effort to identify and explain the variation in the policy setting, especially in the arrangement of state institutions (Dassen, 2010).

This study also proceeds with the idea that, whilst derived from established democracies, the meso-level analysis, in terms of looking at varying sub-polities, is useful for understanding the political setting in undemocratic regimes, including post-liberal reform periods. Their policy arena has been fragmented into sub-polities. Hence, studies concerning undemocratic regimes have recently demonstrated a tendency towards using a meso-level analysis. For instance, in a study on China, Teets (2017) adopted the policy network theory in order to explain how

Chinese NGOs took advantage of the network of relations between several state and non-state actors within the environmental policy domain to resource social capital and create coalitions for changing policies. He suggested that, whilst government departments have the upper hand in making decisions across sectors, they act as members of environmental policy networks in which NGOs have the opportunity to adopt strategies for influencing policies too. This influence is achieved by exchanging information and resources through interrelations between environmental actors. Teets also found the authority and the strategies of the central state determinative in forming the structure and composition of the environmental policy network, arguing that, whilst central state institutions are commonly known to have similar authoritarian attributes and interests, they have varied interests and strategies when dealing with NGOs across different policy domains. This similarity in the findings of Teets' study with the initial policy network studies in democratic contexts, such as Howlett's study (2002), makes the use of meso theories in undemocratic regimes logically more justified.

As for the case of Iran, Rivetti (2013) conducted a study that focuses on the dynamism of general relationships between the state and NGOs, which presents some implications for a meso-level study on policymaking in undemocratic regimes. By comparing two courses of government with contrasting political ideologies, liberal vs conservative, Rivetti discussed the means by which the state appropriated, co-opted, and securitised the area of advocacy activism. The difference between policy domains is not the primary concern of her study, nevertheless, the findings and conclusion show that the NGOs' scope of action and freedoms varies across the 'ideological' and 'technical' domains of activism to a significant extent. Rivetti (2013, p. 203) further stated that state-NGO confrontations are not aligned in a simple 'repression and cooperation' dichotomy in this undemocratic regime; rather, it is a dynamic push-pull game within policy sectors. The implications of Rivetti's study prove that the ground is firm when taking a meso-level analysis in the context of Iran as a hybrid regime.

In general, from the perspective of this study, what can be learnt from the meso-level of literature is that political regimes, democratic or undemocratic, do not structure political activism of NGOs directly, instead exert influence on the sub-polities and networks of actors, which provide different sets of political opportunities and constraints for actors (Rootes & College, 1999; Rhodes, 2006). This means that the participation and agency of NGOs are not recognised as being dependent only on the regime structure and political opportunities at a

macro-level, but are considered to be the direct function of the institutional and structural arrangement of policy networks.

Despite the growth of meso-level studies in the literature, a significant body of scholarship is still biased towards the role of interest groups with economic incentives, at the expense of advocacy NGOs with social causes and political motives (Rhodes, 2006). It is also rich in the area of democratic regimes but ultimately poor in the area of undemocratic regimes, particularly hybrid regimes. This gap occurs despite the similarities between authoritarian and liberal regimes in their daily political life and policy interactions. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a meso-level analysis in order to open the 'black box' of policymaking in hybrid regimes for studying the political participation of advocacy NGOs.

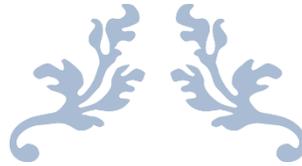
5. Conclusion

Many studies either optimistically or pessimistically considered the civil society linked to democracy. This attitude is evident both at the regime change or policy development areas. Nonetheless, in both areas, the current literature has contributed to knowledge, though with some gaps. In the area of regime change, this study takes a critical stance regarding the prominence of the transition paradigm, also it maintains that the dichotomy of 'authoritarianism versus democracy' is not enough to understand the complicated and paradoxical political dynamisms. This is especially the matter in relation to political participation of civil society organisations during regime change or after periods of political reform. Despite this shortfall, the literature of democratisation has developed the scholarship and terminology concerning the subject of regime typologies, particularly by offering knowledge in relation to hybrid regimes, which has implications for this study on Iran. Regarding the policy-development issue, this study maintains that leaving the regime type behind and focusing only on the dyadic interactions between state agencies and NGOs at the micro-level is misleading too, since it does not take into account the bigger picture.

In hybrid regimes, despite the formation of policy networks across domains and levels of government as a result of liberalising reforms, the scholarship still lacks the meso-level analysis. This study seeks to deal with this lack. It traces the confrontation of state and non-state actors in the processes of policymaking at the meso level by using theories and approaches of this level of analysis. As well as incorporating the macro and micro levels in

understanding the real world of governance, this meso-level study connects the political science and public policy literatures in the context of hybrid regimes. In this framework, the policy network theory from the public policy literature is found as being capable of explaining the configuration of actors which contain the agency of NGOs in policy processes. By using this approach, the present study also produces a new understanding of the dynamic and paradoxical politics in the hybrid regime of Iran. The adoption of hybrid regime typology from the macro-level literature in studying the case of Iran will be justified in the fourth and sixth chapters.

The next chapter will describe how this research integrate the three levels of analysis in a comprehensive theory that is capable of providing a systematic explanation in relation to the agency of advocacy NGOs across government levels and policy domains.



CHAPTER THREE

**THEORIES AND CONCEPTS
OF THE STUDY**



1. Introduction

'Freedom is what we do with what is done to us.' —Jean-Paul Sartre (1946)

In the above quotation, Sartre defines people's scope of freedom as constrained by society. Social interactions and environment dynamically impose commitments on citizens' and social groups' capacity for action and expression, and accordingly determine their freedom of choice. The previous chapter drew attention to the different levels of interaction between civil society actors and regimes, notably in relation to political opportunities for the actions of NGOs. The review of empirical research on undemocratic regimes highlighted in particular the power of authoritarian state institutions to impose constraints on NGOs. However, the opening argument of the thesis was that in a political regime, whether democratic or undemocratic, separate sub-polities differ in the balance between their democratic and authoritarian characteristics (Rootes & College, 1999; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Kenis & Schneider, 1991). This is why the scholarship on this subject demonstrates a trend towards adopting a mid-level of analysis to study NGOs within the context of policy in different policy domains and government levels.

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a theoretical framework in order to explain the mechanism of influence of the political system on the agency of advocacy NGOs. The following section poses research questions derived from the literature review. Then, theories will be adapted from the macro and meso levels of analysis that can explain how the structure of different sub-polities in a regime intermediate the effects of political system and constrain the agency of NGOs. The final section will outline the theoretical approach of this study.

2. Research Questions

The principal research question of this thesis is as follows:

How and why do different types of sub-polities across policy domains and levels of government enable or limit the agency of advocacy NGOs?

Three sub-questions prepare the theoretical ground to approach this main question.

(i): What variables form the structure of sub-polities?

This question drives the macro-level within this study. It seeks to identify the regime-level variables that, first, determine the distribution of political power, and second, form the sub-polities. In doing so, this study will utilise the 'political opportunity structure' theory.

(ii): What factors constitute the structure of sub-polities of a political regime?

Here, a meso-level analysis is adopted. Analysing the structural aspects of the sub-polities by using the 'policy network' theory will allow an assessment of the climate, policymaking style, and distribution of political opportunities within sub-polities.

(iii): How do sub-polities influence the agency of advocacy NGOs?

This question is concerned with the micro-level. It is about opportunities for the agency of NGOs within sub-polities.

The political opportunity structure is the independent variable that explains the structure of policy networks. The transformation of policy networks, as the intermediate variable of study, explains variations in the agency of NGOs, as shown in Figure 3.1.

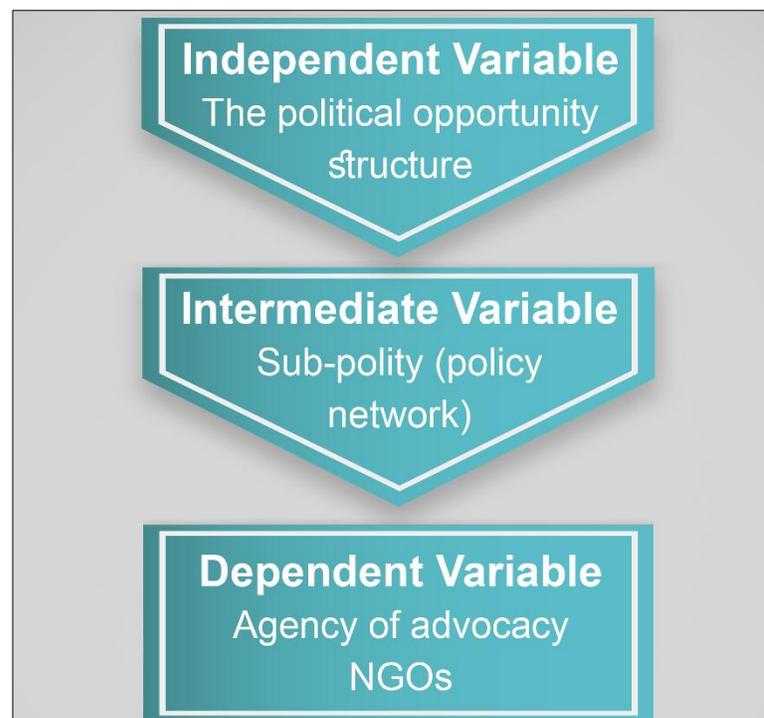


Figure 3.1. Principal variables

3. Theories of the Research

The variation in sub-polities of a regime is the central logic of the theoretical framework of this research. In order to intellectually explain this variation, the present study respects the classic distinction between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes with regards to their structural particularities, as well as their cultural characteristics (Huntington, 1984; Meyer, 2004). With this rationale, the 'political opportunity structure' theory underpins this study at the macro-level.

3.1. Political Opportunity Structure

The political opportunity structure (POS) theory functions as an intellectual tool that helps scholars contextualise the systematic distribution of political opportunities and constraints in different regimes. This theory accounts for the process on the interaction between actor and system, and emphasises the configuration of institutions and the structure of regime as an explanatory factor for the agency of political actors (Williams, 2006; Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Kriesi, 2007). Despite this structuralist approach, the theory also allows scholars to take into account actors and their scope to use available opportunities and freedoms (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). However, the influence of the actor on the system is not the focus of this study.

In essence, opportunity in the political context refers to a set of 'constraints, possibilities and threats', which become politicised through interactions between political actors and interests (Koopmans, 1999, p. 95). In order to define the scope and opportunity of actors, POS theory concentrates on a number of certain freedoms: (i) the rise or decline of political actors; (ii) the inclusion or exclusion of them in policymaking; (iii) their choices of strategy and behaviour (Meyer, 2004; Kriesi, 2007).

The Use of Political Opportunity Structure Theory: The political opportunity structure theory is adaptable to the subject of participation and agency of NGOs in policymaking processes. The implications of the POS theory for this study relate to the central concept of opportunity. Opportunities, in this sense, are systematically related to the structure and culture of the political regime. They characterise the political regime and the atmosphere of political contestation (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009; Koopmans, 1999). A specific political regime that is

known to have a set of definite characters, e.g. liberal democracy, accommodates a particular structure of opportunities and constraints. POS theory has been used to study various political regimes and their tolerance of non-state actors and social movements (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Cragun & Cragun, 2006). The primary utility of this theory is, therefore, its capacity to assess the openness of political regime structures. In the case of this study, POS theory helps to explore regime-level factors that determine the arrangement of political opportunities, and accordingly characterise different sub-polities.

Several scholars such as Koopmans (1999) and Vráblíková (2014) have distinguished between two major types of political opportunity structures, namely 'open' and 'closed', on a linear continuum. However, despite this descriptive capacity, other scholars criticise the extensive use of POS theory and its inclusion of a wide range of factors, even non-structural components of the regime, in the analysis of political opportunity (Koopmans, 1999; Gamson & Meyer, 1996). The present study, however, only uses the essential structural factors of POS theory that cause transformation in the POS across time and disaggregate the policy arena vertically and horizontally into sub-fields.

3.2. The Contributing Factors

Scholars have identified a range of factors that contribute to the openness of political opportunity structures. Kitschelt (2009) distinguishes between static (long-term) and dynamic (short-term) factors. Static refers to inert and fixed structural aspects of the political regime, which tolerate only subtle and small changes, whilst dynamic refers to the flexible factors that shift in their attributes as the result of political contestations (Rucht, 1990).

In relation to longer-term factors, the structural aspect of a political regime is the effect of two factors: the institutional structure and the cultural structure (Kriesi, 2007). The first refers to the separation of powers in the apparatus of the state, as well as the sectoral and hierarchical centralisation and decentralisation of power. The cultural structure is characterised by the ruling ideology and discourse (Kriesi, 2007; Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Duyvendak & Giugni, 1995). With regards to dynamic factors, a number of scholars have also remarked some smaller shifts, such as developments in day-to-day politics, political coalitions, social and political indicators, the national mood, current policies, and international issues (Kriesi, 2007; Meyer, 2004; Rootes & College, 1999).

Understanding both short-term and long-term factors is essential when studying the tolerance of a political regime. In doing so, this thesis will concentrate on three factors: (i) the state's political ideology; (ii) the government level; and (iii) the policy domain. Whilst the first is dynamic and shifts as a result of predictable and regular changes in the government; the other two are static and are seen not to change (Kriesi; 2007).

State's Political Ideology

Contrary to a structural-functionalist approach, political opportunity structure theory emphasises the role of cultural and ideological factors in the distribution of opportunities (Williams, 2006). Social movement theories suggest that the patterns of collective action of society are subject to the prevailing culture (Porta & Diani, 1999). This aspect highlights the political ideology, discourse and cultural practices that the state impose on groups like advocacy NGOs (Cragun & Cragun, 2006). Here, the role of the ruling political elite is also vital in determining the strategy and attitude of the state institutions versus civil society (Meyer, 2004).

The state's political ideology sets the 'political climate' and 'agenda universe' in a country. Agenda universe sets fundamental principles for establishing the issues and claims that can be raised and also for those that cannot be (Birkland, 2007, p. 64). Political climate endows privileges on conformist actors, whilst depriving challengers (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). POS theory 'lends a fixity and strict quality' to the constituting components of the ruling political ideology as they have the power of legitimising or delegitimising the actions and rhetoric of actors instead of being changed by them (Kriesi *et al.*, 1995; Williams, 2006, p. 95). Nonetheless, there is always some flexibility and tolerance in political ideology when interpreting the cultural norms for formulating claims and action (Gamson & Meyer, 1996).

For the characteristics of a state's ideology, scholars distinguish between liberal (democratic) and authoritarian (conservative) ideologies (Kitschelt, 1985). In theory, a ruling elite with liberal political ideology is more likely to tolerate the challenges of society's collective action, whilst a state with authoritarian ideology is more likely to use suppressive and aggressive behaviour against societal challenges (Porta & Diani, 1999).

The type of political ideology is expected to be related to the strategies of state versus civil society. Koopman & Kriesi (1995) distinguish between two types of state strategy: integrative and exclusive. The integrative strategy includes cooperative, assimilative, and facilitative

patterns of behaviour, which open up more political opportunities for a wide range of society's collective actions and demands. In contrast, exclusive strategy refers to suppressive, confrontational, and non-inclusive patterns of behaviour, which substantially restrict the choices that non-state actors can adopt.

Concerning the state's confrontation with civil society, systems theory highlights the strength of the state apparatus by using the input-output process. In this sense, the strength of the state refers to the access points that a state apparatus provides for the public to communicate with decision-makers (Rootes & College, 1999). When a state is strong and concentrates power, access points and input mechanisms are limited or closed to non-state actors; a weak state, conversely, has more access points and is open to input (Kitschelt, 1986).

The official ideology, discourse, and strategy of a state shift with time. Electoral processes, political contestation, and the circulation of power between political elites change the political composition of the administration and parliament, and consequently, the prevailing ideology (Kingdon, 1984). Change in the state's political ideology and strategy, in practice, opens or closes the window of opportunity for different actors and interests within (Kingdon, 1984). Depending on periodical changes in the state's ideology and strategy, the policy arena becomes appropriate or inappropriate for political actors to raise a particular set of issues. When the window of opportunity opens, the state institutions and ruling elites can verify consistent issues on the agenda and accordingly tolerate solutions for them. When the window is closed, this opportunity is gone (Kingdon, 1984).

The table below indicates the correlation between the structure of political opportunity and the types of strategy and ideology of the state.

Table 3.1. The correlation between a state's ideology and strategy with POS

State's political ideology	Strategy of state	Political opportunity structure
Authoritarian	Exclusive	Closed structure
Liberal	Integrative	Open structure

By comparing the ruling period of different political elites in administration and parliament, this study aims to discover how the structure of political opportunity changes over time (Kriesi,

2007). It also traces how the political ideology and strategy of state determine the structure of sub-polities.

Level of Government

State institutions are the “core of the structure” that determine the extent of non-state actors’ access to the political system (Kriesi, 2007, p. 70; Kitschelt, 1986). The structure and configuration of institutions ascertain the balance of power between state and civil society across three aspects: functional, regional, and hierarchical (Kriesi, 2007).

At a basic level, the separation between a state’s legislative, executive and judicial functions leads to power fragmentation and accordingly prevents the concentration of power in one centre. The more these three branches of a state are separated and independent in power, the more the public will be able to access and influence the process of decision-making (Kriesi, 2007). Whilst the characteristics of the legislative and executive branches determine the inclusion of non-state actors in laws and policies; the judicial branch sets preventive and punitive means for the survival of the political regime. The type of judicial means indicates the tolerance of ruling elites against the challenges of civil society in one regard (Kitschelt, 1986).

Several facets of the legislative and executive branches directly influence political opportunities and constraints (Kriesi, 2007). The functions and attributes of the parliamentary systems are determined by the electoral system and its procedures, the party system, and factions in parliament. In the executive branch, internal coordination, resource distribution, and the hierarchical arrangement within the administration system are essential (Kriesi, 2007). Ingraham (1987) distinguishes between legislative and executive apparatuses concerning opportunities for civil society. According to him, the procedure of decision-making in legislation is based on compromise, as the political weight and interests influence the scope of action. Conversely, decisions are more technical and procedural in a bureaucratic setting due to the importance of expertise and knowledge, so they are expected to be less flexible versus political influences and interests of NGOs (Ingraham, 1987). However, when it comes to practice, decision-making can depart from this expectation.

In addition to the functional separation, the decentralisation of administration to local government levels and hierarchical levels condition the opportunities and influence the form of sub-polities (Meyer, 2004; Porta & Diani, 1999). Policy innovation and change occur at all levels of government, and looking only at the national level is misleading (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier;

1994). Different systems of local government, which vary widely from provincial to federal, are expected to come with a different number of, and authority for, administrative offices in public policy (Heywood, 1997, p. 122).

The type of decentralisation in the state apparatus and across regional divisions correlates with the status of access points for the public (Guigni, 1998; Kitschelt, 1985). The decentralisation of state institutions has been linked with broadening the democratic space for public participation in policymaking (Pateman, 1970; Smith, 1985). It follows that decentralisation eliminates the monopoly of national politicians and bureaucrats over decision-making, while keeping them accessible, responsive, and accountable (Smoke, 2001, pp. 38–39). Nonetheless, decentralisation and the creation of local governments can complicate state-society relationships (Vráblíková, 2014). Also, it may enable the state to go against NGOs and social groups by granting additional chances to control and resist collective action across lower levels and regions (Bergh, 2012). This means that decentralisation may unexpectedly present more opportunities for the state rather than NGOs if required prerequisites such as free press and stable civil society are not established (Porta & Diani, 1999; Bergh & Jari, 2010; Kulipossa, 2004). In the decentralised setting of the policy arena, the power battle between state and non-state actors is no longer a straightforward win-lose situation (Vráblíková, 2014). Several factors influence this power battle, including: (i) the degree of devolution of authorities, (ii) proximity of state agencies to local grassroots, and (iii) the extent and mechanisms of accountability (Crook & Manor, 1998).

This study assumes that the decentralisation of power leads to the formation of sub-polities. It also accounts for decentralisation and functional separation of power as influential on the structure and character of sub-polities by providing more access points and institutional opportunities for NGOs. The table below provides an overview of the theoretical correlation between the decentralisation of power and political opportunity structure.

Table 3.2. The correlation between decentralisation of power and POS

Power configuration	Access points	POS
Centralised, accumulated, and concentrated state	Fewer access points and a limited number of decision-maker points	Closed structure
Decentralised, fragmented, and non-concentrated state	More access points and multiple decision-maker points	Open structure

In studying the configuration of power in state institutions, there are advantages to examining the political regime of a single country as its social and political factors particularise the behaviours and functions of certain state institutions (Porta & Diani, 1999).

Policy Domain

Due to the fragmentation of policy arena and political activism, as discussed earlier, the importance of policy domains has been highlighted in more recent work concerning political opportunity (Peterson, 1995; Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Rucht 1990)

Whilst the political ideology of a state functions as the 'blueprint for action' of the whole state apparatus, the literature review has highlighted that state agencies and organisations, across policy domains and levels, interpret the official blueprint differently and adopt different types of discourse and behaviour (Jackson & Jackson, 1993, p. 125). This means that central policies based on a specific ideology and language, when coming to different sectors, are read, understood, interpreted, and implemented differently by officials, bureaucrats, governors, and non-state actors (Savoski, 2018). Contention between state and non-state actors, and their interpretations of policies and rules, vary enormously from one domain to another (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007).

From another perspective, policy domains with different issues and profiles, have different importance and salience for state and civil society organisations. On the one hand, some policy domains have more of a political and ideological profile, e.g., human rights and national security, owing to the fact they engage with the fundamental elements of the ruling political ideology. On the other hand, some domains have more of a technical and executive profile, e.g., public health and sports, which engage with the technical efficiency and executive functions of the state in regards to the needs of society (Bashirieh, 1995; Kriesi, 1991). As for the political establishment, technical domains are low profile regarding the existence and maintenance of the political system and its ideology (Kriesi, 2007). In contrast, political and ideological policy domains have critical importance.

Theoretically, political institutions are anticipated to provide fewer access points and present a lower level of tolerance for NGOs and social groups in political domains, whilst, in contrast, they have a higher tolerance and are more receptive in the technical domain (Duyvendak & Giugni, 1995, pp. 96-8). The 'belief system' theory can be applied in an effort to explain the way in which a hierarchy of beliefs drives actors' choices of strategy and behaviour against one

another in general and within different policy domains (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1994 & 1999). This theory follows that at a centre of the belief system are ideological ‘core beliefs’—concerned with normative principles such as the those related to humanity—, which are strict and static when it comes to bearing change or pressure, and hence, less tolerant. On technical and executive levels, however, ‘policy core’ and ‘secondary’ beliefs are engaged, and policy actors demonstrate more flexibility in relation to them as actors seek greater technical and pragmatic efficiency (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). In the framework of ‘belief system’, the policy preferences about development paradigms are policy-core beliefs, whilst policy implementations and budgeting, for example, are secondary. Thus, different levels of belief systems drive different behaviours of actors.

Concerning the state’s strategy versus society across policy domains, the theory of ‘faces of the state’ has implications (Bashirieh, 1995, pp. 3-15). This theory suggests that state institutions express a harsh face in political and ideological domains while displaying a positive face to social groups in technical areas. This difference provides the rationale for why Rhodes & Marsh (1992) refer to political policy domains as ‘heroic’, which indicates their confrontational and contentious nature. Strategies and behaviours of state institutions across political and technical policy domains change over time, corresponding to government turnover and a shift in political coalitions (Rootes & College, 1999; Kriesi, 2007). Furthermore, across democratic and authoritarian political regimes, the intensity of the political and technical profile of policy domains differ. Whilst democracies may apply less tolerant behaviours versus societal pressures within political areas; the state is more likely in authoritarian regimes to use repressive and confrontational strategies within political areas, as various studies demonstrate (Heydemann, 2007; Rivetti, 2013).

Therefore, political domains are expected to come with a closed structure of political opportunity, whilst technical domains are more likely to provide a broader range of opportunities for NGOs. The table below shows this correlation.

Table 3.3: The correlation between the profile of a policy domain and POS

Policy sector	Significance for the state	POS
Political and ideological	High profile and confrontational	Closed structure
Technical and executive	Low profile and flexible	Open structure

Within this research study, respecting this distinction between policy domains helps to identify their influence on the distribution of political opportunities for NGOs across sub-polities. Despite the importance of policy domains, the difference between political and technical areas is more a matter of theoretical study and, therefore, is not utterly distinctive in the actual arena of policymaking. As the distinction between the technical and political domains increases and becomes more vivid, the difference between the structures of polities within them is also expected to increase. In this area, there is a debate between two streams of scholars. A number of scholars, such as Ingraham (1987) and Linder & Peters (1985), maintain that the process of policymaking is technical, as it follows a means-end analysis. Conversely, other scholars, such as Bobrow & Dryzek (1987) and Schneider & Ingram (1997), argue that policymaking is a political process that is the result of contestation between actors and interests. In either case, the fragmentation of policy arena into various domains causes the designation of the policymaking process.

3.3. Conclusion

Political opportunity structure theory demonstrates itself as being capable of ascertaining the status of political opportunity at the regime level, as well as explaining the institutional and structural factors that influence the formation of sub-polities. The degree of power concentration in the state apparatus and the level of government explain the number and configuration of the access points for the public as a measure for the reception of state versus NGOs in the policymaking process (Kriesi, 2007; Vráblíková, 2014). The political ideology and strategy of the state are thought to explain the normative direction of public policy, and also the state's tolerance versus the causes and actions of NGOs (Porta & Diani, 1999; Williams, 2006; Kriesi, 2007).

Also, the profile of a policy domain is the factor that explains how political ideology and strategy of the state contain different characteristics across different domains. This means that, whilst the state ideology across levels of government determine the tolerance of a government versus the civil society, policy domains divides their interaction into sub-polities. The figure below demonstrates these three independent factors and the potential values they could obtain.

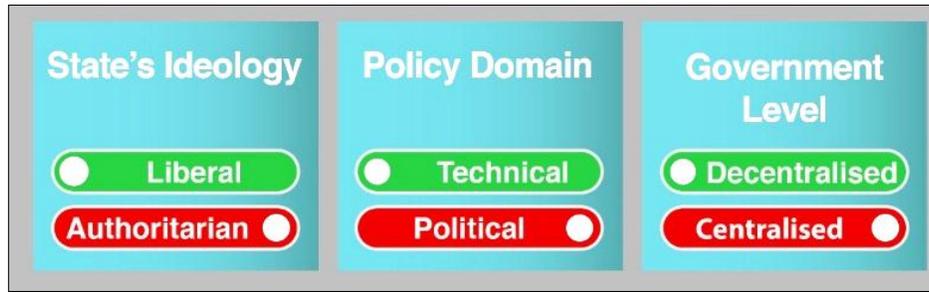


Figure 3.2. The three contributing factors of the POS

The interaction of the three factors above could lead to the formation of different sub-polities of a regime, as the table below demonstrates. Each sub-polity is expected to have a particular structure and arrangement of political opportunities that contain the agency of actors. To understand these particularities, this study utilises the policy network theory.

Table 3.4. The potential scenarios of the interaction between the POS factors

Sub-polity	Policy domain	State's political ideology	Government level
1	Political	Liberal-integrative	Local
2	Political	Liberal-exclusive	Central
3	Political	Authoritarian-exclusive	Local
4	Political	Authoritarian-exclusive	Central
5	Technical	Liberal-integrative	Local
6	Technical	Liberal-integrative	Local
7	Technical	Authoritarian-exclusive	Central
8	Technical	Authoritarian-exclusive	Central

4. Policy Network

Studying the public policy setting through the lens of policy network theory (PN) has its origins in exchange theories that used interchangeable metaphors like 'sub-government', 'policy subsystem' and 'webs' to refer to sets of links between governmental and non-governmental actors in different domains (Dowding, 1995; Miller & Demir, 2007; Rhodes, 2006). PN theory is the confluence of American pluralist and British corporatist approaches concerning power distribution between government and interest groups (Gallagher *et al.*, 1995; Rhodes, 2006). Despite several positive contributions about the role of non-state actors in governance, theories from these two streams are deficient in terms of covering and explaining all aspects of the policymaking process. Corporatism overestimates the hierarchical aspect of power distribution (Siaroff, 1999; Gallagher *et al.*, 1995). It is impotent in explaining recent shifts in relations between the state and civil society from hierarchical to horizontal and the complicated contestation between actors in the fragmented policy arena (Keman & Whiteley, 1987; Peterson, 2003). The pluralist approach is an unrealistic approach to explain the power of privileged actors and hierarchical aspects of the array of actors in policy arena (Rhodes, 2006; Dahl, 1956; Gallagher *et al.*, 1995). These shortcomings have led to the rise of policy network theory with a synthetic approach. PN theory, at the core of the governance paradigm (Hanf & Scharpf, 1978; Howlett, 2002; Peterson, 1995).

PN theory recommends that the policy arena is disaggregated into policy fields with particular settings, which include a network of state and non-state actors (Miller & Demir, 2007; Peterson, 2003, p. 3; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). PN theory proposes several premises concerning power relations and policy processes that are also taken into account in this study. They include (i) single policy domains feature their specific polity, (ii) actors within the polity are interdependent; (iii) actors exchange relationships in order to exchange resources with one another; (iv) the arrangement of actors evolve around shared beliefs, and (v) a polity has a specific type of politics (Klijn, 1997; Rhodes, 2006, 2007).

In PN literature, the government is no longer considered 'capable of deciding public policies', nor is the ultimate power, instead policy domains, agendas and policies are crafted, refined, and established from the bargaining within a network of state and non-state actors across policy domains and geographic regions (Dowding, 1995; Brozel, 1998; Siegel, 2009; Peterson, 2003). Within policy networks, power battle is in practice between similar-interest actors as they seek

to maximise their influence on public policy (Miller & Demir, 2007). The figure below illustrates a schematic map of a policy network.

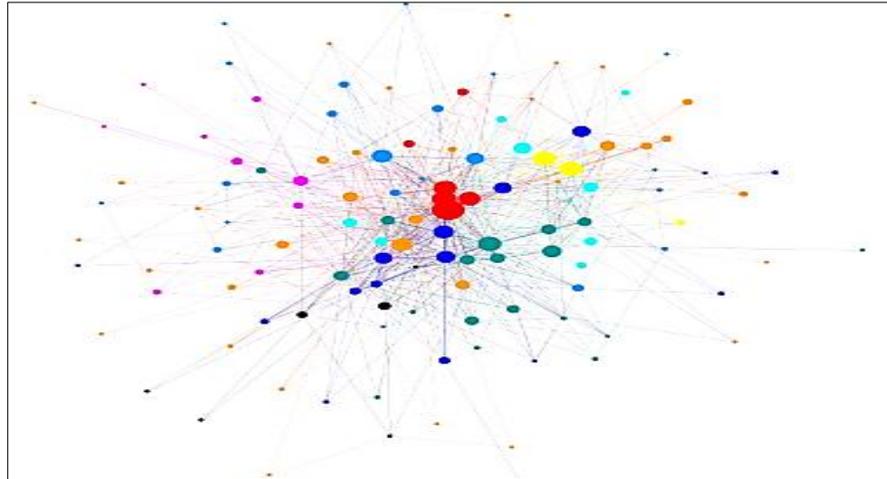


Figure 3.3. The schematic map of a policy network- diagram: The Centre for Environmental Policy and Behaviour

In a policy network, the policy is a reflection of the interest and contribution of numerous actors that are involved in policy processes with different degrees (Konig & Brauninger, 1998; Klijn, 1996). However, this does not mean that the power balance is evenly distributed. Instead, PN theory continues with the hegemony and responsibility of the state in terms of managing policy processes (Dassen, 2010; Peterson, 2003; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). This is especially the case when PN theory is criticised from a realistic point of view.

The Use of Policy Network Theory: The primary utility of policy network theory in the literature has been concerned with explaining the outcomes of the policy process. Also, it is more focused on the role of interest groups such as trade unions and business groups in creating economic policies (Dowding, 1995; Rhodes, 2006). This means that PN theory has been considered as an explanatory variable. Dowding (1995) contests this use of PN theory in several regards with some reasons. First, it does not have an explanatory function and cannot add to the knowledge concerning policy processes and their outcomes. Second, it does not have an explanation for the external variables causing transformation and change in the network's

structure. Third, despite being called a meso-level theory, it has mostly focused on individual actors and interactions within the network, instead of the network as an entity.

In this study, however, the use of this theory is different. First, it is not used to predict or explain policy outcomes. Instead, it is a descriptive tool to analyse the configuration of actors, their relationships, and the ruling institutions. Second, it is a dependent variable in this study, as the political opportunity structure theory is utilised to explain the development and transformation of policy network across various domains and levels of government. Plus, it provides implications for the scope of individual actors that make public policies. Third, as the data will show, PN theory facilitates comparisons between different sets of actors across policy domains in this study, as well as across government levels. Thus, whilst this study extends the use of PN theory from interest groups to NGOs, it also provides implications concerning style and climate of policymaking within different sub-polities.

4.1. The Three Structural Aspects

Within a policy network, the pattern of interrelations and interdependence between the members of a cluster of policy actors involves a set of rules, practices, and behaviours. These rules and relationships become institutionalised, and together with the composition of actors, characterise the structure of it (Rhodes, 1981, 2006). This structure is dynamic, meaning policy networks will change over time as a result of internal and external factors (Marshall, 1995). The change in the structure can be incremental and gradual, or it can be abrupt, which in turn causes disequilibrium (Howlett, 2002; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). With regards to the agency of actors within policy network, this theory has a structuralist approach embedded in it, which means it considers actors' actions and voices confined within the social context of a policy network (Giddens, 1984, pp. 2-12; Klijn, 1997). Three aspects constitute the structure of policy networks, namely compositional, institutional, and relational (Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Dassen, 2010).

Compositional Aspect

Varying from one policy domain to another, the composition of the policy network is characterised based on the number of actors, their profile, affiliation, and resources (Waarden, 1992, p. 33). As per the policy network theory, the composition of actors is influenced by the

issue of a policy domain. If the policy domain involves the interest and captures the attention of a significant portion of society, a higher number of actors are expected to engage with that domain, thus joining the policy network (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). The significance of policy domains in a political regime is relative.

As the number of policy actors involved increases within a network, the likelihood of the formation of more extensive sub-policy that is also plural increases. On the other hand, a policy domain with a smaller number of interested actors forms a smaller network with minor diversity regarding interests and affiliations (Hill, 2009). Therefore, the inclusion or exclusion of any actor and interest within a policy network leads to a change in the composition of that policy network, as well as opportunities and constraints. Kriesi (2007) links the involvement of non-state actors with the accessibility and reception of the state, as the gatekeeper of the network.

Policy actors also engage with policy networks while maintaining their affiliations and social position. Policy participants, including individuals or organisations, can be positioned as state authorities or civil society, as well as affiliated with political and ideological camps (Dassen, 2010). From another perspective, the composition of a policy network influences the stance of actors in terms of de facto and potential capacities, as well as their resources and relations (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000). An actor's affiliation has implications for the actor's behavioural attributes too (Dassen, 2010). This study uses a positional analysis by assigning actors to non-governmental and governmental in an effort to explore their agency and behaviours.

Regarding resources, the participants of a policy network differ in their knowledge, profession, skills, information, money, and social credibility. The composition of different actors with their resources determines the constitutive aspect of a policy network structure, which is the ordering of materialistic and non-materialistic capacities and limitations (Waarden, 1992; Turner, 1986). In addition to an actors' own resources, access to other actors within a policy network provides participants with the chance for acquiring further resources, such as social capital (Coleman, 1988). Social capital, in this perspective, refers to the process of exchanging and mobilising popular forces and physical material through interrelationships that policy actors have with other participants. Gaining social capital is possible as long as relationships exist (Coleman, 1988; Wellman, 1983; Dassen, 2010; Turner, 1986).

The profile and significance of a policy network can affect the distribution of resources between state and non-state actors within it. It also influences the extent of consultative arrangements in policymaking processes (Marshal, 1995). From the perspective of policy domains, the state's need for resource exchange is expected to be more in the technical policy areas, compared to political and ideological areas, and thus comes with a greater chance of involvement for non-state actors, like NGOs, in consultations for decision-making. Political areas are more competitive as ordinary citizens and advocacy groups seek to engage as these issues have an impact on social life (Smith, 1992). However, the state's general strategy and reception also influence the involvement of NGOs.

Institutional Aspect

Policy network, from one aspect, is a social context where a particular type of norms is in practice, and from another, is a sub-polity that functions in the framework of prevailing institutions. Institutions of the policy network, in the context of this study, refer to official or unofficial rules and laws, as well as established practices, which are determined by the prevailing discourse and norms on which actors have an agreement. According to Foucault's definition (1976), discourse refers to the prominent system of views and meanings that informs social practices and regulate the relationships of actors. Institutions in a network, whether textual laws or rhetoric, stabilise the patterns of behaviour that recur through interrelations and structure the opportunities that arise from them (Knight, 1992; Hodgson, 2006; Huntington, 1965; Rhodes, 2006). The agency of non-state actors can either produce new norms and procedures or reproduce current ones (Williams, 2006). Policy network, therefore, produces a sectoral translation and interpretation of the broader cultural and legal context (Knoepfel, 2013). In this area, the term 'sub-culture' can explain the cultural position of policy network in a political system. Thus cultural norms and behaviours within a policy network are the syntheses of 'subordination' and 'deviation' of the political system (Blackman, 2014, pp. 496-8).

Institutions, legal or discursive, generate the 'rules of the game' within a policy network and can be categorised into three distinct types in terms of functionality: (i) rules of possession, which determine the distribution of resources between actors, (ii) rules of behaviour, which define the way in which actors should behave, and (iii) rules of decision, which train the style of decision-making (Giddens, 1984; Knoepfel, 2013). Among all actors within a policy network, state actors possess an authorised position in relation to interpreting and imposing interests on these three

rules, yet non-state actors are in a position to contest that, by advocating their interpretations of laws (Marsh, 1993; Porta & Diani, 1999). New social movement theories recognise the flexibility for actors' roles in framing and shifting cultural practices and rules (Tarrow, 1989). This refers to the actors' interests and capacities in utilising norms and rules in such a way that affords meaning and legitimacy to their actions (Williams, 2006; Kriesi, 2007; Kubal, 1998).

Studying institutions and their sources in a policy network—especially the prevailing discourse as their source—has two implications for this study. First, institutions determine which issues can be shortlisted or raised in a policy network, and which ones cannot. Second, they decide which interests and actors have advantages over others; as well as determining the array of actors (Cobb & Elder, 1972; Arts, 2003). Here, it should be noted that policies, while being the outcome of policy network, simultaneously as institutions influence their structure in a dialectical way (Marsh and Smith, 2000). In the present study, identifying the institutional aspect of policy networks' is a measure for distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate actions, as well as interests (Rootes & College, 1999).

Relational Aspect

From the perspective of policy networks, relations and interactions between policy actors function as a mechanism for bargaining, and also, as a venue for the exchange of resources between actors and formation of policies (Rhodes, 1992; Hajer, 2003). The arrangement of relations in a policy network varies from one policy domain to another in terms of volume, frequency, and characteristics (Rhodes, 1981).

Regarding volume, different policy actors engage in various interactions with other actors within the same policy network. The bulk of relationships is a measure for understanding the reciprocal influence and scope of actors participating in the policy network. The frequency of relations contributes to the strength and stability of the policy network. Regarding character, participants' interactions with one another vary too (Rhodes, 1981).

In the literature of policy network theory, the usual method of studying and discussing the relationships within policy networks is the dyadic way between state and non-state positions, as well as between civil society positions, e.g. NGOs, political parties, and media (Knoke & Yang, 2008). This study will adopt the same method. The dyadic relationships between actors, however, may be mediated, bridged, or enriched by the intervention of other actors through alliance building and resource sharing strategies (Dassen, 2010).

The status and position of actors in the network of relations have implications for their agency (Knoke & Yang, 2008). Actors with a central position in policy network that are subject to more frequent and larger volume of interactions have more capacities and opportunities available, whereas fewer relationships mean less opportunity for gaining resources and opportunities. From another perspective, relationships increase the commitment of actors as they can intensify and place more boundaries on their scope of action and freedoms (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000). State actors, in practice, have the privilege of managing the rules of relationships in a policy network (Smith, 1992).

The arrangement and character of relationships profoundly define the structure of a policy network. A policy network with loose, uneven, and infrequent relationships between participants is expected to function less systematically and less coherently than a policy network with regular, even, and frequent relationships (Sorensten & Torfing, 2005; Knoke & Yang, 2008).

Concerning the importance of relationships in policymaking, the literature suggests that the more cooperative and frequent interrelations between state and non-state actors within policy networks, the more the ground becomes fertile for bargaining and facilitating the exchange of ideas and interests between the two parties (Tandon, 1987). Also, the arrangement of relationships determines the degree of continuity and the stability of a network in terms of resistance against oppositional pressures (Dassen, 2010).

The degree of confidence of actors' interrelations is part of the institutionalisation within a policy network so that a specific set of rules and practices become standardised and normalised through relationships (Rhodes, 2007; Marshall, 1995). Through the process of institutionalisation, actors become homogenised regarding behaviours, resources are exchanged routinely, and power becomes depersonalised (Oslen, 2009). This is where the relational aspect of the policy network connects with the institutional aspect.

Figure 3.4 demonstrates the three aspects of the structure of the policy network and their constitutive factors.

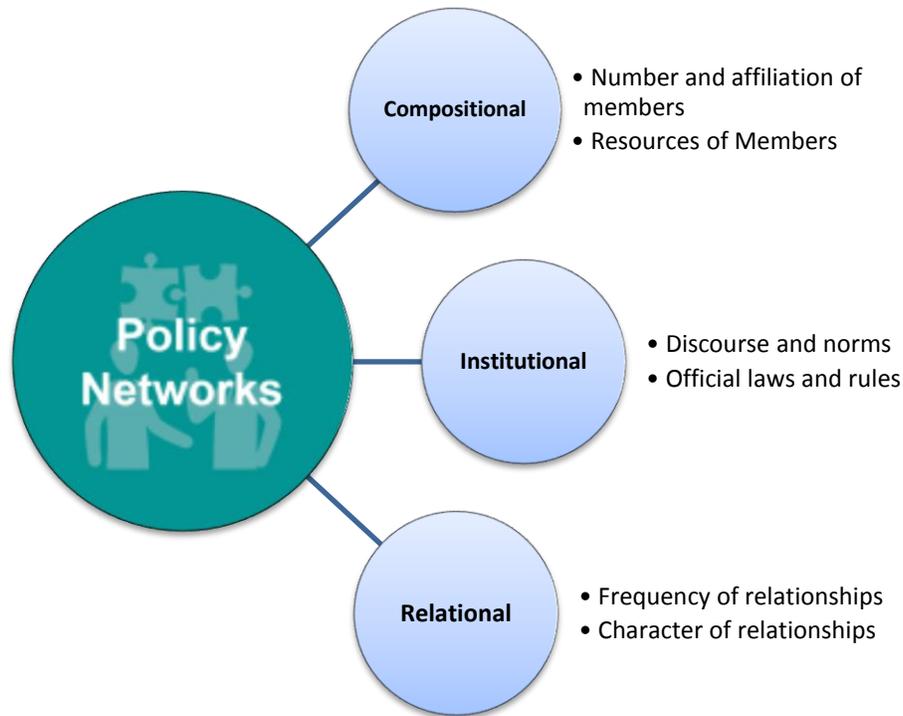


Figure 3.4. The three aspects of a policy network's structure

Policy actors from inside and outside the policy network seek to change or stabilise the three factors above. However, the state has the authority to manage it. Dassen (2010) outlined two distinct management strategies that the state may use to steer the policy network. These strategies include game management and institutional design. In game management, state institutions intervene in the web of relations between actors. Institutional design refers to the management of laws and rules of the game (Dassen, 2010). Klijn (1996) also pointed to several other strategies, including the distribution and redistribution of resources, setting formal agendas and priorities, and including actors inside the network.

The present study takes into account the transformation of the policy network from one structure to another. The following section discusses different structures of policy network.

4.2. The Typology of Policy Network Structure

This study identifies the typology of policy networks from the literature to explain the ecologies and policymaking styles across domains, and the opportunities and constraints of actors, especially NGOs (Kriesi, 2007). In the current literature, different types of policy networks have been distinguished and discussed by assigning particular term. Rhodes & Marsh (1992) presented the leading classification that distinguishes between two opposing types, namely 'issue network' versus 'policy community'. This typology is based on the three structural aspects of policy networks. Waarden, instead, presented a different policy network typology based on 'the concentration of power' and the 'style of policymaking' (1992, pp. 42–49). In his categories, there is a noticeable distinction between the 'open, flexible and pluralistic' versus 'closed, static and centralised' styles. The structural types of policy network correlate with their ecology and policymaking style also. The ecology of policymaking is a consistent set of discourses, rules, and agendas, which as the rules of the game, define the position and agency of state- and non-state actors (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000; Wright, 1988; Klijn, 1996; Jordan & Schubert, 1992).

Issue Network

This type of policy network encompasses a more significant number of actors and a range of affected interests in an open, fluctuating and flexible configuration (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). In issue networks, the degree of interdependence between actors is loose rather than intense. This type of policy network has a low frequency of relationships between members, and access to policy networks is open for external actors and interests. Owing to the diversity in composition, and the low degree of institutionalisation and homogeneity, there is not a monopoly of rules of conduct and ideology in practice, as participants agree on the core beliefs within the network. Regarding ecology, issue networks are expected to have a plural environment, which allows actors to deviate from the formal discourse and rules (Helco, 1978; Hill, 2009).

Regarding the distribution of resources, the issue network has an uneven and unbalanced configuration, with most of the actors having different capacities and resources. Furthermore, social capital is distributed between a large number of actors in such a way that makes the articulation of the network uneven and differentiated (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). The social realm of an issue network provides the potential for the flow of resources between non-state actors.

Concerning the balance of power, state agencies are the central actor in the network of relations with a mediator or facilitator position among the involved actors. This position of the state has substantial advantages because of the power of gaining access to more information and more relations than other actors (Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). On the other hand, these relations constrain the state's actions and interests. This situation is expected to increase other actors' pressures on the state and accordingly necessitates a commitment of the state regarding behaviour and decision-making (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000). Therefore, decision-making is expected to be participative (Waarden, 1992). However, because of the fluctuated form of the network the influence of actors on policies, and their access to decision-making points, are uneven and unsystematic, and depend on the position of actors. Some non-state actors have a central position in the network, therefore, they have a higher number of opportunities to contact and influence state agencies, whereas non-state actors with a peripheral position, have less access and influence (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000).

Regarding the style of policymaking, the issue network has a competitive, integrative, and dynamic nature. In this fashion, actors have the opportunity to interact and lobby with a variety of other actors, such as mass media and political parties, in order to mobilise social capital, either for or against state policies. However, participants' success in utilising their agency depends on their lobbying skills, mobilisation strategies, resources, and capitalising capacities. As issue network does not impose a very concrete set of ideologies and rules, it is expected to come with a freer agency for actors in terms of tolerating different methods of action and a diverse range of demands (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992; Meyer, 2004; Rootes & College, 1999). The table below demonstrates this.

Table 3.5. The characteristics of an issue network

Structure	Policymaking style	Agency of actors
Open, large and flexible	Integrative and competitive	Free range of claims and actions

Policy Community

This type of policy network has a small number of actors that are tightly integrated and who consciously exclude critical actors (Hill, 2009; Peterson, 2003). Actors are expected to be

similar-minded as regards beliefs and policy preferences, and consistent concerning their interests. Regarding institutions, a policy community has a systematic set of rules and norms in practice that is persistent over time (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). A policy community is expected to be more conservative, homogenised and less acceptant of change (Marshall, 1995; Rhodes & Marsh, 1992).

In the policy community, the state agency has a central position, managing a circle of actors that is said to be more efficient due to its tight structure (Peterson, 2003). Whilst the articulation of relationships is even; it is expected that the state offices are bounded in the fixed web of relations (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000). In this situation, state actors go hand-in-hand with allies in a small community of non-state actors who resist outsiders, and exclude competing interests (Wright, 1988). In terms of ecology, this type of network provides an integrative decision-making style only for members.

In the policy community, non-state actors can garner convenient and regular access to the state in the community due to being a part of an institutionalised network of relations, while outsiders can only receive information about policy processes and their outcomes (Smith, 1992). Furthermore, the strict system of rules and norms driving the policy network should not tolerate a wide range of outstanding issues and claims presented by members. The table below demonstrates the characteristics of the policy community.

Table 3.6. The policymaking style in a policy community

Structure	Policymaking style	Agency of actors
Closed, small, and strict	Exclusive and consistent	Tight range of actions and causes

The policy community may come with a state-centric type of decision-making, which Waarden (1992) terms 'statism'. This refers to the dominance of the state in delivering members. This condition may be due to the political attributes—exclusive—of the ruling elites, or their technical justifications—resorting to the efficiency issue (Waarden, 1992).

Overall, the two types of policy network differ in their structural aspects, which particularise them as sub-polities that possess different situations in terms of policymaking style and agency

of actors. The atmosphere in a policy community and issue network differ. In the case of the issue network, as Smith (1992) explains, contestations between actors have a more political character due to competing interests. In the policy community, on the other hand, members depoliticise the policy arena by excluding uncoordinated actors and interests. The table below encapsulates the differences discussed above.

Table 3.7: Differences between the three aspects of the issue network and policy community

Aspects of policy network	Contributing factors	Issue network	Policy community
Compositional	Number and profile of actors	Large and diverse	Small and consistent
	Distribution of resources	Uneven and unequal	Even and harmonic
Institutional	Laws and rules	Lowly institutionalised	Highly institutionalised
	Discourse	Flexible and resilient	Stable and resistant
Relational	Frequency of relations	Erratic and loose	Frequent and intense
	Character of relations	Competitive and elastic	Cooperative and systematic

The structure and characteristics of policy networks depend on their members. Here, Dowding (1995) criticises PN theory for remaining at the micro-level study of individual actors. Despite this criticism, the literature suggests that within different policy networks one can expect a corporate environment and ecology, which can be due to homophily or isomorphism in the environment. The idea is that a web of relations, with a specific ecology in policy networks, confines actors and pushes them towards a homogenised set of actions and claims, which also positions actors' attributes as homogeneous (Dassen, 2010; De Nooy *et al.*, 2005). In this regard, DiMaggio & Powel (1983) identified three probable circumstances leading actors towards homogenisation in agency and behaviours that can be applied to analyse policy networks in this study. The first circumstance is a coercive isomorphism, which takes place as a result of the political pressures from the environment and the matter of legitimacy. In this situation, a set of factors, including cultural expectations, governmental mandates, legal forces, standard rules

and procedures, coerce actors towards a certain set of attributes harmonic with their own environment. The second circumstance for isomorphism is when the political atmosphere and the environment are uncertain, and actors perceive vague conditions in terms of defining goals, identifying issues, and adopting a solution. This ambiguity compels actors to borrow and imitate others' choices in an effort to incur the least possible expense. The third circumstance is caused by the normative pressures of the social arena. In this situation, members of a network of relationships collectively negotiate and interact so that a common interpretation or belief regarding issues of policy or professional fields is reached and practised (DiMaggio & Powel, 1983; March & Olsen, 1985).

Among the circumstances above, the first (coercive isomorphism) and third (normative pressures) are anticipated to be evident in policy networks, albeit with different degrees of influence. Adopting this perspective within this study will show the pressure of the policy network on the agency of NGOs.

4.3. The Agency of NGOs in Policy Networks

The membership of issue networks is open to a broader number of NGOs. Consequently, the possibility of developing an insider position is expected to exist for members. However, the competitive and diverse environment of the issue network does not guarantee equal opportunities for accessing decision makers for all NGO members. Different actors, with varying degrees of political and technical legitimacy in elites' eyes, access the negotiation and consultation processes, meaning the insider or outsider position of NGOs can be dynamic in issue networks (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). Based on the degree of legitimacy and the frequency of relationships with policymakers, insider NGOs can vary between 'low profile' and 'high profile' positions, in terms of their involvement in policymaking. Nevertheless, some insiders can be located in a 'grey zone', which implies a cosmetic and peripheral involvement in policymaking (Maloney *et al.*, 1994; Grant, 1989; Rhodes & Marsh, 1992).

In contrast, in the policy community, it is expected that, whilst a circle of insider NGOs are privileged with an almost systematic and constant position of consultation and involvement, the majority of other NGOs are outsiders because they either cannot, or choose not to, take part in the inner circle. Theories of pressure groups state that outsider NGOs may not have the opportunity to gain access to or influence policy arenas for several reasons, including a

shortage of skills, a lack of expertise, and ideological contradictions (Grant, 1989; Maloney *et al.*, 1994, 1994; Schumpeter, 1947). The boundaries of constraints on the actions and choices of actors are likely to be stricter, which can ultimately limit opportunities. Furthermore, the low tolerance of the policy community allows NGOs only a limited range of actions and specific causes (Birkland, 2007).

Three factors in the policy network are constrain actors, including NGOs. These factors are (i) the position of an actor, i.e. peripheral or central, (ii) political opportunities, i.e. closed or open, and (iii) competitors' strategies, i.e. oppositional or companionable (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000). Based on the evaluation of these factors in the environment, NGOs can adopt strategies that, regarding association, can vary between individual action, alliance-making, and broker intermediation (Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000; Burt, 1997).

4.4. Conclusion

This research will explore the shift in the compositional, institutional, and relational aspects of policy networks as the result of state policies over time, as well as policy domains and government level. Whilst critics such as Dowding questioned the explanatory aspect and intellect of policy network theory; this study has accommodated it as an intermediate variable in a comprehensive theoretical framework, which is expected to improve its utility in the study. Also, whilst some other scholars criticise the PN theory as being static in terms of explaining the change, this study uses the three constituting factors of it to trace the change in sub-polities (Richardson, 2000). This means that it is a functional theory for explaining shifts as well as continuity. Whilst like every theory, policy network theory has deficiencies, this study demonstrates the merits of this theory to provide systematic analysis in relation to change in the policy setting and arrangement of actors and institutions.

5. The Multi-Level Theoretical Framework

This chapter used the theory of political opportunity structure from the macro-level literature on social movements and hypothesised links between it and policy network theory at the meso-level of policy making. The political opportunity structure enables the identification of state political ideology, policy domain, and government level as three significant factors that

systematically determine political opportunities and constraints. By distinguishing between open and closed types of political opportunity structure in the terminology of this theory, this study assumes that over time the arrangement of political opportunities shifts. This study also pursues the interaction between the openness of political opportunity structure and the structure of policy networks. A multi-level theoretical framework is therefore designed as Figure 3.5 shows.

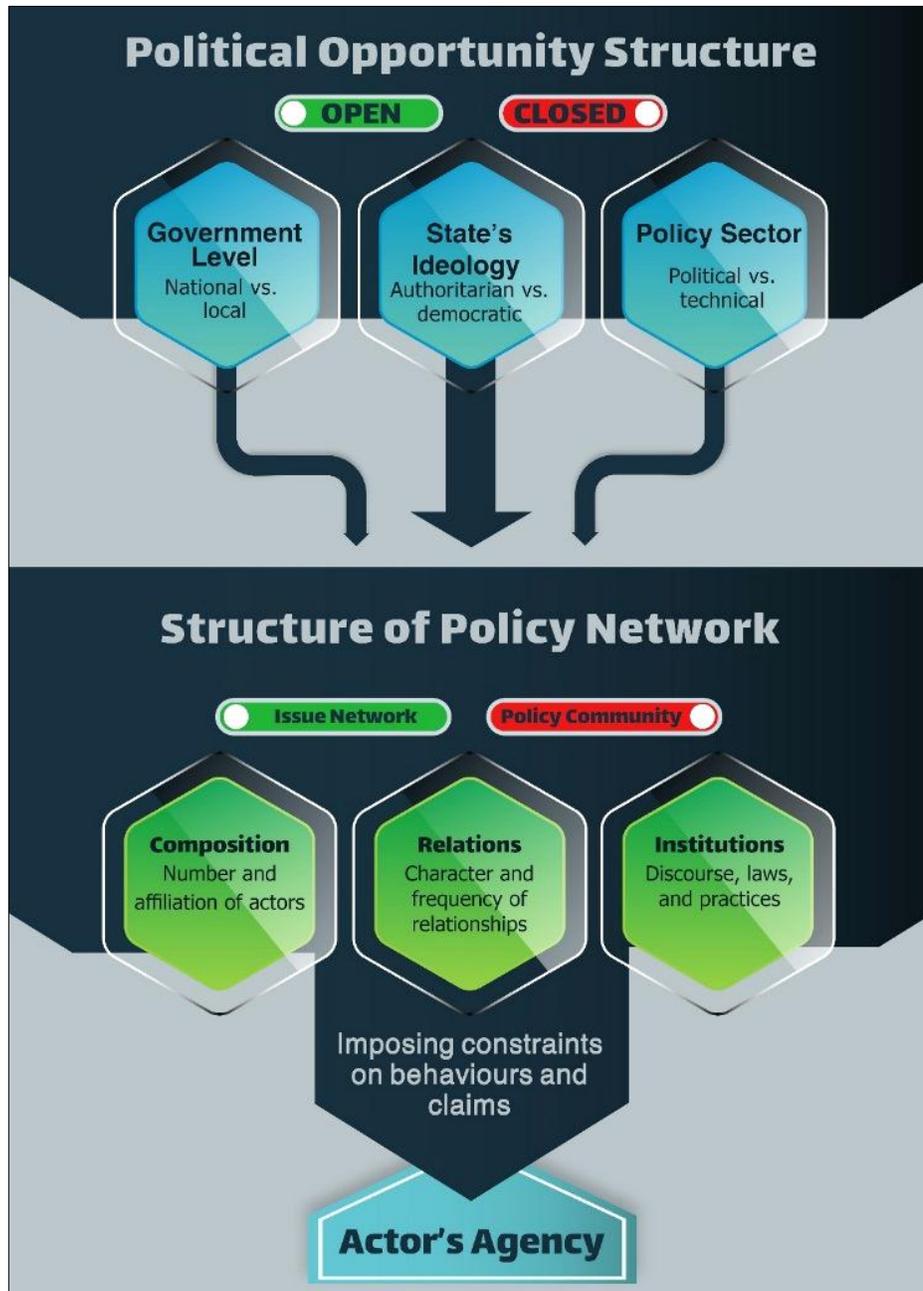


Figure 3.5. The theoretical framework of the study

At the mid-level of the theoretical framework, the use of policy network theory is the intermediate variable that explains the organisation of actors within sub-polities, and the politics practised within them. By distinguishing between ‘issue networks’ and ‘policy communities’, we can analyse the environment in which political actors pursue their objectives. Compositional, institutional, and relational aspects have also been highlighted in an effort to account for significant constituting factors of sub-polities. Furthermore, policy networks have implications for the agency of actor. Theoretically, therefore, the present framework assumes an interaction between the structural and institutional arrangements at both the regime and sub-polity level. The next chapter will discuss the operational measures of the theoretical framework and explains how they can be applied to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

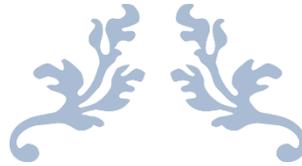
Consistent with the theoretical framework, this thesis studies the interaction between POS and PN in Iran, and will structure and fit the findings in a table. The table below presents the expected results in this relation.

Table 3.8. The expected correlation between POS and PN in this research

		National level		Local level	
		Liberal ideology	Conservative ideology	Liberal ideology	Conservative ideology
Technical domain		Issue network	Issue network	Issue network	Issue network
		Issue network	Policy community	Issue network	Policy community

As it can be seen, at both local and national levels of government, it is expected that the rule of a state with liberal ideology leads to the formation of issue networks across both technical and political domains. Also, this thesis expects that the rule of a conservative state forms policy communities in the political domains, no matter at local or national levels, whilst issue networks are expected to form across technical domains due to the low profile of the domain.

However, some findings of the thesis come in contrast to this expected table. Chapter eleven will present this table revised based on the findings and discusses it in details. It will show the development of issue networks and policy communities across government levels and policy domains in Iran's reformist and conservative periods.



CHAPTER FOUR

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND
METHODOLOGY**



1. Introduction

'Good political science is defined in terms of method, not the object of study.'

— *Asbjørn Nørgaard (2008)*

The review of the current literature underlined the complex and dynamic character of the political contestation and policymaking process evident in undemocratic countries. When it comes to hybrid regimes like Iran, Katouzian (1997) argues that Western-originated theories and methods are not useful as undemocratic systems behave arbitrary, uncoordinated and unsystematic in political processes. Nonetheless, social science research has no choice but to use standard theories and methods to make systematic sense of real-world complexities (King *et al.*, 1994).

The research design section of this chapter builds on the political opportunity structure and policy network theories presented in the second chapter. Following this, there is a discussion on the research design and the justification of using Iran as a case study. It then defines the operational measures consistent with the theoretical framework. The research methodology section outlines the strategy of the study in measuring the main concepts and variables.

2. The Research Design

In political science studies, Dunleavy (2010) criticises the widespread pattern of comparative case-studies between nation states as not being sufficiently rigorous. In line with this criticism, this study examines the Islamic Republic of Iran as a single case of a hybrid regime. It is an embedded type of case study, which contains sub-polities across policy domains and levels of government, as subunits of that one overarching case (Yin, 1984). This design disaggregates the main case into several subunits, and accordingly compares and contrasts them as separate cases functioning in one context. This design provides the study with an accurate and plausible understanding of the critical components and actors in the policy arena (Scholz & Tietje, 2002). This, in turn, highlights various implications concerning the agency of NGOs. The following section explains the significant advantages of utilising Iran as a case study, with regards to its capacities for testing the theoretical framework and explaining the politics of hybrid regimes, as well as the practical advantages offered to the researcher.

2.1. The Theoretical Framework in the Case of Iran

The goal of this study is to investigate the anticipated causal influence of the constituting factors of the political opportunity structure (POS) on the constituting factors of policy network (PN) structure, so as to provide implications about the agency of advocacy NGOs (Waldner, 2015). The theoretical framework of this study structures and directs this investigation. Iran has been selected in order to examine the theoretical framework (Seale, 1999, p. 109). POS theory, which is the independent variable of this study, consists of three factors which simultaneously form the subunits of the case, i.e. sub-polities, across various government levels, policy domains, and terms of government (see Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1. Three constituting factors of the independent variable

When doing a multi-level analysis, the case being analysed should have the essential features hypothesised in the theoretical framework (Gerring, 2008, p. 645). First, the Islamic Republic of Iran is an appropriate case because it has variation in the independent variables: (i) a sectoral arrangement of the policy arena, (ii) a local-central structure of state apparatus, and (iii) the rule of contrary political ideologies. Second, across policy domains, it has multiple state agencies and non-state actors, e.g. mass media, NGOs, and political parties, forming policy networks. Third, the number and vibrancy of NGOs in this country were measurable with changes in value across time. Therefore, Iran provides an opportunity to achieve more substantial empirical knowledge in relation to the particularities of polities across levels and domains of policymaking (Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 1984). King *et al.* recommend case selection based on the variation in an independent variable—the ‘most different’—, which is methodologically appropriate in terms of understanding the effect of different values of the

causal factors (1994, p. 140). Considering this recommendation, this study picks the opposing subunits (sub-polities) in the case (Gerring, 2008; 2004).

Level of Government

This study picks the central and the provincial state divisions as two subunits and accordingly compares the character of national and local polities within them. Based on the Constitution and ordinary laws of Iran, the structure of executive and legislative institutions of the state is divided into provincial divisions that are subordinate to the central state. Iranian provinces are politically and legally semi-independent units of the state that, whilst not having ultimate discretion in the political and legal jurisdiction, have their own body of legislative, executive, and judicial offices and units, and therefore, a separate network of policy actors (Kazemian & Rezvani, 2002).

As for selecting units of study, this research project takes the capital city, Tehran, as the site and the central division of the government, and compares the national policy networks in it with that of provincial networks in Golestan—located in the northeast of the country—which is the sample unit of local government. The study compares the effect of the state political ideology and policy domains as independent variables on policy networks in and across the capital and Golestan.



Figure 4.2. The sample cases for the factors of government levels

The choice of Golestan from amongst 31 provinces in Iran can be justified by theoretical and practical considerations (Bryman, 2012). First, it has an active civil society in terms of the number, vibrancy, and diverse areas of NGO activism, as well as other non-state actors, i.e., mass media and political parties. This means policy networks, as intermediate variables, have been formed across different policy domains of this province.

The second rationale concerns the researcher's positionality. His access, networks of contacts, and knowledge about the politics and social characteristics of this province are rich owing to having had constant engagement with political activities there. Practical considerations, as such, are logically important besides the issue of representing the population (Gerring 2008; Merriam *et al.* 2005).

The third consideration is concerned with representation and typicality. This is because the same political structure and legal regime of local government are in place across all provinces. However, as the demographic, social, and cultural characteristics differ across provinces, one can contest the representativeness of this province. Since the hypothesis is about the influence of regime-level factors on policy networks—and not vice versa—the variation in demographic features in the polities, is not expected to intervene in the causal mechanism. Chapter six of this thesis contains a section assigned on local government in Iran, as such, more information will be provided about this specific area.

Policy Domain

Iran contains the essentials for testing the significance of 'policy domain' factor in the theoretical framework of this study. The sectoral setting is completely established in the policy arena in Iran, both regarding the structure of the state apparatus and also in relation to laws and policies. Furthermore, consistent with this sectoral setting, the spheres of civil society are divided into separate domains that are subject to specific sets of laws and policies of policy sectors (Razzaghi, 2010). This sectoral arrangement functions at both central and provincial levels (Chehabi, 1997).

This study focuses on the issue of women's rights from the political policy domains, and in the case of technical policy domains, focuses on the environment, as the figure below illustrates.



Figure 4.3. The sample cases for the factor of the policy domain

The choice of the two policy domains can be justified with consideration to factual information and research standards. First, the records of Iran’s Ministry of Interior on NGOs confirm that the two selected policy domains, during the period of study, 1997–2013, had advocacy NGOs playing roles within policy networks. This position of NGOs is logically required to study the role of NGOs within policy networks. Second, according to the prior knowledge of the researcher, and based on the initial exchange of information with civil activists and politicians as policy actors, and with experts as commentators, the chosen policy domains adequately represent the political versus technical policy domains in Iran. The women’s-rights domain is a politicised domain in the MENA region, as it relates to the core beliefs of the Islamic ideology, and has often been under pressure from Islamic governments (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). It also relates to the issue of human rights which is important for the majority of political regimes, regardless of their ideology or religion (Rakel, 2009). In contrast, the environmental domain is seen as technical with a low level of engagement with Islamic ideology in Iran (Namazi 2000). In terms of the political aspect, this domain is usually considered insignificant (Doyle & Simpson, 2006). The case study chapters provide an analysis on the profile of these two policy domains in Iran, and also of the position of NGOs operating within these policy domains.

State’s Political Ideology

Between 1997 and 2013, Khatami and Ahmadinejad from two political camps with opposing ideologies, discourses, and profiles—liberal vs conservative—ruled Parliament and the Executive in Iran, as the timeline below illustrates.

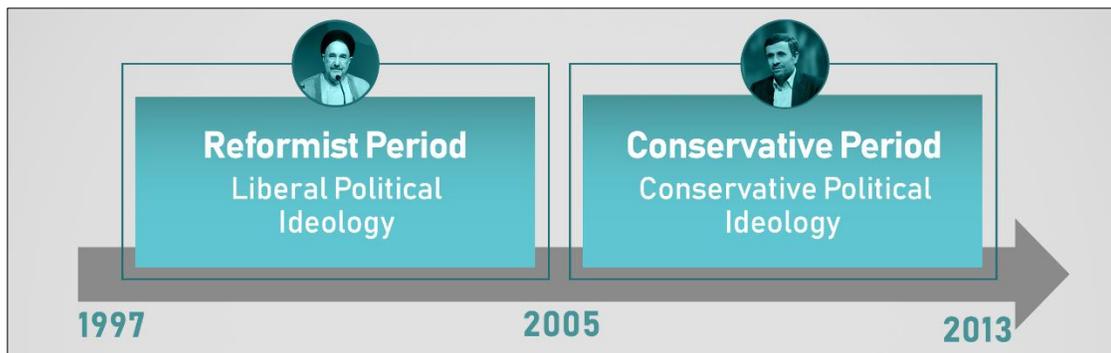


Figure 4.4. The sample cases for the factor of the state's political ideology

The two periods are also associated with two opposing formal policies and strategies towards civil society. From 1997-2005, the reformist camp supported the political participation of civil society and NGOs. In contrast, during 2005-2013, conservatives with a fundamentalist perspective adopted an undemocratic discourse against civil society (Ehteshami & Mahjoob, 2009; Gheissari & Nasr, 2006). These two periods form distinct cases. Tracing the shift in the civil society of Iran during 1997-2013, and change in the composition of state apparatus across different domains, further strengthened the foundation for studying the causal effect of the political opportunity structure (King *et al.*, 1994). Regardless of the particularities of certain political ideologies, e.g. political Islam in Iran, this study provides implications in relation to understanding how the authoritarian vs liberal attitudes of different state's political ideologies may influence the structure of policy networks and agency of actors within them.

To sum up this section, this study by examining the theoretical framework in the case of Iran, provides several insights not only for hybrid regimes, but also for the majority of countries across different regions globally. The three factors of the independent variable in the POS theory are very common. Across the majority of countries, the significance of policy domains differs, and a type of local-central government is established. Furthermore, different governments exert different political ideologies and strategies concerning civil society. If the theory is useful in the case of Iran, it is likely to apply to other countries as well (Yin, 1984, pp. 38-40). Nonetheless, because the case study used in this research project is an undemocratic regime that is considered different from liberal democracies, some aspects of the investigation should be considered as specific only to the hybrid regime (Huntington; 1984). The following section discusses the population of the study and the scope for generalisation with Iran.

2.2. Iran and the Typology of Hybrid Regimes

Findings concerning the causal mechanism between regime-level factors and the structure of the policy network may be relevant to all political regimes. However, it may be possible to make firmer generalisations to hybrid regimes (King *et al.*, 1994, pp. 7-8; Yin, 1984, pp. 38-40). This section defines the meaning and population of hybrid regimes.

Definition of the Hybrid Regime

This study contests the classic dichotomy of democracy vs authoritarianism in defining a hybrid regime (Cavatorta 2010; Clement 2010). However, in order to avoid ambiguity regarding key definitions and the scope of research, the study still adopts the classic regime typologies in an effort to locate and identify the meaning of a hybrid regime. Essentially, two significant features of the political regime differentiate democracy from authoritarianism, namely electoralism and constitutionalism (Wigell, 2008). In the case of electoralism, four important attributes should feature in electoral processes for choosing institutions of a state, in order for a political regime to be labelled a democracy. These attributes are (i) fairness, (ii) inclusiveness, (iii) competitiveness, and (iv) freeness. In relation to constitutionalism, four fundamental freedoms in the political and governmental processes should be fulfilled for citizens, including freedoms of (i) expression, (ii) organisation, and (iii) information, as well as (iv) freedom from discrimination (Wigell, 2008, p. 237).

According to the elements presented above, this study uses a continuum with democracy and authoritarianism at each end, in line with Diamond's typology (1999). It locates the hybrid regime between these two ends. It is independent of them and at the same time is an ambiguous 'grey zone' that integrates characteristics of both (Figure 4.5) (Karl 1995; Diamond, 2002). Regarding identity, it is not a democracy, since it is still far from the full guarantee of freedoms and fully representative government, nor is it authoritarianism, as it is far from full despotism that has no space for liberties and civil rights (Karl, 1995).



Figure 4.5. The continuum of political regime types

A hybrid regime rhetorically incorporates and establishes the architecture of liberal democracy regarding elected institutions; whilst authoritarian institutions limit social and political freedoms (Ottaway, 2003; Wigell, 2008). In practice, ruling elites allow a range of both liberal and illiberal traits that allow a limited, but stretchable scope for civil society organisations (Menocal *et al.*, 2008). Whilst the distribution of freedoms and political opportunities is uneven, elected institutions and democratic capacities should not be dismissed as they still provide a chance for public mobilisation and collective action (Karl, 1995).

In order to make the authoritarian aspect of hybrid regimes more operational concerning the practice of policymaking, this study looks for the following seven features (Carothers, 2002; Heydemann 2007; Diamond *et al.* 1989; Karl 1995):

- i. Limited power for elected positions and institutions.
- ii. Engineered political contestations, i.e. advantaging or disadvantaging groups.
- iii. Low levels of fairness, competitiveness, and freedom in elections.
- iv. Suppressed civil liberties and political rights.
- v. Restrictions on competitor ideologies and critical discourses.
- vi. Appropriation of laws and official procedures by ruling elites.
- vii. Co-optation of civil society organisations.

In terms of structure, one may call Iran's political regime authoritarian for several reasons. The first is the apparent dominance of unelected Islamic institutions in relation to elected ones, notably the Supreme Leader. The second is related to the image and highlights that mainstream Western media present concerning various restrictions on freedoms and civil society. However, accounting for the scope of republican institutions, as in the history of political contestations, especially since the 1990s, demonstrates the flexibility of regimes to accommodate the circulation of power between different political camps and public mobilisation (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has featured electoralism with regular elections for Parliament, President, and local councils—on average one election per year (IRNA, 2017). However, unelected institutions, including Islamic organisations, paramilitary forces, and security offices, monitor and control the whole processes of contestation, especially elections, from the nomination and vetting of candidates, to the verification of final results (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015). Also, the Constitution secures an Islamic ideology in governance which limits free

election (Bashirieh, 2016). Nonetheless, the authoritarian institutions are unintentionally constrained by the counter-pressures of the republican institutions and civil society, subject to the rise of oppositions, which makes the structure and practice of the Iranian regime dynamic (Thaler et al., 2010). As regards constitutionalism, state institutions have executive regulations and rules that allow restrictions on the establishment of civil society organisation and their subsequent claims and actions. Moreover, the enormous bureaucratic machinery and rentier resources of the state, while providing some access points and chances of receiving governmental grants for NGOs, have often been utilised by ruling elites for expanding clientelistic networks and buying the loyalty of civil society (Saboori, 2000, pp. 200-205; Farzanegan, 2011). It can, therefore, be said that the Iranian political system has two contradictory functional characters, namely democratic bureaucracy and ideological arbitrariness. Thus, regardless of the demographic and historical particularities, which are unavoidable in selecting a country as the case for research, Iran is nominally a hybrid regime that is a suitable choice for this research project. (Henry, 1990).

The Population of the Study

The second step in clarifying the scope of research is defining the exact number of hybrid regimes in the world, which is a matter of discord. Several scholars, such as Diamond (1999), and various organisations and publications, such as the Freedom House and The Economist, have adopted different methodologies of ranking political regimes. They observe, evaluate, and rate the electoral and constitutional aspects of political regimes across different countries. The status of 'political and legal freedoms' and the 'governance process' is highlighted here (Kekic, 2007). These efforts are useful in establishing the number of countries with a hybrid regime or partly-free political settings. For example, The Economist estimates 40 countries to have a hybrid regime,² and Freedom House rates 59 countries as partly-free.³ This presents an estimation that around one-fourth of the world's countries have a semi-democratic political regime with selectively accommodated social and political freedoms. In the policy arena of these regimes, one should expect a dynamic trade-off between suppression and freedom, as well as a dynamic inclusion and exclusion of NGOs in governance. This is evident within the context of Iran too (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015).

² The full report is available at this link:

https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=DemocracyIndex2016

³ The full report is available at this link: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

Despite the extensive studies and scholarly efforts for defining the population of hybrid regimes, the striking point is that scholars and observers have overlooked the Islamic Republic of Iran in this area. This oversight may be attributed to a variety of factors. First is the ideological bias and foreign policy concerns of the observers, such as Freedom House, which is affiliated with US conservative right wings' stance against Iran (Giannone, 2010; Steiner, 2016; Holiday, 2011).⁴ Second, is the use of a quantitative approach in the study that can be contested as being impotent to properly explain the dynamic complex power battle between democratic and authoritarian forces and institutions in hybrid regimes (Karl, 1995). Third is the lack of comprehensive knowledge of the political system of Iran, and access to this country for conducting a holistic study on its politics. Finally, in the literature, Muslim countries like Iran are more likely to be considered authoritarian than countries with any other sort of religion (Kuru, 2014, p. 4; Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). Despite this, the political system and policy processes in Iran are hybrid as they have obvious and important mixtures of authoritarianism and democracy. This means it is capable of providing implications for all hybrid regimes.

Although Iran contains the essential and typical features of hybrid regimes, the state in it officially endorses an Islamic ideology. Therefore, the findings of this study which may be associated with the practices and rules of Sharia law would not be considered as generalisable to non-Islamic states (Silverman, 2000, p. 130; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). This particular aspect of findings is distinguishable. Here, Islamic hybrid regimes such as Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, Morocco and Iraq, can be highlighted as the subset of the population of this study. Also, based on the adopted definition of hybrid regimes, the findings of this study can provide various insights into Islamic countries that recently stepped into regime change through uprising, such as Tunisia and Libya, as well as for countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon that combine republican institutions while practicing some Islamic rules in policy arena. Apart from the Islamic aspect, those findings relating to the political opportunity structure, policy network and agency of NGOs are generalisable. With these logics in mind, hybrid regimes in the MENA are defined as the larger population of this study.⁵

⁴ Reviewing the timeline and trajectory of relations between US and Iran shows a history full of tensions, mistrust, and conflict over different issues and incidents. A full review of this relation is available at BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24316661>

⁵ Whereas the definition and composition of MENA is not quite clear, the World Bank list of this region includes countries as Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Israel, Malta, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia. World Bank definition MENA, taken from www.Worldbank.org, retrieved January 2018

2.3. Accessibility and Convenience

The choice of Iran is, in part, due to convenience, which strengthens the overall reliability of the research findings whilst also facilitating access to the field (Gerring, 2008). The literature on Iran's civil society and NGOs is relatively limited because of the problem of access for researchers. This makes local knowledge much more critical than in many other cases where there are fewer political and cultural barriers. In undemocratic contexts, administering data collection requires a personal background and networks of contacts in the field (Tessler & Jamal, 2006). Here, the researcher's knowledge and position facilitated the research undertaken in this study. Nevertheless, fieldwork for someone with a political profile, like that of the researcher, may be associated with biases in collecting and analysing data. Triangulation can mitigate this issue within this study (Merriam *et al.* 2005).

3. Research Methodology

The three factors of the political opportunity structure have dynamic and static dimensions. The dynamic dimension belongs to the state's political ideology, which shifts over government turnovers and is subject to political contestation (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Cragun & Cragun, 2006). Policy domain and government level are the static factors that constitute the fixed dimension of the theoretical framework. In theory, the effect of the static factors is considered systematic and invariant across government turnover, as they are associated with the fixed structure of state apparatus and political setting (King *et al.*, 1994). These two static factors disaggregate the policy arena into domains and levels (Goertz, 2008).

The most appropriate methodology providing for the study of the influence of dynamic and static factors is process-tracing (Beach, 2017; Beach & Pedersen, 2013). It allows for studying the development and transformation of policy networks across dynamic political periods, as well as static domains and levels of government (King *et al.*, 1994). This methodology involves a 'within-case study' that functions based on the 'systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator' (Collier, 2011, p. 823). Empirical evidence such as interviews and historical archives are used to find the linkage between relevant events and incidents and their causes (Ruback, 2010). Process-tracing opens the black box of policymaking in different policy networks within the case study of Iran (Collier, Brady, & Seawright, 2010).

Disaggregating the case into subunits provides additional cases of observing the mechanism of influence (King *et al.*, 1994). Here, mechanism refers to the chain of related events and procedures that intermediate between variables, and furthermore, can explain their outcomes (Mahoney, 2015). As for the dynamic factor of the state's political ideology, process-tracing collects empirical evidence on the successive changes in the state's strategies and discourse that, over courses of time, correlates with changes in the composition, relations, and institutions within policy networks. This may provide evidence of a causal influence of the state's political ideology on the agency of NGOs through the structure of policy networks (Collier, 2011; Tansey, 2007). It also identifies the leading policy actors that exert this influence, which may lead to change or continuity (Ruback, 2010). As for the static factors, this research maintains control (King *et al.*, 1994, p. 140). Here, policy domain and government levels, while being explanatory, mediate the mechanism of influence of a state's political ideology on policy networks (Beach, 2017).

A qualitative strategy is consistent with process-tracing in this research (Collier, 2011; Beck, 2010). Since the politics of Iran are not transparent, systematic, and predictable, a qualitative approach is more suitable for exploring the policy arena, and for explaining the role of actors and their agency and interactions. This research presents a qualitative description of the successive vital shifts in the political ideology of the state in Iran, spanning a 16-year period from 1997 to 2013, and further explains the mechanisms through which the state's ideology and strategy influenced policy networks (Waldner, 2015). This is done at different levels and domains to test the effect of these two constituting factors of political opportunity structure. To explain the mechanism of influence, analytical narrative best serves this study (Mahoney, 2015). The empirical case studies of this research analytically make a story-telling. This presents a 'sequence of facts' that provides a persuasive account of the causal relation between them (Bates *et al.*, 1998, pp. 10-13; Carpenter, 2000, p. 654; Ruback, 2010).

In process-tracing, however, there is always a risk that the researcher misinterprets the correlation between political events as a causal relationship, on the basis that the researcher describes covariation rather than observing causation (Elster 2000, p. 693; Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Nørgaard, 2008). Despite this pitfall, the focus of this study is on the mechanism of causation. Breaking the mechanism of the relationship between different factors into a chain of causal linkages, which here mean—but not limited to—events and changes in the state administration, positions and rules, due to the shifts in the state's political ideology (King *et al.*,

1994; Waldner, 2015). This reduces the risk of the researcher's misunderstanding. Also, the theoretical framework of the study has systematically directed and modelled the narration of the policy process. This makes the narrative analytical, instead of historical storytelling (Carpenter, 2000, p. 654; Ruback, 2010).

4. Operationalisation of the Variables

This section will, first, operationalise the three factors of the political opportunity structure. Second, it will discuss in details the constituting factors that determine the structure of policy networks as the intermediate variable, and third, the agency of NGOs as dependent variable will be operationalised.

4.1. The Measures of the Independent Variables

The theoretical framework of the study outlines three factors as contributing to the political opportunity structure, namely the state's political ideology, government level, and policy domain.

State's Political Ideology

Political ideology refers to a belief system, with a body of consistent notions and thoughts, which drives politicians and civil servants in issue preferences, setting goals and strategies. This same body also drives policy means and methods, creating discourse, and justifying politicians and civil servant's own behaviours and actions (Holbrook-Provow & Poe, 1987, p. 399; Converse, 1964; Jackson & Jackson, 1993). The state's formal political ideology is seen as the cultural source of discourse and rhetoric of state agencies, as well as communications and policies, albeit with variations across different policy domains and levels of government (Charteris-Black, 2018; Savoski, 2018).

This study uses Riley's threefold schema in analysing political ideology and discourse (1983, pp. 419-20). This schema posits three symbols as cultural and ideological outputs, namely verbal, actional, and material. Verbal symbols are associated with language descriptors and oral elements of an ideology, which reverberate in the rhetoric, metaphors, conversations, and arguments and counterarguments of officials. Actional symbols refer to regular practices and

activities. Material symbols visualise political ideology. The material and actional symbols are more convenient for observation, whereas verbal symbols are more subject to interpretation and ambiguity (Riley, 1983). The table below summarises this.

Table 4.1. The three constituting components of a political ideology

Verbal symbols	Action symbols	Material symbols
Language descriptors	Practices and activities	Cultural artefacts
Rumours, slogans, metaphors, names, arguments, etc.	Rituals, breaks, covert strategies, traditions, etc.	Status symbols, dressing style, perks etc.

The criteria for categorising the political ideology of conservative and reformist camps into liberal vs conservative types, as well as NGOs' profile, was taken from Jackson & Jackson (1993). This criterion concerns with the position of particular principles in their political ideology, namely individual rights, social freedoms, political equality, the rule of law, and limited government.

The present study focuses on the core components of the reformist and conservative discourses in Iran, and also attempts to analyse their sectoral discourse within policy domains. By taking into account their dominant narratives, arguments, and conversations, this study aims at understanding two points: (i) how integrative or exclusive were their communications with society, (ii) what specific values they advocated in relation to policy domains. At the practical level, the study analysed the covert and overt patterns of behaviour and strategy of the reformist and conservative state agencies versus allied actors and rivals across domains and levels (Savoski, 2018; Amossy, 2018).

Regarding strategy, reformist and conservative governments are associated with authoritarian and democratic attributes (Diamond *et al.*, 1989; Whitehead, 1997). This concerns their attitudes and behaviour toward societal pressures and challenges. The authoritarian political ideology refers to a state with tendencies towards monopolising the political sphere, manipulating rules, evading the law, excluding non-state actors, and the use of violence and suppression against opponents. The democratic political ideology, in contrast, refers to a state with a tendency towards a freer political sphere, commitment to law and responsiveness,

integration of non-state interests, and flexible traits versus social pressures and competing discourses. The table below depicts the categories of political ideology and strategy.

Table 4.2. The categories of the state's political ideology and strategy

Democratic (liberal)	Authoritarian (conservative)
Open and free political sphere, commitment and responsiveness to law, and modest and flexible traits	Monopolising the political sphere, manipulating the law and evading rules, and using of violation and suppression

Regarding research methodology, this study investigated the political manifesto of the reformist and conservative camps and interviewed expert respondents, to categorise the reformist and conservative camps in Iran (Holbrook-Provow & Poe, 1987). It should be noted that attributing character to the reformist and conservative governments in Iran does not mean that they are entirely and always democratic or authoritarian; it is instead an intellectual analysis of their general character. Chapter Six elaborates on this.

Policy Domain

The political or technical profile of policy domains may vary from one country to another. For instance, while the household policy domain can have a more technical profile in secular Western countries, in countries with political Islam endorsed as the official ideology of the state, it may be subject to ideological principles. Nonetheless, to situate the definition, this study establishes specific profiles as the table below demonstrates.

Table 4.3. The categories of the policy domain

Political domain	Technical domain
Associated with the symbols and elements of the ruling political ideology	Associated with the services and technical needs for the maintenance of the country
Examples: Human rights, cultural policy, foreign policy, national security, asylum seeker issues etc.	Examples: Healthcare, environmental issues, child and family, energy management, economic and public finance, science, etc.

Heydemann's comparative study of MENA countries (2007) presents insightful implications for contextualising the issue of policy domains within this research project. The implication of his study is that the more a policy domain engages with human-rights issues, the more it can be considered as politically or ideologically contentious. Considering the table above and Heydemann's study, this study defines policy domains with issues relating to political liberties and legal rights of citizens and society as high-profile, and therefore, political. In contrast, the technical domains as low-profile are defined with issues relating to the efficiency of policies for managing the needs and functionality of society and its environment.

In Iran, political Islam is the formal ideology of the regime. This ideology has specialised discourses and teachings, as well as policy language, in relation to the social and political role and rights of women, as well as a particular approach towards women's social position (Holiday, 2011; Sedghi, 2007). This means that women's-rights domain is high-profile. However, for the environmental domain, this ideology does not present strict or specialised discourse, and therefore the domain is not significant in the Islamic ideology (Doyle & Simpson, 2006). Participants' observations and experiences—notably those of Iranian civil activists and politicians—also suggest the political versus technical profile of these two policy domains in Iran.

Level of Government

This factor has two aspects, namely regional and hierarchical. The first relates to the national vs. local arrangement of government and the second concerns with political and administrative levels of state offices. The government level is expected to be a factor in explaining the variation in the patterns of behaviour, discourse, and tendencies of state agencies.

Most modern states, including hybrid regimes of the MENA, have an established and functioning system of local government, varying from federal to provincial systems (Heywood, 1997). Accordingly, the central institutions and organisations of state, with different degrees of decentralisation, have transferred a part of their resources and discretion to lower-level authorities in governmental divisions that have varying degrees of independence from the central state (Manor, 1998; Heywood, 1997).

The cases of Golestan Province for local and Tehran for national policymaking sites methodologically provides two opposing values of the factor of government level. This study analyses how the differences between the national and local government affected the

distribution of resources, policymaking and setting the political discourse. It also analyses these same effects on the configuration of actors and interrelations between them, and when all are considered together, the impact on the structure of policy networks. Here, particular emphasis has been placed on the accessibility to state institutions, relations with policymakers, involvement in decision-making, responsiveness and accountability from state agencies, alongside opportunities and restrictions for non-state actors (Heywood, 1997).

However, it is difficult to generalise the findings from the local government in Iran due to several reasons. First, the adaption of local government varies from one country to the next in terms of the institutions and processes of policymaking (Heywood 1997). Second, the missions and hierarchical rankings of administrative posts in policymaking vary across different political regimes. Third, local culture contributes to the variation. Nevertheless, findings concerned with the relationship between government level and the structure of policy networks can still present preliminary implications for further case studies on other hybrid regimes.

The government level also refers to hierarchy, i.e. administrative and political levels. This aspect concerns with the extent of discretion, power and the functions of bureaucrats under the authority of politicians, as well as with the distribution and concentration of power in the hierarchical system of administration (Lipsky, 1980). While the discourse and orders of politicians are considered as the formal language of communication of state institutions, at the lower levels, officials and bureaucrats can potentially read and practice the formal ideology and discourse differently (Savoski, 2018). This study, therefore, includes a comparison concerning the patterns of behaviour, discretion, decision-making, and the actions of politicians and top-level officials and that of mid-level and low-level bureaucrats in Iran, in order to highlight how they differ in policy networks. Table 4.4 shows this categorisation.

Table 4.4. The hierarchical levels of government

Political level	Administrative level
Politicians and high-level managers at the top of the organisation/institution	Bureaucrats and street-level officials at mid and low levels of organisation/institution

To conclude, process-tracing coupled with a ‘cross-case’ comparison for the static factors of the policy domain and government levels, and ‘cross-time’ comparison for the state’s political

ideology, makes the methodology of this study robust (King *et al.*, 1994). This comparative approach combined with breaking down the mechanism of influence makes for a valid causal investigation (Nørgaard, 2008).

4.2. The Measures of the Intermediate Variable

The theoretical framework of the study outlines three factors as contributing to the structural aspect of policy networks, namely composition, institutions, and relationship.

Compositional Aspect

The composition of a policy network is characterised by the number of actors, and their affiliation and resources. This study discusses how, in Iran, the agencies of state during reformist and conservative governments, both from legislative and executive branches, and along with the policy domain and government levels, influenced the composition of involved actors, and in particular NGOs. It identifies the number of involved actors in the environmental and women’s-rights policy network (Table 4.5). There is no definite measure for assigning policy network as large or small; the findings are relative. As the first step in doing so, the study adopts a positional analysis that is based on the social status of actors (Dassen, 2010). The main positions include (i) legislative and executive actors; (ii) unelected state actors; (iii) advocacy NGOs; (iv) political parties; and (v) mass media (Waldner, 2015). In the second step, the political affiliation of actors will be discussed to provide an analysis concerning the balance between the influences of the competing political camps. In measuring this aspect, two categories of affiliation are used to assign the actors, namely reformist and conservative.

Table 4.5. The constituting factors of the composition of the policy network

Size	Affiliation	Resources
The number of involved actors	The political camp of actors	Actors’ properties and capabilities

Furthermore, the third aspect of the composition, as depicted in the table above, is the balance of actors’ resources. This study evaluates the distribution of resources between the members of a policy network, notably between state and non-state actors, as well as between reformist and

conservative camps. By doing so, the main types of resources to be taken into consideration include money, skills, human resources, office space, knowledge, social support, social credibility, property and physical facilities, and coercive power (Dassen, 2010).

Institutional Aspect

This study considers institutions in two separate forms, including the dominant discourse and established practices. In order to identify and analyse the general and sectoral discourses of the ruling elite in the specific policy domains in Iran, the focus is centred on the theme of the arguments, conversations, rhetoric and metaphors of the officeholders and governors (Hansson, 2018; Hodgson, 2006). Through ethnographic interviews and examination of official documents, this study has explored the constitutive elements of the sectoral discourses imposed and communicated by agencies of the state. The approach of policymakers in policy networks is analysed in two respects, including: (i) the rhetorical approach concerning the priorities and agendas in the policy domain, and (ii) the rhetorical approach concerning the position of NGOs in decision-making. In this arena, the official discourse of state agencies is contrasted with the prevailing discourse that was supported and communicated by advocacy NGOs in order to capture the competing ideologies. Official policy documents, texts of the communications of government, and approvals of Parliament have been used too. Based on these, the formal practices and rules of policy networks are evaluated in respect of (i) the position of NGOs in decision-making, (ii) the criteria for distribution of resources between NGOs; and (iii) defining accepted and non-accepted claims and behaviours (Hansson, 2018).

Table 4.6. The constituting factors of the institutions in the policy network

Discourse	Practice
Arguments, rhetoric, conversations, and metaphors	Enactments, laws, decrees, edicts, orders, policy documents, development plans etc.

Relational Aspect

The frequency and character of relationships structure policy networks. Along with the influence of the issue of policy domain and level of government, the ideology of the ruling elite

in the state, with its specific discourse and strategy, decides the type of relation state agencies establish with other actors, particularly NGOs (Dassen, 2010).

This study evaluates the manner of contacts and interactions between advocacy NGOs and state agencies. However, the study also accounts for the relationship of NGOs with other actors, including political parties and mass media when they are involved in state-society relations, for example, by bridging between the two (Burt, 1997; 2004).

In order to describe the frequency, this study has adopted categories of strong, weak, and lack of relationships between a pair of actors (Granovetter, 1973). These categories have implications for relationships between different social statuses in policy networks. There is no minimum or maximum frequency in the context of policy networks; thus, this study takes a comparative approach and qualitatively compares the change in relationships across time, levels, and domains. This analysis includes both types of formal (official) relationships and informal (unofficial) relationships.

The character of the relationship belongs to actors' perceptions and attitude towards one another in the relationship, which can bring about a variety of values along a continuum from friendly to confrontational (Clark, 1991, pp. 75-6). The ethnographic method is used to research the perception of policymakers and NGO activists. Comparing the two terms of government, as well as domains and levels, reveals the way in which the reformist and conservative elites behaved differently in their relationship with NGOs in Iran.

Table 4.7. The contributing elements of relations in policy networks

Character	Frequency
The attribute of the relationships	The interval of formal and informal contacts

From the perspective that originates from the arrangement of actors, this study uses the positional analysis to group actors based on their association with civil society (e.g., political parties, NGOs and mass media) and state (e.g., executive offices and parliamentary commissions). This helps to present a comparative analysis of the interaction between same-position actors and different-position actors (Dassen, 2010, p. 54).

To conclude this section, by operationalising the structure of policy network and accordingly measuring the value of its three constituting factors, this study traces the chain of the causal relationships. Examining and observing the formal institutions and the composition of policy networks is convenient, whereas observing and evaluating the discourse and arrangement of relationships is not, hence, this reliance on the perceptions and experiences of participants. However, where it is not observable, this study relies on a set of real-world events (Gerring, 2008, p. 167).

The three structural factors of the policy networks, while forming the sub-polities, are considered as the mechanisms of influence for the state. This means the structural factors of policy networks conduct the effect of political opportunity structure. Therefore, the two major types of 'issue network' and 'policy community'—as discussed in Chapter 2— have systematic implications for the agency of NGOs across policy sectors and levels (Mahoney, 2015).

4.3. The Measures of the Dependent Variable

Political agency is the capacity to take action and make claims in the policy arena. Agency is measured as the range of options advocacy NGOs have to influence public policies (Kockelman 2007, p. 375). This political definition involves contention in terms of bearing claims and action on the government's interest (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). The agency of advocacy NGOs, thus, is measured concerning two capacities: (i) raising claims and issues to make it an agenda; and (ii) adopting a strategy of action and choosing the manner of behaviour.

This study examines and evaluates the implications of the two types of policy network, i.e. issue network and policy community, for these capacities of advocacy NGOs.

Claims

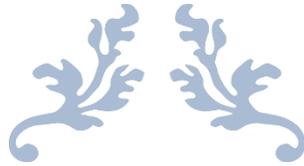
Regarding claims of actors, this study elaborates on the tolerated and non-tolerated range of issues in the public spheres and rules. This is done with regards to the cultural norms and legal codes that determine the 'agenda universe' for members of policy networks (Birkland, 2007). The study evaluates the tolerance of the policy network in terms of allowing critical claims, timid or strident, on the government's interest and discourse (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007).

Actions

Regarding strategy and behaviours, the study distinguishes between two characters of action, namely moderate and extreme. Extreme actions refer to methods mostly known as direct, confrontational, and strict, such as protesting, marching, demonstrating and striking. Moderate actions, conversely, refers to those behaviours associated with soft, timid, and cooperative methods, either direct or indirect (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Moderate methods include actions such as dialogue, holding meetings and seminars, negotiation with policymakers, publishing materials, carrying out petitions, training, and lobbying. This study evaluates the tolerance of policy networks versus the methods above.

5. Conclusion

The methodology of this thesis has been designed to meet the multi-level theoretical framework. The separate sub-polities across policy sectors and government levels in this study function as individual subunits, each presenting implications for meso-politics. From this point of view, the results of the study can provide several insights in relation to the policy processes and state-NGOs' interactions within political and technical policy domains, as well as national and local governments. While extending knowledge concerning the Islamic Republic of Iran and generating implications from it for hybrid regimes, this thesis also has implications for variations inside other non-hybrid political regimes. The next chapter maps the structure of the political regime in Iran and identifies the variables of study in this country. After that, in a shorter chapter, the data and fieldwork will be reported.



CHAPTER FIVE

**THE DATA AND METHODS
OF RESEARCH**



1. Introduction

Chapter Four discussed the embedded case study of Iran, the process-tracing methodology, and the qualitative strategy employed in this study. This chapter reports the methods for data collection, as well as the approach to the data analysis. The first section explains the use of triangulation in the methods and analysis of the sources. Both primary and secondary sources will be reported and listed in detail. The second section discusses the limitations and difficulties of the fieldwork. Then, the issues of reliability and ethics in this research will be discussed respectively. The chapter concludes by illustrating the analytical approach used to manage the data collected.

2. Research Methods

Iran, the case study of this research, lacks a free political public sphere and remains hostile towards political research. Potential problems related to research have therefore been considered since the first day the researcher started studying and had to be reflected in the choice of research methods. Concerning the governmental restrictions imposed on the flow of information, which damage the reliability of data, the present study has adopted a triangulation strategy in all aspects of data collection, in an effort to achieve a more plausible and reliable account of the truth (Silverman, 2000, p. 120). Integrating different methods and sources of data by triangulation facilitated the comparative approach and also 'cross-checking' the information as the evidence 'corroborate each other' (Silverman, 2000; Mason, 1996, p. 25).

The triangulation method is not free from critiques. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 199), for example, contend that aggregating data and sources do not necessarily lead to a 'more complete picture'. Silverman (2000, p. 122) even goes so far as to warn that triangulation may lead to rough 'under-analysed data'. Despite these potential risks, the present study used triangulation not only as an adding-up tool for gaining different elements of truth, but also as a strategy necessary to adopt a comparative theoretical approach to research. This strategy has been implemented in the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary data.

2.1. The Primary Data

In the cases of the capital city (national level) and Golestan (provincial level) in Iran, which are the subunits of the case study, this research used a mixed-methods approach for collecting evidence, including ethnographic interview and direct observation. Furthermore, the researcher enjoys a background as a political activist in the field and had the opportunity to carry out extensive direct observations of the political dynamics at play in the country.

Interviews and the Sampling Method

The approach of the researcher in relation to interviewing was to identify and gain information from the experienced policymakers and civil activist, i.e. expert participants, in order to achieve the most precious information and utilisable evidence. The study, therefore, adopted qualitative open-ended interviews and questionnaires, predominantly owing to their explorative character, which allows respondents to present their answers freely and explain at lengths topics dear and significant to them (Tansey, 2007). The chosen method was interviewing; in cases in which the respondent was reluctant to carry out face-to-face interviews because of personal considerations or possible risks, a copy of the questionnaire, asking the same questions, was delivered to the respondent. The content and design of the interviews and questionnaires were semi-structured, and based on the multi-level theoretical framework of the study. Apart from some general questions, when respondents came from a similar position, they received the same questions so to avoid any bias. The included positions related to the state and civil society will be discussed in the following sections.

In order to reach respondents, the study adopted the snowball method. The researcher's network of contacts was utilised with two logics at hand: first, an official, complete and reliable databank of NGOs was not available in Iran, plus politicians were unavailable or inaccessible through normal channels, meaning the researcher had to use his own knowledge and personal contacts to approach NGO activists and politicians. Furthermore, because of affiliation with a foreign university, the researcher was aware not to approach uninvited or cold call unknown civil and political activists in Iran, since this could lead to risks for both the respondents and the researcher, and could have provoked Iranian security agencies. Concerning these issues, the use of purposive sampling was unavoidable in this research (Henry, 1990). Nonetheless, this sampling type was also the best suited for this study, considering that the multi-level type of

theoretical framework adopted in this research necessitates the purposive intervention by the researcher (Tansey, 2007).

At one level, the quota-sampling method was used. This allowed the researcher to accurately define several sub-groups of respondents according to the factor of the level of government in the theoretical framework (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). In this relation, the criteria used in relation to quotas of respondents in both provincial and national level included (i) policy domain; (ii) institutional position; and (iii) political affiliation.

As for the policy domain, the study purposively assigned the population of respondents in the two domains of ‘environmental’ and ‘women’s rights’ consistent with the political vs technical types of policy domain. In addition to these two, in order to strive for a credible and neutral understanding, the study interviewed some expert respondents. This group of experts were assigned as ‘general’ respondents in this study, which includes four positions, namely scholars, journalists, freelance activists, and political activists or partisans. Expert respondents’ domain of knowledge or area or activity was not limited to the two policy domains; instead, they offered a wide array of useful information about the civil society and the political processes in Iran. The table below details the number of respondents based on their position.

Table 5.1. The number of respondents across government levels-based on policy domain

Case	Environmental	Women’s rights	General	Total
The capital city	5	8	7	20
Golestan Province	5	6	13	24
Total	10	14	20	44

Within each group of respondents, the researcher divided the respondents into sub-groups of ‘state’ and ‘civil society’ based on the criterion of institutional position. Each sub-group included several respondents with different political affiliations and viewpoints. This established the ground for the positional analysis, which was discussed in the previous chapter. The table below details the number of respondents based on their position across the capital city and Golestan Province.

Table 5.2. The number of respondents across government levels- based on the institutional position

Case	State	Civil Society	Total
The capital city	8	12	20
Golestan Province	12	12	24
Total	20	24	44

The sub-group of state respondents in the table above includes people associated with policymaking positions, namely MPs from legislative, governor-generals, advisors, director-generals, ministerial managers, office holder, city councillors, and junior civil servants and officials. The sub-group of civil society, on the other hand, includes people directly experienced with and involved in NGO activism across the two chosen policy domains of study. This category includes ordinary members as well as presidents of advocacy NGOs.

As for the state sub-group, the study adopted the third criterion for dividing respondents, which is their 'political affiliation'. This study interviewed several policymakers from across both reformist and conservative periods and camps in Iran. This allowed comparing the political ideology and policies during the two periods, as well as across political camps. The table below details the number of respondents based on their political affiliation.

Table 5.3. The number of state respondents across government levels- based on political affiliation

Case	State respondent	Reformist	Conservative
The capital city	8	4	4
Golestan Province	12	6	6
Total	20	10	10

More than equalising the number of respondents from the two political camps, the balance between the chosen respondents was managed in a way that did not result in a gap or bias in the collected data. In case that the information the respondents presented did not sound reliable or secure enough, as well as in the case of lack of access to more respondents, the

researcher was able to find and collect alternative material respecting the mixed method of study, as the next section will discuss in detail.

Moreover, it should be noted that while the political affiliation criterion was mainly used for state participants, it was also followed when choosing NGO respondents. It means that respondents in the civil society sub-group in both policy domains also include NGO activists from both conservative and reformist camps. This allowed for comparison and contrast in the political viewpoints of NGO activists.

Concerning the number of respondents in the tables above, two points are noteworthy. First, in relation to the use of open-ended interviews and qualitative research, 'a large number of respondents' was not necessary because the smaller could provide enough information (Silverman, 2000, p. 111). Second, the balance between the number of respondents across the capital city and Golestan is not very equally distributed. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher anticipated that more respondents are needed in the capital city in order to explain the complexities of decision-making due to Tehran hosting a large number of state offices and being the centre of policymaking and political contention, and also due to the large size of the population and political society. However, in practice, the smaller number of interviewees presented enough information, examples, and evidence. This was because, in the capital of Iran, the chosen respondents were former or current officials in the policymaking centres and so were more experienced and knowledgeable than those in the Golestan Province, with the former seeming to be more aware of the legal and practical practices. Also, in relation to national politics, the available secondary sources such as materials of websites and official documents demonstrated to be rich to help the research.

Furthermore, in terms of presenting relevant information, whilst in the capital city, civil activists were seen to be more knowledgeable than state respondents concerning the interview questions, in Golestan, state respondents were more knowledgeable and experienced than civil activists. Regarding practicalities, in Tehran, access to high-profile respondents was more difficult. Concerning the unequal number of respondents across the two policy domains, it should be noted that, in general, the respondents contacted in the environmental domain presented more useful data whereas some of the women's-rights activists did not present much useful and insightful information. This was because of the nature of the information. In the women's-rights domain, the political character of data made some respondents reluctant to

disclose information. This explains why the researcher needed to interview a larger number of respondents in the women’s-rights domain too.

Exploratory Field Trip

Fieldwork was designed in such a way that required two field trips for data collection. Based on this plan, the researcher carried out a one-month exploratory trip to Iran in March 2013, which was after deepening knowledge of the literature and theories of the topic. The purpose of the trip was to gather preliminary information in relation to Iranian NGOs and their status in different areas of activism, as well as planning for utilising the network of contacts and spotting the respondents. In line with the pre-set sample of respondents, several initial contacts were established with civil activists.

Data Collection in Golestan Province

The main phase of the data collection commenced in March 2014, and took approximately six months, until early September. Throughout this phase, Golestan Province—notably the researcher’s home—was chosen as the first site of the study. By using a snowball method of sampling, a preliminary list of respondents was sorted respecting the three criteria discussed earlier (Tansey, 2007). The list of respondents was later expanded and completed through the intermediation of available contacts. This sampling procedure was applied to both state respondents and civil society activists. In a six-month timescale, the researcher exhausted his network of contacts to cover all information based on the plan with 24 interviews, besides the collection of documents. The table below presents the information about the respondents in Golestan, based on their policy domain.

Table 5.4. The number of respondents based on policy domains and positions in Golestan Province

Policy domain	State	Civil society	Total	
Environmental	2	3	5	11
Women’s rights	3	3	6	
General	7	6	13	
Total	12	12	24	

As it can be seen in the table above, in total 11 out of 24 respondents were state actor or civil-activists specialised on either one of the two different policy domains; whereas the profile of 13 respondents, in the row of general respondents, was not limited to a single policy domain. Instead, these respondents were experts either on civil society or on the state; it included officials such as governor-generals in provincial institutions. The area of authority of state respondents in this category is general as includes all policy domains. Appendix 1 provides greater information in relation to the respondents, their affiliation, and position in Golestan Province.

Data Collection in the Capital City

After completing the fieldwork in Golestan Province, the second phase of the field trip continued from early September 2014 in Tehran, the capital city, and continued for one year. In the beginning, several first links with reformist politicians and civil activists in Tehran were already available to the researcher. Nonetheless, these links were re-established and developed through the available links in Golestan Province. Through the snowball method, this phase completed more than 20 interviews, as well as a document collection.

Due to several reasons, this phase took longer time than in Golestan, including the difficulties of accessing respondents, a matter of time and cost, longer distances, as well as the research limitations, which will be discussed later. The table below presents the information related to the number of respondents in Tehran, based on their policy domain and position.

Table 5.5. The number of respondents based on policy domains and positions in the Capital

Policy domain	State	Civil society	Total	
Environmental	2	3	5	13
Women's rights	2	6	8	
General	4	3	7	
Total	8	12	20	

As it can be seen, in total 13 out of 20 respondents were specialised either of policy domains; whereas the background and profile of 7 respondents was general. In this table, the category of general respondents on the one side includes civil-activist respondents i.e. journalists, political

activists, scholar, freelance civil activists, and on the other side, state respondents who were identified as policymakers at national institutions. The area of authority of state respondents in this category is general as including both environmental and women’s-rights domains, besides all other domains. Appendix 2 shows the list of respondents in Tehran, with greater details in relations to their affiliation, status, and background.

In general, the study included a diverse set of respondents, which helped the analysis to have an inclusive account of the facts. The figure below illustrates the sampling details and the location of the respondents, as well as the direction they were approached.

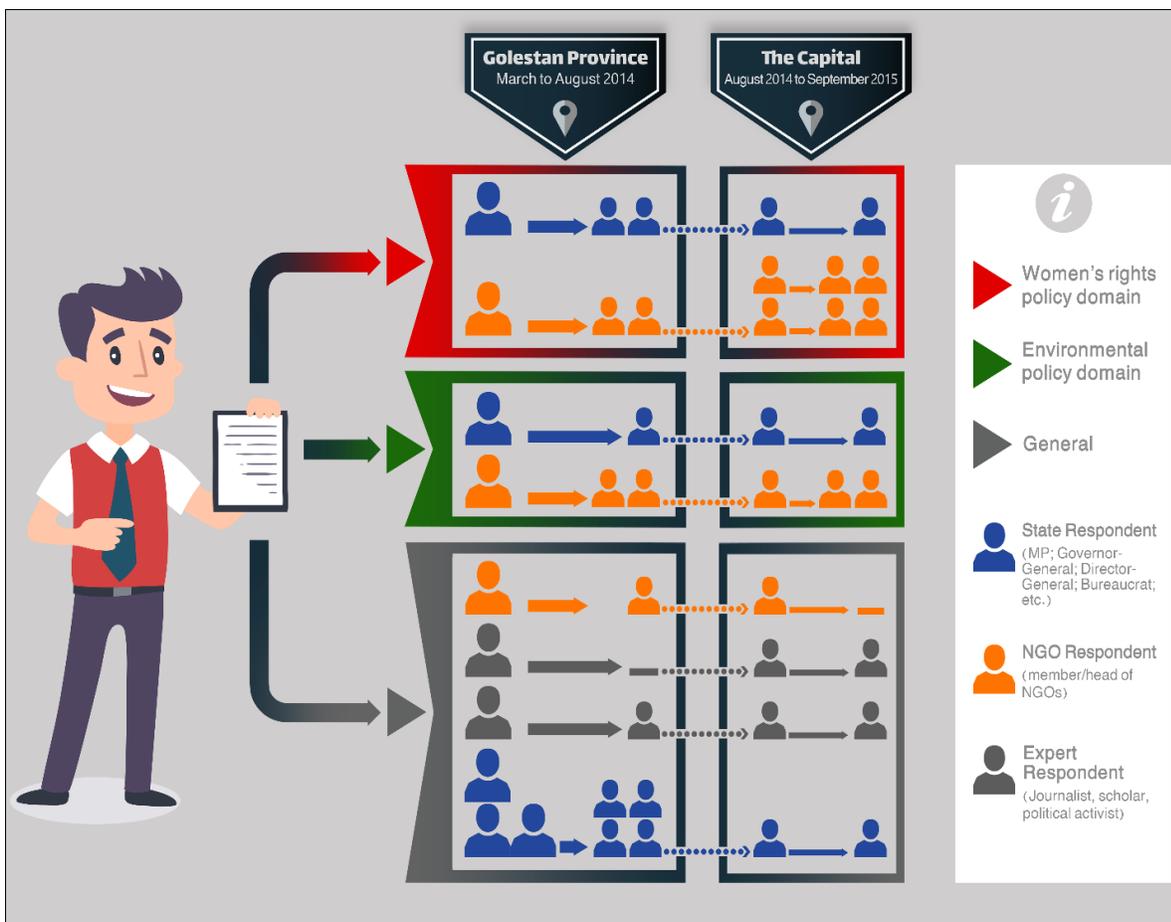


Figure 5.1. The map of respondents and the direction of approaching them

A point to be considered is that some interviewees were found to have an overlap regarding their background. Some of the interviewed policymakers had experience in NGO activism or other institutions of civil society, e.g. mass media; and also some NGO activists had experience

in cooperating with other institutions of civil society or with governmental agencies across different terms. This is a common phenomenon in undemocratic regimes in the MENA due to the extensive networks of patrimonial relations (Heydemann, 2007; Erdmann & Engel, 2006). In the tables above, however, the study categorised respondents based on their main profile that was defined by the researcher based on the respondent's primary area of expertise and profession, regardless of the overlap in the background. This overlap posed the risk of bias in the respondents' tendency towards several questions of the interview, especially concerning the need for respecting confidentiality by the former policymakers. Nonetheless, this was also an advantage for the research, because these respondents were able to provide a comprehensive explanation to questions, and sometimes factual points concerning the realities of the government and state-NGOs interactions in Iran.

Conducting Interviews and Questionnaires

The length of interviews and the time taken to complete the written material in the questionnaires depended on the personal experience and skills of the respondents. Those with less experience and information finished the interview in half an hour, and with more struggles; whereas those with more experience had interviews lasting longer, in a few cases around three hours. The respondents of the questionnaires had enough time and privacy as they filled the forms and prepared it for collection in a few days after delivery. The interview conversations and written questionnaires were all recorded and done in Persian—the official language in Iran.

Themes and Codes

As mentioned before, the design of the interviews and questionnaires were semi-structured and dictated by the theoretical framework (see Appendix 3). The interviews and questionnaires included some initial questions that were common for all respondents, followed by particular questions considering the category of respondents' affiliation and position, in line with Bryman's recommendation (2012). As for the main parts of the interview, the questions were designed in the same way for same-positioned respondents. The common introductory questions were formulated based on the pre-chosen themes of study, including:

- 'the perception of respondents about NGO', and
- 'the context of political participation of NGOs in Iran's legal and policy documents'.

Also, as a common theme, all respondents were asked about:

- ‘the political tendencies of the reformist and conservative states’, and
- ‘the position of NGOs in the political discourse and official policies of reformists and conservatives’.

The remaining parts of interviews were allocated to themes and questions formulated to pursue ‘the frequency and character of NGOs’ relations with other actors, including ‘state agencies’ and ‘non-state actors’, i.e. political parties and media.

On the one hand, NGO activists from both women’s-rights and environmental domains were asked to explain and elaborate on the subject of their ‘claims and demands’ in their area. On the other hand, the former officials and MPs from reformist and conservative periods were asked to describe their ‘official blueprints and formal discourse’ about women’s-rights and environmental domains, as well as NGOs. This allowed comparing the discourse and official approach of the state and civil society across the two policy domains. Furthermore, a section of the interview was dedicated to the respondent’s assessment and opinion about the changes in ‘the official rules and laws’ of the policy domains about public participation, and also about the ‘style and procedures of decision-making’ across reformist and conservative governments. Concerning the practical aspects of interactions in policy domains, respondents from both state and NGO participants were asked to highlight some instances of laws and policies as outcomes of NGOs’ pressure and action within policy networks.

In order to spot the role of other actors across the two policy domains—as the members of policy networks—, NGO activists were requested to explain the ‘role and significance’, especially the ‘mass media’ and ‘political parties’. Also, the ‘relation and interaction’ of NGOs with these members of policy networks was discussed in the interview.

The experts i.e. politicians, journalists, civil activists, and scholars, as the general observers of between state-NGOs interactions, were asked similar questions, as well as questions prompting on ‘particular aspects of confrontations and contentions between NGOs and state agencies’ across two terms of government, and the ‘contribution of other actors’ in that.

Due to the open-ended and qualitative design of the interviews, during the interview, the researcher was positioned to go through details, ask more questions and seek out examples based on the ongoing subject of conversation. Despite the advantages, however, throughout the interviews, some issues were faced that should be pointed out in order to be taken into consideration (Berry, 2002). First, because of the hostile political climate in Iran, doing an

interview with a researcher from a foreign university might be potentially risky; hence, at times, the respondents—especially the politicians from conservative and reformist governments—were reluctant to discuss and open up about sensitive issues, such as ‘the mechanisms of controlling and restricting NGOs’. Also, a number of former conservative officials refused to take part in the interview, which raised the non-response error (Bryman, 2012). Second, in some cases, interviewees appeared to exaggerate or, conversely, peremptorily dismissive in relation to the role they or other actors played in the political processes and events. For instance, the respondents from the NGO side tended to exaggerate their influence in situations or to show a ‘critical gesture’ against the state; whereas state respondents demonstrated an interest in showing a ‘democratic character’ while describing their behaviours and policies towards NGOs. These two issues, while potentially damaging the reliability of the data, were managed through the application of the triangulation strategy. As for the first issue, the researcher asked the unanswered questions from other respondents that had the same position, i.e. state position. As for the second issue, cross-checking the responses of interviewees revealed some more details in many cases.

Observations

Along with conducting interviews and questionnaires, the researcher carried out indirect participant observation when feasible. This method facilitated gaining first-hand information and insights pertaining to the realities of politics in Iran, especially in relation to the interaction between NGOs and policymakers (Bryman, 1989, p. 118).

The researcher had the opportunity to secure entry permission from two NGOs: one in Golestan and one in Tehran. There, the researcher took part in two of the internal meetings of the NGOs, where there was a discussion centred on making decisions about ‘the strategies for provoking public opinion’ in order to put pressure on particular politicians, as well as about ‘the mechanisms of accessing the governor-general and lobbying’. In another case, owing to the links with NGO activists, the researcher had the chance to take part in a meeting between an environmental NGO and a Director-General in Golestan Province in 2015. During that meeting, the researcher focused on ‘the subject and manner of arguments and conversations’ between NGO members and governors. Further to the internal meetings, attending two large-scale seminars, notably between a large number of NGOs and tenures of public authorities, presented another opportunity to explore and examine different aspects of ‘the venue of networking’ between NGOs and policymakers. These two seminars included:

- A national seminar titled ‘Assessing the Advocacy Role of Iranian NGOs in Policy Processes’—Tehran, Spring 2015, and
- A national seminar titled ‘29th National Gathering of NGOs in Iran’—Ardebil, summer 2013.

The two seminars above presented significant and valuable opportunities to discover ‘the common types of behaviour’, ‘subject of debates’ and ‘characteristics of formal debates’ between civil society representatives and state officials in Iran.

However, in the procedures of observation, there is always the risk that subjects’ behaviour change as a result of the researcher’s presence (Bryman, 1989, p. 121). In the case of this research, this issue was not evident. First, in the case of the NGOs’ internal meetings, the established frequent contacts and familiarities between the researcher and NGO members prevented ‘role-playing’. Second, in the case of the seminars, the presence of the researcher as one participant amongst hundreds of participants did not provoke any distraction for or influence on the ongoing procedures, nor was it noticeable for them.

The researcher took some notes concerning the mentioned events and procedures while doing the data collection, which helped to improve the narratives in the chapters presenting the findings.

2.2. The Secondary Data

In this study, in addition to interviewing and observations, secondary sources of data were utilised, including official agenda documents, announcements, memoranda, leaflets, minutes of meetings, official reports, academic studies and publications, media archives (Yin, 1984, p. 85). This category of source includes both the material released in Iran by organisations of the state and civil society and the publications, mostly academic, outside Iran. Hand-in-hand with carrying out the interviews, the responsible state agencies across the women’s-rights and environmental policy domains were identified at both the provincial and national levels in order to facilitate the collection of relevant official documents, consisting of the specific rules for regulating NGOs in policymaking. Furthermore, the websites of the state agencies were identified and explored in order to find and download relevant information, which was mostly in the Persian language.

This secondary source of data provided a number of advantages regarding the subject of research and fieldwork (Bryman, 1989, p. 124; Tansey, 2007). First, in combination with interviews, which were mainly centred on the practical aspect and stories in relation to policymaking, the secondary documents provided valuable information concerning the government communications and aims of policies in Iran. These documents allowed for a comparison of the practice of policymaking and the official documents of the government across the reformist and conservative periods. They were also a measure to evaluate the distance between the verbal claims and practices and actions of policymakers. Second, these sources facilitated cross-checking for verifying the validity of data in the interviews. Third, whilst the primary strategy of the research is qualitative, the official secondary sources provided several quantitative data relating to various issues, such as 'the number of NGOs' and 'distribution of government funds', for example, which supported the research.

In addition, the researcher referred to several mass media and journalists, as informative sources of data, across Golestan Province and the Capital, which had a focus on Iran's current politics and civil-society's life, and accordingly gathered a copy of several issues in relation to NGOs and their status during the reformist and conservative periods. In the press archives, almost 20 interviews with relevant content were identified, which were done with policymakers from both the reformist and conservative state officials, as well as with experienced civil activists. These complemented the gaps in the interviews of the present study. Besides these resources, the researcher was able to gain access to the archives and membership in several social media and online messenger of environmental and women's-rights groups and public channels. These channels were recognised as offering a plentiful amount of virtual conversations and debates between civil activists, who, on a regular basis, reported and discussed their activities and issues with one another.

Regarding books, Iranian scholars have published many books in relation to the politics, government, and civil society in Iran, which while having useful information, have not been targeted and considered by foreign scholars, mostly because of the Persian language of the publications. The researcher could identify and use several analytical and academic publications of Iran with a focus on the Iranian political regime and civil society.

Despite the diversity in the published material and official reports at the hands of the researcher, it should be noted that because of the political control on publications and media, as well as due to the censorship in practice, in Iran the information and data sometimes were

biased, less factual, and unreliable. The offices usually seek to manipulate the statistics and information for the maintenance and justification of the ruling political camp, or otherwise in order to exaggerate their performance. Specifically, when it comes to publishing statistics and reports in relation to NGOs, the central organisation responsible is the Ministry of Interior and its subordinate offices and the Office of Governor-General across provinces, which are political in character and profile and strongly influenced by the political ideology of the ruling camp. This could damage the reliability of its reports. Nonetheless, this issue was also managed through triangulation and cross-checking the information with NGO activists and expert's information.

3. Limitations and Difficulties

The political regime of Iran, predominantly owing to its undemocratic character, makes the field and situation in the country hostile and unwelcoming to critical and independent research on political issues. More specifically, from 2009, the securitisation of the political sphere due to the rule of radical conservatives made the field intensively complicated for researchers from foreign institutes and universities. Some foreigner researchers have been stopped and interrogated. This characteristics of the field of research caused some difficulties while meant that it would be possible for researchers to encounter risks when conducting field research in Iran. The political background and public profile of the researcher in the case of this study was another reason that caused some difficulties during the fieldwork.

During the second phase of fieldwork in 2014, the Intelligence Service of Iran, unpredictably and without any prior notice, seized the researcher's passport and banned him from travelling abroad, because of both his political profile, i.e. student activist and partisan background, and research mobility. While, on paper and according to the laws, there is no restriction on political research, in practice, the police and Intelligence Service may make a track of records of foreigner researcher and Iranians who study abroad. This happened to the researcher in Iran. Because of the un-transparent legal procedures, unaccountable officials and unresponsive judicial system, the process of seizing the researcher's passport happened off-record and informal. This meant there was no official resort to chase this issue effectively. As a result, the researcher was unable to return after finishing his fieldwork. Interrogation sessions followed this incident. These focused on ensuring that the researcher and his fieldwork would not cause

any risk to the national security and reputation of Iran. The problem took a lot of effort to be resolved and, consequently, delayed the return of the researcher to the home university in Ireland. This caused a two-year delay (2014-2016) in the process of writing this thesis. Nonetheless, it should be reminded that, the asset of the researcher in surviving this difficulty and the obstacles on the field was his extensive networks of contacts. By approaching the influential politicians and negotiating the issue with them during the two years, the researcher managed to convince the Intelligence Service about the nature of the research and the researcher's mobility.

4. The Reliability of Data

Concerning the difficulty with regard to gaining access to data sources in Iran and the use of the researcher's position and a network of contacts, 'positionality' is important when evaluating the reliability of this research (McDowell, 1992). Positionality refers to the status of the researcher in relation to the participants and data sources (Merriam *et al.*, 2005, pp. 405-6).

In order to conduct fieldwork in an undemocratic context having an 'insider' status is necessary to a large extent (Gerring, 2008; Tessler & Jamal, 2006). The researcher of this study was active amongst reformist civil society for years prior to his PhD course. This position brought him deep knowledge in relation to political actors and streams, social factions, local culture, offices and organisations of state, formal and informal procedures and traditions, and the Persian language in Iran. The position of the researcher was practically advantageous for identifying and approaching respondents, as well as for understanding verbal and non-verbal clues, designing and asking insightful and useful questions to respondents, as the literature confirms (Merriam *et al.*, 2005, p. 411). The researcher's position and knowledge of the Persian literature and sources in relation to civil society and politics in Iran was useful not only for including the relevant data from the Iranian sources and the academic literature of this country, but also providing new knowledge that exists neither in Persian nor in English. Moreover, making access to the official sources of data from state organisations is difficult and sometimes impossible in Iran, due to the lack of political trust. The networks of contacts of the researcher, especially with former and current officials, helped to manage this issue. Also, the local position of the researcher made it possible to identify, access, and collect first-hand information from a large number of Iranian websites and media, as well as newspapers archival.

However, this position might be a source of bias. Positionality constitutes a trade-off between accessibility to data and unbiased status. The disadvantages of this insider position are in terms of being 'inherently biased', being supportive of the affiliated political orientation, i.e. the reformist in Iran, and asking 'provocative questions' (Merriam *et al.*, 2005, p. 411). Nonetheless, the character and design of this study attenuate this bias. The insider position of the researcher was not a 'central' one, because the researcher had been away from Iran since 2010, three years before the fieldwork took place, a time in which he was not directly involved in politics and activism in his home country. This distance means that the insider position of the researcher had become a 'peripheral' one, which subsequently led to lower risks of bias (Merriam *et al.* 2005, p. 410). In addition to the research design itself, in order to avoid any personal bias, this research included different viewpoints and exercised standard rules of researching such as triangulation in data collection and systematic analysis (Tansey, 2007). Concerning the first point, the study included participants from both state and non-state parties and having diverse political opinions in relation to the topic of research. Therefore, impartiality was respected. For this reason, chances of replication leading to different results are meagre. Moreover, as the respondents have been chosen from the civil society and the state actors with a proper profile in Iran, the context is open to replicability.

5. The Research Ethics

Concerning ethical considerations, the researcher in the first place informed all respondents in the study of its topic and purposes, and acquired consent from all participants, oral or written (see Appendix 3).

It should also be noted that none of the respondents in this study occupied a vulnerable position, neither sensitive status, as they are civil, political, or state participants that have been officially and openly acting in the public spheres. In addition, their position, affiliation, and information are publicly available and accessible. Thus, approaching and interviewing them did not lead to a risk for these respondents to be identified by the state as activists, because the government already knew them for their activities. Nevertheless, to apply care, the identity of the non-state respondents was kept anonymous and safely protected, as they requested. With regard to the data collected, official documents concerning Iranian organisations which are publicly available were not considered sensitive documents and actions towards protecting

them (e.g. encryption or password protection) was not required. On the contrary, the researcher employed extra care in the handling of data such as questionnaires and interviews, which he protected by storing them in a password protected and encrypted device. These are in original language and can be made available upon request, in an anonymised form.

6. Data Analysis

In the phase of organising the data collected, a mixed method of coding was adopted. Such strategies and methods helped to make sense of the empirical data with the purpose of analysing the 'roles', 'behaviours and interactions', and 'rules and practices' in policy networks (Saldaña, 2009; Gibbs, 2007). Process coding method was used to analyse strategic and routine interactions, negotiations, confrontations and relations amongst different state and non-state actors (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 247; Saldaña, 2009, p. 77). The versus coding method was utilised so that the study could compare and contrast the influences and attitudes of state and non-state actors towards one another and do so in a binary way (Saldaña, 2009, p. 94). Moreover, in order to identify the common values and discourse within the policy networks, whilst also analysing the political ideology of reformist and conservative states, the study applied values coding based on participants' opinions (Saldaña, 2009, p. 89).

Concerning the three regime-level factors as the independent variable of study—i.e. government level, state's political ideology, and policy domain—, a 2*2 structure organises the analysis and the order of the thesis' chapters. Concerning the two types of policy domains in the present study, the empirical chapters are foremost divided into two main areas to compare environmental and women's-rights domains. Additionally, the government levels divide the chapters into two levels, the provincial and national. Thus, there are four empirical chapters. In each of the four chapters, the ruling period of the reformist and conservative camps formed the narrative line about the trajectory of change in the structural aspects of policy networks, as well as the opportunities and constraints imposed upon the agency of advocacy of NGOs. The table below illustrates this model of analysis, which also shapes the structure of the empirical chapters, as adopted in this thesis.

Table 5.6. The organisation of the subunits of the case

Policy domain	Women's Rights				Environmental			
Level of government	Central		Provincial		Central		Provincial	
State's ideology	Reformist	Conservative	Reformist	Conservative	Reformist	Conservative	Reformist	Conservative
Chapter	Chapter Seven		Chapter Eight		Chapter Nine		Chapter ten	

Thus, following the next chapter that maps the Iranian political regime explaining the constituting factors of the political opportunity structure in this country, the four empirical chapters are as follows:

- Chapter Seven (dark-blue cell): national women's-rights policy network,
- Chapter Eight (bright-blue cell): provincial women's-rights policy network,
- Chapter Nine (dark-green cell): national environmental policy network, and
- Chapter Ten (bright-green cell): provincial environmental policy network.



CHAPTER SIX

**POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY
STRUCTURE IN THE ISLAMIC
REPUBLIC OF IRAN**



1. The Rise of a Mysterious Regime

'A clerical dictatorship but one of the Middle East's liveliest democracies, [...], a revolution that has rejected secularism but a nation heading toward a fusion of Islamic and Persian identities.'

— *Ira Lapidus (2000)*

The politics of Iran is 'mysterious' as, in terms of institutional structure, it comprises a complex interaction between the authoritarian and democratic offices and procedures (Lapidus, 2000, p. 1738). Moreover, its social and cultural dynamism reflects the struggle between liberal and conservative ideologies in the framework of Islamic ideology.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, adopted democratic rhetoric, and promised to replace the Monarchy of Pahlavi with the Islamic Republic that would follow republican democracies across the world (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015). This almost came true concerning the constitution of regime especially its functional separation of power between three branches and regular elections. However, during the decade of state building (1979-1989), the conservative clerics, as the dominant stratum in the establishment, developed the authoritarian character of the regime, as well as undemocratic institutions (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015). As a consequence, over a few decades, this political regime evolved into a mixture of Islamic autocracy, clerical theocracy and republican democracy in its architecture, which in ideological legitimacy brings together the God's divine and popular sovereignty (Alem, 2002, pp. 105-7; Bashirieh, 2016, pp. 48-51; Alamdari, 2009).

In practice, the interaction between the two institutional and ideological sections of the political regime, on the one hand, and between two camps of political society, on the other hand, has dynamically transformed the relationship between state and civil society across the history of the Islamic Republic (Bashirieh, 2016).

This chapter discusses the political opportunity structure in the Islamic Republic regarding the three independent variables of the study. The next section explains the profile of different policy domains in the Islamic Republic. Then, the offices and procedures of the national and provincial government will be discussed. In the final section, the political ideology and discourse of the two political camps will be compared.

2. The Islamic Republic: A Radical Concept

Islamic Republic (hereafter IR) is a radical concept that drives the political system in Iran. Not only does it function as the core of the political system of Iran but also is the formal political ideology of the state (Khajesarvi, 2010). The profile and significance of different policy domains is characterised based on the elements of this political ideology.

2.1. A Twofold Political Ideology

The IR as an ideology in the context of Iran refers to two main notions, including freedom and political Islam, which originated from the slogan of the 1979 Revolution, i.e. 'Independence, Freedom, the Islamic Republic' (Mohammadi, 2013; Khajesarvi, 2010). The first word in the slogan drives an authoritarian and exclusive aspect in the IR ideology, whilst the second supports the democratic aspect of it, and the third represents its hybrid architecture. This twofold political ideology is the origin of the liberal and conservative socio-political streams and factions of society and motivates the competition between their discourses. Thus, the IR structures the cultural and institutional aspects of political opportunity structure at the regime level and modulates policy processes across different domains and levels.

While integrating both democratic and authoritarian aspects, the IR leans towards political Islam, which overrides democratic notions. Political Islam, apart from being the formal religion, is defined beyond a simple Sharia, rather it is an omnipotent ideology that outlines the policymaking and regulates all practices in social and private life in Iran (Karasipahi, 2009; Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006, pp. 73-76). The exercise of Sharia laws in the territory, and across all policy domains, must be the agenda of the government machinery, and has been explicitly stated in the Iranian Constitution. Also, none of the ordinary laws and policies of the Cabinet of ministers or Parliament should violate Islam, with the Islamic appointive institutions guaranteeing this (Mohammadi, 2014). Nonetheless, in a contradictory manner, IR also places great emphasis on democratic principles. A special section of the Constitution requires respect for the rule of people, citizens' freedoms and political liberties (Bashirieh, 2016, p. 50). This creates a dynamic, integrative political ideology that is internalized in the formal rules and practices.

As a source for policymaking across domains, the IR is spelled out by the Supreme Leader, and his subordinate institutions across policy domains and government levels, based on jurisprudential interpretation of Sharia. The general guidelines of the discourse of the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, have remained remarkably stable over his tenure (1989-), which practically and legally has always been the yardstick for different ruling elites (Holiday, 2011). In practice, this means that his discourse not only set the state's strategies but also confined the discourse and actions of the conservative and reformist governments from 1997 to 2013.

Ayatollah Khamenei has often articulated his discourse so that it encompasses both democratic (populist) and authoritarian (Islamic) rhetorical elements. As for the authoritarian rhetoric, he has taken advantage of the concept of independence and placed the notion of 'resistance' at the centre of his arguments (Holiday 2011). He has defined the identity and stance of the IR as an independent political regime with an Islamic nation against the hegemonic Western ideologies and liberal democracies, especially US; he uses the alternative term *Mardomsalari* (supremacy of people) (Holiday, 2011, pp. 80-90):

'[...] this is something else. [...] it is not that we get democracy from the West and we pin it to religion until we are able to have a complete group, no, *mardomsalari* itself is connected to religion.' (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006, p. 90)

Concerning the internal politics, he has opposed the liberalist thoughts and intellectual discourses and undermined their legitimacy (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006, p. 77; Holiday 2011). Khamenei's discourse distinguishes the IR system from all competing discourses and systems at the domestic and international levels. The large cultural state organisations and government-sponsored media advocate and disseminate this Islamic conservative ideology in their narratives, practices, and material products and publications.

The IR's discourse also combines the elements of Islamism and nationalism. The three colours of Iran's flag, as well as the content of its national anthem, represent this discourse, as they bring the concepts of martyrdom, development and religious prosperity together. In public spheres, e.g. on the main streets of all cities, large posters, monuments, and wall paintings denote and illustrate Islamic and nationalist concepts such as martyrdom, as the figure below shows (Sreberny, 2013). Besides this, the education system and public ceremonies are used as other mechanisms of conceptualising and disseminating the elements of Islamic nationalism. By

resorting to this discourse, the Supreme Leader has always narrated a distinction between self—the Islamic nation and religious conservatives—and others—liberals and secularists (Holiday, 2011). Therefore, the state’s ideology and discourse is paradoxical and integrated, as its structure is.



Figure 6.1: Wall paintings of Ayatollah Khomeini and martyrs of Iran-Iraq war, Tehran/ photo credit: Daily Times

In relation to the democratic aspects of the IR’s discourse, reviewing Ayatollah Khamenei’s key speeches over his tenure shows that he recognises the freedoms and liberties of people and social groups, as well as their right to choose their rulers, policies, and government (Holiday, 2011).⁶ His conversations and verbal orders offer guidelines for the active participation of people in governance (Khajesarvi, 2010). However, he has sought to incorporate a localised populist meaning of democracy in terms of public participation and civil society (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 118). This localisation is an effort to rework democracy in the framework of Sharia, which on a religious-nationalistic ground reduces political participation in electoral activism and mass mobilisation. The example of the mass mobilisation which is often led by the government is street demonstrations on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the 11th of February (see the figure below) (Bashirieh, 2016, pp. 76-80; Zarifinia, 1998; Holiday, 2011). In

⁶ The archive of the Supreme Leader’s speeches in relation to public participation, available at: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=3314>

the IR ideology, there is also a stress on the historical victories of Islam and Muslim outstanding figures, such as the prophets and Imams, and the conservative figures affiliated with Islamic organisations have sought to glorify the Islamic culture. By integrating Islamism with nationalism, in fact, the institutions Islamic Republic regime have sought to strengthen the social cohesion and stability in Iran.



Figure 6.2. The government organises the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution/ photo credit: The Iran Project

In the context of the IR, the concept of civil society comes with an adjusted meaning too, as is common in Islamic regimes (Cavatorta 2013; Sajoo 2004). Ayatollah Khamenei, whilst recommending the inclusion of civil society in policies, has constantly contested the Western concept of civil society and instead replaced it with Islamic concepts, such as *Umma* (the society of Muslims) and *Madinatonabi* (the city of Prophet), which refer to practicing religious ethics under the rule of Islamic leaders and institutions (Feirahi, 1999; Sajoo, 2004). The function of civil society is defined as facilitating the exercise of Islamic values, such as social cooperation, charity, and devotion more than conducting organised participation or activism (Zarifinia, 1998, pp. 173-180).⁷ Also, Ayatollah Khamenei has tailored civil society to the Islamic

⁷ Interview: NGO activists, 2014-15

Revolution's narratives, saying 'to me those NGOs that care about the Revolutionary discourse are more privileged than others'.⁸

In the constitutional and ordinary laws, as well as in the strategic policy documents, the role of NGOs has been recognised, albeit limited by the IR discourse. The registration and activities of NGOs are subject to the security clearance and official acknowledgement of the government authorities, mainly the Ministry of Interior (Ajourloo & Poshti, 2016, p. 65). Nonetheless, NGOs' participatory scope in practice encompasses the range from proposing alternative solutions to appealing the state's decisions.

2.2. The Profiles of Policy Domains

The Constitution stipulates that across all domains, rules and policies must be compatible with the IR ideology. Nevertheless, each domain comes with a certain degree of ideological significance and a particular profile. Policy domains that directly associate with the fundamentals of the IR ideology—i.e., Sharia laws about citizenship and social life—have a higher profile and more significance than technical domains (Bashirieh 1995). Since securitisation and patron-client relations as two essential features of the Iranian regime, these also matter in each policy domains (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 38). Association with the function and interests of security, military or Islamic institutions, increases the political significance of a domain, as well as the interests of individual establishment members, such as conservative clerics and revolutionary figures.⁹ Otherwise, a policy domain is expected to be low-profile.

Across government turnovers, sectoral offices of the executive and Parliament have been subject to different levels of attention and intervention of the Islamic and security institutions of the establishment. In general, the offices that deal with executive-industrial domains of public service and social welfare, if not engaged with economic interests of establishment and security forces, have been subject to less political intervention. The environmental domain is considered a technical domain about which the neither the Islamic, nor the security-military,

⁸ The personal website of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, April 2017, available at: <http://ngobase.ir/node/1309>

⁹ They are normally individuals related with the family of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Office of Supreme Leader, or conservative clerics and figures that are trusted by them. Interview: a partisan, 2015

institutions evince much interest (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015; Doyle & Simpson, 2006, pp. 756-8). However, the broad area of human rights, including women’s rights, has always been considered high-profile, as risky, for the interest of the Islamic and security institutions (Moinifar, 2010, p. 415; Ertan, 2012, p. 10). The leverage of the establishment on the political/ideological domains has always been evident—regardless of which political camp rules the executive or Parliament.¹⁰ The table below instances the formal title of political vs technical policy domains in Iran for which the Cabinet and Parliament have a specialised commission or offices.

Table 6.1. The political and technical policy domains of the state in Iran

Political domains	Technical domains
Culture and Islamic Guidance; Defence and Armed Force Logistics; Economic Affairs and Finance; Foreign Affairs; Intelligence; Interior; Justice; Petroleum	Agriculture; Communication and Information Technology; Cooperation, Labour and Social Welfare; Education; Health and Medical Education; Industry, Mine and Trade; Roads and Urban Development; Science

The importance of the political domains can be observed by the establishment frequently intervening in appointments or making decisive policies. Moreover, the policies of the executive, as well as their subordinated offices, in the political domains have been under the legal audit of the Parliament.¹¹ In practice, in the women’s rights domain, the intervention of the security and Islamic institutions has been evident across different periods. The Office of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has officially admitted that during the last three decades it has always had a role choosing political ministers, as well as in setting the policies of vice-presidents and in areas central to Islamic ideology.¹² A similar trend applies to Parliament. In women’s issues, the relevant Commission and MPs are under the influence of the establishment and Islamic institutions, and occasionally security institutions.¹³ The profile of the Parliament’s commission also affects its composition. From a legal perspective, MPs have the freedom of join

¹⁰ Interview: NGO and political activists, 2014-15

¹¹ Interview: political activists, 2015

¹² The website of the Supreme Leader, June 2016, available at: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37223>

¹³ Interview: former MP, 2014

commissions; in practice, however, being a member and especially chair of a commission with a political profile is subject to compliance with the approach of Islamic and security institutions, according to a former MP.¹⁴ Corresponding with the establishment, from the societal arena, NGOs, political camps and citizens also have become involved within high-profile domains and directed pressures from below on the composition and policies of the political commissions of the Cabinet and Parliament.

Therefore, in Iran, the political opportunity structure is subject to the IR ideology. On the one hand, the Islamic dimension of this ideology systematically confines the opportunities because it hardly tolerates the competing discourses and actors. On the other hand, its democratic dimension provides for political freedoms and civil rights (Thaler *et al.*, 2010). This duality causes 'systematic inefficiencies and paradox[es]', but it also underpins political dynamism (Tazmini, 2013, p. 99; Bashirieh, 2016). The third section of this chapter deals with this dynamism as expressed in the rotation of power between the reformist and conservative camps.

3. The Structure of the Political Regime

For Ayatollah Khomeini, the 1979 Revolution aimed to translate the idea of the Islamic Republic into state institutions. Nonetheless, in the process of establishing the state apparatus from 1979 to 1988, other political groups contributed too, e.g. liberalists, nationalists and leftists. Therefore, the institutional architecture reflected their influence, albeit subject to the dominance of Islamic institutions (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015; Holiday, 2011; Gheissari & Nasr, 2006). This hybrid architecture is reflected in the structure of both national and provincial governments.

3.1. Policymaking at the National Level

In the central level, there is a complicated confluence and interaction between the republican section and unelected authoritarian institutions. The interaction of the sections of the regime

¹⁴ Interview: 2014

that are 'loosely connected and fiercely opposed' runs the process of making national policies and determines the structure of political opportunity (Tazmini, 2013, p. 99). The figure below illustrates the national level institutions of the state.

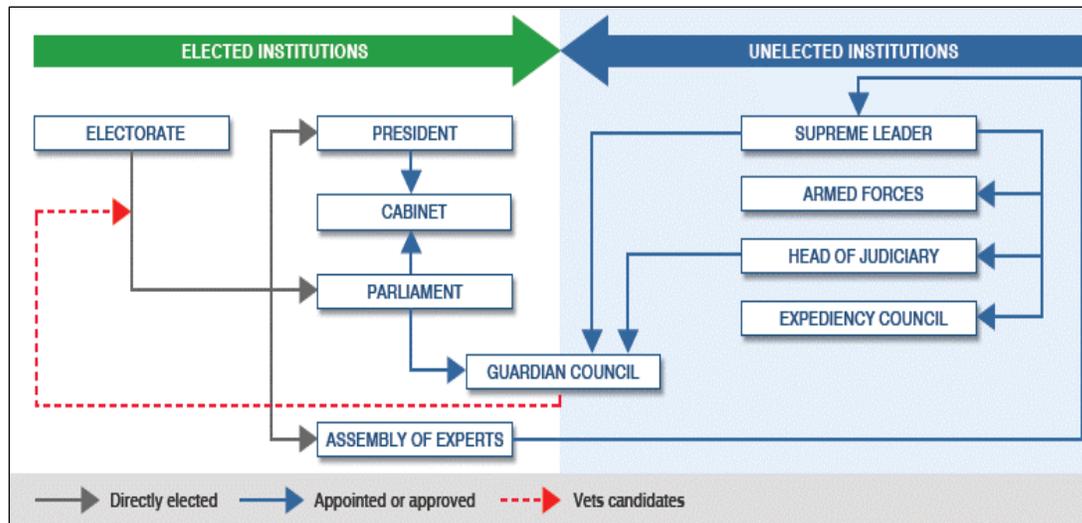


Figure 6.3. The structure of the political regime of Iran at the national level/ image credit: BBC

On the left side of the figure, the Iranian regime has an elected Parliament and a President who chooses the cabinet subject to parliamentary approval. On the right side, the unelected Islamic, security, and military institutions, which constitute the core of the establishment, oversee policymaking and legislation (Tazmini, 2013, p. 99). Political contestation and policymaking across domains is the function of the interaction between the offices of these elected and unelected institutions. Overall, the unelected Islamic and military institutions, override the republican section. Since the revolution, the IR has been shifting from a pseudo-democracy towards a semi-democracy with the republican institutions gradually gaining importance (Bashirieh, 2016, p. 51).

The Unelected Section

Islamic, military or paramilitary, and security institutions, all together, secure the ideology and interests of the Islamic-revolutionary establishment (Tazmini, 2013, p. 99). This section includes: (i) the Supreme Leader, (ii) the Expediency Council, (iii) the Guardian Council, and (iii) the Judiciary, as well as the military, police, and religio-political paramilitary forces, notably the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC). Whilst the Supreme Leader position is an autocratic Islamic institution with some democratic attributes; other institutions maintain the theocracy

of conservatives and clerics as the dominant stratum (Bashirieh, 2016, pp. 50-52; Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 118).

All the Islamic and security institutions are subordinate to the broad authority of the Supreme Leader, who is a religious jurist at the apex of the state. According to the Constitution, the Supreme Leader sets the long-term strategies and global agendas of the state (Khajesarvi, 2010, p. 90). In a practical sense, he defines the 'must' and 'must not'.

The majority of institutional power is centralised in the Supreme Leader's hand, and the institutions affiliated with his office. He can appoint and dismiss the commanders of the military and security forces, the chief of the only TV broadcaster, the head of the Judiciary, the Guardian Council members, as well as choosing the head and members of tens of Islamic schools, state-sponsored mass media, and cultural organisations across all domains and regions (Tezcur, 2012, p. 123). His power overrides the power of elected institutions, as he is given the authority to inaugurate or dismiss the elected President, vetoing his agendas and decisions; as well as the decisions and agendas of Parliament (Khajesarvi, 2010).

The institutional and ideological influence of the Supreme Leader is extended and sustained across the policy domains and regional divisions, with his representatives articulating his discourse across all provinces—the Imam for Friday Prayer Sermon—and, his delegates auditing policies in almost all state institutions—the Islamic Commissars (Tezcur, 2012, p. 123). These representatives and delegates function as the eyes and ears of the Supreme Leader, which means, in addition to sustaining top-down authority; they potentially can be access points for the public to communicate with the highest positions (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 24). Thus, all institutions of the state, whether directly or indirectly, are influenced by the wide power and the discourse of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (Ganji, 2008).

The authoritarian institutions also extend into civil society through a body of semi-governmental cultural and economic foundations, as well as religious associations, under the ultimate control of the Office of the Supreme Leader, such as the The Organisation for Islamic Propagation, Foundation for Oppressed People, Foundation for Martyrdom and Sacrifice, Assistance Committee, Islamic schools. These hybrid institutions, interest groups and governmental agencies at the same time, have two functions: (i) to manage the parastatal enterprises in the economic interest of the ruling clerics, and (ii) to extend the influence of Supreme Leader and conservative clerics across the lower classes (Tezcur, 2012, p. 123; Raket,

2009). There is no transparent and accessible formal document outlining the scope of these public and Islamic institutions, which means that they are the members of informal networks under the Islamic flag.¹⁵ The establishment has developed more than 60 types of schools and foundations with cultural-religious brands, which receive huge funds every year, defined vaguely in a specific section in the Annual Budget document, which has always been exempt from public audit and tax.¹⁶

The security and military forces, in addition to their professional missions, also guard the interests and safety of the conservative establishment. In Iran, the elected and unelected sections have their specialised security and intelligence services that ultimately follow the orders of the Ayatollah Khamenei's office, albeit with different interpretations and behaviours. In addition to the Police and Military, which have a professionally-defined profile in guaranteeing the internal safety, the Constitution legitimises the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a paramilitary institution with a substantial cultural and political authority and answers directly to Ayatollah Khamenei (Tazmini, 2013, p. 99; Thaler *et al*, 2010, p. 34). With more than 120,000 official personnel, plus 300,000 affiliated members across regions and policy domains, the IRGC is the most potent security-military force in Iran (Green *et al*, 2009; Thaler *et al*, 2010, p. 34). As the security arm of the Supreme Leader, it protects the establishment from opposition forces and competing discourses. The IRGC, together with the Police and Judiciary, have extended their influence through suppression and by appealing to the ideological missions assigned to them by the Constitution (Mohammadi, 2013).

Notwithstanding its authoritarianism, the unelected section of the regime—and, in particular, the institution of Supreme Leader—maintains democratic linkage. The appointment of the Supreme Leader is the function of an elected religio-political council named as the Assembly of Experts that is legally meant to supervise the performance of the Supreme Leader and the institutions under him. In theory, this is to fulfil popular sovereignty at a high level, but in practice, Ayatollah Khamenei—since his appointment in 1989 —has overcome monitoring mechanisms (Kadivar, 2010). During recent decades, the Assembly of Experts has been filled by conservative Mullahs and transmuted to an authoritarian institution serving the establishment,

¹⁵ A report on 'Where the Cultural Budget of the County Are Spent?', Shargh Newspaper, 17 April 2016, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=3343121>

¹⁶ *Ibid*

with its agendas, meetings, and deliberations mostly inaccessible and unpublished to the public (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 28).

The Guardian Council is the major theocratic institution that connects the unelected authoritarian section with the elected section. By inspecting the policymaking and vetting electoral competitions, it serves the Islamic interest of the conservative Mullahs and establishment. Six Islamic jurists in this Council are appointed directly by the Supreme Leader, whilst six other jurists are chosen in a cooperative procedure between Parliament and the Judiciary (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015). The jurists in the Guardian Council, with Islamic profile and legal knowledge, ensure the compliance of the legislation and the executive's policies with both Islamic codes and the Constitution (Khajesarvi, 2010, p. 102). With an Islamic legitimacy, it has a range of extensive powers that restrict both the constitutional and electoral aspects of the regime (Tazmini, 2013, p. 102). The Guardian Council can veto Parliament's decisions, and interpret constitutional and ordinary laws. Its most significant power is its supervision of electoral procedures, which ranges from vetting candidates to approving the election and its results. The conservative clerics in the Guardian Council have privileged the conservatives in elections (Khajesarvi, 2010).

Another important authoritarian institution is the Expediency Council, which is the exemplar of the discretionary Islamic nature of the IR. It consists of 32 political and religious figures affiliated with the establishment, and has dual roles in policymaking: (i) administrative: compilation and delivery of the strategic documents and policies of the state to the Supreme Leader. (ii) political: mediating between Parliament and the Guardian Council in case of disputes over legislation (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015). It does not engage with political routine processes and ordinary policies. In practice, the public—including NGOs—has little or no access to Expediency Council, only the Cabinet and Parliament can use this channel.¹⁷

The Judiciary is also a semi-elected institution that safeguards the practice of Islamic codes. The Supreme Leader appoints the head of this branch on the basis of jurisprudential, political, and religious qualities (BBC, 2009). The Judiciary is not independent, has always been under the rule of the conservative establishment Mullahs (Rakel, 2009; Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015).

In practice, the profile and attitudes of the authoritarian institutions depend on who controls those (Thaler *et al.*, 2010). Usually, conservatives and fundamentalists run the authoritarian

¹⁷ Interview: political activist, 2015

section of the regime through patron-client relations and securitisation which enlists the support of the military and paramilitary forces (Thaler *et al.*, 2010). Politicians and clerics with revolutionary and conservative profiles have developed kinship and political networks, which help sustain the establishment. Beyond their political affiliations, however, many of the high-profile political figures from both reformist and conservative camps—mostly from the cleric stratum—have familial connections with one another, and therefore, different levels of leverage in the establishment.¹⁸ In many cases, those politicians with longer tenure in the religio-political and cultural institutions are either immediate or distant relatives or trustees of Ayatollah Khamenei and his Office's personnel. The expansion of kinship relationships has permeated the public administration too, characterising the interrelations between policy actors and influencing decision-making (Saboori, 2000).

In general, the political opportunity structure has been limited by the political, ideological, and security approaches of the authoritarian section of the regime, with conservative clerics and factions resisting their rivals' demands and discourse. Despite several institutional restrictions on the freedoms and fairness of electoral procedures, the presidential and parliamentary elections have often been competitive and served as forums for questioning national strategies and policies (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015).

The Elected Section

The President and his Cabinet, along with the Parliament, constitute the republican section of policymaking at the national level. Despite the strict supervision of the Guardian Council on the electoral procedures, the direct vote of people determines the President and the political ideology of the government.

The President, according to the Constitution, is the number-two political position, after the Supreme Leader. As Thaler *et al.* (2010) point out, in high-profile domains, such as domestic security and foreign policy, their authorities compete—depending on the presidential incumbent. This means that, whilst Ayatollah Khamenei and Islamic institutions tend to restrict the political opportunity structure, the President's position has the potential to open up the structure to public opinion. In this struggle, executive and budgetary power are centralized in the hands of the President (Gholipur & Ahangar, 2010, p. 324; Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 32). In

¹⁸ A report on 'Family Relationships in Iran's Political Regime', Shahrvand newspaper, November 2015, available at: <http://shahrvand-newspaper.ir/>

addition to the ordinary decrees and policies, the Cabinet compiles the main guidelines of the executive with the cooperation of Parliament, and in some areas the Expediency Council. The Cabinet creates one mid-term and one short-term policy document, including the 5-Year Development Plan and the Annual Budget. These documents need the approval of Parliament.

In practice, the President and his Cabinet are accountable to both elected and unelected institutions. The appointment and performance of ministers are subject to the approval and audit of the Parliament; simultaneously, they should also be accountable to the high-level Islamic institutions and responsive to the Supreme Leader. In practice, many ministers have failed to gain approval or have been impeached, as a result of the direct and indirect pressures of both the Islamic and security institutions or Parliament.

After the state-building decade (1979-1988), different presidential terms have been associated with different, and sometimes opposite policies and discourses (Mosallanejad, 2005). They include: (i) 1989-1997: economic reconstruction of Rafsanjani, (ii) 1997-2005: political reforms of Khatami, (iii) 2005-2013: socio-economic justice of Ahmadinejad, (iv) 2013-2021: rationality and political moderation of Rouhani. The second and third periods are the two most different presidencies in the recent history of Iran, and indicate the flexibility of the regime, as well as a shift in high-profile policies.

Concerning the involvement of people in the Executive branch, the access to and involvement of non-state actors in the specialised commissions of the Cabinet is also at the discretion of the head of the commission. Thus, the chance of NGOs furthering their causes directly through official correspondence is limited. Also, if a proposal is supposed to pass through the lower levels of bureaucracy to the cabinet level, there is a need for political loyalty, personal relationships or familial links with officeholders or senior officials, because of the clientelistic character of bureaucracy, otherwise the huge bureaucracy and lengthy procedures delay access and impede public demands. This feature of the administration has been a privilege for policymakers. A former Director-General in the Ministry of Interior states that the administration, with overlapping rules and complicated codes, instead of facilitating public causes, have allowed politicians to repel pressure from NGOs and citizens.¹⁹

The bureaucracy in Iran is a mixture of traditional and modern structures and procedures. This system is to a great extent centralised under senior politicians. Nevertheless, mid-level officials

¹⁹ Interview: 2014

contribute to agenda setting and policymaking, depending on the area and context of decision (Saboori, 2000, pp. 168-175).

Iran's Parliament was rhetorically glorified as 'the abstract of the nation's virtues' by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Constitution grants a wide range of authority to the Parliament, with unlimited freedom of questioning all the elected and unelected institutions. The MPs for all 290 seats of Parliament are elected every four years at provincial level from counties. There are 17 permanent commissions with authority in setting agendas and several temporary committees that are established every term as parliamentary groups (Gholipur & Ahangar, 2010; Madani, 2000; Khajesarvi, 2010). Parliament is the most accessible and popular institution at the national level. MPs are legally supposed to frequently allocate a certain amount of time to meetings with the public. However, in practice, as most political and civil activists complained in their interviews, contacting MPs is hard and, usually, requires personal links or strong political affiliation. When it comes to accessing specialised commissions of Parliament, the inclusion of social groups in the meetings and decision-making does not follow a fixed procedure; rather, it depends on the decisions of members and the head of commissions.²⁰

However, powers of the Parliament are limited as well. In practice, the Guardian Council has rejected many of the Parliament's decisions and bills, particularly the ones aiming at political reforms and democratic changes. Also, the Parliament has been subject to overt and covert pressures from Ayatollah Khamenei's Office, as well as security forces such as the IRGC, which 'has constrained the agency of MPs and trained their behaviours across different terms'.²¹

In general, across national policy arenas, the scope of action and influence of the president and Parliament is dynamically determined in their interaction with the Islamic and security institutions. Authoritarian institutions are privileged with preventive and restrictive means of controlling both policy and electoral competition. Nevertheless, political competition and civil society have changed many policies. The President and Parliament have been considered the 'mouthpiece of popular will', albeit in the framework of the IR political ideology (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015, p. 562).

²⁰ Interview: journalist, 2014

²¹ Interview: political activist, 2015

3.2. Policymaking at the Provincial Level

The modern Iranian provincial system of government was established by Pahlavi monarchy in 1937, along with modernisation of the bureaucracy and were extended and reformed during the IR (Chehabi, 1997). After many changes, today's Iran comprises 31 provinces (Aleka]baf, 2013).

The borders of the provinces are the results of population growth, and politics, as well as the ethnic and social cleavages (Iran Portal, 2014). Golestan Province, the case of local government in this study, is located in the very north of Iran and was separated from its western neighbour Mazandaran in 1997—the beginning of the reformist period (Figure 6.4).



Figure 6.4. The provincial boundaries in Iran. Golestan is highlighted in red

Golestan is a small province with a population of 1.8 million.²² In 2015, 53 per cent of the population lived in urban areas. Its literacy rate of 86 per cent is close to the national average.²³ However, the province is ranked as semi-developed when compared to others regarding industrial, human development, and social indexes (Safaeepour & Mavedat, 2013). These demographic and socio-economic features of the province remained unchanged during 1997-2013.

Golestan is divided into 14 counties. The offices of County Governors rules them. The Office of Governor-General and central offices of local government are based in Gorgan, the capital city of the province. The map below shows the counties; Gorgan is located southwest.

²² Iran's Centre for Statistics, April 2017, available at: <https://www.amar.org.ir>

²³ Available on the website of Iran's Centre for Statistics: <https://www.amar.org.ir/>



Figure 6.5. The location of counties in the Golestan Province

Despite its young age in administrative terms, Golestan has a 7000-year recorded history of civilisation with more than ten ethnic and religious minorities—known as the ‘rainbow of ethnic and religions’—, this province has long been a base for spontaneous social movements and political struggles against despotism across contemporary history.²⁴ Since 1990 the organised civil and political activity has grown and most of the national political parties and NGOs have their offices based in Golestan. This is in addition to the registered and active unregistered political groups belonging to the province. The official records show that Golestan had an estimated 300 registered NGOs across 1997-2005, which later changed but was not officially recorded. The number of people engaged with NGOs in the mentioned period, as the latest dataset shows, was an estimated 19,000 strong—one per cent of the population.

Moreover, active local newspapers, news-agencies, and websites blossomed after 1995 and increased over time—up to more than 30 print media houses.²⁵ The civil society in Golestan, therefore, has been often vibrant and participatory across recent decades. However, the

²⁴ Interview with a history scholar, Mehrnews website, September 2014, available at: <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2374593/>

²⁵ The list of print media in Golestan Province, retrieved in March 2018, available at: <http://ads.dabi.ir/PubsInfo.aspx?state=%DA%AF%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86>

number of NGOs plummeted to only 100, alongside the decline in the activity of political parties and media, during the conservative period.²⁶

In terms of policymaking and state institutions, the local government of Iran mirrors the hybrid structure at the national level, i.e. a set of republican and authoritarian institutions. The following section outlines the local offices of the two sections of regime.

The Offices of the Executive Branch

In the executive branch, the Office of Governor-General, positioned at the top of local government, exerts a vast range of authority over all areas of public policy and all offices of government, ranging from security domains through to service-provision. Consistent with the policies and discourse of the Office of Governor-General, the sectoral offices named Director-General represent the national organisations and ministries within different policy domains.

In the provinces, the appointment of the governor-general, director-generals, and head of organisations is a matter of both political considerations and technical criteria. In practice, this is a top-down process, which, while tolerating the say and influence of the local non-state groups and individuals, is more subject to the authority of the central government.²⁷ A governor-general is an entirely political position chosen and appointed by the Ministry of Interior based on the criteria of political affiliation and personal profile. For director-generals and heads of local organisations, the ministers and head of national organisations in Tehran choose and appoint them through a consultation process and consensus with the governor-general—as the delegate of the President in the province.²⁸

Similar to the President that runs a cabinet at the national level, governor-general directs a local cabinet, referred to as the Administrative Council, which includes director-generals and heads of provincial offices across all policy domains, plus the delegates of high-profile Islamic and security institutions in the province e.g. the IRGC and the Representative of the Supreme Leader. It is at the governor-general's discretion to include more members in the Administrative Council meetings and committees, which can be MPs, independent experts, officials, and NGOs' delegates. The strategic bills and plans in the province require the approval

²⁶ Interview with the then Director-General for NGOs in the Ministry of Interior, IRNA website, February 2017, available at: <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82417493>

²⁷ Interview: former Governor-General, 2015

²⁸ Ibid

of the Administrative Council, which also has specialised committees for identifying and investigating sectoral issues, as well as crafting proposals and setting agenda.

Regarding public access, the committees of the Administrative Council, as well as the Office of Governor-General, are main venues through which local NGOs and citizens can deliver their proposals and involve with decision-making, whereas the Administrative Council rarely gives direct involvement or access to civil activists and citizens.²⁹ The involvement of NGOs in the committees for consultations has always been a political matter and varies depending on the discretion and attitudes of governor-generals and their offices, otherwise legally, there is no obligation to do so.³⁰ Nonetheless, because of short distances, more linkages between local people, i.e. friendships and familial bonds, and being within reach of local people contacting policymakers is, in practice, possible for the public and NGOs as well.³¹

The Legislative Institutions

Legislation in Iran has no provincial chamber, however, MPs are elected from provincial constituencies. MPs have fewer legal authorities compared to the governor-general in formulating provincial policies.³² Nonetheless, in practice, MPs strive to engage with the provincial politics and policymaking in order to meet personal and political intentions, politically to protect their viewpoints in the province's affairs; and personally to sustain and expand clientelistic relations for electoral purposes (Gholipur & Ahangar, 2010; Madani, 2000).

MPs usually have political influence and prestige at the provincial level, which in fact, originates from their legislative role at the national level, in particular, their institutional power in the process of approval of national development plans and the annual budget in the Parliament, which defines provincial budget and plans. This equips MPs with political leverage over the Office of Governor-General and director-generals, either through pressuring their superior organisation at the Cabinet or national level—through the MP's right to questioning—otherwise through lobbying directly with local policymakers in securing their interest.³³ Also, provincial policymakers need MPs' support and cooperation at national policies and laws to get their demands heard by the central government. This dependence of the governors on MPs, makes

²⁹ Interview: NGO activist, 2014

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² A report on 'Tasks and Authorities of MP', Iran's parliament website, available at: http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/content/about_Parliament

³³ Interview: former MP, 2014

MPs an individual member of policy networks at the provincial level;³⁴ this is why MPs' arguments and demands are usually considered by the Administrative Council members, with their advice valued by the Office of Governor-General.

Regarding public access to MPs at the province, MPs have a local office with all communication equipment to facilitate their public relations and interactions with local people and groups. This office presents an opportunity for NGOs for making contacts.³⁵ Also through the informal linkages, NGOs and citizens may find an opportunity to influence the opinion and the votes of MPs in the General Session of Parliament or provincial affairs.

The Offices of the Unelected Section

The security offices, military forces, and Islamic institutions have their offices established in provinces and counties, which beyond their officially defined scope play a role as an interest group affecting the different policy domains. As for the Islamic institutions, the Representative of the Supreme Leader—who also acts as the Imam of Friday Prayer, in power corresponds to the governor-general and represents and advocates the political discourse of the Supreme Leader, as well as the interests of the conservative establishment. In Golestan, Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader (1979-), has always had an influential position across all policy domains. Concerning political affiliation, he has been 'centrist by keeping in association with both conservative and reformist camps', meaning he was a potential resource for the interests of both conservative and reformist camps, as communicated by Hossein Rafati, the then reformist county-Governor (2003-2005).³⁶ Since the rise of the IR, he delivered the weekly Friday Prayer Sermons as the chief Imam in the centre of the province, with thousands of people in attendance, facilitating him a powerful position and voice in the political arena.

Also, some other local offices such as the ones for the Guardian Council and the Organisation for Islamic Propagation have either institutional authority or state sponsorship and resources and based on their interests seek to influence the electoral and political processes and contestations in the province. Also, more notably, the IRGC and the Judiciary have their forces and installation in the centre of the province and across all major cities in the province exerting preventive and

³⁴ Interview with Monadi-sefidan, Iran's Parliament website, October 2014, available at: <http://www.1abzar.com/abzar/convert-date.php>

³⁵ Interview: NGO activist, 2014

³⁶ Mazandnume website, June 2008, available at: <http://www.mazandnume.com/fullcontent/8592>

supervisory role in safeguarding the IR ideology and interests in policymaking at the provincial level (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 83; Thaler et al., 2010).

Therefore, in the provinces, the policymaking processes across different domains are the process of interaction between the provincial offices of elected and unelected institutions, as the table below shows.

Table 6.2. The main state offices and actors at the provincial level of Iran

The elected section	The unelected section
<p style="text-align: center;">-Governor-General -The Administrative Council -MPs</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">-The Representative of the Supreme Leader -The IRGC and Police -The Judiciary office</p>

This process is to a great extent influenced by national politics since all the organisations and institutions of provincial government must follow their superior officers in Tehran (Chehabi, 1997, p. 238; Lalepoor *et al.*, 2011; Saboori, 2000, p. 243). Politicians and officeholders in the central government usually do not tend to delegate much discretion to their local offices because they perceive it as being inefficient and slow.³⁷ Despite this, the provincial government has a scope in crafting proposals and setting alternatives for development plans and budget specifications.

4. The State and Political Ideologies

The style and climate of policymaking of the Iranian polity are based on factional contests, rather than the party system. Electoral procedures and the tenure of republican institutions are not meant to allow the institutional position to political parties. Instead, Iranian politics functions based on competition between two major political coalitions—namely reformist and conservative (Farhi, 2012). These camps are two significant clusters of individual figures, political parties, mass media, and NGOs with opposing political discourses in relation to

³⁷ Interview: former Governor-General, 2014

domestic policies and international policies, albeit in the framework of the Islamic ideology of Ayatollah Khamenei (Khajesarvi, 2010, p. 152; Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 119; Holiday, 2011). The government turnover has been, therefore, the result of the circulation of power between these two political coalitions. This factional politics, on the one side, is coordinated with the IR hybrid regime in terms of structure and political ideology, whilst on the other side with the twofold social cleavage society concerning the social practices and lifestyle (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 67-69). In order to understand Iranian factional politics, one should first understand the major cleavages of society, which encompasses traditional and modern sections.

The traditional cleavage, in terms of social cast, includes people from lower classes in the rural and urban areas, which, regarding the stratum, are led by conservative clerics and members of the religio-political foundations and para-military institutions such as the IRGC and Foundation for oppressed people (Kamali, 1998). This cleavage includes the Bazaar guilds and shopkeepers, religious neighbourhoods, Islamic schools, farmers, industrial workers. On the other side, the modern cleavage includes people from the educated middle and upper classes in urban areas that belong to the new strata, including businessmen, bankers, teachers, bureaucrats and technocrats, university students, journalists, intellectuals, human rights activists, scholars etc. (Bashirieh, 2016; Rakel, 2008).

The social identity and discourse of civil society are formed in association with social cleavages. On the one hand, from pre-revolution Iran, the traditional civil society inherited the Islamic conservative discourse (Karasipahi, 2009). It is estimated that there should be approximately 52,000 unregistered associations, as well as 4,600 unregistered cultural groups associated with this section of the society (Razzaghi, 2010). Traditional groups of civil society support the conservative political camp and seek the practice of Sharia and an Islamic interpretation of justice, freedom, equality and the culture articulated by Ayatollah Khamenei and conservative clerics in policymaking (Bashirieh, 2016, p. 27; Bashirieh, 1999, p. 271). On the other hand, yet within the Islamic framework, the modern section of civil society identifies with: freedoms and liberties in the Western sense, secularism in lifestyle and the abandonment of social controls, prioritising national interests over Islamic rules, rationalism in decision-making, and the rule of law (Thaler, *et al.*, 2010, p. 69; Bashirieh, 1999, p. 272). The NGOs affiliated with this section of the society support the reformist camp and takes a liberal-secular approach (Bashirieh, 2016, p. 29; Tazmini, 2013, p. 98). Experts estimate that the number of active NGOs, which can be associated with the modern section of society, ranges between 5,000 and 8,000 (Beehner,

2007). The emergence and growth of the modern section of society was, to a high extent, the result of social shifts and liberal economic policies during President Rafsanjani's government, as well as the rise of the middle class and youth strata in the 1980s, who have new demands and values (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006; Rakel, 2008).

The interaction between the two cleavages of civil society in the political spheres has often shaped the reformist and conservative camps, with opposing ideologies on governing style and confrontation with society (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 119). The conservative camp has always had dominance in the unelected section of the regime, whilst the contestations between the two camps have made the republican section dynamic across different periods. The two camps ran the elected institutions of the Islamic Republic, i.e. the Executive and Parliament, across two consecutive periods that later became known after them in the political terminology of Iran (Thaler *et al.*, 2010).

- 1997 to 2005: the reformist period
- 2005 to 2013: the conservative period

However, it should be noted that, in terms of language and behaviour, both political camps adopted their strategies and policies within the framework of the IR political ideology, which was defined by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei—they legally and practically had no choice but to follow it.

4.1. The Reformist Period

The reformist camp formed as an outcome of socio-political changes leading up to the 1997 presidential election. The eight years of economic liberalisation policies of Rafsanjani's government, 1989–1997, led to considerable growth in the literacy rate, the number of university students, the rate of urbanisation, and the size of the middle class. Subsequently, the number of youth and women with new demands in the social and political areas rose, who steered the national mood towards change and reform (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006; Mosallanejad, 2005).

Corresponding to the shifts above, in the middle of 1990s, eighteen of the leftist, liberal, pragmatist, and moderate conservative parties allied with one another, formed an umbrella camp (Rakel, 2008, p. 70; Tazmini, 2013, p. 56). This camp followed a group of intellectuals,

scholars and modernist clerics who advocated the discourse of institutional democratic reforms, arguing that limiting the despotic and authoritarian tendencies of the unelected section of regime could be curtailed only by modernising social, political and cultural spheres and reforming the state institutions (Zeidabadi, 2005). This political camp nominated Muhammad Khatami as its candidate in the 1997 presidential election. Although he was a Mullah affiliated with the establishment and studied Theology in Qom—the religious capital of Iran, Khatami was in close contact with democratic theories and Western thoughts due to his career in Germany, i.e. President of the Islamic Centre in Hamburg (Alexader & Hoenig, 2008). Accordingly, he entered the electoral campaign with a modern manifesto and liberal discourse based on IR ideology (Laali, 2000; Thaler *et al.*, 2010, pp. 67-70). Mobilised by the youth and women, and along with the middle class, especially the university students, the majority of votes surprisingly were cast in favour of Khatami.

Three years later, in 2000, the reformist camp, with the same flag and slogan, also gained a solid victory in the election for the 6th term of Parliament and accordingly gained the majority, with 215 seats (Tazmini, 2013, p. 73). As a result, the reformist camp dominated the elected section in the 1997-2005 period, whilst the conservative camp ruled over the unelected institutions.

The reformist camp advocated and articulated a set of liberal rhetoric, symbols, and actions which resonated in the state apparatus (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 5). This was apparent in their effort to break the dominant dress codes at the state level, including the President himself. Khatami started to appear with brighter colours of cloaks—light brown; milky; or light grey—which was a symbolic effort to challenge the traditional clergy institution, as dark brown and black were the standard colours, as the image below shows.



Figure 6.6. President Khatami with his chocolate brown cloak/ photo credit: Arash Ghafoori

Khatami also expressed a new face of clergy with a constant smile on his face, with people subsequently naming him Smiley Cleric.³⁸ Simultaneously, the government supported the phenomenon of modern and open dress codes, especially for women, which was becoming a trend in the modern section of society (Tazmini, 2013, p. 51). As for his Cabinet, the composition of the ministers and the chief advisors in the President's Office, especially in political and social areas, was made up of men and women who either had the experience of living or studying in European countries and the U.S. or were high-profile academics that had familiarity and association with Western political literature and thoughts. This choice of cabinet members had the intention of promoting rationalisation and modernisation of discourse and practice in the state, consistent with international contemporary agendas and models (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 7).

The reformist government formulated and presented a liberal and democratic rhetoric based on the populist section of the IR ideology, which in parallel was advocated by reformist politicians and liberal religious scholars in the emerging print media and public sphere events e.g. university debates, public speeches etc. (Rakel, 2008; Laali, 2000, p. 49). The core argument of the reformists was based on questioning the authoritarianism of the establishment while also criticising the undemocratic tendencies of the establishment's Islamic institutions such as the Supreme Leader and Guardian Council (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 69; Laali, 2000, p. 49). The

³⁸ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

reformists also presented a different narrative of the Islamic Revolution that highlighted the democratic slogans and popular demands of the revolutionary groups such as freedom. With a stress on supporting civil society as a counterforce and sphere against the authoritarian establishment, as well as transparency, human rights and public participation, the formal conversations of the reformist camp encompassed integral notions of ‘toleration versus opposition’— including Khatami’s iconic slogan of ‘long live my opponent’ (Namazi, 2000, p. 13; Thaler, *et al.*, 2010, p. 69; Brumberg, 2001, p. 1). In this vein, the reformist Cabinet officially imported and adopted the word NGO, with the same definition as in international documents, into the communications and political vocabulary of the government, and accordingly, the Ministry of Interior used it in the official documents. This adoption of a Western term was keenly accepted, welcomed, and widely used by the social and political activists.³⁹ However, in response to the growing concerns of the establishment about the rise of the civil society, Khatami eventually re-adjusted and softened his narrative about this concept. He Islamised it through justifying it with the language and history of Islam, as opposed to the Western civil society, so that made it consistent with Ayatollah Khamenei’s traditional narrative of civil society (Laali, 2000, p. 110; Rakel, 2008). This effort, while reducing the establishment’s reactions, resulted in making the term confusing and vague in the public sphere (Zeidabadi, 2005).

In practice, the reformist government expanded the civil society in three areas, including (i) political parties, (ii) mass media, and (i) NGOs. For doing so, reformists amended the legal and administrative procedures and utilised the financial resources and mechanisms in the state. Markedly, the Ministry of Interior under the rule of reformist figures such as Abdullah Noori (1997-1998) and Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari (1998-2005), both from a clerical reformist party, relaxed the procedures in relation to obtaining a license for political parties, as well as receiving regular governmental grants. As a result, 180 political parties and groups rose and registered during the reformist period. Political activists named it the era of ‘blossoming of parties’.⁴⁰ In parallel, by relaxing policies of the Ministry of Culture, more opportunities were provided for the emergence of mass media as the number of newspapers and periodicals rose from 274 to 850 at the end of the reformist period (Rakel, 2008, p. 133). Besides print media, the public access to the Internet increased towards the end of Khatami’s tenure, and users of online media

³⁹ Interview: NGO activist, 2014

⁴⁰ ILNA (Iran Labour News Agency) website, July 2017, available at: <https://www.ilnanews.com/fa/tiny/news-508150>

and websites grew at least 4 million (Omidvar, 2005). These political groups and media outlets were mostly the voice of the liberal and modern faction of the civil society promoting the discourse of political reforms (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 8). However, many of the media and political parties, due to their dependence on governmental funds and physical support, such as offices, were rarely independent or vibrantly active (Kazemi, 2009).

At the centre of political reforms, the reformist-led State introduced several legal and administrative amendments in order to support the establishment and development of NGOs. With the supportive policies and budget of different state organisations, the experienced social and political activists across the country, especially in the capital, were recommended to establish a formal NGO in their field of activity and organise their activities and human forces into official registered NGOs. As a result of this, the total number of registered NGOs increased from approximately 75 in 1997 to more than 10,000 in 2005, as reported by the Ministry of Interior (2004). This number was apart from unregistered cultural and social associations that existed from a long time ago. In the initial phases of the rise of NGOs—i.e. the first couple of years, mostly the high-profile political and civil activists, the ones affiliated with reformists and state officials, i.e. family members and friends, succeeded to establish and register their NGOs due to their convenient access to offices and their familiarity with policymakers.⁴¹ These leading NGOs and activists spread the state-led enthusiasm from top to the society so that, over following few years, thousands of ordinary civil activists and traditional associations across the country joined this movement and established their NGOs.⁴² As NGO activists explained in their interview, the emerging NGOs were mostly unprofessional organisations. They were a type of friendly, lowly-organised, un-hierarchical, and small groups of interested people that used to have informal networks and activism before. They improved their organisation, registered and reported their activities, and organised the membership, and officialised their interactions with the state until 2004, as the reformist state encouraged them to do so.

Most of the emerging NGOs were small (up to 10 members) and medium (between 10 and 50 members) in size, with a smaller number of them being large and resourceful.⁴³ The majority of fresher NGOs had no office and official equipment, rather they either shared their resources and offices together or used the spaces and resources that was lent to them by the government in

⁴¹ Interview: former Governor-General, 2014

⁴² Interview: NGO activist, 2015

⁴³ Ibid.

case they had close relations with officials and reformists.⁴⁴ In many cases, the “government openly gave NGOs a tiny amount of seasonal funds, as well as regular access to office space, stationery, telephone and printing machines, and lend them other resources like state cars in order to help them stand on their own foot over time”.⁴⁵

In terms of official registration and agency, NGO founders had to obtain a permit from the relevant state offices in their field of activity, for example from the Office of Youth Affairs in they wanted to work in this area, as well as register with the Ministry of Interior. After establishment, they had to report the list of members, NGO’s charter, minutes of meetings, and public performances to the relevant departments in the Ministry of Interior. This meant ‘governmental authority and political monitoring’ by the state from the first day of establishment of NGOs, which was “contrary to the nature of an NGO”.⁴⁶ Over the second reformist term, the Ministry of Interior extended its subordinated offices in the area of registering and monitoring NGOs, and also included the representatives of security offices and the police in the processes and offices related to monitoring NGOs (Rivetti, 2013). Despite the governmental control, the movement for establishing NGOs became “a widespread fashion very soon and across different fields, thousands of fresh, active, and enthusiast NGOs flourished”.⁴⁷

In terms of approach and agenda, as most of fresher NGOs were amatur, they had no pre-determined goal or purpose, nor a designed charter concerning their organisation, regulation, and membership. Thus, the Ministry of Interior designed a template charter for emerging NGOs and officially delivered it to them, which developed and changed over time regarding the government’s political and security agendas.⁴⁸ The government and officials also sought to promote the ‘liberal politics and development’ approach between NGOs through formal and informal communications.⁴⁹ When this approach came to different policy domains and fields of activism, though, it was translated and implemented differently, which will be discussed in detail in the following empirical case studies in this thesis.

In the first reformist term, as the government, itself, was unpracticed in managing NGO activists, and also the official regulations concerning NGOs and their activities were small and

⁴⁴ Interview: political activist, 2014

⁴⁵ Interview: NGO president, 2014

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Interview: NGO president, 2014

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

flexible. In the second term, the Ministry of Interior compiled the first official regulations for registered NGOs, named The Executive Regulation for NGOs. This regulation addressed NGOs as formal policy actors, allowed them to act and organise formal activities with the permission of the government, as well as deliver plans, agendas and alternatives to the government. The regulation stated that NGOs have the institutional right to access documents and information from all organs of the government. Besides this, the reformist-led Parliament specified several articles in the Third (2000) and Fourth (2004) Development Plans so as to allow organs of the government to allocate a tiny part of their financial resources to NGOs—subject to their discretion. By these changes, the reformist State provided for broader public access to centres of policymaking, as well as opening the venues for lobbying policymakers and pressuring them for transparency and accountability (Tazmini, 2013, p. 64). However, at the same time, it led to the growth of stringent regulations and monitoring by the administration and bureaucracy. Also, in the public sphere new practices and mechanisms of participation spread, e.g. strikes and demonstrations (Tazmini, 2013).

However, not all the policies and actions of the reformist government were purely democratic or liberal. The control of the Islamic and security institutions on civil society imposed limits on the scope of NGOs. For example, in the regulations passed by the Ministry of Interior, NGOs were required to obtain an official license, which was against their fundamental freedom and independence, or they were also barred from any political activities in the sense of targeting the electoral processes and party activism.⁵⁰ Moreover, the government established audit boards across the capital and provinces, which had the authority of revoking NGOs' license or banning their activities. The boards had representatives of the Ministry of Intelligence and Islamic institutions as a member (Rivetti, 2013, p. 190). Moreover, many of the NGOs were established with direct funding from the government and had their offices granted by the state organisations, therefore, they were considered as 'governmental NGOs'. In many cases, the NGOs were established by or belonged to reformist officials and governors.

Apart from the civil society, a primary strategy of the reformists in relation to the state–society relation was enforcing decentralisation in the state. Khatami's government re-enforced the abandoned laws of local councils, and in 1999 held the first round of local council elections across the cities and towns of Iran (Tajbakhsh, 2000). As a result, more than 200,000 elected people entered the structure of government, and many of the institutional authorities of the

⁵⁰ Interview: NGO members, 2014

state in the area of urban and rural planning were deployed to elected councils (Tazmini, 2013, p. 72). Besides this, the Third and Fourth development programmes obliged the Ministry of Interior to create plans for delegating the government’s affairs to the public and facilitating the process of public checks on the government’s performance. These policies came along with schemes for reducing the size of government machinery, privatising the enterprises, and reducing the dependency on oil revenues (Tazmini, 2013, p. 77).

In reaction to the impact of reformists’ policies on the Parliament and State, the Islamic and authoritarian institutions perceived the reforms as anti-Islamic and retaliated by acting as a parallel government, thus weakening the growing liberal and opposition forces (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006, pp. 120-130). They also sought to expand their counter-force over different domains of civil activism (Green, 2009; Tazmini, 2013, p. 103). Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei openly expressed his dissatisfaction over the political and cultural policies of the reformists. He warned that any freedom is meant within the framework of Islamic teachings. He also alleged the critical forces—in this context vocal reformist media and parties—as being the agents of enemies and requested the Judiciary and IRGC to confront them (Rakel, 2008). By flashing the green light, the Supreme Leader triggered a series of securitising policies especially during the second term of the reformist period (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 21). The IRGC established its specialised Intelligence Unit to expand its political role. For instance, as the records show, the Judiciary closed more than 100 press outlets, 2000 websites, revoked the licenses of many vocal NGOs and reformist parties, and detained partisans and journalists under the pressure of the IRGC (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 57; Barzegar, 2005; Rakel, 2008, p. 136).

To sum up, in the reformists’ period, the two sections of the political regime were divided between two political camps with opposing policy approach and discourse in relation to governance and civil society (Table 6.3).

Table 6.3: The distribution of power in the structure of the Iranian regime during the 1997-2008 period

The elected section	The unelected section
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the President: reformist -the Cabinet: reformist -the Parliament: reformist -City Councils: reformist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the Supreme Leader: conservative -the Guardian Council: conservative -The IRGC: conservative -Armed forces and police: conservative -The Judiciary: conservative

As the table above illustrates, on the one hand, reformists (the green box) in the elected institutions sought to expand the freedoms and public access to policymaking centres, whilst on the other hand, conservatives (the red box) in the unelected institutions developed counter forces in order to restrict the scope of action for the emerging civil society. This opened the political opportunity structure, albeit with conflicts and contradictions.

4.2. The Conservative Period

The pushback of reformist forces made the conservatives within the authoritarian institutions more concerned about the growth of vocal civil society and perceived it as a threat to the establishment (Baghi, 2003). Amidst decline in the hopes of the middle class for steady and successful political reforms, the conservative camp took the majority in 2002 local elections due to a low voter turnout in large cities (Amini, 2010). Though this did not nullify the discourse and power of the reformist Parliament and State, nonetheless, it prepared the ground for further victories of the competing camp at higher levels. Following this victory, in 2004, the conservative camp succeeded once again in claiming the majority of seats in the Parliament, thanks to the Guardian Council disqualified the majority of the reformist candidates—at least 2500 persons. Through these two elections, many former security figures and IRGC commanders, hand-in-hand with their conservative allies, entered the Parliament and local councils (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, pp. 22-36).

In 2005, a more united conservative camp entered the presidential election with a populist revolutionary discourse, which was in line with the Islamic discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei. This camp nominated Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who a few years ago had been the Mayor of Tehran—the capital. In fact, this post granted Ahmadinejad the chance to receive exposure by the mass media and channel his critical arguments against the reformist government to the general public. It also granted him access to a large amount of financial and administrative resources in the Tehran Municipality, which was considered as a launch pad for the presidency in Iran.⁵¹ He was a trustee of the establishment because of his previous career and services during Rafsanjani's government, i.e. former Governor-General of Ardabil province and an ex-member of the IRGC (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 56). By formulating a radical Islamic narrative of the 1979 Revolution and coming from a poor rural family, Ahmadinejad appealed

⁵¹ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

to and echoed the social demands of the lower classes against the reformist camp (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 85). In addition, he publicly called for a ‘combat against economic and political corruption’ of the reformist government, especially against state-sponsored ‘Oil Mafia’—as he argued— whilst also promising the revival of the legacy of the conservative camp and discourse referring to their domination during the first decade of the revolution also known as the state-building era (Rakel, 2009; Thaler *et al.*, 2010, p. 48; Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 85). His critical and radical discourse was not only welcomed by the Islamic schools and the IRGC but also received the votes of economically deprived people and conservative clerics. Ahmadinejad won the election in 2005, albeit in two rounds (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 52). The manifesto of the conservative camp was based on supporting the revolutionary values of the Islamic ideology, such as martyrdom, social coordination, and resonating the social conservatism and restrictions (Thaler *et al.*, 2010). Politically, the President barely demonstrated a grumpy face to the opposition by calling them ‘dirt and dust’ (Sreberny, 2013, p. 5). Consistent with his manifesto, the conservative Cabinet and, notably, the President himself, presented a different set of symbols and actions at the highest political level. Markedly, as Figure 6.7 shows, Ahmadinejad wore an informal Khaki jacket in most of occasions and events, which culturally was associated with the clothing of poor classes in Iran, rather than formal suits associated with the politicians (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 54).

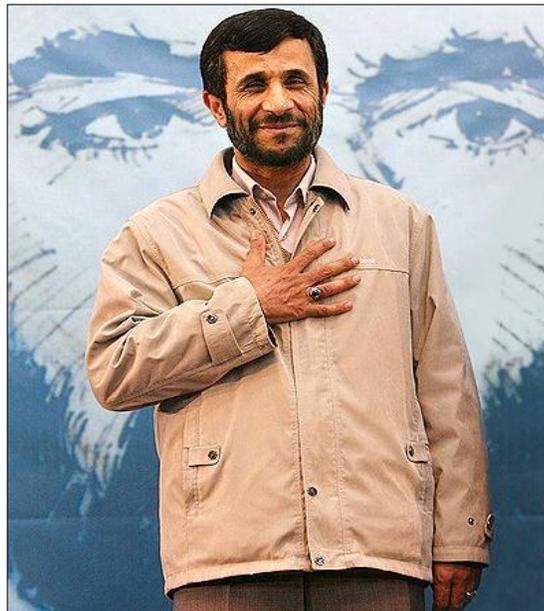


Figure 6.7. President Ahmadinejad with his Khaki jacket/ photo credit: Fars news agency

Whilst the educated people criticised him as damaging the prestige and image of the country, the conservative camp asserted that Ahmadinejad's clothing meant he was a 'man of the people' (Kamali, 2013). From one perspective, disseminating this title and clothing style transmitted the signal that the conservative State would be populist in approaching the society, and therefore, less access and attention would be provided for the established political and social NGOs.⁵²

The Cabinet members hailed from a conservative background with the similar dress code as the President and religious women covered with a black veil that resembles Christian Nuns' veil. Their dress code and symbols associated and advocated by fundamentalists in the 1980s, the first decade of the Revolution (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 54). Furthermore, regarding their background, Ahmadinejad and his ministers in the cabinet, as well as the chief advisors, were mostly figures previously associated with the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence or associated with fundamentalist Islamic schools, mostly sporting beards (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, pp. 58-67). As for the social approach, the conservative State emphasised on the celebration of religious festivals and ceremonies in the Islamic calendar. In line with the new discourse and strategy, most of the reformists in the government who were affiliated with the liberal streams—especially in the public universities and cultural organisations—were replaced with figures loyal to the conservative camp within the first year being in power (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009; Raket, 2008).

The political discourse of the conservatives centred on reducing the gap between the rich and poor, as well as glorifying the notions of Islamic justice (Jahangiri & Fatahi, 2010; Raket, 2008). This discourse articulated Ayatollah Khamenei's notion of resistance against Western values, capitalism, and liberalism, and making own independent identity (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 90). Consistent with this discourse, the conservative camp advocated an interventionist style of governance, which did not have any recognition for the civil society (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009; Jahangiri & Fatahi, 2010). In this vein, Ahmadinejad ended the story by saying 'where there are spontaneous religious associations, there is no need for NGOs'⁵³. The conservative camp 'perceived NGOs as 'Western phenomenon', and in consequence of their cynical views towards the West, defined NGOs as potential agents and spies of the West in Iran'.⁵⁴ Instead of NGOs, the

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Radio Zamaneh Website, July 2011, available at: <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/34010>

⁵⁴ Interviews: NGO activists, 2015

conservative State articulated a populist discourse concerning public participation through traditional gatherings across neighbourhoods and mosques. Also, instead of improving the reception of public demands through access points in state apparatus, Ahmadinejad held regular meetings of his Cabinet ministers in different provinces. Moreover, with the intention of extending direct access to masses, the state initiated the mechanism of exchanging letters and face-to-face contacts with people during public speeches of the President (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 68).

Also, by amending the laws and administrative practices, and using financial and security means, the conservative government restricted the scope of civil society. As for the political parties, except for conservatives and their allies, the Ministry of Interior gradually ceased the previous governmental supports—both political and physical. As a result, two critical political parties, namely the Participation Front and Mujahedin Organisation—associated with and funded by the reformist government— encountered legal bans or became semi-active, while a number of new small-sized conservative parties emerged during the same period.⁵⁵ Moreover, some vocal partisans were imprisoned and detained by the security forces, especially by the IRGC's Intelligence Unit (Rakel, 2008, p. 138). In parallel, the decline in the tolerance of the Ministry of Culture towards opposing and critical ideologies and actors resulted in increased suspicions towards journalists, which led to the closure and banning of many online and print media, censorship and official warnings to editors, and detention of tens of journalists (Rakel, 2008, p. 141).

More specifically, the Ministry of Interior, under the command of Mostafa PoorMuhammadi (2005-2008), previously a conservative Judge and Deputy Minister of Intelligence, and Mostafa Najjar (2009-2013), previously an IRGC commander, focused on NGOs and their activities with the purpose of appropriating them with the Islamic conservative guidelines. At the beginning of Ahmadinejad's time, thousands of NGOs from Khatami's time had been established, settle, and institutionalised in the formal procedures and official documents of state, while on the ground the number of emerging NGOs was still going up too. The said Ministry, in the first step, changed the official title of NGOs to *SAMAN* in the official communications—this word is the abbreviation representing community-based organisations. Through this change, firstly, the government tended to make a distinction between the self-made notion of Iranian Islamic NGOs and the Western NGO which was on the reformist government's agenda. Second, the conservatives

⁵⁵ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

sought to move NGOs from a policy role and advocacy, or political status, to the religious and volunteer activism associated with mass movements in support of the Islamic ideology.⁵⁶ In practice, this policy came with different changes in the real world. The government set up regular funds/grants for religious and Islamic areas of NGO activism, mostly in cultural and educational fields. Also, many of the unregistered religious and traditional associations, schools, and groups—affiliated with the IRGC—were informally requested and invited to the Ministry of Interior to register their organisation as an official NGO. The government ceased the access of previously founded NGOs and critical ones to the public resources and state offices.⁵⁷ Moreover, due to the securitising approach of the conservative-led government, and alongside the growing political leverage of the IRGC, the then Minister of Interior increased the controlling measures on NGOs, e.g. encouraging the governmental audit boards to use their right of revoking the licenses of critical NGOs (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 83).

The government acted with the objective of limiting the role of NGOs to religious activities. The Cabinet of ministers put an article in the draft of Fifth Development Plan (2011), with Parliament passing it in order to limit the role of NGOs to religious and cultural activities.⁵⁸ Article 3 of that document especially obliged the government organisations to support NGOs that are active in the area of the propagation of Islamic values, e.g. martyrdom and social coordination. As a result, the traditional and religious section of civil society expanded, which was at the expense of the modern section of it. The government purposively changed the composition of civil society in a few years from 2005. As an NGO activist said, until 2009 the religious, traditional, and conservative NGOs became the majority in the civil society, while the advocacy and modern-rights NGOs were becoming isolated. Many of the new NGOs had closed membership, non-hierarchical structure, unofficial and unreported activities, and an unknown profile in the public. The government engineered the laws and procedures in order to convert back the structure and nature of modern NGOs to religious and volunteer associations consistent with the ancient Islamic society.

In order to limit the official agency of NGOs, the Ministry of Interior removed the 12th Article of the Executive Regulations, which granted NGOs the right to access all information and documents of the governmental organisations. The government also hardened the procedures of issuing permission/security clearance for NGOs. Whilst previously applicants were required

⁵⁶ Interview: NGO activists, 2014-15

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Interview: NGO activists, 2014

to get security clearance only from the Judiciary, Intelligence Service, and Police, the number of required references increased to 13 centres, including the IRGC and in some cases local Islamic schools.

As a consequence of the conservative government's actions, the general enthusiasm of society in civil activism and establishing NGOs decreased over the years. Furthermore, many NGOs altogether stopped their activities, with many also banned from any activities and audit boards seizing their licenses.⁵⁹ The independent and critical NGOs had to rely on their own tiny resources and funds, which meant becoming irregular and weak in terms of activity and organisation. They also lost their members over time, and the number of registered members of NGOs did not grow. The official databanks and records on NGOs became unavailable, with the official website of the Ministry of Interior not updating its records after 2005. Thus, the available reports on the volume and performance of NGOs relied on the estimation and speculation of civil activists and officials. The Director-General for NGOs under Rouhani administration, in 2015, announced that, between 2005 and 2013, the volume of NGOs decreased by half, totalling approximately 5,000.⁶⁰ NGO activists acknowledged this decline, adding that, many NGOs became seasonal in their activities.

Ahmadinejad's administration also demonstrated a trend towards centralising the power in the hands of the President and the Cabinet. For example, Ahmadinejad suspended The Organisation for Management and Planning which was responsible for compiling budget and auditing the financial performance of state agencies. This step was taken in an effort to reduce the checks on his Cabinet's decisions and expenses.⁶¹ Also, for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, President Ahmadinejad during his tenure removed and replaced 20 members of the Cabinet at the ministerial level, due to disobedience and incompatibility with his political and personal preferences.⁶²

Thus, as Table 6.4 shows, during 2005-2013, the elected and unelected institutions of regime went under the uniform discourse and policy of the conservative camp (red boxes), for the first time since the Revolution, with greater consistency formed between the conservative clerics and the military wing of the regime (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006, p. 142; Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009,

⁵⁹ Interview: NGO activists, 2014-15

⁶⁰ Interview with the then Director-General for the NGO Office in the Ministry of Interior, Arman newspaper, 2014, available at: <http://armandaily.ir/1393/08/20/Files/PDF/13930820-2613-16-4.pdf>

⁶¹ Interview: former Governor-General, 2015

⁶² Tasnim website, October 2013, available at: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1392/05/13/109941>

p. 80; Keshmiripour, 2015). This led to the dominance of a conservative ideology within the regime which closed the political opportunities structure.

Table 6.4: The distribution of power in the structure of the Iranian regime- during the 2005-2013 period

The elected section	The unelected section
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the President: conservative -the Cabinet: conservative -the Parliament: conservative -City Councils: conservative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the Supreme Leader: conservative -the Guardian Council: conservative -The IRGC: conservative -Armed forces and police: conservative -The Judiciary: conservative

5. Conclusion

Although in a flawed manner, the political regime of Iran is hybrid and allows a certain level of democratic contestations. Liberal and conservative coalitions battled over policy across domains and levels of government, which, as a result, made Iranian politics dynamic over the period spanning 1997-2013 (Figure 5.8).

During the reformists' period (1997–2005), the liberal ideology, opened the political opportunity structure in terms of (i) decentralising power, (ii) devolving discretion to local and sectoral institutions, and (iii) creating supportive laws and policies for NGOs. These trends and policies of the reformist government, along with the rise of spontaneous civil society opened more access points in the executive branch. However, along with the reformists in the republican institutions, the authoritarian institutions and the conservative camp acted as a parallel government, and sought to securitise politics and nullify the liberalising reforms.

In contrast, during the rule of the conservative camp, there was an exclusive strategy towards the civil society, which was combined with other policies, including (i) securitising of the political sphere, (ii) centralising of power and decision-making, and (iii) manipulating supportive laws governing the civil society. The consequence was a decline not just in the volume and vibrancy of NGOs, but also of media and political parties. Conservatives also

reduced public access and contact with the State and the Parliament. The political opportunity structure, therefore, leaned towards the closed end of the spectrum as the elected and unelected institutions of the regime were allied against the vocal and critical NGOs (Figure 6.8).

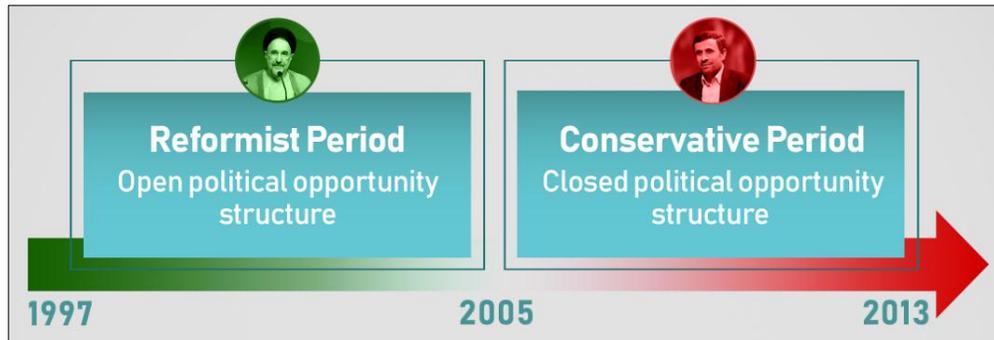
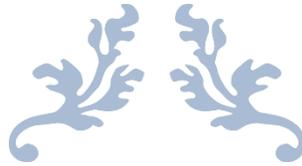


Figure 6.8: The transformation of the political opportunity structure across the reformist and conservative periods

To conclude, in the dynamic politics of Iran, the authority of the unelected institutions drives the structure of political opportunity towards limiting the scope of action for outsiders and critical actors. This authority, as Thaler *et al.* point out (2010, p. 52), excludes the majority of Iranian society. Nonetheless, the republican institutions have provided opportunities for the critical streams to rise to power and open access points to the civil society organisations.

The similar configuration of actors, policy setting, and type of contestation across the highlighted political periods is expected to apply to policy domains and provinces. The next four chapters discuss the configuration of the policy arena and processes in the women's-rights and environmental policy domains.



CHAPTER SEVEN:

**NATIONAL POLICY
NETWORKS IN THE
WOMEN’S-RIGHTS DOMAIN**



1. A History of Fighting for Democracy and Equal Rights

'A few decades after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, women's-rights NGOs succeeded in capturing the attention of conservative leaders and raising the profile of this domain.' – A women's-rights activist, 2015

In spite of being the 'second sex' in the patriarchal civil society and political system, women's organised role in the Iranian political arena has often been vibrant and vocal.⁶³ As well as working with men to promote democracy, women's-rights activists, coming from different Islamic and secular backgrounds, have been asserting their private and public rights. Libertarian women activists from different ideologies and religions stood up with men against the monarchy in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Figure 7.1) (Namazi, 2000, p. 92; Bashirieh, 1995, p. 291).



Figure 7.1. Iranian revolutionary women in street demonstrations, 1979/ photo credit: Quora website

Since the rise of the IR, however, the Islamisation of politics and its fundamentalist interpretation has circumscribed women's rights (WR), especially in the body of Family Laws. In this respect, Iran is similar to the Islamic countries in the MENA that have adopted anti-feminist discourses (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). Nonetheless, the circulation of power between

⁶³ Interview: 2015, a woman activist referred to the 'Second Sex' phrase that is originally the title of a book written by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949.

reformist and conservative camps with opposing discourses caused shifts in the formal laws and policies concerning women's rights, despite being in an Islamic framework (Sedghi, 2007, p. 246). Whilst the IR has a tendency towards restricting women's rights, including in relation to private property, social activism, managerial and employment status, physical and emotional safety; field research shows that women's social status and political activism has gradually improved (Jalaeepur 2012, pp. 427-431). One indicator of this improvement in the social area is the rise of women's-rights NGOs (WRNGOs).

Similar to other Islamic regimes, Iran's WR domain is twofold as has been an ideological battlefield between opposite streams and discourses (Keddie, 2003). It accommodates thousands of traditional conservative women's groups and hundreds of modern liberal WRNGOs that compete within the framework of the Islamic ideology of the regime (Sedghi, 2007; Lakpoor & Sharifpoor, 2014; Ertan, 2012, p. 10).

This chapter traces the trajectory of national policy networks in the women's-rights policy domain across the reformist and conservative periods, which based to the theoretical framework of the study, is expected to be from an issue network to a policy community. Before discussing this trajectory, the following section outlines the national context of this policy domain. The third and fourth sections discuss the formulation of the policy network and subsequently shift of it. This explains variations in the agency of WRNGOs.

2. The Duality of Institutions and Laws

State Institutions: In the first decade of the Revolution, due to the eight-year war with Iraq and the need for national unity and regime's consolidation, there was no justification at the state level to raise gender issues, nor for women's political activism (Namazi, 2000). During the second decade, however, the 'economic development' policy of the government involved women's employment issues in the society, which provided further development in the following decades (Sedghi, 2007, p. 200). Since then, the state's agencies and offices within the women's-rights policy domain grew in terms of numbers and organisation.

Initially, in the 1990s, the Office for Women's Affairs was established at the president's office.⁶⁴ According to its original statute, its missions were centred on identifying gender gaps and compiling solutions for improving women's position. Since its establishment, the Office became the principal state actor leading the process of setting WR national agendas and policies. Along with this office in the Executive, in the 1990s, female MPs formed the Committee for Women's Affairs (hereafter the Committee) in Parliament in order to promote gender-related issues in legislation.

In parallel, the Islamic institutions, e.g. the Expediency Council and Guardian Council, developed specialised units for inspecting laws and policies concerning women's issues and also advocating the Islamic discourse on this area (Sadeghi, 2009). Moreover, the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC established special female forces and units in order to secure the establishment's fundamentalist ideology against competing discourses in society (Rakel, 2008).

Therefore, during 1985–1995, the WR domain was formally established as different agencies and offices of the state grew and across different periods went under different policies and discourses, albeit within the Islamic framework that was set by the Supreme Leader.

Official Documents: In high-profile legal and policy documents, the IR combines a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam with a liberal one. The Constitution, as well as General Strategies of Regime and the 20-Years Vision, associate women with 'motherhood and household'; simultaneously, they emphasise women's social role and political representation. The Constitution prohibits any gender discrimination in social rights, whilst the conservative approach embedded in the 20-Years Vision justifies some limits, such as dress codes, in the name of protecting women's integrity and chastity in social relationships (Nazari, 2016). This duality and contradiction, in practice, 'has awkwardly allowed contradictory discourses about WR, notably across the reformist and conservative periods', a female lawyer said in her interview.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Zahra Shojaee, the then reformist Head of the Centre, interview with ILNA website, March 2014, available at: <https://www.ilnanews.com/fa/tiny/news-150679>

⁶⁵ Interview: 2015

3. The Reformist Period: Towards an Issue Network

The reformist camp's manifesto in the 1997 presidential elections featured with critical sections on women's issues (Rakel, 2008). This manifesto, along with liberal slogans on the election trail, encountered positive responses from Iranian women. Remarkably, for the first time in the IR's history, the number of female voters was more than men, with 40 per cent of Khatami's votes coming from women (Tazmini, 2013, p. 66). This positive trend in women's electoral behaviour continued in the 2000 parliamentary elections and 2001 presidential elections.⁶⁶ Ashraf Borujerdi, the then reformist Deputy Minister of Interior (2001-2005), interpreted this trend as 'public will for changing the status of women', which was the prominent narrative of the reformist government.⁶⁷

3.1. The Composition of the Issue Network

State Actors: When the reformist President rose to power, his administration considered the Office for Women's Affairs 'small and incapable of incorporating the political purposes of reformists in women's-rights domain', Zahra Shojaee, the reformist Head of the Office (1997-2005) said. According to her, Office's area of activity was limited to economic issues, respecting President Rafsanjani's policy (1989-1997), whilst, regarding administration and resources, 'it was small with few subunits, fewer than ten civil servants, and a tiny budget'. Also, politically it was only a consultative office to the president.⁶⁸

In 1998, President Khatami elevated the administrative rank of the Office to a headquarters which had a wider range of institutional authority.⁶⁹ Also, he changed its title to 'The Centre for Women's Participation' (hereafter the Centre), which 'was chosen based on the United Nations' blueprints about women's participation', and also had a liberal implication.⁷⁰ This chapter refers to this office with the Centre.

⁶⁶ The Analysis of Parliamentary and Presidential Elections, compiled by the Ministry of Interior, 2001, available at: <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/734683>

⁶⁷ Interview with Ashraf Borujerdi, the former Deputy Minister of Interior, 'Iran' National newspaper, October 2016, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=3650564>

⁶⁸ Interview: 2014

⁶⁹ Zahra Shojaee, the then reformist Head of the Centre, interview with ILNA website, Ibid.

⁷⁰ Interview: Zahra Shojaee, the then reformist Head of the Centre, 2015

In order to increase the political profile of the Centre, Khatami picked Zahra Shojaee, a well-known female politician, as its head, who had a reputation for supporting the new rights of women (Hawza, 1992). In civil society and at the national level, this appointment directed more attention and importance to the Centre. Furthermore, Khatami appointed the then Head of the Centre as a member of several high-profile governmental councils that compile the long-term strategies of the government, e.g. the Council for Cultural and Social Affairs. As a result, it extended her say and authority across different policy domains. In response to Zahra Shojaee's request, President Khatami also increased the income of the Centre by 800 per cent over the eight years, as well as increasing the number of personnel in the office, as shown by the official records of the Centre (2001, p. 32). These changes not only boosted the institutional power of the Centre but also brought it up to the leading position within the WR policy network.

Alongside the developments above in the president's office, in the elections for the 6th term of Parliament, of the total 13, ten were women from the reformist camp.⁷¹ They were figureheads from larger reformist parties, such as The Participation Front, with a handful of them being family members of reformists in President Khatami's administration, all possessing higher academic degrees (Azghandi, 2012, pp. 182-85). Elahe Kulaaee, the then reformist MP (Tehran, 2000-2004) stated that 'because of the presence of these leading MPs, the Committee for Women in that term of Parliament became an active legislative actor for the first time, which openly expressed some feminist attitudes and rhetoric'.⁷² Despite lacking legal authority in passing agenda and law, this committee became a reformist pressure group inside the Parliament. This chapter refers to it as the Committee.

Conservatives in the establishment developed the departments and units on women's issues in Islamic institutions, such as the Guardian Council. Owing to their inspecting power, they could take suppressive measures against civil society and stymie the initiatives of reformists in government and parliament.

Civil Society Actors: Corresponding to the developments in the government, the volume and composition of WRNGOs, mass media, and political parties, changed in the civil society. Notably, the number of national WRNGOs across the country increased. Crosschecking the official records of the Centre (2005, p. 104), and based on international reports, a considerable growth

⁷¹ Young Journalist Club website, April 2015, available at: <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5193334>

⁷² Interview with Kalemeh website, June 2011, available at: <http://www.kaleme.com/1391/03/18/klm-103010/?theme=fast>

took place across the reformist period, from 55 in 1997 to 470 in 2005 (Povey, 2004, p. 257). The respondents' estimations imply that until 2005 more than 100 WRNGOs were established just in Tehran, either with active or semi-active status, with others being established across the large cities of Iran (Povey, 2004, p. 254).⁷³

Most of the emerging WRNGOs were small in terms of personnel with unskilled but enthusiastic members—usually between 20 to 50 persons, with no independent office and physical resources. Sometimes, they were separate names, but one entity sharing office and resources, and were completely reliant on the government's donations to function.⁷⁴ Shojaee said that 'the government—and specifically the Centre during my tenure—deliberately invested the money and legal authorities in increasing the number of WRNGOs'.⁷⁵ Thus, the growth in the number of WRNGOs was a direct result of the intervention by the government. Reformists organised a large number of women as human capital, amounting to at least 50,000 persons, which benefited them with influencing the public opinion due to the national enthusiasm towards women's-rights issues.⁷⁶

The conditions were different in Tehran. Most of the vocal WRNGOs in Tehran were presided by female lawyers and scholars—which mostly had a feminist and liberal profile.⁷⁷ Among them were the wives and daughters of reformist politicians, e.g. Fakhrosadat Mohtashamipur, the wife of the then Deputy Minister of Interior. Many of these WRNGOs in Tehran had an independent office, full-time personnel, and office equipment, thanks to their political relationships and privileges.

In parallel to the liberal reforms, the IRGC and Islamic schools also transformed their organisation from a traditional force to modern groups and established WRNGOs with a conservative and religious outlook, acting as a counterforce to the reformist camp (Sedghi, 2007, p. 214). The IRGC extended a special Women's Force, which as a paramilitary WRNGO, meant to recruit social capital from the traditional section of the society.⁷⁸ As a result, the reformist executive branch, whilst extending a network of WRNGOs mostly with citizenship and

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

⁷⁵ Interview: 2014

⁷⁶ Interview: WRNGO member, 2014

⁷⁷ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁷⁸ Ibid.

human-rights profile, encountered a body of growing critical WRNGOs with a fundamentalist profile.⁷⁹

Moreover, the liberalising policy and governmental funds of the government led to the emergence of new mass media with interest in the WR area. The national radio and television were exceptions as they were always institutionally subordinate to the conservative camp in the unelected institutions, which had no specific profile for women in their programs. Apart from that, tens of spontaneous periodicals and newspapers emerged with names associated with women's role and rights, for example, a periodical entitled *Zanane-Emrouz* (Today's Women) and a newspaper entitled *Zanan* (women). In some cases, partisan women from the reformist camp and family members of reformist and moderate figures, e.g., President Rafsanjani's daughter were behind the rising newspapers in this area. Also, female MPs and scholars owned some newspapers.⁸⁰ Further, the active nationwide newspapers, e.g., *Salam* and *Hamshahri*, with a large number of readers—mostly affiliated with and funded by the reformist administration's agencies and individuals—started publishing women's columns and pages (Gheytaishi, 2001, pp. 561-3). Towards the second term of the reformist period, women bloggers emerged with an estimated 70 plus active national weblogs, becoming virtual members of the WR policy network.⁸¹

Developing political parties in this domain was also a section of reformists' bigger project of civil society. During this period, the number, organisation, and the vibrancy of both conservative parties with religious women wing and members—e.g. the Islamic Coalition—and reformist parties with egalitarian women wing, e.g. the Participation Front, increased.⁸² They both had the agenda of improving women's contribution to their organisations, albeit with opposing political ideologies. Markedly, in response to the liberal WRNGOs' request, a few reformist parties increased the number of women members in their national councils to 20 per cent with the aim of fostering loyal women that can influence the WR policy network (Fakurian, 2014). One can also take into account some women's political groupings; which, however, did not become active and plentiful.⁸³

⁷⁹ Interview: WRNGO president, 2015

⁸⁰ Interview: journalist, 2015

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

⁸³ The official list of the Iranian registered political parties, collected in person from the Ministry of Interior, 2016

Therefore, since 1997, as a result of the intervention by the reformist-led government, a vibrant WR issue network with a large number of non-state actors, especially NGOs, formed at the national level. Over the following eight years it grew in size and transformed into a diverse policy network regarding affiliation and profile of actors. This policy network, accordingly, carried a certain degree of pluralism regarding political interests. These shifts created the conditions for the establishment of an issue network.

3.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Issue Network

Discourse: Similar to Muslim countries in the MENA, in Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei always advocated a traditional discourse of women's rights (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015). Whilst reluctantly recognising the minimum social participation and political rights of women, Khamenei labelled the liberal and feminist discourses as 'Western ideology' and delegitimised them. For example, he said: 'Western discourses commercialises the gender of women for pornographic purposes'.⁸⁴ Islamic institutions, such as the Guardian Council, and paramilitary organisations, such as the IRGC's Women's Forces advocated and spread this traditional discourse across. Within this discourse, motherhood was the core notion which relegated women's agency to household affairs. By connecting that concept to the concept of chastity, this traditional discourse labelled the social presence and political activism as something in contradiction to the Islamic values and women's dignity (Sadeghi, 2009, p. 221).

In the IR's formal discourse, not only is 'women's organised participation' in social spheres missing but also 'women's private rights' are ignored, with women fundamentally considered as men's property'.⁸⁵ When it comes to social rights, the fundamentalists in the Islamic institutions insisted on Quranic texts that define women's share and position half of men, especially in standing in a court for testimony (Cavatorta & Durac, 2015, p. 195). This discourse, as an activist symbolised, emphasises the 'presence of women in the bottom rows of religious occasions and demonstrations' which are led by religious figures, such as in the Friday Prayers (see Figure 7.2).⁸⁶

⁸⁴ The website of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, available at: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech>

⁸⁵ Interview: journalist, 2015

⁸⁶ Interview: WRNGO activist, 2015



Figure 7.2. Friday prayers venues are the bases for religious women in Iran/ photo credit: Mehr website

Nonetheless, the traditional Islamic discourse of the regime as allows the involvement of women in the government, albeit to a small extent (Saeedzade, 1998, p. 110). Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei mandated in his speeches that ‘women that have enough capacities and qualities should be appointed to governmental posts’, yet, he openly said: ‘some high-profile posts and technical roles only belong to men’.⁸⁷

At the societal level, the IR’s discourse was advocated by the conservative WRNGOs and parties, as well as the IRGC’s Women’s Forces; these groups had their mass media amplifying the traditional narratives (Sedghi, 2007). Conservative WRNGOs centred their demands mainly on dress codes, maternal issues, and family protection laws. They sought to strengthen the foundations of the family by advocating more legal advantages and benefits for housemakers and mothers. In opposite, feminist WRNGOs, reformist newspapers such as *Jamee* (the Society) and *Sobhe-Emruz* (Today’s Morning), and reformist parties such as the Participation Front adopted the critical metaphor of ‘glass ceiling’ from the Western context in order to contest the

⁸⁷ Mizan website, August 2015, available at: <http://www.mizanonline.com/fa/news/77440>

traditional approach of conservatives.⁸⁸ They said that the regime's discourse wants to 'bind women in the house and restrict their social and political progresses.'⁸⁹

The reformists in the executive and Parliament raised an adversarial discourse at the state level, which echoed international liberal discourse on women's rights. President Khatami questioned the monopoly and legacy of outdated Islamic interpretations. While respecting the role of motherhood, Khatami repeatedly stressed the necessity of equal rights for women in his official statements, particularly concerning employment laws. The reformist President's critical rhetoric 'sounded inspirational to feminists and motivated them in that time' (Baniyaghub, 2005; Tazmini, 2013, p. 68).

Consistent with Khatami's liberal discourse, Zahra Shojaee, the then Head of the Centre, explained that she 'enthusiastically adopted her blueprints from international organisations' agendas on women's-rights, e.g., UN's Millennium Development Goals, with a focus on women's political participation and gender justice'.⁹⁰ As its official reports (2001, p. 39) show, the Centre focused its communications and publications on a number of particular areas, including: social and political participation, awareness and education, gender gaps and discriminations, and women's status in the government and Parliament. Indeed, these were missing elements in the IR's discourse. In practice, as Molawerdi, the then Deputy Head of the Centre (1997-2005) said, the Centre directed official research projects and agendas towards eliminating violence and discrimination against women, with 'feminist scholars hired to work on these aims'.⁹¹ However, despite this enthusiasm at the political level, some WRNGO members argued that 'managers and civil servants at the administrative level did not have enthusiasm or knowledge about women's modern rights', which impeded the spread of this discourse at the administrative level.⁹²

In the reformist Parliament, the Committee for Women's Affairs came as an ally for the reformist President and amplified egalitarian arguments, which stressed on eliminating

⁸⁸ The term 'Glass Ceiling' in origin is used in the Management studies in order to refer to the limitations on women's progress in the organisation's hierarchy (Wirth, 2002)

⁸⁹ Interview: WRNGO president, 2015

⁹⁰ Interview: 2014

⁹¹ Video interview with Darham internet TV, 2018, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRjuahUL93U>

⁹² Interviews: 2014

discrimination against women in Family Laws and policy documents.⁹³ With an emphasis on international schemes and campaigns, such as the Convention for Eliminating Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), reformist MPs centred their public conversations and parliamentary speeches on the status of women in particular laws such as Blood Money, Atonement, and Custody.⁹⁴ Feminist female MPs, also, symbolised their liberal arguments in their social interactions, for instance, the reformist female MPs from Tehran, Elahe Kulaee, did not exercise the established practice of wearing a black veil during her tenure in the Parliament (Figure 7.3), which was considered as ‘taboo-breaking’ in public opinion.⁹⁵



Figure 7.3. Tehran MP, Elahe Kulaee, in her Khaki dress, taking part in a strike along with other female MPs in the 6th Parliament/ photo credit: ISNA website

On the societal front, the liberal and feminist WRNGOs advocated the discourse of equal rights for women with a focus on the right to divorce, equal atonement, being a judge, as well as eliminating violence against women. This was a discourse at bigots with the establishment’s pro-conservative Islamic discourse (Sreberny, 2013). These WRNGOs borrowed their agendas from international organisations, such as the UN, and through international events such as ones related to Beijing+5 platform that, as a globally accepted declaration, promoted initiatives and actions for equal gender rights.⁹⁶ In contrast, thousands of conservative WRNGOs disputed and

⁹³ Zahra Shojaee, the then reformist Head of the Centre, Interview with Paytakhte-Kohan periodical (p.26), number 20, March 2015

⁹⁴ The details of CEDAW are available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

⁹⁵ *The ‘role of women in Iran’s Parliament’*, Deutsche Welle, January 2012, available at: <http://p.dw.com/p/13hBQ>

⁹⁶ More information about this platform is available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/beijing+5.htm>

stood against these agendas, labelling them as 'contrary to the Islamic ideology' (Sedghi, 2007, pp. 214-17). These groups had their voice amplified by mosques and religious bases.

The climate of policy network over time became conflictual. In the contestation between liberal and conservative discourses in this policy arena, President Khatami had to respect the hegemony of the Ayatollah Khamenei's position and conservative clergy too, thus, by undertaking an intermediate position, he incorporated some elements of the traditional Islamic discourse, e.g. motherhood, into his administration's liberal discourse (Tazmini, 2013, p. 66). This consideration was also taken into account when it was about adjusting the policy and legal documents. Nonetheless, the Centre pushed the Cabinet of ministers, hand-in-hand with the Committee and MPs in Parliament, to implement several liberal reforms in governmental policies and practices.

Rules and Practices: In order to reform the official practices, Zahra Shojaee, the then Head of the Centre, officialised the interaction of WRNGOs with the government by establishing the Bureau for Participation in the Centre. This Bureau went on to extend its leverage over other state institutions by the support of the President's office. For example, it proposed an official decree to the Cabinet, which would oblige ministries and national organisations to establish women's advisory office in their chart. The Cabinet passed it, and over a few years, this decree was implemented in 50 offices, according to the Centre's report (2001). This institutionally increased the importance of WR issues in different domains. Another example was a decree that 'required all organisations of the executive to allocate one per cent of their budget every year to women's areas while involving WRNGOs in their decision-making processes.⁹⁷ These shifts led to the official recognition of WRNGOs in the government's regulations and communications, as well as providing access points for them.

The reformist's WR approach was incorporated into the mid-term development plans too. Initially, before the rise of the reformist government, no details on the political participation and legal rights of women were present in the First and Second documents. In order to fill this gap, the executive and Parliament adjusted the Third (1999-2004) and Fourth (2004-2009) development plans (Afrakhte & Saraee, 2013, pp. 136-7). The Centre from the executive and female MPs from the Parliament increased the number of governmental funds for women's areas by 28 per cent in this document. According to its 2005 reports, the Centre meant using

⁹⁷ Interview: 2014

this financial resource for funding emerging WRNGOs in the form of providing yearly grants for their research projects and public events. On top of this, by putting the term ‘WRNGO’ in the text of the Third development plan, e.g., articles 71 and 158, for the first time Iran’s high-profile documents recognised the policy role of WRNGOs in this domain (Ghadimi *et al.*, 2011).

By 2005, due to the influence of the liberal discourse within the policy network, the number of articles in relation to women’s rights in the Fourth Development Plan increased to 20. Shojaee noted that, ‘with the leading efforts of the Centre, the government incorporated positive discrimination in these articles’.⁹⁸ This was the reformists’ response to feminist WRNGOs’ demands for more governmental support. This demand was also heard in the Parliament as exemplified in Iran’s Immigration Law.

In Iran, based on the Sharia code that women are under the guardianship of men, the Immigration laws had restricted the right to free travel for women. According to this rule, married women had to have written consent from their husband and also girls under 18 must get an official consent from their guardians—father or husband—to be allowed to travel abroad. After the rise of the reformist government, feminist WRNGOs disputed this rule and challenged it in the public spheres, such as seminars, as well as in the pro-reformist mass media. In response to WRNGO’s concerns and also in line with recommendations from the Centre, the reformist-led Parliament, in its second reformist term, abandoned the legal need for husband’s permission for foreign travel.⁹⁹

The ongoing institutional changes left the conservatives disturbed. In order to limit the effects of public actions and vibrancy of the liberal stream, the conservative commanders of the police developed regulations for gatherings and demonstrations. They required NGOs to provide detailed information including slogans, the text of banners, venue, and list of speakers of every public event to the authorities in order to obtain any legal permit. Moreover, the IRGC’s Intelligence Unit and the Ministry of Intelligence extended legal restrictions on the emergence and public activities of feminist WRNGOs. In this respect, they exercised the institutional authority of their delegates in the audit boards of the Ministry of Interior and delayed the requests filed by liberals to issue licenses for new WRNGO.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, while suppressing

⁹⁸ Interview: 2014

⁹⁹ *Deutsche Welle website*, *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Interview: WRNGO president, 2015

WRNGOs' actions, the security forces also adopted new tactics, such as frequent summoning of women activists' in order to harass them, and prohibiting street gatherings by not issuing permits for feminist and reformist protesters, for example the request to hold a gathering to mark International Women's Day in 2004.¹⁰¹

Moreover, the conservative clerics sitting in the Guardian Council maximised their institutional power and rejected the bills advocating gender justice, or in some cases returned them to the Parliament for profound amendments. For instance, during 2000-2003, the reformist-led Parliament passed some bills on child custody and divorce, which aimed at abandoning stringent practices on the women's rights of divorce and giving wives more rights over their husbands. The Guardian Council instantly rejected these bills, and labelled them 'contrary to Islam'.¹⁰²

Therefore, as reflected by the actions of the reformist President and Parliament, the prominent discourse of the policy network was directed towards gender justice. Simultaneously, by recognising liberal WRNGOs in the legal and policy documents, as well as providing institutional access points in the state apparatus, new voices were transmitted from the society to the official spaces. However, conservatives had their specialised official centres impeding the liberal shifts, as well as bolstering conservative WRNGOs and the Islamic discourse regarding WRs. As a result of the encounter between the contrary streams, the policy network of institutions became polarised and rendered them inconsistent.

3.3. The Relational Aspect of the Issue Network

Corresponding with the emergence of new WRNGOs, the Centre, in the middle of the policy network, adopted a two-level strategy in managing the arrangement of relationships. The Bureau for Participation in the Centre facilitated frequent contacts, i.e. on the weekly or monthly basis, while demonstrating more eagerness towards feminist WRNGOs.¹⁰³ As a result, while the top of the executive within the policy network was institutionally open to all, a smaller cluster of WRNGOs enjoyed privileges in terms of having a deeper influence, more involvement in the Centre's plans and policies, and receiving more research projects and funds.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² *Deutsche Welle website*, Ibid.

¹⁰³ Interview: WRNGO members, 2014

For instance, a member of a feminist WRNGOs in Tehran revealed that ‘in response to our requests, Zahra Shojaee’s Office accepted to conduct a series of joint nationwide research projects with us’ with a focus on the status of violence against women, and alternative solutions to curb it.¹⁰⁴ The results of these projects were used in forming the policies of the Centre.

Also, the Centre extended the network of relationship by bringing in other governmental organisations and ministries through their bureaus and advisors for women’s affairs. Also, as its report shows (2001, p. 41), the Centre facilitated WRNGOs’ access to high-profile governmental councils and the Cabinet, as well as Islamic and security institutions. These relationships especially advantaged the feminist WRNGOs, as an activist said that, ‘we were constantly learning from global experiences and platforms, and pushing forward in our relationships with the Cabinet and Parliament’.¹⁰⁵ Thus, over time, this network became a mechanism of the triumph for the feminist voices and liberal stream. Though, the geographical locus of the WRNGOs was important in utilising this network, ‘being distant from Tehran meant less chance of being seen and heard by policymakers’.¹⁰⁶

The Centre, in practice, also had to sustain official correspondence and minimum relationships with the security forces and Islamic institutions owing to official regulations, which remained problematic. A WRNGO member said ‘I heard from the staff that the Centre was constantly under the conservative establishment’s security pressures and religious leverage to reduce its relationships with feminist WRNGOs’. In reaction to these pressures, Zahra Shojaee, the then Head of the Centre, said: ‘I reluctantly had to request my personnel to reduce or avoid close relationships with radical activists’.¹⁰⁷ These pressures also tied the President’s hands in some cases. For example, in the second term, in response to the four-year long-standing demands of feminist WRNGOs and reformist parties, President Khatami intended to appoint a female minister for the first time in the history of the IR since it turned into a public cause. Nevertheless, because of the overt pressures and covert intimidations orchestrated by conservative clerics and fundamentalist Islamic schools, Khatami gave up on this idea (Tazmini, 2013, p. 68).

¹⁰⁴ Interview: journalist, 2015

¹⁰⁵ Interview: 2015

¹⁰⁶ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁰⁷ Interview: 2015

In the legislative area, WRNGOs established and utilised relationships with the Committee and female MPs in the Parliament; though it was not quite frequent and interactive.¹⁰⁸ The Committee did not tend to regularise relationships in a weekly or daily fashion, and female MPs, 'while being politically consistent, in practice, were not enthusiastic to accept WRNGOs in their offices'.¹⁰⁹ In practice, only in the case of common interest or WRNGOs' insistence, the relationship became frequent. Joining CEDAW was an occasion in this relation.

For the reformist MPs, joining CEDAW was a priority that, in addition to political victory against the conservative establishment, could legally limit Islamic institutions' scope against women's freedoms and rights in social and political areas. In 2000, after a few years of public discussions in the civil society, the Committee intended to pass a law to oblige the government to join CEDAW officially. As it was also the WRNGOs' demand, MPs arranged a series of joint meetings with large WRNGOs in Tehran and organised some joint plans in order to mobilise social support on this issue.¹¹⁰ The purpose was to increase 'social pressure from below'. Parliament finally passed the bill, but then the conservative Guardian Council resisted it and suspended the approval for a few years.¹¹¹

In addition to these official contacts, women activists pointed out the influence of personal links, saying, 'it was a better choice for delivering opinions to the Committee in Parliament'.¹¹² From the stream of feminist WRNGOs, the relationship of the Centre with bigger and more famous ones, especially those with the family members of the reformist politicians as a board member, became more frequent, with their voice getting significant in the network. Also, in some circumstances, WRNGOs had to appeal their relationship with the Centre to access Parliament, but this was a privilege for liberal WRNGOs regarding their close relationships with reformist MPs.¹¹³

Sometimes, the success of WRNGOs depended on their relationship with political parties and media as well. A WRNGO president said: 'In case of not being able to reach Zahra Shojaee, the then Head of the Centre, or the Committee members in Parliament directly, reformist partisans

¹⁰⁸ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ The 'Sixth Parliament and CEDAW', Shargh newspaper (p.8), number 1314, August 2011, available at: <http://old.sharghdaily.ir/news/90/05/17/24829.html>

¹¹² Interview: 2014

¹¹³ Interview: Zahra Shojaee, the then reformist Head of the Centre, 2015

helped us'.¹¹⁴ For example, some feminist WRNGO activists that were in contact with Participation Front party had the opportunity of speaking directly to the President, due to the close relationship and family linkages of senior members of that political party with the President's Office. However, women activists complained that the shadow of electoral competition always stayed on their relationship with political parties since 'partisans tended to recruit them for electoral campaigns'.¹¹⁵

The WRNGOs' relationships with the mass media 'was a must if they needed success in advocating their discourse. Reformist journalists centred their published articles and reports on the subject of gender justice.¹¹⁶ Where WRNGOs could not guarantee their voice to be heard by policymakers, they 'named and shamed them as anti-women figures' in pro-reformist newspapers.¹¹⁷ For example, a female lawyer termed the amendments in the women's atonement laws as a 'result of the WRNGOs-media cooperation in the long-term'.¹¹⁸ She added 'because of the strong resistance of the establishment; we needed to engage public opinion on this issue, which eventually accumulated pressure on the conservative clerics in the Guardian Council, forcing them to accept the Parliament's amendments in the laws'.¹¹⁹ Also, in some cases, such as the Parliament's bill for joining CEDAW, protagonist feminist WRNGOs together with fellow journalist and partisans, organised public petitions and group-discussions in major streets and university campuses of Tehran, which were also seen by ordinary people and covered in pro-reformist newspapers.¹²⁰

In reaction to reformists' law and policy reforms, e.g. the bill of joining CEDAW in the Parliament, fundamentalist WRNGOs, together with conservative parties and press—funded by the IRGC— petitioned the Guardian Council to resist the bills (Sedghi, 2007). Conservative WRNGOs enjoyed the privilege of the national TV broadcaster, which is also the biggest mass media. In several cases, they contributed to video reports on the most popular TV channels to delegitimise the image of feminist WRNGOs in the public, and question not just the policies of

¹¹⁴ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹¹⁵ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

¹¹⁶ Interview: journalist, 2015

¹¹⁷ Interview: WRNGO president, 2015

¹¹⁸ Interview: 2015

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Interview: WRNGO president, 2015

the Committee and the Centre, but also the credibility of liberal women in the executive, e.g. Zahra Shojaee.¹²¹

Therefore, the policy network in this domain grew in terms of relationships, and became polarised. Within this issue network, however, the relationships were not even, as close relationships of the feminist WRNGOs with the executive and Parliament advantaged their liberal discourse. In parallel, Islamic institutions, along with conservative WRNGOs, consolidated their critical stance and by taking hard measures restricted the liberal actors and their ideology. This made the articulation of relationships between the conservative and reformist coalitions confrontational.

3.4. The Agency of WRNGOs in the Issue Network

In the reformist period, the government's policy of directing political and financial support to the WRNGOs increased their potential of gaining institutional scope. In parallel, the structural reforms in the executive established the direct and indirect channels of public contact with the Cabinet and the President's Office. While the public spheres were becoming vibrant, these access points enabled the critical discourse of feminists to rise against the traditional narratives of the conservative establishment in this policy domain. Not only did the policymaking climate become pluralised, but also did the public spheres, e.g., streets, parks and university campuses were open to the public actions of women activists (Figure 7.4).



Figure 7.4. Streets were open to feminist activists during the reformist period/ photo credit: Asre-Nou website

¹²¹ Ibid.

In this environment, the growth of political parties' women's wings, alongside mass media, provided more channels to influence policymakers in the Executive and Parliament, as well as to exert pressure on authoritarian institutions. In this circumstance, due to the counter-power and low tolerance of the authoritarian institutions, the policy network tolerated mostly moderate mechanisms of participation with a narrower range of influence on the public opinion, such as seminars; but other activities, such as street protests were still likely to encounter repression.

4. The Conservative Period: Turning to Policy Community

By the time the 2005 presidential election was held, the tendency of the society had slowly shifted from political to economic priorities (Siani et al., 2016). This meant that the demands of the lower class women had become prominent versus the political voice of the middle-class women. This shift became the mounting point of the Islamic-revolutionary manifesto of Ahmadinejad and his allied conservatives, which however did not disclose a specific narrative on women's rights (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009). In practice, however, the conservatives' economic justice approach brought about a profound political shift with effects on the structure of the women's-rights issue network.

4.1. The Composition of the Policy Community

State Actors: Soon after taking office, Ahmadinejad purged feminists and liberals from the Centre (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 91; Sadeghi, 2009). He also changed the name of the Centre from Women Participation to the Centre for Women and Family. This change had the following two implications. First, removing the word 'participation', which according to a liberal WRNGO president, 'signalled that the centre no longer has the mission of promoting the social presence and political representation of women'. Second, adding the word family into the title meant that conservatives 'tended to return women to the confines of home and relegate them to being mothers in the family'.¹²² This change was not just at the surface; rather the Centre underwent further shifts inside its composition and organisation. Ahmadinejad appointed two radical conservative females as the heads of the Centre during his period, both 'were unfamiliar

¹²² Interviews: WRNGOs president, 2014

to women activists and journalists'.¹²³ They had an affiliation with Islamic schools, as well as strong connections with the establishment (Sadeghi, 2009). The first head of the Centre, Zohreh Tabibzade (2005-2009), was selected from the *Jebhe-Paidari* (the Resistance Front) party, which, is known for its radical anti-Western and fundamentalist discourse.¹²⁴ Maryam Mojtahedzade, the head from 2009 to 2013, was an ex-member of the IRGC's Women's Force and the ex-wife of the martyred ambassador of Iran to Lebanon, meaning she was also a trustee of the establishment.

Following these changes on the top, most of the personnel of the Centre were either removed or relegated to junior positions one-by-one, and new faces with an active family and political affiliations with conservatives were appointed instead.¹²⁵ With the profile and composition of the Centre shifting, the conservative government increased its annual revenue. Also, the Cabinet obliged all the ministries and national organisations to hand over one per cent of their budget to the Centre, while granting the then Head an exclusive discretion on spending.¹²⁶ In his last year of presidency, Ahmadinejad also elevated the position of the then Head of the Centre to vice-president, though, without developing its organisation, which as Zahra Shojaee the former reformist Head of the Centre argued, 'was only a facade and did not involve its political prestige and organisational power'.¹²⁷

Since 2004, the majority of the Parliamentary seats had been dominated by the conservatives, which as a result affected the composition of the Committee. In the elections for the 7th and 8th Parliament, the Guardian Council disqualified feminists and liberal female candidates (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, p. 37). In the 7th term, there were 13 female MPs in Parliament; 12 of them conservatives, and just one reformist. A similar trend continued throughout the 8th term when the number of female MPs dropped to eight, all conservatives—the lowest in the history of the IR.¹²⁸ This also reflected the low profile of women's political role in the conservative camp, because whilst they were privileged in the electoral processes, they did not let more women in their electoral coalition. Most of the female MPs were connected with the IRGC, Islamic schools, and the establishment's cultural foundations (Azghandi, 2012, p. 203).

¹²³ Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Zahra Shojaee, the then reformist Head of the Centre, Interview with ILNA website, Ibid.

¹²⁶ Hamshahri website, May 2013, Available at: <http://hamshahrionline.ir/details/216226>

¹²⁷ Zahra Shojaee, the then reformist Head of the Centre, Interview with ILNA website, Ibid.

¹²⁸ Young Journalist Club website, April 2015, available at: <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5193334>

During the eight years of the conservative rule, as many WRNGO members pointed out in their interviews, political profile changed the vibrancy and prestige of the Committee.¹²⁹ A journalist claimed that ‘the then female MPs repeatedly postponed the regular meetings of the Committee; as they were not interested in it, and once the member MPs suspended the meetings for a few months’.¹³⁰ Concerning its political profile, Maryam Behrouzi, the former conservative MP (Tehran, 1980-1984) criticised that ‘the Committee was only a formality for female MPs and it had a mannish profile more than a feminist one’.¹³¹

In the same period also the political role of the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC increased including in the women’s-rights domain, with the Centre allocating large funds to the IRGC’s Women Force in order to establish it as a ‘pseudo-WRNGO’ and help it propagate the conservative discourse in the society (Figure 7.5) (Sadeghi, 2009; Thaler et al., 2010).



Figure 7.5. The IRGC’s Women Force regularly held street marching, Tehran/ photo credit: Al Shia website

Civil Society Actors: The Centre requested all the existing WRNGOs to undergo a re-registration process, which as one feminist WRNGO activist said, ‘excluded many of the vocal feminist WRNGOs’.¹³² Also, the Centre ceased governmental funding for critical WRNGOs, while

¹²⁹ Interview: 2014

¹³⁰ Interview with Zanane-Emrouz periodical, September 2014, available at: <http://zananemrooz.com/category/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%87>

¹³¹ Radio-Zamane website, December 2011, available at: <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/39267>

¹³² Interview: 2014

directing money to the conservative ones.¹³³ As a result, many feminist WRNGOs either faced a shortage of financial resources and confiscation of their offices by the government or revocation of their licences by the audit boards. At the same time, many of the conservative and traditional groups, e.g., neighbourhoods' women's groups, religious associations, and women's assemblies in mosques—which until that time had an informal identity—were pushed into governmental registration process and became formal WRNGOs.¹³⁴

The Executive, specifically the Centre, also stopped publishing an official record of the registered WRNGOs. However, in 2017, President Rouhani's administration revealed that the total number of WRNGOs at the end of Ahmadinejad's government was 1677.¹³⁵ This meant a growth in the number of WRNGOs; which feminist activists claimed in the interviews, 'was façade as the majority of them were only registered names or state-sponsored groups'.¹³⁶ Thus, in this period, the Centre deliberately intervened and changed the composition of NGOs in the policy network.

Moreover, the composition of the political parties in the WR policy network changed as a result of the restrictive policies of the conservative ministers of Interior and Islamic Culture, who had security and military profiles, as discussed in the sixth chapter. The reformist female partisans stated in their interviews that the conservative deprived them of governmental funds, this was an effective punishment for their 'critical activities'.¹³⁷ In the second term of the conservative period, the two largest reformist parties, the Participation Front and Mujahedin Organisation, which had the most active women's wings, were banned by the conservative-led Judiciary.¹³⁸ As a result, the number of partisans with a feminist profile dropped and their activities went underground, whilst in the conservative camp, the majority of the parties did not have a women's wing or, if they did, it was not influential or active.¹³⁹

Conservatives applied similar pressures on the mass media. An experienced journalist explained in the interview that, 'the process of issuing permits and providing funds for increasing the volume and circulation of women's newspapers became strict'.¹⁴⁰ Also, due to the

¹³³ Mehrkhane website, June 2014, available at: <http://mehrkhane.com/fa/news/7054>

¹³⁴ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹³⁵ ISNA website, August 2017, available at: <https://www.isna.ir/news/96060804650/>

¹³⁶ Interview: 2014

¹³⁷ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

¹³⁸ *Deutsche Welle*, October 2010, available at: <http://p.dw.com/p/PWm2>

¹³⁹ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

¹⁴⁰ Interview: journalist, 2015

securitisation, the Judiciary shut down the leading women's newspapers, e.g., *Zanan* (women), especially after the 2009 elections.¹⁴¹ With several feminist journalists being detained from 2006 onwards, women's security forces silenced critical mass media one by one ever since (Rakel, 2008). At the same time, with the funding provided by Ahmadinejad's administration, several newspapers with a conservative profile were established, e.g. *Javan* (Young). However, the increase in women's weblogs and websites, as well as social media such as Facebook, compensated for these limits and replaced the print media. In the first term of the conservative period individual women's weblogs and websites mushroomed, estimated at more than a few hundreds, but in the second term, they became subject to security measures as well.¹⁴²

During the eight years of conservative-led rule, the size of the policy network reduced a little concerning the number of active WRNGOs, as well as mass media and political parties; the government synchronised the composition of WRNGOs. With the feminist actors curtailed, the political diversity and pluralism in the composition of the policy network reduced. This meant that, regarding size, the policy network remained large, but became uniform and consistent in terms of diversity.

4.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Policy Community

Discourse: Whilst the top establishment kept toeing the line of Ayatollah Khamenei's discourse—which revolved around chastity and motherhood, Ahmadinejad's discourse in relation to women's rights was not disclosed to the public until he took office, which turned out to be the same as the Islamic-revolutionary rhetoric of Ayatollah Khamenei. This discourse in civil society was known to be gender unfriendly (Sedghi, 2007, p. 21). The administration, accordingly, openly said that women should return home, and laws and policies should support their family role and rights (Sadeghi, 2009).¹⁴³

Zohreh Tabibzadeh, the then conservative Head of the Centre (2005-2009) acknowledged a '180-degree turn' in the discourse and agendas of the Centre during her time, as she believed that 'reformist's narrative was deviant due to originating from Western thoughts, whereas

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Interview: WRNGO member, 2015

conservatives' narrative was the real Islamic discourse'.¹⁴⁴ Because of this ideological scepticism, the Centre confiscated the policy documents from the reformist period, and 'trashed a collection of hard copies of research that the reformist Centre co-produced with WRNGOs which addressed violence against women'.¹⁴⁵

Across the two terms, two conservative women that headed the Centre critically stressed on the necessity of replacing the discourse of social rights with the family discourse in the policy documents.¹⁴⁶ Zohreh Tabibzadeh, the first conservative Head of Centre, announced that 'our goal is defining and presenting a national exemplar of Muslim woman based on the personality of Fatimah (604 -632 AD), Prophet Muhammad's only daughter, in early Islam and incorporated it in its policies'.¹⁴⁷ This inspiration was rooted in Ayatollah Khamenei's glorification of Fatimah, as many traditions in Islam praise her devotion to family. Following this line, the Centre and the Cabinet of ministers invested their resources in amending Family Laws, whilst concerning employment and labour laws; they advocated home-based employment as the ideal social contribution for women (Hoseinkhah, 2014).

In parallel, conservative MPs also advocated a similar discourse in the Parliament by referring to the symbolic Islamic narratives such as 'the heaven is under the mother's foot'.¹⁴⁸ By amplifying this voice in public speeches, MPs and the Committee conditioned the public opinion for amending common laws in Parliament, particularly Family Laws, with the purpose of providing legal incentives for marriage and reproduction (Sedghi, 2007). The Parliament also pushed back the liberal discourse and the reformist period bills, e.g. conservative MPs removed the issue of joining CEDAW from the agenda in 2004.¹⁴⁹ 'This was a message to the feminist WRNGOs and reformist groups too', a reformist WRNGO activist said.¹⁵⁰ Taking an opposite stance towards reformists, the Committee members made conversations about men's rights of temporary marriage and polygamy in parliamentary speeches (Sadeghi, 2009). Women's dress codes were also back on the conservative Parliament' agenda, and MPs spoke about a stringent Hijab Law in their speeches (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, pp. 91-2). The conservative-led

¹⁴⁴ Mehrkhane website, June 2013, available at: <http://mehrkhane.com/fa/news/7056/>

¹⁴⁵ The website of the Centre, January 2015, available at: <http://women.gov.ir/fa/news/6254>

¹⁴⁶ Mehrkhane website, June 2013, available at: <http://mehrkhane.com/fa/news/7056/>

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Interview: WRNGO member, 2014

¹⁴⁹ 'The role of women in Iran's Parliament', *Deutsche Welle*, ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Interview: 2014

Parliament intended to manipulate the balance between 'social role' vs 'house-keeping role' of women in society through laws (Hoseinkhah, 2014).

Whilst the executive and Parliament were consistent in their discourse on the societal side, the confrontation between the discourses of feminist and conservative WRNGOs kept raging in public conversations. However, due to the state-sponsored growth in the volume of conservative WRNGOs and media, and the decline of many feminist WRNGOs, the motherhood and family rhetoric gradually overshadowed egalitarian rhetoric (Hoseinkhah, 2014). Based on the opinions of conservative female activists, the national TV channels also broadcasted several programmes on anti-feminist issues such as polygamy and temporary marriage (Sedghi, 2007). As a consequence, feminist WRNGOs also intensified their rhetoric seeking a 'gender movement' on the ground with the purpose of changing gender clichés, habitus, and comportment, with their demands advocated in several pro-reformist newspapers such as *Shargh (the East)* (Sreberny, 2013). They resisted the government's promised shifts, yet, their voice was muted by the louder voice of pro-conservative media and forums such as Friday prayer sermons.¹⁵¹ Notwithstanding their distinction, feminist and conservative WRNGOs were not always against each other's throat. A feminist activist said that in cases of overlapping demands such as equal payments for women and increasing women's seats in the Parliament; there was unity among liberal and conservative WRNGOs'. Thus, WRNGOs were resilient to cooperate on some political causes, while maintaining rivalry on ideological issues such as the ones related to the family (Shojaee, 2013).

Rules and Practices: Between the competing discourses in the society, the Centre and the Committee took the side of the conservative stream in policymaking and amended the regulations and policies concerning public participation and women's rights. In order to promote family and marriage in policies, the Centre established two new deputy offices, one for Family Issues and the other for Women's Economic Development, while also reducing the activities and authority of the Bureau for Participation. Zohreh Tabibzadeh, the then conservative Head, directed the resources and mission of the Centre towards specific alternatives, including (i) reduced working hours for women, (ii) gender segregation in workplaces, and (iii) insurance for housemakers.¹⁵² These priorities influenced the budget of the Centre, as cooperation with civil society became limited to WRNGOs supporting the

¹⁵¹ Interview: journalist, 2014

¹⁵² Interview with Mehrkhane website, June 2014, available at: <http://mehrkhane.com/fa/news/7054>

motherhood rhetoric, with their public activities such as seminars and workshops across streets, parks, university campuses and theatres being funded by the Centre.¹⁵³ Moreover, the veto power of the delegates of Islamic schools, the IRGC, and the Ministry of Intelligence increased in the audit boards after receiving the green light from the Ministry of Interior and the Centre.¹⁵⁴ This move granted them more institutional power and extended the spectre of security measures in the procedures of issuing permission for establishing WRNGOs. As a consequence, the dominance of the Islamic discourse and the intimidations of security forces increased towards the second term of Ahmadinejad, with more female activists and WRNGOs adopting spatial and topical focus, as well as their rhetoric, to an Islamic one in order to be considered as legitimate participants in the policymaking (Tahmasebi, 2010, p. 83; Rivetti & Moheimany, 2015).

Alongside the Centre, the Parliament also amended the theme and direction of the mid-term plans. In the Fifth Development Plan, as an example, while the conservative-led Parliament extended the size of the content on women's issues, there was a dominant tendency towards legal rights and social benefits for home-based jobs and family-based activities. For example, the document contained articles obliging the government to provide insurance for housemakers. Also, in order to promote the Islamic dress code, the document necessitated financial support and physical actions of cultural organisations, such as the Ministry of Culture, for improving Hijab and ethical practices in relation to women. This was an invitation to the IRGC to further its hardline actions in the name of culture. These changes were taking place while MPs either shortened or removed articles on the social, political and economic opportunities for women, which officially undermined the legitimacy of the feminist discourse in the government's communications, plans, and policies (Afrakhte & Saraee, 2013, pp. 150-2).

At the same time, the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC's Intelligence Unit hardened their stance towards feminist WRNGOs by applying more physical restrictions and suppressing their public activities, such as the case of street gatherings in June 2007 in Haft-Tir Square in Tehran (Figure 7.6). As a result, they had to limit or hide their activities and moderate their causes, as,

¹⁵³ Radio-Farda website, June 2007, available at:
https://www.radiofarda.com/a/o1_wemen_after_ahmadinejad/399214.html

¹⁵⁴ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

an activist pointed out that there was an increase in the number of secret houses-meetings of feminist WRNGOs after 2009.¹⁵⁵

Also, the IRGC's Women's Force introduced joint programmes and activities together with female supporters of the Islamic discourse of family and Hijab (Sadeghi, 2009). The IRGC commanders, as well as conservative figures, e.g. Friday prayer imams, in their formal speeches and lectures, recommended this paramilitary force as 'the ideal organisation for the social and political participation of women that want their chastity and dignity protected in their public presence and movements' (Tila, 2005). The government opened streets and public spaces to the IRGC's Women's Force, as well as the Moral Police, which firmed the ground for actions such as hitting women for not donning the Hijab properly and giving face-to-face religious advice to ordinary people (Figure 7.6).



Figure 7.6. The police detain young women with the non-compliant dress code and oppress feminist gatherings, Tehran/ photos credit: Manototv website

During the conservative period, therefore, reversing the discourse of WR policies and laws, and adjusting the organisational structure of the Centre, dominated the Islamic narrative and limited the public mechanisms of participation in the policy network. As a result, the policy network became consistent and uniform regarding policy approach and discourse, while because of the politicisation of security forces it became resistant to feminist WRNGOs. With the growth in the policy role and political intervention of the IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence, the environment of the policy network also became less tolerant of critical groups.

¹⁵⁵ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

4.3. The Relational Aspect of the Policy Community

Conservatives in the Centre and Committee adjusted the arrangement of relations in the policy network. The most substantial shifts happened in the relationships of the Centre with feminist WRNGOs, as the then Head and the personnel held a negative view of them. Nevertheless, it took a couple of years to completely adjust the Centre's network of relationship, because as a female activist claimed in her interview, 'the former participatory procedures and relationships had already been stabilised during eight years of reformists'.¹⁵⁶ Tabibzadeh and Mojtahedzadeh, the conservative heads, 'through a long-term balancing project', not only cut her relationship with feminist WRNGOs towards 2013 but also became hostile.¹⁵⁷ In practice, this meant that 'when feminist WRNGOs submitted requests for funds or holding a public event such as seminars, the personnel of the Centre deliberately entangled them in administrative delays'.¹⁵⁸ This impeded the presence and action of feminist WRNGOs in public spheres such as university campuses and streets. A feminist journalist observed the post-2009 interactions between the Centre and feminist WRNGOs as being 'contentious' because of the increased securitisation at the national level.¹⁵⁹ Instead of feminist WRNGOs, the Centre's personnel extended their contacts to conservative WRNGOs with religious profile and rhetoric.¹⁶⁰ However, as a feminist journalist argued, the interactions between the two sides were not even, since the former used to sponsor and recruit the latter.¹⁶¹

The Centre also shifted its political position in relation to the conservative establishment by reducing its distance with the Islamic schools and security institutions. The Centre became closer to the IRGC and the Guardian Council because, as an activist claimed, 'they intended to islamise the theme of policies and line of agendas about women's rights'.¹⁶² As a result, the duality that used to exist between the Centre-Committee on one side and the IRGC-Guardian Council on the other side diminished during the conservative period. An obvious outcome of this change in the coalitions was their close collaboration in manipulating laws after 2006, for example in the areas of family rights and women's dress code that was core to their belief system (Sadeghi, 2009).

¹⁵⁶ Interview: WRNGOs activist, 2015

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁵⁹ Interview: 2015

¹⁶⁰ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Interview: 2014

In response to concerns of the Centre, the Parliamentary Committee drafted a bill on Women's Dress Code. It aimed at intensifying security and hardened measures in relation to the practice of Hijab in public spheres, e.g. parks, cinemas, streets, which received a Yes from 137 MPs, was quickly approved by the Guardian Council, and communicated to the Moral Police for implementation (Figure 7.6) (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009, pp. 91-2). A similar practice was evident in the case of Family Laws that was approved in the second term. This law granted a wide range of rights to men in marriage and divorce. Two articles of this law were more controversial, namely the rights of polygamy and easier divorce for men. However, despite social pressures, Parliament approved the amendments (Sadeghi, 2009).

Along with the Centre, the then Committee took distance from WRNGOs. A feminist activist said 'The vivid ideological distinction between our WRNGO and the Committee widened the gap between us, and later hindered further interactions'.¹⁶³ In practice, famous feminist faces were either denied entrance to the Centre's and Parliament's buildings—or, when they managed to make any contact, had their proposals and critiques rejected instantly.¹⁶⁴

Alongside the shrinking network of relationships with NGOs, especially the critical ones, the executive and Parliament found their way paved for further changes in rules and regulations in relation to women. Usually, they reformed the rules based on the notion of gender segregation, an instance of this attitude was the introduction of women's quotas in the admission process in public universities in the second term, which limited women's position in more than 70 fields, mostly technical ones, because conservatives considered them as 'men's fields' (Sreberny, 2013).¹⁶⁵ In order to spread this discourse, in the second term, Ahmadinejad's administration informally banned the entrance of women with bad Hijab—not completely covering head or body—to state buildings (Rakel, 2008). In parallel, the closer relationship of the IRGC and the conservative government led to increased formal restriction and suppression on WRNGOs' activities, especially in the public sphere, e.g. street gatherings. The obvious instance of this was the physical repression of feminist women in Tehran's major streets on International Women's Day, 'which also had the consent of the Centre', as claimed by a WRNGO member.¹⁶⁶ Also, the

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Interview: WRNGO member, 2015

¹⁶⁵ Radio Farda website, June 2007, available at:
https://www.radiofarda.com/a/o1_wemen_after_ahmadinejad/399214.html

¹⁶⁶ Interview: woman journalist, 2014

Centre increased the frequency of revoking the licenses of critical WRNGOs, or, in some cases, as a WRNGO president said, 'the Centre contacted WRNGOs and obliged them to change the composition of the central board by removing political opponents from it'.¹⁶⁷ This led to a new condition in which, as phrased by a journalist, 'the streets and public spaces were seized from feminist groups'.¹⁶⁸

In order to compensate for their exclusion from the policy community, feminist WRNGOs resorted to the reformist media and online platforms, as well as the remaining active political parties. By doing so, WRNGOs' purpose was to mobilise public opinion and put counter social-pressure on the conservative WR policy community and its policies.¹⁶⁹ As for the relationship with political parties, two phenomena were remarkable. First, the active reformist parties suffered from the same or more intense pressures as applied on feminist WRNGOs; thus, in some cases reformist partisans, while helped WRNGOs members, 'migrated to WRNGOs as the last shelter to survive their organised activism'.¹⁷⁰ This led to the politicisation of the larger and more liberal WRNGOs', especially during the second term. Second, in a few cases, feminist WRNGOs made common causes with conservative parties and utilised it as an opportunity in the public sphere. For instance, in the case of approved amendments to the Family Laws, as described earlier, the coalition between women activists from both reformist and conservative camps, mass media, and WRNGOs succeeded to stop the implementation of the law, and forced the Parliament to revise it (Sadeghi, 2009).

However, the relationship of feminist WRNGOs, which were outsiders, with reformist parties and the mass media were under the strict monitoring of the Ministry of Intelligence. A good example is a campaign called 'One Million Signatures'.

A journalist explained that, in order to put pressure on the executive and Parliament and push back their anti-women rhetoric, a large number of WRNGOs together with partisans and journalists founded a national campaign in 2006. It aimed at launching a petition with one million signatures as a public request for revising discriminatory laws and codes (Figure 7.7). This campaign received an extensive reaction from activists and ordinary people in the streets and public

¹⁶⁷ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁶⁸ Interview: 2015

¹⁶⁹ Interview: WRNGO member, 2015

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

events. However, because it was becoming a nationwide movement, it faced severe security measures and ceased within a year.¹⁷¹



Figure 7.7. Global feminist symbols inspired Iranian feminists in designing the logo of the One Million Signatures Campaign

Also, when pro-reformist media reflected feminist issues on the front page, the IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence sent official warnings to them and in some cases even revoked their licenses.¹⁷²

At the end of the conservative period, therefore, the government managed to form a policy community dominating the WR policy domain. This policy community included a closely-knitted cluster of Islamic and security institutions as core members, hand-in-hand with the executive and Parliament, while enjoying the support of conservative WRNGOs. This shifted the direction of the policy network towards a fundamentalist Islamic discourse, with the use of security measures against the opposition's interests and discourse on the increase. Furthermore, the closed network of the relationship between the members of the policy network made it resistant.

4.4. The Agency of WRNGOs in the Policy Community

The policies of conservatives in the Centre and the Committee closed the mechanisms and access points in the state on feminist groups, while privileging the allied WRNGOs. In addition to the administrative hurdles in the process of establishing WRNGO with a liberal profile, the

¹⁷¹ Interview: journalist, 2014

¹⁷² Ibid.

relationship between feminist WRNGOs and reformist parties and the mass media came under the scrutiny of the security forces. This reduced the vibrancy of civil society in the domain. Over time, with the more political and security interventions of the IRGC, the opportunity of using public spheres and media diminished for outsider WRNGOs. Critical WRNGOs survived their networks and organisation through private gatherings and events like house parties. In contrast, the conservative WRNGOs enjoyed privileges in the public. Plus, the opportunity for feminist rhetoric, if not wholly suppressed, dropped to the lowest level.

5. Conclusion

The reformist period saw the development of the national women's-rights policy network. The flourishing of WRNGOs, along with the political parties and mass media, diversified the policy network, which together with the development of interrelationships between these actors and the government formed a vast issue network. On the one hand, the feminist WRNGOs, together with reformist parties and the media forged closer links with the Centre and the Committee through their shared liberal discourse. This coalition showed its influence in the Centre's more important bills, which aimed to equalise women's rights with men. On the other hand, the issue network of the conservative WRNGOs, under the umbrella of the Islamic and security institutions, pursued a closer relationship with the conservative media and parties seeking to undo liberal policies.

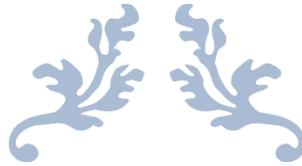
The two competing coalitions of actors made the climate of the issue network polarised. The structure of the policy network was two-fold in terms of articulation of relationships and was uneven regarding the proximity of actors to the government. It also had a low degree of institutionalisation because of the contrasts between the competing interests and discourses of actors. Despite the low degree of institutionalisation, over the eight years, the stream of feminist WRNGOs, together with the reformist government, succeeded in making the 'egalitarian WR discourse' a significant element of Iran's politics, as most activists stated in the interviews. Furthermore, the distribution of resources was uneven, whilst, on the one hand, security measures and affiliation with the establishment were the primary resources of the conservative actors; on the other hand, the liberal actors benefited from social forces and access to the policymaking centres.

During the conservatives' period, the structure of the policy network shifted in almost all aspects. Although it was not the intention of the conservative government during 2005–2013, the volume of the WRNGOs kept increasing. This was a result of manipulation and an attempt to dominate the network with conservative actors. Regarding institutions, the policy network adhered to traditional interpretations of Ayatollah Khamenei's Islamic discourse. The conservative Centre and Committee, hand-in-hand with allied WRNGOs, became a policy community that also included security institutions playing a more active political role. The policymaking process, thus, became exclusive due to the homogeneity of the discourses and interests. Furthermore, the interrelationships between the members of this policy community developed over time, which made it more resistant to external pressures and actors. Influenced by the intolerance and strictness of the policy community, the policy domain also became intolerant of feminist discourse and the public actions of critical actors, which deprived the liberal stream of the opportunity to form competing coalitions. The conservative policy community was also rarely accessible to, never mind accommodative of, outsiders. As a consequence, the feminist WRNGOs and reformist parties and media resisted the conservative policy community's policies sporadically by mobilising social influence. Overall, they were systematically isolated.

The table below shows the transformation of the WR policy network in the 1997-2013 period, which corresponds with the trajectory that the study expected based on the theoretical framework.

Table 7.1. The character of Iran's national WR policy network during the 1997-2013 period

Period	Structure	Climate	Policymaking style
Reformist	Issue network	Confrontational	Integrative
Conservative	Policy community	Strict	Exclusive



CHAPTER EIGHT

**PROVINCIAL POLICY
NETWORKS IN THE
WOMEN’S-RIGHTS DOMAIN**



1. From Neighbourhoods to NGOs

'The success of WRNGOs in Tehran excited us in Golestan so that we grouped our networks of social forces into formal NGOs.' — A WRNGO President, 2014

The previous chapter demonstrated the contentious character of that national policy network in the WR domain and discussed how the networks developed differently depending on the policies of the government. This chapter studies the development of the Golestan's WR policy network during the reformist period and its shifts during the conservative period. As the theoretical framework predicted, this chapter shows the slower—but still considerable—changes in this policy network across the two political periods.

For about two decades after the 1979 Revolution, the share of Golestani women in social activism was at the scale of neighbourhoods' activities mostly centred on teaching Sharia, practicing rituals, and fundraising for charity purposes. Since the mid-1990s, Golestani female activists gradually moved towards NGO activism, as part of a shift in the national mood.¹⁷³ The growth in public education and literacy of women helped this development (Kordi, 2001).

However, the share of women in top governmental posts and electoral positions is still insignificant. Across all terms of Parliament, this province never has had a female MP up to 2019, nor a woman appointed as the province's Governor-General.¹⁷⁴

Following the political reforms and especially the establishment of local councils, the presence of women in the structure of Golestan's local government started to grow. Across all the five terms up to 2017, women held an average 8 per cent of seats, higher than the national average of 6 per cent.¹⁷⁵ In parallel, the vibrancy and number of female civil activists also grew.¹⁷⁶ Overall, Golestani women have gradually increased their established and organised role in provincial governance and political contestations.

¹⁷³ Interview: scholar, 2014

¹⁷⁴ Interview: a former governor-general, 2014

¹⁷⁵ Darsahn website, September 2017, available at: <http://www.darsahn.org/1396/08/10/zanan-shoura-iran/>

¹⁷⁶ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

2. The Reformist Period: The Birth of an Issue Network

Following the 1997 presidential elections, the rise of the reformist camp in Golestan local government gradually changed the configuration of its political setting. This political change involved the WR domain, which in eight years formed a vibrant policy network within it.

2.1. The Composition of the Issue Network

State Actors: The Office of Governor-General together with its Office of Advisor for Women's Affairs (hereafter the Advisor) manage the WR domain. The Advisor for Women's Affairs has initially been a consultative post, which was established in all provinces during the 1990s. With a low political profile, this post was merely responsible for identifying issues related to local women and reporting them to the governors. It did not have a defined position in the local government's structure, neither had an independent budget and personnel.¹⁷⁷

In the first four years of the reformist period, concerning Golestan's separation from the neighbouring province—in 1997, the central government assigned the Office of Governor-General with the mission of consolidating and developing the administration system including in the WR domain. Consistent with this technocratic mission, Ebrahim Derazgisu (1997-2001) and Aliasghar Ahmadi (2001-2002) were appointed as the first two governor-generals. Ebrahim Derazgisu was a career diplomat, while Aliasghar Ahmadi was a former IRGC commander. Nonetheless, both had a technocratic profile as well. They were not affiliated with any of the reformist parties. This meant, in their agenda political participation and human rights, including WR, were missing.¹⁷⁸ Due to their non-political agenda, these two governor-generals handpicked their team comprising senior officials and experienced bureaucrats and technocrats. As for the Office of Advisor for Women's Affairs, Ebrahim Derazgisu appointed Adeleh Kashmiri as the Advisor, who also stayed in office during Aliasghar Ahmadi's time i.e. until 2002. Adeleh Keshmiri was a teacher of Theology in the moderate Islamic schools and had no affiliation with reformist parties. Thus, she took office with interest in women's social and cultural issues instead of political and legal rights.¹⁷⁹ During her tenure, the structure of the Office developed due to the blueprints received from the President's Office in the capital, which

¹⁷⁷ The Website of the Office of Governor-General, July 2015, available at: <http://banovan.golestanp.ir/kar-gorohe-zanan>

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

subsequently 'made it the cardinal governmental actor in the domain'.¹⁸⁰ Ebrahim Derazgisu, the then reformist Governor-General granted the then Advisor a special room in the central building of the Office of Governor-General, also a small complement of personnel and a 'small budget that increased every year.'¹⁸¹ Ebrahim Derazgisu also ordered the establishment of the Commission for Women's Affairs in 1998, which included delegates of social and political offices in addition to the deputies of the Governor-General.¹⁸² This Commission had the then Advisor as the secretary with the authority of its management and, under the Governor-General's flag, possessed a range of institutional powers, including compiling plans and alternatives, monitoring the implementation of state policies, and facilitating collaboration amongst state offices.¹⁸³ Furthermore, to increase its political influence, the then Advisor, Keshmiri, became a member with voting rights in high-profile provincial councils, e.g., the Council for Social Planning. This status of the Office continued during the tenure of the second Governor-General of Golestan in the reformist period, Aliasghar Ahmadi.

However, from 2002 through to 2005, the Ministry of Interior put the political development high on the agenda for Golestan Province and appointed Hashem Mohimani as the Governor-General. He was affiliated with the Participation Front, a radical reformist party. His team consisted of senior officials and governors from the more radical local reformists and politicians.¹⁸⁴ For the Office of Advisor, Hashem Mohimani replaced Adeleh Kashmiri with Sedigheh Nasiri, who was a member of the Participation Front party and had been working as a WRNGO president for a decade. Before taking Office, Sedigheh Nasiri was also a leading member of the first term of Gorgan City Council—the centre of the province. Concerning her dedicated efforts on women's issues in the City Council (1998-2002), 'She was publicly perceived as a radical advocate of feminism and modern women's-rights', a WRNGO president said.¹⁸⁵ This appointment was implemented with the intention of 'elevating the political weight of the Office', as noted by Hashem Mohimani, the then reformist Governor-General, in the interview.¹⁸⁶ Mohimani also asked social and political offices to hand over a portion of their annual budget to this office with the intention of investing it in the growth of the network of the

¹⁸⁰ Interview: Sedigheh Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor for Women's Affairs (2002-2005), 2014

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² The Website of the Office of Governor-General, Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Interview: Hossein Rafati, the reformist Governor of Gorgan County (2002-2005), 2014

¹⁸⁵ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁸⁶ Interview: 2014

Office of Advisor with non-state women's groups.¹⁸⁷ Besides this, Sedigheh Nasiri's utilised her large personal network of contacts, which grew the political influence and prestige of her Office, along with the expansion of the administration and personnel.¹⁸⁸

In parallel with the rise of reformists in the executive offices, Golestan's MPs in the 6th Parliament were also from the reformist camp and, thus, politically demonstrated positive tendency towards WRNGOs, with Sobhan Hosseini, the then reformist MP of the capital city of Golestan (2001-2003) referring to them as 'good sources of advice' in his interview.¹⁸⁹ Despite this positive perception, MPs did not present an active political role in the women's area due to several reasons. First, 'None of the MPs were female, therefore, they expressed less interest in the women's issues and had minimum contacts with female activists'. Second, they were more concerned with the economic development of the province.¹⁹⁰ Nonetheless, as a WRNGO president pointed out, the then reformist MPs' political attitude and potential role in the domain was a chance for the liberal and feminist WRNGOs.¹⁹¹

Security institutions joined the policy network with some hesitation during the second term of reformist period. The IRGC and the Intelligence Office began growing their specialised political units in response to the rise of reformist figures in the WR policy domain. However, they expressed lesser interest in taking major actions, because as a reformist partisan said, 'They were confused and had no clue about the nature of political reforms and the rise of WRNGOs, therefore, they had no strategy to confront them'.¹⁹² However, during the second term, 'they became concerned, especially the IRGC showed serious scepticism about the possible threats of WRNGOs against Islamic and security interests'.¹⁹³ Thus, in line with the policies in the capital, the IRGC invested in its Women's Force and extended it by recruiting more members from local neighbourhoods and religious schools. Hossein Rafati, the reformist Governor of the capital city of the province (Gorgan, 2003-2005), said 'different from the IRGC, the Intelligence Office was more cautious and also moderate in the government's audit boards'.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁷ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁸⁸ Interview: 2014

¹⁸⁹ Interview: 2014

¹⁹⁰ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

¹⁹¹ Interview: 2014

¹⁹² Interview: journalist, 2014

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Interview: 2014

Among Islamic institutions, Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of Supreme Leader, was active and influential in this domain. In practice, when he commented about women's issues in the public tribunes, particularly the Friday prayer sermon, governors and civil activists had to hear and follow it. As a moderate Mullah, he maintained his ideological alignment with Ayatollah Khamenei, while 'also sustaining personal links with local and national reformist figures such as President Khatami', which over time transmitted some modern rhetoric to his discourse, including in women's-rights area.¹⁹⁵ Therefore, Ayatollah Noormofidi became, to a certain extent, tolerant and receptive of feminist WRNGOs, while committed to the Islamic camp.¹⁹⁶

Civil Society Actors: since 1997, formal WRNGOs emerged corresponding to the developments and policies of the Office of Governor-General. The state-supported 'mood for establishing NGOs' by disseminating motivation through personal linkages, friendships and fellowships. To explain this, a WRNGO president said 'In 1997, my university lecturer recommended that I should go to the Office of Governor-General and establish an NGO'; in another case, the founder of an active WRNGO said that she 'was assisted in establishing an NGO by a friend who was a member of the staff of the Office of Governor-General'.¹⁹⁷ In two years, with the governmental funding, WRNGOs also established and registered a provincial WRNGO network including all the registered ones. Sedigheh Nasiri, the then Advisor, acknowledged this supportive tendency in the Office: 'We actively contacted and encouraged female activists to do so'.¹⁹⁸ In her view, until 2000, albeit with a slow pace, up to 20 WRNGOs were established and officially registered. This growth of WRNGOs continued with the government also sponsored 'the process of converting traditional women groups to formal WRNGOs', a female activist said.¹⁹⁹ After 2000, regarding the then Governor-General Mohimani's political enthusiasm, more funds and material support were allocated to emerging NGOs and, in effect, at a faster pace until 2005, the number of WRNGOs increased to 50.²⁰⁰

The emerging WRNGOs were set up by female university students and partisans, and also the family members—e.g. wives and daughters—of reformist governors, female government officials, and female politicians. Therefore, in some cases, 'females in the WRNGOs were the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Interview: member of a reformist party, 2014

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Interview: 2014

¹⁹⁹ Interview: 2014

²⁰⁰ Interview: the then Advisor, 2014

same females or affiliated with officials', the then Deputy Manager of the Office for NGOs (2002-2005) said.²⁰¹ These WRNGOs were privileged with receiving a room in government-owned buildings as their office. On the other hand, the majority of the WRNGOs that were founded by ordinary female activists were small in size, with fewer than 20 members, and no separate office and personnel.²⁰² Nonetheless, Sedigheh Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, claimed that 'we tried not to discriminate against WRNGOs, and to be generous to them. We let them access our facilities and resources such as buildings, telephone sets, printers, even drivers and cars for their transport'.²⁰³ However, she unintentionally expressed her bias for liberal WRNGOs: 'They were more competent and active to be funded'.²⁰⁴ Simultaneous with liberal women, a number of traditional and religious women, including the members of the IRGC's Women Force and students of women's fundamentalist Islamic schools, created conservative WRNGOs with religious profiles.²⁰⁵ They had the support of the conservative organisations, e.g. the Organisation for Islamic Propagation and the IRGC, therefore, received physical facilities and funds from them.²⁰⁶ The founders of emerging WRNGOs had social credibility and large networks of connection with ordinary women from different neighbourhoods, which together with conservatives' support, helped them develop.

In parallel with WRNGOs, women activists also created women's wing of political parties whilst the number of active political groups increased from less than three to eight registered groups. This number mostly included the branches of national reformist political parties such as the Participation Front, however, since 2000 the Islamic Coalition Party from the conservative camp established its Women's Wing too.²⁰⁷ In practice, according to political activist, 'these women's wings did not have regular, vibrant or active status; they were more individual female activists rather than women's groups'.²⁰⁸ Also, many of them were, at the same time, WRNGOs' members.²⁰⁹

Despite the influx of women activists into institutional establishments, no particular newspaper or periodical established a women's section during the reformist period. Also, in spite of the

²⁰¹ Interview: 2014

²⁰² Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁰³ Interview: 2014

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Interview: WRNGO member, 2014

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Interview: member of a reformist party, 2014

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

growth in the number of print media up to 15 newsweeklies and periodicals —which mostly belonged to reformist politicians and governors, e.g. *Salim* newsweekly owned by the then Governor-General, Hashem Mohimani—only three dedicated a column or page to women’s issues after 1998.²¹⁰ Several WRNGO presidents and reformist partisans at the same time cooperated with local newspapers as an editor or freelance journalist, with one woman having the franchise of a local newsweekly; ‘They sought not to remain behind in terms of getting their voice on the media’, one journalist stated.²¹¹ Also, from 2003, more than 50 women’s online weblogs were created mostly by feminist activists, with only a few of them being active, which, regarding subscribers and profile, were neither popular nor influential, ‘because weblogs and websites, in that age, were still unpopular’.²¹²

In general, through the sponsorship and support of the reformist governors, over the eight years, the volume of political parties, mass media, and WRNGOs engaged with WR increased. The organisational development was also evident across both the reformist and conservative camps, as well as across the state and paramilitary institutions. However, in many cases, the people behind these emerging actors were families, friends, and acquaintances. Nonetheless, formally, an issue network formed and grew, which, was diverse in terms of the profile of actors and had a medium size relatively. The distribution and possession of resources within this policy network was not even due to the intervention of governmental actors.

2.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Issue Network

Discourse: During the period spanning 1997–2001, Ebrahim Derazgisu and Aliasghar Ahmadi, the then technocrat governor-generals did not present rhetorical interest in advocating the egalitarian or feminist discourses about WR; instead, ‘in occasional speeches, they just alluded to social collaboration and volunteerism’, a WRNGO president said.²¹³ In the second reformists’ term, however, the then Governor-General Hashem Mohimani chose the discourse of the Office, which was more attentive to women’s political participation and legal rights, and was inspired by the discourse articulated by leading reformist ideologues in Tehran, such as Saeed

²¹⁰ Interview: journalist, 2014

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

Hajjarian.²¹⁴ In this vein, he made egalitarian arguments and criticised Islamic and authoritarian institutions in the province, such as ‘we [ironically he referred to the conservative Islamic institutions] must learn that without women our society cannot survive and develop’.²¹⁵ A journalist observed that ‘in line with the then Governor-General, his director-generals and deputies increased their statements and pronouncements on gender discrimination’.²¹⁶ They also harmoniously and repeatedly recommended WRNGOs as a ‘prescription for political development’, as a review of the archives of local newspapers demonstrated. This discourse, as stated by a liberal activist, ‘was inspired by international agendas and adopted by Golestan’s feminist WRNGO activists’.²¹⁷ Nonetheless, the officials and civil servants in the local government were still committed to the traditional Islamic discourse owing to their official position.²¹⁸

The discourse of the Office of Advisor during the Adeleh Kashmiri’s time (1997-2001) was centred only on social areas such as education and employment of women, whereas throughout the second term, Sedigheh Nasiri shifted the discourse towards political rights and participation while retaining social issues on the agenda.²¹⁹ Towards 2005, more actively through preparing and handing over leaflets, books, and flyers amongst female NGO activists, Sedigheh Nasiri’s Office, as she explained, sought to steer WRNGOs’ discourse and agenda, as well as the public opinion, towards previously neglected areas, such as women’s political awareness, women’s social confidence, and women’s presence in elected and unelected posts.²²⁰ However, at the same time, the Office of Advisor remained attentive to marriage and motherhood as the rhetorical symbol of the regime’s Islamic discourse.²²¹ By sustaining this religious side of the discourse, ‘Sedigheh Nasiri’s Office presented political caution and respect towards fundamentalist Islamic schools’ in order to prevent ‘the probable aggressive reaction from them’.²²²

Different from the rhetorical vibrancy of the Office of the then Governor-General, reformist MPs rarely contributed to the public conversations and debates in this domain. As a WRNGO

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Mehr website, December 2003, available at: <https://www.isna.ir/news/8209-10124>

²¹⁶ Interview: journalist, 2014

²¹⁷ The archives of Salim and Golshane-Mehr newsweeklies, Golestan, period spanning of 2002 to 2005

²¹⁸ Hosein Rafati, The reformist Governor of Gorgan County, Ibid.

²¹⁹ Interview: journalist, 2014

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

member stated, 'they were accepting of modern WR discourse, albeit passively, and that was because of the matter of compliance with the mainstream mood for reform in the society, rather than their interest'.²²³ In a comparable vein, the junior officials and civil servants in different government organisations did not have the same level of rhetorical interest as the governor-generals, as WRNGO activists said, this means 'being a member of Khatami's government did not mean being liberal in discourse about WR'.²²⁴

On the societal side, the majority of emerging WRNGOs were advocates and followers of the reformist government's liberal discourse, especially the one articulated by Sedigheh Nasiri's Office in the second reformist's term. Although 'modern WRNGOs were not hesitant to use radical feminist narratives, they were cautious in raising contentious arguments; because, for example, issues such as eliminating violence against women were still considered taboo by the traditional section of society'.²²⁵ In sensitive areas, the support of the Office of Advisor was needed (Figure 8.1).



Figure 8.1. The reformist official mullah sat with WRNGOs in a workshop on violence against women, hosted by the Office of Advisor/ photo obtained personally from the official archives

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Interview: 2014

The feminist discourse of WRNGOs was also echoed in the reformist media, including the ones that belonged to incumbent governors, e.g. *Salim* newsweekly, and also discussed in reformist parties' events across university campuses and amphitheatres on a monthly basis.²²⁶ A WRNGO president added that, in parallel with this feminist discourse, women activists, owing to their daily contacts with other ordinary women from the lower classes, also had to represent everyday issues and social concerns, e.g., women's unemployment, young girls' drug addiction, and sexual harassment faced by female students.²²⁷ This meant that the modern WRNGOs' narratives in the public debates shifted dynamically between political and day-to-day practical issues. In contrast, conservative WRNGOs were not receptive to the feminist and liberal discourses as they considered it as 'not compliant with the culture of a Muslim society'.²²⁸ They made arguments related to marriage and motherhood, and how the local offices should encourage young women to set up a family. However, this rhetoric was less significant due to the advocacy of the Office of Governor-General for the liberals.²²⁹

In this competitive policy network, security institutions did not exhibit rhetorical presence, nonetheless. They disseminated scepticism 'only behind the scene', as follows. A feminist WRNGO member said, 'a reformist official in the Office of Advisor, who was a friend of mine, disclosed to me that, for several times, he received informal admonitions from the security agents and the Judiciary about Sedighe Nasiri's Office's close contacts with us considering our thought to be Western'.²³⁰ As most WRNGO members admitted in the interviews, the conservative institutions were suspicious of WRNGOs.²³¹

In contrast to the security institutions, Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader, whilst tasked with articulating Ayatollah Khamenei's traditional Islamic discourse of women's chastity and maternity, was a selective advocate of the elements of the feminist rhetoric of WRNGOs.²³² Accordingly, from time to time in his Friday prayer sermons in the centre of the province, or in public events, as key speaker, he moderately challenged the 'systematic violence against women' and recommended improving 'women's presence in social

²²⁶ Interview: journalist, 2014

²²⁷ Interview: 2014

²²⁸ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²³¹ Interview: 2014

²³² Personal website of Ayatollah Noormofidi, available at:
http://www.noormofidi.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=22

spheres'.²³³ In several cases, female journalists and activists gained license from his acknowledgements in order to legitimise their modern rhetoric within the framework of religion.

Rules and Practices: Relying on the growing social support for newly-emerged WRNGOs, the Office of Advisor 'introduced liberal reforms in the procedures and policies', especially in the second reformists' term.²³⁴ Sedigheh Nasiri, the then Advisor, said that the formal agendas of her Office, on the one hand, included social concerns of the Islamic institutions such as The Organisation for Islamic Propagation, while conservative WRNGOs' focused on the issue of 'facilitating marriage and reducing divorce'.²³⁵ On the other hand, the majority of her Office's agendas were dedicated to the political concerns of feminist WRNGOs, such as empowering women's position in the government (Figure 8.2).²³⁶



Figure 8.2. The Office of Advisor, together with WRNGOs, hosted seminars on women's socio-economic rights

Thus, with the involvement of both conservative and feminist WRNGOs, the Office of Advisor held public training courses and seminars for the public in relation to subjects such as traditional motherhood and modern human rights, with more privileges for the latter.²³⁷

²³³ Interview: journalist, 2014

²³⁴ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²³⁵ Interview: 2014

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Whilst members of WRNGOs argued in the interviews that, 'there was a lack of obligatory rules and practices for involving WRNGOs in the first term', the then Governor-General, Hashem Mohimani, said that 'in my defined discretion, I reformed some administrative procedures and also issued several decrees in order to ease the access and inclusion of WRNGOs'.²³⁸ He, for example, referred to his formal statute that stipulated the Administrative Council of his office to grant a seat to the delegates of WRNGOs in the meetings of its social and cultural sub-committees.²³⁹ For this purpose, the Office of Advisor was assigned with the task of creating a comprehensive databank of registered WRNGOs and accordingly chose the delegates 'based on evaluating their performance and profile'.²⁴⁰ Moreover, the then Governor-General issued a decree that from 2002, obliged the then director-generals in social and political areas to donate money to WRNGOs and help them with their activities.²⁴¹ However, 'at the administrative level of the Office of Governor-General and in other organisations, this approach was not genuinely implemented due to lack of political enthusiasm and technical feasibility'.²⁴²

During Adeleh Kashmiri's time in the Office of Advisor, i.e. until 2002, the major practice in relation to WRNGOs was defining joint projects and cooperation, e.g. carrying out research and holding workshops on social problems.²⁴³ However, after her, and in line with the then Governor-General Hashem Mohimani's policy, Sedigheh Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, 'ordered the regular inclusion of the delegates of the Network of WRNGO in the weekly meetings of the Commission for Women's Affairs', a top council in the domain, albeit not granting them voting rights.²⁴⁴ Voting rights for NGOs was not originally considered in Iran's administrative laws so changing it was not at the discretion of the Office of Advisor. The delegate of the WRNGO in this Office was normally chosen internally through the meetings of the Network of Golestani WRNGOs every year.²⁴⁵ However, not all created rules were democratic. For example, a female activist pointed out that 'from 1999, WRNGOs were officially required to report all their public actions, and also internal approvals and records, to the Office of Advisor'.²⁴⁶

²³⁸ Interview: 2014

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Interview: Sedighe Nasiri, the then reformist advisor, 2014

²⁴¹ Interview: Hashem Mohimani, the then reformist governor-general, 2014

²⁴² Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁴³ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁴⁴ Interview: 2014

²⁴⁵ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

In reaction to the reformist Office of Governor-General opening access points in the executive, particularly after 2000, the Intelligence Office and the IRGC implemented various constraining practices restricting the public scope of WRNGOs such as formal summoning and phone calls for harassment.²⁴⁷ Furthermore, whilst during the first term of reformists, there was no official need for security clearance for registering a WRNGO. During the second term, despite resistance from the Office of Advisor, the Intelligence Office imposed a few security restrictions on WRNGOs.²⁴⁸ In order to counter feminist WRNGOs in the public spheres, the IRGC encouraged its female members to engage in further social practices such as 'physical presence in the streets and giving moral advice to young women'.²⁴⁹

Therefore, during the reformist period, the WR policy network became institutionally acceptant of diverse actors and competing WRNGOs. It was low regarding consistency as both the conservatives and reformists were received and heard in the official procedures. Also, the ruling policies facilitated the rise and involvement of new actors, which increased the size of the network. The tolerance of the Islamic institutions allowed for the rise of new discourses, whilst the institutions moderately controlled the growth and balanced the vibrancy of WRNGOs by counter-practices.

2.3. The Relational Aspect of the Issue Network

The governor-generals of Golestan in the reformist period, due to both their political affiliation and personal familiarity with female activists, gradually 'opened the doors of the Office of Governor-General on WRNGOs from 1998 and requested the county governors and director-generals to do the same'.²⁵⁰ Hashem Mohimani, the third Governor-General in the reformist period, issued a decree in 2002 during his second term, which 'obliged the sectoral commissions and bureaus of his office to facilitate and regularise their contact with WRNGOs'.²⁵¹ As the majority of WRNGO members acknowledged, interactions between officials and WRNGOs, over time, became friendlier and regular, with 'many of the female activists, regardless of their political affiliation, stepping into the offices and meeting senior officials for the first time'.

²⁴⁷ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Interview: WRNGO activist, 2014

²⁵⁰ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

²⁵¹ Interview: 2014

These relationships were not conducted only through official correspondence but also developed through personal contacts.²⁵² Many WRNGO members were close or distant acquaintances or friends of officeholders and, therefore, during weekdays and even weekends, had frequent contact with them through phone calls or private events, such as house parties or religious celebrations.²⁵³ These personal networks, however, warped the choice of WRNGO partners by policymakers. For example, the then Deputy Manager of the Office for NGOs (2002-2005), acknowledged in the interview that his choice of WRNGOs' delegate for the meetings of the Social Commission in the Office of Governor-General was based on the balance between his 'official contacts and personal trust'.²⁵⁴

In general, liberal and feminist WRNGO activists had a higher chance of being trusted and heard in the lobbies or using governmental facilities such as official cars for transportation.²⁵⁵ This privilege demonstrated some unintended positive effects concerning the promotion of women's rights. For instance, in response to the long-standing and frequent requests of feminist WRNGOs that had regular contacts with governors and other officials, and also with the pressure from reformist newsweeklies and political parties, the then Governor-General, Hashem Mohimani, appointed three women as governors and deputy-governors to counties in 2003-2004.²⁵⁶ This happened for the first time not just in Golestan Province but also Iran, and enjoyed the religious backing of Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader.

In this ever-growing network of relationships, reformist MP's official relationships with WRNGOs' members were confined to 'intermediating between them and policymakers when the influence of WRNGOs was insufficiently deep', as confirmed by Sobhan Hosseini, the then reformist MP of Gorgan County (2001-2003).²⁵⁷ Also, their relationship was subject to the occasion of passing bills in the Parliament and the Commission for Women, i.e. if local WRNGO activists needed their opinion to be heard for national lawmaking.²⁵⁸ Aside from that, they had personal contacts with MPs through phone calls or in private events and friendly gatherings, which were infrequent.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Interview: 2014

²⁵⁵ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Interview: 2014

²⁵⁸ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

The Office of Advisor, with more enthusiasm, was at the centre of the network of relations in this domain.²⁵⁹ Through the relationship with the reformist advisors, WRNGOs extended linkage and influence over officials and commissions too, as well as with Islamic and security institutions.²⁶⁰ The following case demonstrates this.

In 2002, a large WRNGO in Gorgan, the centre of the province, and the Office of Advisor jointly compiled a plan called the Social Training for Women Prisoners, which because of the need to enter prisons required the approval of Judiciary to be effected. Sedigheh Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, used her institutional discretion and facilitated a joint meeting between the WRNGO president and the Attorney General in her Office, which led to finalisation of that plan.²⁶¹ After the implementation of that project, the Judiciary and the WRNGO extended their relationship, which later became a mechanism for further cooperation on judicial agendas.²⁶²

In return for the growing support, Sedigheh Nasiri, the then Advisor, required WRNGOs to fulfil several purposes. They include extending her office's networks to the society, implementing training plans, and conducting regular surveys on the local women's issues.²⁶³ This meant an interdependence between the two sides, which over time developed relations and cooperation between them. For instance, between 2000 and 2005, according to Sedigheh Nasiri, most of her Office's training courses about women's rights 'were contracted out and implemented by the participation of WRNGOs members' (Figure 8.3).²⁶⁴ From WRNGOs' perspective, this cooperation was also necessary for sustaining a channel of conducting concerns to policymakers.

²⁵⁹ Interview: 2014

²⁶⁰ Interview: WRNGO members, 2014

²⁶¹ Interview: Sedighe Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, 2014

²⁶² Interview: WRNGO members, 2014

²⁶³ Sedighe Nasiri, *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 8.3. Liberal scholars from Tehran delivered the joint workshop of the Office and feminist WRNGOs on the issue of women's rights- photo obtained personally from the official archives

WRNGO members—notably both conservatives and feminists—acknowledged in their interviews that the Office of Advisor provided opportunities for cooperation and contact for all WRNGOs, albeit uneven. The privileges of feminist WRNGOs reverberated in the policies and plans of the Office of Advisor, as the case below demonstrates:

In 2004, in response to the concerns of feminists and liberal WRNGOs, Sedigheh Nasiri's Office compiled a proposal titled 'Empowering Local Women in Government', which had the following purposes consistent with the reformists' discourse: (i) identifying women in the government; (ii) training and enabling them; (iii) supporting their progress; as well as (iv) improving their involvement in policymaking.²⁶⁵ This proposal was supported by female journalists and was also advocated by reformist political parties. Finally, the Office of Governor-General passed and implemented it.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ ISNA website, October 2004, available at: <https://www.isna.ir/news/8308-00555>

²⁶⁶ Sedighe Nasiri, *Ibid.*

Utilising the opportunity of relationships also required the intellect of WRNGOs, with one WRNGO activist accusing her counterparts of ‘egoistically, expecting officials to send them an invitation’.²⁶⁷

However, if the governors avoided them, WRNGOs still had the chance of engaging their relationships with Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of Supreme Leader, for exerting influence over officials. These relationships were not frequent. Nonetheless, they were friendly, as expressed by WRNGO members.²⁶⁸ For example, in response to feminist activists’ concerns, on a few occasions in his Friday prayer sermons and regular meetings with reformist governors, Ayatollah Noormofidi expressed his concerns about women’s status and forwarded WRNGOs’ demands to officials. According to WRNGO members, ‘this immediately affected governors’, or in some cases pushed back Islamic institutions and conservatives.²⁶⁹ At the same time, conservative WRNGOs also used the same capacity and requested Ayatollah Noormofidi to speak about the importance of family and motherhood in his Friday prayer sermons, which he promptly obliged to owing the matter of compliance with Ayatollah Khamenei’s rhetoric, the Supreme Leader.

In parallel with reformist governors, the Intelligence Office and the IRGC also increased their relationships with WRNGOs, albeit with the intention of exerting their influence, which along with the growth in vibrancy and the critical actions of WRNGOs, changed the frequency of relationship gradually.²⁷⁰ WRNGO members said: ‘As years passed, the number of calls from unknown security agents increased, which was a method of harassment’.²⁷¹ However, these relationships did not become unfriendly because ‘personal or family linkages between WRNGO activists and security agents were the factor that prevented harsh confrontations’.²⁷² At the same time, ‘female activists were reluctant to use aggressive rhetoric and confrontational behaviour’ as well, a journalist noted.²⁷³ Thus, apart from one case of seizing a WRNGOs’ licence because of a scandal, as narrated by a WRNGO president, female activists did not encounter suppression, nor did they face any bans on their public activities in this period.²⁷⁴

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Interview: 2014

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Interview: 2014

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

As an effort to maximise their influence in the public spheres, WRNGOs also used their relationships with local print media, mostly reformist newsweeklies such as *Golshane-Mehr*, a publication that received government subsidies. Because the mechanisms of contacting officials were established, WRNGOs used this capacity for training ordinary people and reported their activities to the people, rather than ‘confronting governors in the public’.²⁷⁵ As a review of local newspapers demonstrated, female journalists and activists mostly published their narratives and arguments about ‘modern rights of women, which were becoming a trend in the political vocabulary’.²⁷⁶

The relationships with political parties were not the same: WRNGOs ordinary members alleged partisan figures as being ‘greedy in taking advantage of their social forces for electoral campaigns’.²⁷⁷ A WRNGO president, who was a partisan at the same time, admitted this trend, and described her own experience: ‘I obtained a license for my political group in parallel with my WRNGO and then asked some members of my WRNGO to register there as well so that I could gather and mobilise them for electoral campaigns without any legal restrictions’.²⁷⁸ This trend was not widespread though; as several partisan females claimed: ‘We were very cautious and reluctant towards abuse of WRNGO members, as it could attract security-related issues’.²⁷⁹ Nonetheless, cooperative interrelations were usually established between political parties and WRNGOs, especially in organising public events and speeches, as ‘they needed each other to implement their plans at the end of the day’.²⁸⁰

Therefore, the liberal attitudes of the reformist governors in their relationships made the WR policy network open to new memberships and relationships. This flexible but unequal relationship of the officeholders with WRNGOs destabilised the structure of policy network. The position of the governor-generals and advisors in the network was often focal, albeit with more proximity to liberal actors than conservatives. The character of relationship amongst most of the actors was friendly, or at least non-confrontational during this period, with personal linkages providing the potential of accessing one another.

²⁷⁵ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁷⁶ Interview: journalist, 2014

²⁷⁷ Interview: WRNGO member, 2014

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Interview: journalist, 2014

2.4. The Agency of WRNGOs in the Issue Network

The policies of the reformist government provided mechanisms and procedures for direct access to officeholders. In parallel, the personal contacts of female activists with governors and MPs, as well as the Representatives of the Supreme Leader, developed the relationships in a friendly manner, which made conducting demands easier for WRNGOs. However, due to their political affiliation, feminist WRNGOs enjoyed an edge over conservatives. Whilst traditionally the conservative discourse was monopolised in the policy domain, the rise of reformist media and feminist WRNGOs pluralised its climate and made it competitive. Also, the low level of intervention of the Intelligence Office and the passiveness of the IRGC increased the tolerance of the issue network of various events and actions of WRNGOs in public places. However, WRNGOs were cautious to use a radical discourse.

3. The Conservative Period: Towards a Policy Community

In 2005, the change in the national government resonated in Golestan's local government as well. Female activists said in the interview that they did not know 'what will happen to their young establishments'.²⁸¹ When the conservative policies came into practice, the pace of the shift was slow, yet towards 2013, reversed the structure of the WR issue network.

3.1. The Composition of the Policy Community

State Actors: The change came in the issue network from the above. During the conservative period, the Ministry of Interior appointed three governor-generals in Golestan, each with a different profile. Ali Muhammad Shaeri, the first conservative Governor-General (2005–2007) with an environmental-agricultural background assumed office. Despite his non-political profile, he 'changed the political composition of his Office by replacing the main reformist officials such as in the deputies' offices', as pointed out by a reformist partisan.²⁸² Ali Muhammad Shaeri appointed Nosrat Babaei as his Advisor for Women's Affairs who remained in the post until 2009. She was a Theology teacher in the Islamic schools, and also affiliated with the IRGC's Women Force. Nonetheless, her religious profile in public outweighed her political

²⁸¹ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁸² Interview: 2014

profile since she had no association or working experience with NGOs and, as a result, made her 'unfamiliar to the Golestani women activists'.²⁸³ With this composition, in the first year of the conservative period, 'the Office of Governor-General was passive in the WR domain'. Hence, WRNGOs sustained their activities and position with no major challenge, though they were confused and concerned about the situation.²⁸⁴

From 2007, consistent with the government's securitisation policy, the Ministry of Interior replaced governor-generals across the country with an added securitised approach. Yahya Mahmudzade was the second conservative Governor-General (2007-2009) in Golestan, who was a former high-ranking IRGC commander. He did not change the head and composition of the Office of Advisor. After him, Javad Ghenaat (2009-2013), a former senior manager in the Intelligence Office was appointed to the position and managed the Office across the second term of conservatives—2009 to 2013. As a result of these changes, the profile of the Office of Governor-General changed in the political domain, including women's rights. Accordingly, 'all the remaining reformist officials and civil servants in political and social offices were replaced' mostly with figures from the Intelligence Office and the IRGC, or, in some cases, from the fundamentalist Islamic schools and the Guardian Council's local office.²⁸⁵ In line with this pattern of change, the then Governor-General, Javad Ghenaat, appointed Mehri Mahdavi as his Advisor on Women's Affairs (2009-2013). She was known for her affiliation with the IRGC's Women Force and being a member of the Islamic Union, the traditional conservative party.²⁸⁶

In 2006 the main offices of local government, including the Office of Advisor, moved to a large administrative town, centralising the decision-making.²⁸⁷ Administrative changes came with an annual increase in the revenue of the Office of Advisor. Also, in line with the political mandate of the central government, it changed its title to 'The Advisor for Women's and Family's Affairs', which for the civil society meant 'aligning its profile with the conservative discourse'.²⁸⁸ Also, in 2012, along with the escalation of the Centre for Women and Family Affairs in the President's Office, the Office of Advisor in provinces including Golestan, was upgraded to a Directory-General in the Office of Governor-General. Although this increased the authorities and resources

²⁸³ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

²⁸⁴ Interview: WRNGO President, 2014

²⁸⁵ Eqtesade-Golestan newsweekly, February 2006, page 1, available at: <http://iranpress.ir/egolestan/egolestan/News.aspx?NID=133>

²⁸⁶ Interview: the then Deputy Advisor, 2014

²⁸⁷ Hossein Rafati, the reformist Governor of Gorgan County, *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

assigned to the Office of Advisor, 'it was very late to influence the policy domain significantly'.²⁸⁹ Feminist activists argued that 'despite gaining more money and personnel, the Office lost its popular position in the civil society'.²⁹⁰

From 2003 onwards, fundamentalist clerics, former security agents and military officers started getting elected to the Parliament from Golestan Province. They were hardline figures- such as Ayatollah Ali Taheri, a member of Resistance Front known for its fundamentalist stance- had associations with fundamentalist Islamic schools and held radical opinions on women's rights.²⁹¹

Consistent with these changes, the Intelligence Office and the IRGC expanded their organisations and received an extended annual budget.²⁹² The IRGC also continued expanding its Women's Force and transformed it into a registered radical pressure group.²⁹³

The conservative governor-generals and the IRGC transferred more funds from their budget to the fundamentalist Islamic schools, as well as to the Organisation for Islamic Propagation in order to grow their political weight across political domains, including women's rights.²⁹⁴ Despite the monopoly of these allies, Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader, sustained his moderate political profile before Islamic institutions. According to a political activist, Ayatollah Noormofidi and the moderate Islamic schools under his rule 'had the potential to act as counter actors under the new configuration'.²⁹⁵

Civil Society Actors: The wave of changes in the government actors spread to the civil society too. From 2005, the growth of the Islamic schools and associations led to the formation of a new cluster of conservative WRNGOs.

The founders and presidents of the emerging WRNGOs were 'students and teachers of fundamentalist Islamic schools, the IRGC's Women's Force, and conservative female partisans' who in a fast-track process received permissions for establishing their WRNGOs (Figure 8.4).²⁹⁶ They were also encouraged by conservative governors and officials to do so. Accordingly, in

²⁸⁹ Sedighe Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ Interview: 2014

²⁹¹ Sobhan Hosseini, the then reformist MP of Gorgan, *Ibid.*

²⁹² Interview: member of a reformist party, 2014

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ Hossein Rafati, the reformist Governor of Gorgan County, *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ Interview: WRNGO members, 2014

addition to their privileges of receiving occasional donations from fundamentalist Islamic schools, they became the recipients of the government's public facilities such as office equipment and transport services.²⁹⁷



Figure 8.4. A conservative WRNGO on strike for dress code in front of the Office of capital county Governor, 2006

At the same time, the domain squeezed for feminist WRNGOs as governmental resources became unavailable to them. As a result, they went in different directions, including: (i) discontinuation as government ceased their grants, which led to their gradual decline, and (ii) increased isolation due to ideological and political conflicts with the governors. Moreover, the more radical WRNGOs along with other members from reformist political parties and former reformist female officials faced difficulties with renewing their security clearances and licenses.²⁹⁸ Nevertheless, some WRNGOs were determinant to survive this new climate, nonetheless, their composition changed and they became less diverse as a result.²⁹⁹ As a then official in the Office of Advisor estimated in the interview, the overall number of WRNGOs dropped from 50 in 2005 to 30 at the end of the conservative period in 2013.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ Interview: WRNGO members, 2014.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Interview: 2014

In contrast to WRNGOs, the number of print media increased up to 20 newsweeklies and periodicals, as along with conservatives, reformist activists obtained licenses for their newspapers during the first term of the conservative period (Rajaei, 2006, p. 40). Five conservative periodicals emerged with the support of government, mostly associated with then MPs and officials.³⁰¹ Although the number of female journalists and editors witnessed an increase, there was no particular print media that was focused on women's rights.³⁰² Since 2009, the growing trend of media reversed, particularly the number of newsweeklies belonging to the reformist camp dropped by half, due to the securitisation of the political spheres. Female journalists and activists set up weblogs and websites in a period when internet activity was increasing. During the second conservative term, more than 20 weblogs in women's domain emerged with the majority of them having names that represented the feminist camp, such as *Zane-Emrouz* (Today's woman).³⁰³

In the shifting policy network, political parties experienced fewer degrees of change in their position during the first conservative term. However, during the second term, the number of reformist parties started to decline due to the government's securitising policies (Rajaei, 2006). In 2009, the Judiciary revoked the licenses of the local branches of two biggest reformist parties—the Participation Front and the Mujahedin Organisation, who had very active women's wings. At the same time, the conservative political parties sustained their seasonal activities, thanks to the government funds extended to them.³⁰⁴

Therefore, the policies of the conservative governor-generals, as well as their advisors, changed the composition of the policy network during this period. The size of the network reduced in the first couple of years due to the decline in the number of WRNGOs. Furthermore, the conversion of conservative women forces to formal WRNGOs, along with the growth of the IRGC's Women's Force and Islamic schools, resulted in a uniform composition. During their first term, conservatives maintained some degrees of diversity in the network but towards the end of the period, the rigidity of security policies homogenised the composition of actors.

³⁰¹ Interview: journalist, 2014

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

3.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Policy Community

Discourse: From the early conservative period, the formal discourse of the Office of Governor-General shifted to the traditional interpretation of Islamic teachings.³⁰⁵ The conservative governor-generals and senior officials harmoniously echoed the narratives of Ayatollah Khamenei about the personality of Lady Zahra, which was consistent with the ‘privileged motherhood as opposing to the social role of women’.³⁰⁶ For instance, in 2012, the then Governor-General, Javad Ghenaat, stated that ‘in order to attain good citizens and virtuous governors our women should be good mothers in the homes’.³⁰⁷ In order to promote this rhetoric, the Organisation for Islamic Propagation, together with conservative media such as *Inghilab* (the Revolution), organised public meetings, speeches and training courses and disseminated published materials.³⁰⁸

The conservative MPs also contributed to disseminating this Islamic discourse. Isa Emami, the then conservative MP of Gorgan (2011-2015), stated in his interview: ‘We believe that WRNGOs must adhere to the regime’s Islamic discourse. Otherwise, they are not legitimate’.³⁰⁹ This discourse was intolerant of liberal discourses and actors. Consistent with the discourse of the conservative-led Parliament, Golestan MPs also monopolised the agenda of the WR policy network, particularly about Hijab and dress code, which ‘in their viewpoint were the symbols of women’s chastity’, as noted by a journalist.³¹⁰ For instance, Ayatollah Ali Taheri, the then hardline conservative MP from Gorgan (2007-2015), the capital county, time to time issued statements on the necessity of increasing governmental actions in order to ‘improve women’s dress code in public’, which was widely amplified by the state-sponsored conservative newspapers.³¹¹ The then conservative MPs became louder and more radical in this domain, though Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader, remained moderate but toned down his voice compared to the reformist period. Thus, the voice of the conservative governors and MPs prevailed gradually.³¹²

³⁰⁵ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

³⁰⁶ Sedigheh Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, *Ibid*.

³⁰⁷ Fars website, available at: <https://www.farsnews.com/news/13910226001575>

³⁰⁸ IQNA website, May 2012, available at: <http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news/2327044>

³⁰⁹ Interview: 2014

³¹⁰ Interview: 2014

³¹¹ Mehr website, July 2010, available at: <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/1114142/>

³¹² Interview: member of a reformist party, 2014

Consistent with the government's discourse, the then conservative advisors Nosrat Babae and Mehri Mahdavi devoted their effort to the current issues related to the status of the family as a 'holy institution' according to their interpretation of Islam, and aimed at introducing and imposing an Islamic family epitome through governmental communications and practices'.³¹³ A feminist WRNGO activist argued that the then conservative advisors 'in fact attempted to move public attention away from the subject of women's political participation and instead focused on subjects such as marriage and children's upbringing'.³¹⁴ These issues were conveyed to the conservative WRNGOs in order to align their agenda and activities. As a result, WRNGOs subsequently started contributing to public training about motherhood and treatment of children.³¹⁵ In parallel, the Office of Advisor highlighted the importance of marking religious occasions and their implications on women's lives. A WRNGO member stated: 'On different occasions, the then conservative advisors requested us to find implications from the life and behaviours of religious female icons for incorporating governmental policies and public training'.³¹⁶

In this new configuration, the Intelligence Office and the IRGC provided utmost protection to the Islamic discourse by openly issuing security warnings in public spheres. A WRNGO president quoted one of the security agents as saying: 'We [the IRGC and security forces] must be careful about feminist WRNGOs and their political harms such as colour revolutions'.³¹⁷ The Intelligence Office, in cooperation with the conservative Office of Advisor, organised mandatory training for registered WRNGOs and 'admonished them in those pieces of training', as noted by a feminist activist.³¹⁸

However, in response to the anti-women rhetoric of conservative incumbents, feminist WRNGOs toned up their critical discourse alongside reformist newspapers and parties.³¹⁹ Nevertheless, they also had to take into account the red lines in the public sphere and the probable reactions of security forces, some of the reasons to moderate the discourse at the same time.³²⁰ The results of this contradictory circumstance was that, first, critical WRNGOs focused their arguments on questioning the discourse of 'confining women to the home', and

³¹³ Interview: an official in the Office of Advisor, 2014

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Interview: WRNGO journalist, 2014

³²⁰ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

second, they reduced the range and diversity of their demands to the more basic women's rights such as the choice of dress that was violated by the conservative government.³²¹ A WRNGO member argued that 'these pressures were not powerful enough to push back conservatives'.³²² As a consequence, 'the radical rhetoric of women's modern rights gradually faded out of the public sphere and debates'.³²³

Rules and Practices: From 2006 onwards, the Office of Governor-General made the procedure of obtaining a license for establishing a WRNGOs more stringent.³²⁴ His Office also managed many of the public requests, particularly those from reformists, in two ways, including delaying the administrative procedures, and more involvement of the IRGC's Women Force and the Intelligence Office in the procedure of issuing security clearances.³²⁵

Moreover, in 2007, Yahya Mahmudzade, the then conservative Governor-General, abandoned the membership of the delegate of the Network of WRNGOs in the Commission for Women's Affairs, and also in the social and political sub-commissions.³²⁶ Instead, his Office increased the number of seats allocated to the delegates of Islamic offices such as the Islamic Propaganda Organisation, as well as the IRGC's Women's Force. Alongside these delegates, 'The conservative WRNGOs were included for their personal and political contacts with officeholders, therefore, their opinions were informally heard at the commissions', a WRNGO president claimed.³²⁷ This limited the public channels' access and influence over strategic plans and senior officials.

In the same vein, Nosrat Babaei, the then conservative Advisor, changed the official terms and conditions for governmental funds and furthered religious agendas. By doing so, her Office excluded the feminist WRNGOs from the list of funded groups and replaced them with religious and conservative WRNGOs.³²⁸ In addition, the political affiliation of WRNGOs' members to conservatives was an eligibility requirement too, as a female activist said: 'After 2006, I changed the agenda and charter of my NGO to make it compliant with the Advisor's Office's conditions. Nonetheless, the Office refused to reinstate my funds because I was profiled as a reformist.'³²⁹

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Sedigheh Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, *Ibid.*

³²⁴ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

³²⁵ Sedigheh Nasiri, the then reformist Advisor, *Ibid.*

³²⁶ Website of the Office of Advisor, July 2015, available at: <http://banovan.golestanp.ir/kar-gorohe-zanan>

³²⁷ Interview: WRNGO member, 2014

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ Interview: 2014

Also, the policies with the theme of enabling women were restricted to teaching the skills of the housemaker role, such as the Enabling Rural Girls policy in 2012 that taught vintage girls about this issue.³³⁰ Other themes included training the society and government personnel about family issues, and organising Islamic courses for female activists, as recorded in its official documents and minutes.³³¹ The Office of Advisor on purpose limited the area of public engagement to the conservative WRNGOs that could fulfil these policies.

Therefore, in their eight-year period, conservative governors and advisors, with the support of Islamic schools and WRNGOs, elevated the traditional Islamic discourse in the domain. Also, by restricting the institutional access points and manipulating the administrative procedures, they limited the opportunity of the rise of new actors and membership of feminist WRNGOs. The more active role of the security forces also increased the stability and resistance of this policy community against critical pressures.

3.3. The Relational Aspect of the Policy Community

From 2006, the Office of Governor-General reversed the nature of relationships with feminist activists. An activist said ‘Ali Muhammad Shaeri, the first conservative Governor-General in that period, and his men in the Office showed their grumpy face to us because for them we were the unwanted residue of the reformist period that had to be wiped out’.³³² This attitude grew over time and, from 2007, it was coupled with a decline in the frequency of interactions.³³³ From 2009 onwards due to the securitising policies and the proximity between the then Governor-General Javad Ghenaat’s Office and the IRGC, ‘The guards of the Office of Governor-General even physically banned the feminist activists get in the building’, leading to a total boycott.³³⁴ This was unexpected and disappointing to some feminist WRNGOs, which led to their self-imposed closure.

This excluding trend spread across different administrative levels, so much so that it threw a wrench between the relationship of WRNGOs with other actors in the society. For example, Mahmud Sadeghi, the then conservative Director-General for Social Affairs (2005-2007),

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

³³⁴ Ibid.

explained in the interview that once he invited some leading feminists to his office and through informal chats made them promise to reduce their media communications. He also asked them not to 'raise their demands in the reformist newsweeklies', nor in public speeches because 'it could disseminate pessimism about the Islamic government'.³³⁵ This was while conservative WRNGOs enjoyed the privilege of having 'off-the-record communications and contacts'.³³⁶

However, few liberal WRNGOs with close personal contacts with officials still had few opportunities in their official correspondences. The president of a feminist WRNGO said: 'In 2007, my request for annual renew of my NGO's license was delayed for 5-6 months due to my affiliation with reformists. I resorted to my personal contacts with a Director-General who finally solved my problem through his informal actions.'³³⁷ Whilst, these personal contacts with officials were helpful for feminist WRNGOs to sustain their existence, for conservative WRNGOs it was a privilege in terms of conducting more demands and receiving more support.

In the Office of Advisor, Nosrat Babaei and Mehri Mahdavi, both the then conservative advisors, extended the security and ideological measures to the official correspondences with feminist WRNGOs required to 'establish political trust and ideological loyalty before establishing official communication with the Office', even if they had informal links with the advisors.³³⁸ In parallel, the then advisors also reduced their attendance of formal events that could result in interaction with WRNGOs. For instance, the website of the Commission for Women's Affairs demonstrated that over the eight-year conservative period the number of its meetings declined from five to one formal meeting per year, whilst the number of policies passed increased through informal meetings and contacts of officials with their allies.³³⁹ Nevertheless, the minimum formal and personal communications between officials and conservative WRNGOs were in place. The Office of Advisor accepted feminist WRNGOs only as implementers of policies or in non-political areas unrelated to human rights such as anti-drug addiction projects.³⁴⁰ The IRGC's Women's Force was the alternative to liberal WRNGOs. In 2012, Mehri Mahdavi in a joint public conference praised the IRGC's female members as the exemplar of Muslim woman.³⁴¹ This, as the core

³³⁵ Interview: 2014

³³⁶ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

³³⁷ Interview: 2014

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Website of the Office of Advisor, July 2015, Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Interview: WRNGO president, 2014

³⁴¹ IRNA website, December 2012, available at: <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/2000032521>

discourse of the WR policy community, was echoed by the government's websites and conservative newswEEKlies.

At the same time, the IRGC and security forces increased the suppression of WRNGOs in a bid to curb their contacts with reformist media. A WRNGO president said: 'Discussing women's political rights in the newswEEKlies and public speeches, although allowed by law, became forbidden in practice'.³⁴² Women's websites and weblogs were the only shelters for feminists, which had a smaller number of readers, thus less influence, but were safer.³⁴³ Also, feminist WRNGOs were banned from joint actions and cooperation with reformist parties in public under the guise of security laws.³⁴⁴ At the same time, conservative partisans and WRNGO activists had their relationships legitimised due to their Islamic discourse.

The two conservative advisors promoted Islamic projects and policies with the involvement of conservative WRNGOs, such as two large-scale projects described below:

In a three-year (2006–2008) provincial project, called the Mercy, Nosrat Babae's Office organised training sessions for women's roles, as well as about the functions and characteristics of the Muslim family based on Islamic values. For this project, the Office of Advisor registered and included more than 30,000 female students, employees, housemakers and activists.³⁴⁵ In a similar project called 'The Light of the House—in reference to the cherished household role of women in Islam—Mehri Mahdavi's Office held a series of workshops on the tasks and role of motherhood.³⁴⁶ In this project, 40,000 female civil servants were involved.

In this climate, some less well-known feminist WRNGOs played along the religious line in order to be funded and involved by the Office of Advisor, as well as sustaining limited communication with the government.³⁴⁷

This Islamisation of the policy domain, aside from its limitations, provided some unintended opportunities for critical WRNGOs to maximise relation with some of the policy community

³⁴² Interview: 2014

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Interview: member of a reformist party, 2014

³⁴⁵ Website of the Office of Advisor, July 2015, Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

members such as Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader. A WRNGO president described a case:³⁴⁸

In 2006, my NGO planned a seminar on the violence against women in Gorgan, the capital city of Golestan Province. We had speculated that it was a sensitive time for this subject. To be on the safe side, we chose a political tactic. We negotiated with Ayatollah Noormofidi and requested him to be a participant and keynote speaker of our seminar, respecting the fact that he had high political leverage. He agreed to do so. As a result of his presence and his name mentioned on the posters, as we predicted, we faced no formal or informal harassment or warning, and no pressure was put on us afterwards.

The example above shows that the Islamic WR policy community had some loopholes and capacities that could be penetrated from the inside.

During the eight years of the conservative period, the WR policy community became consistent with Islamic-security institutions driving it through their close interrelationships. In this policy community, the articulation of relationships became top-down, with conservative WRNGOs subordinated to the policies and discourse imposed by governors. In the first conservative term, the policy community was still developing, thus, allowing feminist actors to have their relationships and joint actions. However, from 2009, it became strict with more systematic relationships and harsher policies. Accordingly, it threw its shadow over the whole WR domain and interrupted the relationships and actions of critical actors.

3.4. The Agency of WRNGOs in the Policy Community

The style of decision-making became exclusive in the conservative WR policy community regarding the manner and climate. Whilst the public spheres and governmental resources were available to the conservative WRNGOs, along with regular contacts with governors, feminist WRNGOs had to moderate their discourse and be cautious in their actions. Feminist WRNGOs were also deprived of access points in the Office of Advisor, and also in the public spheres, their relationship with political parties and media was under the scrutiny of the IRGC and Intelligence Office. In this environment, the primary mechanism of surviving their activities was

³⁴⁸ Interview: 2014

through informal spheres such as house gatherings and friendly parties. Nonetheless, by identifying some potential opportunities, the more experienced feminist WRNGOs succeeded to maintain pressure on the policy community.

4. Conclusion

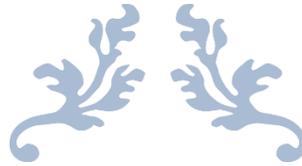
During the reformist period, the Office of Governor-General prepared the ground for the emergence of WRNGOs. Alongside mass media and political parties, WRNGOs formed a medium-sized issue network in the women's rights domain. With the tolerance of the Intelligence Office and the IRGC, civil society grew large and diverse. Over time, reformist governors used official rules to expand access for WRNGOs. This made the issue network accessible to both conservative and feminist WRNGOs, which in parallel with the informal relationship, allowed for a diverse set of WRNGOs in policy network. However, the government managed the arrangement of interrelationship in an uneven and discriminatory way. Through the closer relations between the feminist WRNGOs and the reformist governors, with the leading role of the Office of Advisor in the second term, improving modern rights and political participation became the prevailing discourse and policy approach. Nevertheless, because of the competition between opposing streams of actors and discourses, this issue network did not become fully institutionalised.

However, the conservative government from 2005 steered the issue network in the opposite direction both regarding structure and policy approach. By limiting the membership of the issue network, as well as homogenising the composition of WRNGOs, the structure became closed like a policy community. Also, through close relations with the IRGC and the Intelligence Office, senior governors imposed a hardline discourse. With the support of Islamic schools and conservative media, advocating motherhood and limiting women's social roles replaced the liberal discourse. By closing the access points to the state and manipulating the relationship with WRNGOs, the policy community became stable and hostile to outsiders' pressure and discourse. In this policy community, conservative WRNGOs sustained their relationship with policy centres through formal and informal linkages, whilst feminist WRNGOs were consciously excluded. The table below (8.1) provides an overview of the trajectory of the policy network across the two periods. As it can be seen below, whereas the political profile of the WR domain

was expected to be low at the local level, it was still influential as it took the policy network into two opposite directions:

Table 8.1. The character of Golestan's WR policy network during the 1997-2013 period

Period	Structure	Climate	Policymaking style
Reformist	Issue network	Competitive	Integrative
Conservative	Policy community	Consistent	Exclusive



CHAPTER NINE

**NATIONAL POLICY
NETWORKS IN THE
ENVIRONMENTAL DOMAIN**



1. The Distinguished Nature and Ecosystem of Iran

'Iran's government is not able to fulfil its environmental objectives without NGOs; not only do civil activists know this, but governors confess it.'

—A Former Advisor to Iran's Department for Environment, 2015

The previous two chapters discussed how the reformist and conservative governments separately imposed their ideological discourse and policies onto the women's-rights domain and engineered the structure of its policy networks. This chapter studies environmental policy networks as a technical domain and shows how the relationships between state and civil society differed in this technical policy domain. As the theoretical framework suggested, in this domain, the structure of policy networks is expected to be issue network across the two political periods, though with small changes. Before tracing this trajectory, the significance of the profile and status of the environment in Iran should be outlined.

Iran has distinguished ecosystem and landscapes and a valuable wildlife distributed across the whole country. The Caspian Sea on the north and the Persian Gulf on the South, as well as extensive fertile lands, rivers, and many registered forests across Iran, host thousands of species of plants and animals that put the country at the 'forefront of biodiversity conversations' (Figure 9.1) (Namazi, 2000, p. 43).



Figure 9.1. The satellite view of Iran illustrates its diverse environment and nature/ image credit: Planet Observer

Nonetheless, research expresses concern about the environmental status of Iran, as well as the Iranian government's policies. Notably, after 2000, the international ranking of Iranian environmental protection declined from 40th to 117th.³⁴⁹ Environmental threats include air pollution, drought and water pollution, and the destruction of forests and rangeland (Lotfian & Fakhrdavoud, 2018, p. 87). These issues captured the public attention and led to the rise of spontaneous environmental movements that established formal organisations and interactions with the state since the early 1990s.

The next section outlines the national setting of policymaking in this domain. Then, the chapter will also discuss the formation and development of the environmental policy network during the reformist and conservative governments.

2. The Official Position of the Environmental Policy Domain

State Institutions: The official records show the first environmental state agency was established several decades before the Islamic Republic. However, this domain was left on the margins of the national agenda for two decades after the 1979 Revolution (Foltz, 2001, p. 157). Until 1989, due to the Iran–Iraq war and the priority of the national security to political leaders, there was no space for environmental issues; following that, until 1997, this issue was overlooked due to the Rafsanjani governments' concentration on economic rebuilding (Amini, 2001, p. 97). From the mid-90s, environmental issues returned to the government agenda and plan to correspond with the rise of middle class and its growing tendency towards sustainable development (Amini, 2001, pp. 96-8; Afrasiabi, 2003, p. 432).

The Department of Environment (hereafter DoE) is the leading state actor that manages this domain in Iran. It has a wide range of powers varying from 'planning' to 'monitoring' the performance of the line ministries and state agencies. Regarding its format, the head of the DoE is the Vice President. However, experts argue that the office's political influence depends on the incumbent (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015, p. 21). As for legislation, Parliament's Committee for Environment (hereafter the Committee) deals with promoting causes and concerns in the laws. It is like an interest group with no legal authority in investigating bills and passing laws. The

³⁴⁹ As reported by the United Nations Environment Programme in Deutsche Welle website, August 2013, available at: <http://p.dw.com/p/19PNf>

Commission for Agriculture, Water and Natural Resources is the higher legislative authority as, besides other areas, it officially investigates the environmental issues before approval in the General Session (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015, p. 267). Above all, the High Council for Environment is the top governmental council that approves the essential strategies. This Council, which is run by the president, coordinates with the head of the Department of Environment, cabinet ministers, MPs, as well as the delegates of judicial and security offices (Namazi, 2000, p. 45; Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015, pp. 258-260).

Strategic Documents: The Constitution defines environmental protection as a religious responsibility for the public. Also, 'The General Strategies of Regime' and the 'Law of Protection and Improvement of the Environment' encompass stringent conditions and necessitate governmental action in this area. Iran is also a signatory to some international conventions that oblige the enforcement of international standards in policies (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015, p. 245).³⁵⁰

3. The Reformist Period: The Rise of an Issue Network

During the 1997 presidential election, the manifesto and slogans of the reformist camp did not feature the environmental subjects. Khatami did not raise it in his election campaign either. Nevertheless, in practice, environmentalism became one of the main elements of the government's political reform. This developed the national policy network in this domain.

3.1. The Composition of the Issue Network

State Actors: President Khatami made the environmental domain a subject of his political reform, as soon as he picked Masoumeh Ebtekar as the Head of the DoE, who ran the organisation during the entire reformist period. This appointment, besides technical aspects, had several political implications. First, concerning the position of the gender balance in the reformist's manifesto, Masoumeh Ebtekar became the first female serving as the Vice President, as well as the first female holding a seat in the Cabinet of ministers. This political aspect of the

³⁵⁰ For example: UNFCCC (1992) on climate change; CITES (1963) for endangered plants and animals, the Vienna Convention (1985) for protecting the Ozone layer etc.

appointment also attracted and inspired female activists in this domain.³⁵¹ Second, in addition to her affiliation with the Participation Front, the leading reformist party, Masoumeh Ebtekar had the experience of civil activism in NGOs, with an extensive network of contacts with civil activists and partisans.

Moreover, due to living and studying in the U.S., she was familiar with the environmentalism from a political perspective as its importance in the democratisation literature.³⁵² The political aspect overweighed the technical aspect of her appointment that was connected to her family background. Her father, Taghi Ebtekar, was the former Head of the DoE and was known as an outstanding figure in this field.³⁵³ Masoumeh Ebtekar's university degree was in Immunology, which was irrelevant. Nonetheless, she said in an interview: 'During my father's tenure at the DoE, I was often his right hand in translating English-language environmental papers and arranging some of his office works due to my English language skills, which also brought me the primary knowledge of the environmental domain and the DoE'.³⁵⁴

As several ENGO activists stated, Masoumeh Ebtekar's political reputation, besides her family-prestige, elevated the public profile of the DoE in civil society. ³⁵⁵ Also, President Khatami delegated several political powers in Masoumeh Ebtekar's hands, which enhanced the DoE's institutional position in the government, e.g. approving national environmental plans, as well as the Chair and member seat in the High Council for Environment.³⁵⁶

Along with the head of the organisation, the senior officials in the DoE were replaced with reformist figures. However, the composition of junior managers and employees remained untouched, which therefore can be taken to mean that the attitudes remained technical at the administrative level (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015, p. 265).

During the first reformist term, Ebtekar developed the DoE's organisation with two developments. First, she established specific subcommittees concerning different environmental threats and problems, including the Committee for Air Pollution.³⁵⁷ Second, more than 1,500 new official posts and research units were created within the organisation

³⁵¹ Masoumeh Ebtekar in interview with Etemaad newspaper, new-year special issue, March 2015, pages 194 to 197

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ ISNA website, July 2017, available at: <https://www.isna.ir/news/96051710249>

³⁵⁴ Masoumeh Ebtekar in interview with Etemaad newspaper, Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Interview: 2015

³⁵⁶ Etemaad newspaper, 2015 new-year special issue, March 2015, pages 194 to 197

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

(Lotfian & Fakhrdavoud, 2018, p. 85). Also, the Cabinet helped this development by increasing the revenue of the DoE in the annual budget. From 1998, the Cabinet ordered less environmental-friendly ministries, such as the Ministry of Road Construction and Transformation to allocate a percentage of their annual budget to the DoE as an effort to promote Ebtekar's plans.³⁵⁸ These changes brought the DOE to the fore of the environmental policy network. However, this organisation was not yet resourceful enough in order to fulfil the plans or to afford to employ enough expert staff, 'which kept it dependent on the collaboration of NGOs', as acknowledged by Hossein Nik-Khah, the reformist advisor to Masoumeh Ebtekar.³⁵⁹

Despite fast-paced developments in the executive and the Parliament, the reformist MPs did not have the personal enthusiasm or individual profile related to the environmental domain while having a two-thirds majority. As a result, most of the leading MPs preferred to join political commissions, e.g. the National Security, whilst the Committee for Environment was left to lesser-known MPs and remained insignificant (Azghandi, 2012, p. 190). The then Head of this Committee was Alireza Tabesh (2000-2004), President Khatami's nephew, who had a degree in Natural Resources.³⁶⁰ In spite of his education and linkage with the President, the Committee under him remained low in vibrancy and public profile.³⁶¹ The reformist MPs also demonstrated a similar trend towards the Commission for Agriculture and Water Resources that was the higher legislative authority in this area. As a result, it was taken over by technocratic and conservative MPs (Amini, 2001).

Whilst being aware of the importance of environmental threats, the Islamic and security institutions did not increase their intervention in this area over time; only the Ministry of Intelligence developed a special bureau for environmental issues in the second reformist term corresponding with the growth of civil-society activism in this domain (Doyle & Simpson, 2006).³⁶²

Civil Society Actors: Initially, the non-state environmental actions were in the form of small volunteer groups who were cleaning and protecting nature. Alongside the political developments, this civil society developed in the organisation especially since the distribution

³⁵⁸ The full text of the 1998 government budget is available at: <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/93051>

³⁵⁹ Interview: 2015

³⁶⁰ The personal website of Alireza Tabesh, June 2018, available at: <http://www.tabesh-ardakan.com/Page.asp?PID=06000000>

³⁶¹ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

³⁶² Ibid.

of governmental funds led to the emergence of ENGOs, with the numbers showing an increase from 20 ENGOs in 1997 through to 650 ENGOs registered in 2005 (DoE, 2005). Although the official records differed about the number of ENGOs, they all confirm this drastic growth.³⁶³ Through this positioning of NGOs, the government sought to launch a bottom-up environmentalist movement (Afrasiabi, 2003, pp. 432-3).

ENGOs emerged with different types of profiles, informally known as professional vs general.³⁶⁴ On the one hand, the professionals, e.g., The Experts of Environment and The Iranian Cheetah, were those with a focused area of activity about one element of nature or animal species; they were resourceful regarding expertise, knowledge, and skills, but had less money and smaller organisation. On the other hand, the general ENGOs were driven by the generosity and passion of the founders for the environment; they were ordinary civil activists and people with no relevant knowledge: for example, the Association for Protecting the Nature. This type of ENGOs rarely engaged with public policies. The official records do not detail the relation between these two types. Nonetheless, an ENGO activist mentioned that the professional ENGOs constitute less than one-fifth of the number, which is less than 100.³⁶⁵ However, regarding the organisation, except for a few long-established ENGOs, most of them were recipients of government funds and facilities such as office space and equipment.

The composition of the emerging ENGOs was diverse regarding ideology too, i.e. Islamists versus secularists, whilst concerning political affiliation, some had a minimum affiliation with the reformist or conservative camps, which inspired their approach to environmentalism as well (Afrasiabi, 2003, p. 433). Despite political affiliation, however, in contrast to authoritarian countries such as China, Iranian ENGOs did not transform into a political front. The government also remained reluctant to allow dissenting groups, i.e. radical conservatives or secularists, register their ENGO and politicise the domain (Doyle & Simpson, 2006, pp. 750-9).

Corresponding to the rise of ENGOs, several reformist parties, e.g., the Participation Front, went in the forefront of creating the first environmental wings, with a few conservative parties, such as the Islamic Union, also following this route, albeit with a delay of few years.³⁶⁶ In total, the number of the political parties with an environmental wing was not large—no more than five—

³⁶³ The Website of the Ministry of Interior, available at: <https://www.moi.ir/>

³⁶⁴ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

and the wings were mostly small in the number, low in vibrancy, and with little or no environmental skills and knowledge.³⁶⁷

Ahead of the political parties, the national newspapers and magazines, whilst mostly centred on social and political issues, joined this domain. The leading reformist newspapers such as *Khordad*, and, later, the conservatives—allocated a column or page to environmental issues, which were managed by environmental activists and scholars.³⁶⁸ Also, more than ten environmental periodicals and newsweeklies slowly began to emerge as in the case of *Jonbeshe-Sabz* (Green Movement) periodical.³⁶⁹ However, they were not very popular and influential regarding readership and subscribers. During the second reformist term, alongside the growth in the number of Internet users in Iran, more than 100 environmental websites and weblogs were registered by ENGO activists and scholars, albeit not with a very active status.³⁷⁰

Therefore, during the reformist period, along with the rise of the DoE's profile, ENGOs with different affiliations and resources emerged, and the size of the environmental policy network increased. With the absence of Islamic and security institutions, ENGOs and the DoE dominated the network; whilst political parties and mass media were growing their environmental profile too, albeit at a slower pace.

3.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Issue Network

Discourse: At the top of the state, the environmental discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei, as the official ground rule, had both Islamic and humanitarian narratives. He, on the one hand, emphasised that 'damaging the environment is an act of human rights violation', whilst on the other hand, articulated the importance of the environmental protection with Islamic principles (Foltz, 2001).³⁷¹ Also, He always appeared in major symbolic events such as planting trees on the environment day (Figure 9.2). Nevertheless, He never mentioned nor spoke about organised environmental participation.³⁷² For instance, in a book gathering all his speeches in this area,

³⁶⁷ Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

³⁶⁸ Interview: journalist, 2015

³⁶⁹ The list of environmental media, retrieved in June 2018, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/category.asp?cat=45>

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Mashregh website, March 2014, available at: <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/290868>

³⁷² Ayatollah Khamenei's website, retrieved in June 2018, available at: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=6608>

Movement for Protecting Environment (2016), Ayatollah Khamenei only alluded to citizens as individuals and society as an entity, but not ENGOs.



Figure 9.2. Ayatollah Khamenei plants a tree every year on the Environment day/ Photo credit: Fars news agency

The Islamic institutions and the security forces affiliated with the establishment followed the same discourse, yet, did not make public statements or speeches about it.³⁷³ Even though the ENGOs tried to encounter them with the new discourse of environmentalism, they did not update their discourse, as described by an ENGO president:

We were invited to lecture about environmentalism and the new role of ENGOs in a meeting with Ayatollah Shahroodi—Head of the Judiciary during the reformist period, and his senior officials. After a few hours of interactive debates, their understanding of NGOs, yet, remained traditional, as Shahroodi, in the end, said he thought ENGOs should work on charity functions.³⁷⁴

The high-ranking conservative's discourse not only excluded NGOs' advanced functions but also reduced environmentalism naively to 'having a share in protecting the green-coloured elements of nature, e.g. trees'.³⁷⁵

³⁷³ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

However, President Khatami adopted a modern discourse concerning environmentalism, which was a combination of religious philosophies and modern theories, as Masoumeh Ebtekar, the reformist Head of the DoE, described:

In one of the international conferences we organised, in my first year of office, President Khatami was invited as the keynote speaker. I was very concerned whether he could prestigiously address the issue to the guests who were mostly Western environmental experts and scholars. However, when the time came, beyond my expectations, he presented a fascinating and enlightening speech that cited Western philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant and tailored the Western theories with Islamic and Christian teachings to justify the importance of the environment.

President Muhammad Khatami put forward an environmentalist discourse with emphasis on protection and made it part of his political reform ideology. This was an effort to replace the exploitation approach that had been internalised in government (Figure 9.3) (Foltz, 2001, p. 156; Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015). The reformist President also incorporated his liberal approach to his environmental discourse in order to make it participatory (Doyle & Simpson, 2006).



Figure 9.3. Khatami hosted international seminars on the environmental issues/ photo credit: ISNA website

Notwithstanding the President's effort, the technocratic ministers and organisations, such as the Minister for Oil, did not completely give up their exploitative approach.³⁷⁶ Similarly, the administrative-level bureaucrats and civil servants perceived ENGOs as 'technical barriers and intruders on the pathway of development.'³⁷⁷

The DoE took the leading role in undermining the traditional discourses in this domain by putting forward progressive rhetoric concerning environmentalism, which had three aims: making it a public concern, broadening its scope, and promoting NGOs' role therein.³⁷⁸ She tried to incorporate the Islamic discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei and international agendas concerning sustainable development championed by the UN in the DoE's discourse (Foltz, 2001; Amini, 2001, p. 97). Masoumeh Ebtekar made the critical argument that 'environmentalism is not about planting trees and watering them; rather, it involves all areas of our life and government'.³⁷⁹

Moreover, in stimulating public participation, Masoumeh Ebtekar and her senior officials, in the formal and informal occasions, declared that 'without ENGOs, we are incapable of protecting the environment'.³⁸⁰ In this vein, 'Ebtekar encouraged her senior officials to establish ENGOs' in order to institutionalise her modern discourse and inspire the society to follow it. ³⁸¹ Ebtekar registered her own 'Peace and Environment' ENGO in Tehran. As a result of this top-down stimulation, an environmental scholar said: 'Whereas for 18 years beforehand people were not familiar with the DoE and environmentalism, but by 2005, it became a vibrant and popular domain'.³⁸² Also, due to her reputation and efforts in the DoE, at the end of her tenure, the United Nations titled Ebtekar as the Hero of Earth (BBC, 2006).

In Parliament, the Commission for Agriculture, Water and Nature did not react positively to the participatory protection approach made by the DoE.³⁸³ The environmental priorities were not on the agenda of reformist MPs (Esmaeelifard *et al.*, 2017, p.12). The Committee for Environment was passive too. Vahideh Talghani, the conservative MP of Tehran (2000-2004),

³⁷⁶ Interview: ENGO activists, 2015

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Masoumeh Ebtekar in interview with Etemaad newspaper, Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Hossein Nik-Khah, the reformist advisor to the DOE, Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Radio-Farda website, August 2016, available at: <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/masomeh-ebtekat-from-environment-protection-to-women-affair/28688653.html>

³⁸³ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

objected to this passive position saying: 'Due to the affiliation of the Committee's Head and members with President Khatami and the reformist camp, they were expected to play a more active role'.³⁸⁴

NGOs with general profile 'had a more proactive rhetorical and public presence than officeholders'. They made arguments concerning the tangible and observable environmental issues, such as air pollution, drought, and the destruction of natural parks and forests.³⁸⁵ However, the notable point was that since most of the large and active NGOs were located in Tehran, the range of their demands were, intentionally or unintentionally, more attentive to Tehran's environmental issues rather than other national issues, i.e. air pollution. This, in practice, meant that Tehran's environmental problems prevailed in the bulk of conversations within the policy network.³⁸⁶ A minority of NGOs made best efforts towards more specific problems, such as wildlife habitats and river-margin construction and pollution. These NGOs' narratives targeted policy vacuums; although, their voice was not the significant one.

Following NGOs, political parties contributed to the environmental conversations, but selectively, as a member of the Participation Front's Environmental Wing said: 'My party usually cherry-picked and made statements about popular environmental issues such as air pollution in Tehran, that advantaged them politically'.³⁸⁷ Similarly, 'newspapers, mostly reformist, had a stronger attitude towards iconic environmental issues that could boost their market, for example, illegal construction in forests'.³⁸⁸ After all, their position and narratives were protectionist and for environmentalism. The national TV, IRIB, under the management of conservative camp, however, remained reluctant to cover the protectionist discourse, due to political rivalry.³⁸⁹

Rules and Practices: Consistent with the executive's protection discourse, the DoE and the Cabinet amended the policies in this domain. The DoE tried to comply with blueprints of international organisations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Ahmadi, 2009). Besides that, Masoumeh Ebtekar's office purposively and frequently conducted the

³⁸⁴ Meybodema website, January 2015, available at: <http://meybodema.ir/?p=29008>

³⁸⁵ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Interview: 2015

³⁸⁸ Interview: journalist, 2015

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

concerns of ENGOs to the Cabinet, which captured ministers' attention and led to an increase in the number of national regulations and decrees that restricted developmental projects with environmental footprint, especially in the areas of construction and mining.³⁹⁰ However, an ENGO president argued that 'this effort was not a guarantee in practice', for example, he pointed out the Office of Dam Construction that 'continued its multiple dam projects across the regions with water crises.'³⁹¹ This ignorance was also the result of Parliament's inaction, and a lack of a necessary framework of environmental laws that allowed the line ministries and organisations to take advantage of their discretion (Amini, 2001).

In order to promote environmentalism as an on-the-ground movement, the DoE undertook several actions across the reformist period. First, it established the National Network of ENGOs (Namazi, 2000, p. 43). Subsequently, Masoumeh Ebtekar 'issued an official decree that required all sub-committees of the organisation to include delegates of that Network in their meetings'.³⁹² This action also inspired the Cabinet to implement the same practice in its internal Committee for Environment.³⁹³ Second, Ebtekar's office introduced the Scheme of Assessing Managers whose function based on ENGOs' evaluation, in order to increase the institutional power of ENGOs versus officials within her organisation. When developing institutional access points, Masoumeh Ebtekar also established the Bureau for Public Participation, which was assigned the mission of regulating NGO-DoE contacts and the distribution of government funds and facilities to ENGOs.³⁹⁴ This allowed non-states into the state.

Third, Masoumeh Ebtekar's DoE compiled special regulations which included ENGOs in environmental policies, and was approved by the Cabinet as a compulsory decree for all governmental organisations. It granted ENGOs the right to monitor and assess the policies and performance of governmental organisations, as well as the right to contribute to planning processes (Ebtekar, 2009). Fourth, in 1999, Masoumeh Ebtekar convinced President Khatami to issue a decree requiring Cabinet members to establish the Bureau for Environmental Issues within their ministries/organisations (Ebtekar, 2009). These bureaus were meant to facilitate the ENGOs monitoring of the projects and policies of the executive. These changes opened the

³⁹⁰ Masoumeh Ebtekar in interview with Etemaad newspaper, Ibid.

³⁹¹ Interview: 2015

³⁹² Masoumeh Ebtekar in interview with Etemaad newspaper, Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

state apparatus to ENGOs. However, it was alleged to be discriminatory since the government could control the membership of ENGOs in the National Network in the first instance.³⁹⁵

In contrast to the Executive, in Parliament, the Commission and Committee did not develop any participatory mechanism or regulation concerning the inclusion of ENGOs in meetings and legislation.³⁹⁶ Nonetheless, due to their affiliation, reformist MPs cooperated with Muhammad Khatami's Cabinet and Masoumeh Ebtekar's DoE on reforming the development plans. The First and Second Development Plan (1989-1999) comprised fewer than three articles concerning environmental protection whilst having no articles concerning public participation in this particular domain.³⁹⁷ In 1999, Khatami's Cabinet compiled the Third plan, with a special section dedicated to environmental protection, which particularly in Article 104, recognised ENGOs as the government's partner. The votes of reformist MPs for this section led to its final approval. Later in 2004, this section in the Fourth Development Plan was extended to more than twenty articles as a result of this cooperation. This section also increased governmental funds for ENGOs.

In reaction to the ongoing development of formal rules and the rise of ENGOs' activities in public spheres, whilst the IRGC did not bother, the Police and the Ministry of Intelligence upgraded their practices and rules concerning ENGOs' public actions.³⁹⁸ The police developed the regulations for Gatherings and Demonstrations. This regulation required NGOs to provide all information—including the slogans, banner texts, the venue, and speakers—of every public programme to the authorities so that legal permit is sought beforehand. Also, the Ministry of Intelligence moderately delayed the procedures of obtaining security clearance for ENGOs. However, 'these counter-efforts did not deviate the Executive's general policy of supporting ENGOs'.³⁹⁹

Therefore, over the reformist years, the DoE increased the vibrancy of a policy network by putting forward a modern discourse and upgrading the rules. However, protectionism hardly became the dominant discourse since the technocrat ministers and MPs sustained a certain degree of exploitation discourse and practice. Moreover, the new rules and practices provided the domain for the rise and policy role of new ENGOs, along with political parties and mass

³⁹⁵ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Website of the DOE, Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

³⁹⁹ Interview: journalist, 2015

media using critical rhetoric. Thus, the policy network became resilient but remained consistent due to the government's efforts.

3.3. The Relational Aspect of the Issue Network

At the centre of the policy network, Masoumeh Ebtekar utilised her extensive contacts network to cultivate the DoE's organisational relationships with ENGOs, political parties and mass media. An ENGO president said: 'owing to her partisan and journalism background, she honestly believed that ENGOs could help the DoE promote environmentalism'.⁴⁰⁰ In this respect, the Bureau for Public Participation in the DoE facilitated frequent contacts with registered active ENGOs. These formal relationships, as the reformist Advisor to Masoumeh Ebtekar, said, had several objectives and functions, including delivering governmental funds, training them on the protection discourse, and involving their delegates in the DoE's affairs.⁴⁰¹ This arrangement of relationships led to several policy developments. For example, in 1999, the DoE compiled the national scheme of Managing Urban Waste, responsible for the largest recycling plans nationwide. Also, in the same year, the DoE revised the Automotive Emission Regulation in response to the advice received from several expert ENGOs in Tehran (Ebtekar, 2009, p. 293).

However, at the lower levels and in sub-committees, the DoE's technocrats 'acted reluctantly towards ENGOs and resisted their demands'.⁴⁰² Also, the opportunity of establishing a relationship with the DoE was not equal for all since 'ENGOs with reformist members or leaders had a greater chance of a regular or influential relationship. Furthermore, sometimes reformist ENGOs were privileged owing to their personal and political links'.⁴⁰³ At the same time, only professional and expert ENGOs had a good chance of inclusion in the special policy areas such as wildlife and plant species due to the DoE's lack of knowledge and expertise.⁴⁰⁴ Despite different types of discrimination, most ENGO members confirmed that the opportunity for establishing minimum contact with the organisation was available to all, which in some cases 'required more creativity and intellect to make possible'.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Hossein Nik-Khah, Ibid.

⁴⁰² Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Interview: 2015

Masoumeh Ebtekar's office also connected ENGOs with the line ministries and national organisations, especially the technocratic ones, e.g., Ministry of Oil, with the aim of addressing the environmental pressures of the society. Despite this effort, the relationships between large companies and industrial cartels outweighed the societal pressures of ENGOs (Amini, 2001, pp. 97-100). In this case, as an ENGO member pointed out: 'The intermediation of the DoE could have pushed back the ministries only if it had the support of the President or widespread pressure from public opinion'.⁴⁰⁶ This meant that, in economically backward areas, the agency of the DoE and ENGOs was influential only if they could form a joint coalition together, with media also included. This coalition formed on several occasions and led to the changes in the policies of the Ministry of Oil, including: the schemes for phasing-out of leaded petrol, the policy of water and soil contamination control, and upgrading the quality of Iranian petrol (Ebtekar, 2009, p. 293). As for appreciating long-term changes in behaviour, the DoE granted this Ministry—which previously was known for its anti-environmental credentials—the National Prize for the Environment in 2003.

As for the Parliament, ENGOs needed the DoE to be the intermediary despite MPs political cooperative acceptance. Otherwise, 'their personal and political linkages were not sufficient in increasing the frequency of relationship'.⁴⁰⁷ An example of this intermediation was the case of developing environmental sections in the Third and Fourth Development Plans. As a result of pressures exerted on the Committee and MPs through Masoumeh Ebtekar's office, the protectionist ENGOs succeeded in putting a number of articles in the development plans, including: (i) protecting environmental sources; (ii) assessing the biological footprints of projects; (iii) limiting the utilisation of natural resources; (iv) involving experts and universities in environmental policies; and (v) using modern technologies in protecting the environment (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015; Goldani & Meybodi, 2015).

Also, despite their ideological and political disagreements, the Islamic institutions cooperated with the reformist Cabinet and Parliament concerning the environmental policies. An ENGO president said: 'Confrontation between the Parliament and the Guardian Council was very rare in this domain'.⁴⁰⁸ Another area of this cooperation was the establishment of the Special Court for Environment in the Judiciary. This was initially at the request of several leading ENGOs, which was passed on to the Judiciary by Masoumeh Ebtekar's office during the second term

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁰⁸ Interview: 2015

(Ebtekar, 2009, p. 291). This particular court accepted and allowed ENGOs to appeal their concerns against anti-environmental policies and projects and dealt with violations in this area (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015). The court was an institutional capacity for ENGOs, plus it became a connecting mechanism between the two distant parts of the policy network - the Islamic institutions and the protectionist ENGOs.

The security institutions, in the absence of the IRGC, the Police and the Ministry of Interior, established 'peaceful contacts with ENGOs respecting the President's moderate policies'.⁴⁰⁹ Regardless of this attitude, ENGO members had imposed self-restrictions as they preferred moderate methods of public actions, e.g. seminars and lobbying instead of holding protests.⁴¹⁰ The ENGOs' reckoned that street protest was a 'European method that could not be effective in Iran' (Doyle & Simpson, 2006, p. 760).

In the societal spheres, the frequency of relationships between ENGOs developed while there were some unexpected disagreements too. Some disagreements were technical, whilst some of them were political and ideological, i.e. reformist ENGOs versus conservative streams. For example, an ENGO president highlighted the importance of the Iranian Cheetah as an endangered species. However, when it came to negotiations on alternative solutions, 'expert ENGOs could not make a compromise. Eventually, the DoE made decisions without them'.⁴¹¹

Mass media were the inseparable member of the ENGOs' network of relationships, as 'on most issues, ENGOs needed the cooperation of journalists to make an influential case to the government'.⁴¹² Since most of the emerging newspapers took a critical socio-political line, protectionist and critical ENGOs had the chance of fitting their demands and causes in this line of questioning the policies of ministries that were less acceptant of ENGOs.

The relationships of ENGOs with political parties, whilst helpful in accessing distant policymakers, such as Alireza Tabesh, the then Head of Committee in the Parliament, and the then technocratic ministers, were not friendly enough because of the negative perceptions held by each side. On the one hand, partisans perceived environmental activities as being 'low-profile and sentimental', whilst on the other hand, ENGO members blamed political parties for being greedy. An ENGO president stated: 'I neither believed nor saw that political parties had

⁴⁰⁹ Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

⁴¹⁰ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Interview: journalist, 2015

real concern for the environment'.⁴¹³ Therefore, the frequency and character of relationships between them were very insecure, and even ENGOs were reluctant to sit in joint meetings with partisan.⁴¹⁴

Under the auspices of the DoE, ENGOs also established a relationship with research institutes and think tanks, such as the Environmental Department of Tehran University. This had several Reasons. First, ENGOs needed to exchange skills and information with them. Second, it was encouraged by officials in the DoE because it was non-political cooperation.⁴¹⁵ The trilateral relationship between the ENGOs, the DOE, and think tanks, though occasional, led to several environmental policies that were approved by the Cabinet, including the introduction of environmental courses in the high-school curriculum, establishment of environmental university degrees, and the creation of 20 research centres across the country (Ebtekar, 2009, p. 292).

Therefore, over the reformist period, the relationships between ENGOs and the government grew, though with a different frequency between different sets of actors. The DoE was close and more cooperative towards protectionist ENGOs, which helped the protection discourse prevail in policy communication. Nonetheless, the issue network was extensive and receptive to new relationships due to the positive attitudes and open access points in the state. There was no significant intervention from security institutions in this network of relationship.

3.4. The Agency of ENGOs in the Issue Network

In the reformist period, the policies of the Cabinet and the DoE promoted environmentalism, which provided an opportunity for the rise of various critical ENGOs. Within the environmental issue network, the political support of the Cabinet and environmental cooperation of the DoE expanded the capacities of ENGOs in terms of criticising government's projects and policies and demanding change. Also, ENGOs had institutional access to policy centres and the assessment systems of policies.

The emergence of reformist and critical mass media provided ENGOs with more opportunities for engaging public opinion with environmental issues and making arguments in public.

⁴¹³ Interview: 2015

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

However, in practice, the climate was better provided for making arguments about environmental issues that were simpler and more observable to ordinary people, such as air pollution. At the same time, owing to the disconnection and pessimism between ENGOs and political parties, environmental activists had insecure access to MPs and ministers through partisans. Moreover, towards the end of the second term, the security hurdles gradually tightened the public spheres for ENGOs.

4. The Conservative Period: Towards a Policy Community

Similar to Khatami in 1997, Ahmadinejad expressed no apparent interest in environmentalism during the 2005 presidential campaign.⁴¹⁶ Nevertheless, during his era, the national environmental issue network became a subject of conservatives' policy and, therefore, changed in structure.

4.1. The Composition of the Policy Community

State Actors: From his first year in power, Ahmadinejad started the process of manipulating the composition of the environmental issue network through his appointments to the DoE. For the first term (2005-2009), he picked Fatemeh Javadi, a university lecturer with a religious profile, to head the organisation. This appointment had several political implications with fewer environmental aspects. Because the reformist government linked the environmentalism with women's rights in the person of Masoumeh Ebtekar, Ahmadinejad tended to continue this linkage by appointing another woman to the DoE (Doyle & Simpson, 2006). An ENGO president claimed that 'he tended to show off the appointment of a female to his Cabinet, albeit in a politically insignificant domain. The DoE was the best choice for him to fulfil this purpose'.⁴¹⁷ However, Fatemeh Javadi herself said: 'My appointment was due to Ahmadinejad's trust in me and friendship with my family'.⁴¹⁸ Whilst she had no political profile, her uncle, Ayatollah Javadi,

⁴¹⁶ Deutsche Welle website, June 2009, available at: <http://p.dw.com/p/l4jv>

⁴¹⁷ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴¹⁸ Fararu Website, September 2009, available at: <https://fararu.com/fa/news/30354>

was an outstanding conservative magistrate. A political activist said: ‘This appointment was a message of loyalty from Ahmadinejad to conservative Mullahs’.⁴¹⁹

From day one, Javadi’s appointment provoked negative reactions from clusters of protectionist ENGOs and reformist mass media in Tehran. Unexpectedly, even the conservative Cabinet ministers did not express recognition of the DOE. In one instance, the Cabinet spokesman, Gholamhosein Elham, during a press conference ridiculed Fatemeh Javadi by saying: ‘She is not an environmental expert so do not expect much from her and do not mind her opinions’.⁴²⁰ These reactions downgraded the DoE and damaged its profile in civil society.

The profile of the DoE continued to decline during the second conservative term. Ahmadinejad replaced Fatemeh Javadi with Javad Muhammadizadeh (2009-2013), the former conservative Governor-General of Khorasan, the second most religious province in Iran. Although he had a PhD degree in Environmental Health, his background was anti-environment as he had granted multiple permissions to environment-unfriendly projects during his time as the Governor-General (2005-2009).⁴²¹ Moreover, he had no active connection with ENGOs. This appointment signalled the end of the protectionist profile of the DoE.⁴²²

Despite the decline in the political, environmental, and public profile of the DoE, the government increased its annual revenue and organisation, thanks to the drastic growth in the oil revenue during the conservative period.⁴²³ The size of the personnel also grew especially during Javad Muhammadizadeh’s tenure as the DoE employed more than 10,000 personnel—including civil servants, experts, and foresters.⁴²⁴ Although this was a part of the plan of recruiting loyalists to the executive offices as some of the hired people were ‘conservative partisans or family members of the conservative figures’, for example, Fatemeh Javadi recruited

⁴¹⁹ Interview: 2015

⁴²⁰ Etemaad Newspaper, 2nd June 2009, page 8, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=1872693>

⁴²¹ Khabaronline website, ‘Cold Welcome for the New Head of the DOE’, August 2009, available at: <https://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/16200/society/environment>

⁴²² Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴²³ Fararu website, April 2014, available at: <https://fararu.com/fa/news/150171>

⁴²⁴ Tasnim website, October 2013, available at: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1392/05/13/110643>

her husband to the DoE as her Senior Advisor.⁴²⁵ Thus, this expansion in the organisation did not add up its technical resources.⁴²⁶

Along with the DoE, the environmental profile of the Parliament decreased drastically. During the term of the 7th Parliament (2003-2007), the reformist camp had only 58 seats; thus, in the Committee for Environment, conservative MPs took over the majority of the seats. Nonetheless, Alireza Tabesh, the then reformist Head managed to remain in the position until 2008. However, during the 8th term (2007-2011), along with a drop in the number of reformist MPs to 29, conservatives took over the majority of the Commission's seats and its leadership.⁴²⁷ As well as this Committee, the members of the Commission for Agriculture and Water Resources, were politicians with the conservative and technocratic background, with some also having a security profile, thus, 'no association with environmentalism'.⁴²⁸

Across this period, the security institutions and paramilitary forces increased their influence which changed the balance of member actors of the policy network. The Ministry of Intelligence, with Gholamhosein Mohseni, a radical conservative Mullah at its head, extended its security measures versus NGOs, including in the environmental domain.⁴²⁹ In parallel, the IRGC expanded its Engineering and Construction unit in such a way that, over time, this paramilitary force got involved in big projects, including constructing dams, roads, and buildings across the country (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, pp. 58-60). This development, besides its politicised profile, engaged this force with the environmental policy network, especially with ENGOs and the DoE (Mehrabpour, 2013).

Civil Society Actors: ENGOs experienced several changes, intended or unintended, in their status, which were influenced by shifts in the DoE's policies. From 2005, Fatemeh Javadi, the conservative Head of the DoE, reduced and later ceased its financial and administrative support of ENGOs with members directly affiliated with reformist camp. The majority of ENGOs were not involved as they were deemed non-political.⁴³⁰ This policy disappointed critical ENGOs and also created maintenance problems for governmentally funded ENGOs, which were mostly

⁴²⁵ Rooonline website, February 2009, available at:

<http://www.rooonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/article/-4ccd449c01.html>

⁴²⁶ Interview: ENGO activist, 2015

⁴²⁷ Jamejam website, 16th March 2008, available at:

<http://www1.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100933359144>

⁴²⁸ Interview: former MP, 2015

⁴²⁹ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

professional ones cooperating with the DoE.⁴³¹ Furthermore, by tightening and delaying the administrative processes of registration of new NGOs, the pace of the growth of ENGOS declined. This was because many of the submitted requests belonged to the opposition and reformist activists, which eventually faced rejection or extra security checks such as fingerprinting.⁴³² Thus, opposition ENGOS, whether political or environmental, gradually became isolated and were pushed out of the policy network. In parallel, ENGOS allied with Fatemeh Javadi's religious discourse and those with executive functions, such as The Sweepers of Nature, were officially registered with privileges 'as an effort to keep the official statistics about the number of ENGOS high'.⁴³³ However, despite the government's intention, the shifts above led to a decline in the volume of active ENGOS to approximately half, i.e. about 300 NGOs, although the conservative-led DoE never published the formal records.⁴³⁴

The political parties in the environmental domain experienced different circumstances across the two conservative terms. Until 2009, they sustained their environmental wings and sporadic activities.⁴³⁵ However, the Ministry of Interior, as part of its agenda of securitising the politics, revoked the licence of leading reformist parties such as the Participation Front, which also meant the revocation of the active environmental wing.⁴³⁶ The situation was different to media during in the first term of the conservatives, as more than 30 environmental websites, periodicals and newspaper were registered, whilst at the same time, more than 100 environmental activists created weblogs.⁴³⁷ It sustained the social vibrancy within the policy network. After 2009, however, influenced by the political domains, the environmental mass media, as well as opponents' press and websites, decreased in number and volume, which meant they either had to stop their activities or face closure from the Ministry of Culture.⁴³⁸

Therefore, over the conservative period, due to the stricter policies from above, the size of the policy network decreased. These shifts also targeted the composition of the policy network as the governmental resources and support directed the cluster of ENGOS, media, and political parties with conservative affiliation and religious profiles. As a result, a consistent and less diverse policy community was formed.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Etemaad newspaper, 2015 new-year special issue, March 2015, pages 194 to 197

⁴³⁵ Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Interview: journalist, 2015

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

4.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Policy Community

Discourse: During the conservative period, Ayatollah Khamenei continued his Islamic-humanitarian discourse articulating the same rhetorical mandate: 'All policies and plans must adhere to the environmental principles'.⁴³⁹ However, this time, his political rhetoric came into conflict with his environmental rhetoric and dominated it, since, corresponding with Ahmadinejad's social justice discourse, Ayatollah Khamenei upgraded the construction and social justice component in his discourse, which was at the expense of the environment.⁴⁴⁰

Whilst, in its first year, the conservative Cabinet rhetorically published a special statement concerning environmental plans and concerns, the political manifesto of the government deliberately excluded sustainable development and its sub-domains, including environmental protection, since they deemed it insignificant (Nili, 2009).⁴⁴¹ Thus in practice, 'the President's real incentive was construction and development projects'. Ahmadinejad, in his rhetoric, also reduced environmentalism to 'protecting and growing green spaces'.⁴⁴² Concerning environmental participation, the Executive articulated its justice and development discourse in a way that excluded the ENGOs and defined them as political intruders or technical hurdles. For instance, Parviz Davoodi, the conservative Vice-President, in environmental speech, labelled vocal ENGOs and their concerns as 'voices of the Western enemies' (Nili, 2009).⁴⁴³

Consistent with the approach above, the DoE synchronised its discourse in three aspects: (i) ideologically Islamic; (ii) politically exclusive; and (iii) technically conformist. In terms of ideology, during Fatemeh Javadi's tenure, the DoE started to articulate Islamic narratives in relation to the environment, which was sustained during Javad Muhammadizadeh's term too, for example, he referred to the Prophet Muhammad's advice recommending that 'even in wartime, Muslim armies must take care of plants on the battleground'.⁴⁴⁴ This discourse Islamicised and simplified the formal discourse of environmental protection. Regarding the political approach, the DoE's senior officials expressed an explicitly negative view concerning ENGOs, as 'whatever has been left to us from the reformist period, including ENGOs, must be pushed away from the DoE'.

⁴³⁹ Mashregh website, March 2014, available at: <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/290868>

⁴⁴⁰ Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Ahmadinejad's personal website, March 2012, available at: www.ahmadinejad.ir

⁴⁴³ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁴⁴ Islamic Free University website, March 2012, available at: <http://srbiau.ac.ir/fa/news/144>

Moreover, concerning its technical functions, the DOE shifted from the vanguard to the conformist position in relation to the position of Cabinet and technocrat ministers. The first Heads of the DOE, Fatemeh Javadi, welcomed construction projects and said: 'We have no further criticism of the Ministry of Oil', meaning that the former duality in the state level, protection versus exploitation, was over with the DoE abandoning its protectionist discourse.⁴⁴⁵ Regarding this repositioning, a critical environmental journalist used the irony of 'the department for environmental destruction' to criticise the DOE under Fatemeh Javadi's leadership.⁴⁴⁶

The exploitation discourse resonated in the Parliament too. The Conservative MPs, 'sought to pave the way for the developmental projects of the conservative Cabinet', an ENGO president stated.⁴⁴⁷ The Commission for Agriculture and Water Resources, as the higher legislative authority, did not express tolerance to the professional functions of the DoE. For example, in 2013, some technocratic MPs in this Commission crafted and forwarded the bill for abolishing the DOE and merging it, as a sub-unit within the Ministry of Agriculture.⁴⁴⁸ Concerning this, an ENGO president said: 'MPs' compiled their views in environmental areas with the interests of greedy large cartels and companies'.⁴⁴⁹ Also, concerning their conservative ideology, they negated the involvement of ENGOs in their conversations.

In response to the exploitation discourses of the Executive and Parliament, 'whilst the minority of conservative ENGOs passively respected their political and financial dependence on the state; the protectionist and reformist ENGOs sustained their critical rhetoric'.⁴⁵⁰ The first actual confrontation between the protectionist and exploitative discourses occurred after Fatemeh Javadi took office:

In 2006, the DOE issued a permit *to* hold an Italian circus in the Pardisan Park in Tehran. The venue was right in front of the DOE's central building. In that circus, organisers were allowed to exploit animals as part of their show. The permission faced instant criticism from ENGOs, accusing the DoE of renegeing on one of its

⁴⁴⁵ Khabaronline website, 'Cold Welcome for the New Head of the DOE', Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Roozonline website, February 2009, available at:

<http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/article/-4ccd449c01.html>

⁴⁴⁷ Interview: former MP, 2015

⁴⁴⁸ Mehr website, February 2013, available at: www.mehrnews.com/news/2224257

⁴⁴⁹ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

primary missions, i.e. protecting animals' welfare. However, Fatemeh Javadi's office did not bother to react. Therefore, the event was held.⁴⁵¹

In addition to indicating its acquiescence to the Cabinet's exploitative stance, the case above revealed the reluctance of the conservative-led DoE to listen to critical ENGOs.

In this climate, reformist and protectionist ENGOs purposefully limited the range of their demands to more significant environmental issues in public conversations, e.g. air-pollution and forest destruction, which also had more popularity. ENGOs deployed this tactic because 'they wanted to increase the chance of success by centring their pressure on fewer demands'.⁴⁵² Alongside ENGOs, reformist political parties' environmental wings criticised the more significant policies and projects such as the abolition of the DoE organisation. Conservative parties defended the government's policies with the logic that some environmental investments 'burden extra costs on the government, which instead could be invested for lower classes'.⁴⁵³ However, 'the partisans' political struggles did not warp the mainstream environmental conversations that were taking place between protectionist vs exploitative streams'.⁴⁵⁴

National newspapers, websites and weblogs—especially the critical ones—made a major contribution to public debates on anti-environmental policies. For instance, in the earlier-mentioned case of Parliament's bill for abolishing the DoE, the pressure of the mass media, along with the public actions of ENGOs, convinced the conservative MPs to reject the bill.⁴⁵⁵ Also, in another example, because of the pressures of the opposition ENGOs through reformist media, usually websites, against the IRGC's military manoeuvres in natural zones, the commanders of the IRGC stepped back by issuing a decree stopping future military manoeuvres from 2006 (Figure 9.4) (Mehrabpour, 2013). However, the critical debates and protectionist arguments in the policy domain, since 2009, became restricted due to the securitisation and the interventionism of the IRGC.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² Interview: journalist, 2015

⁴⁵³ Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

⁴⁵⁴ Interview: ENGO member, 2015

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*



Figure 9.4. The military manoeuvres of the IRGC caused fires in Kurdistan province/ photo credit: CH1 website

Rules and Practices: The DoE triggered the process of re-adjusting the institutional aspect of the policy network by manipulating its structure. Fatemeh Javadi abolished the Bureau for Public Participation and subsequently abandoned the seat for ENGOS' delegate in sub-committees of her office in the first term of the conservative period.⁴⁵⁷ These two changes closed the main access point on ENGOS. Also, the organisation extended the terms and conditions for obtaining a license for establishing an ENGO in several ways, such as increasing the number of security clearances, whilst similar security clearances were required for organising meetings and speeches in public spaces.⁴⁵⁸ This practice restricted the rise and actions of ENGOS and impeded the growth of the policy network.

Moreover, the Cabinet adjusted its environmental practices according to its exploitative stance. Ahmadinejad, in his first term, initiated the change by abolishing the High Council for the Environment.⁴⁵⁹ As an environmental scholar said, this was because the conservative President saw this council as intruding in his developmental plans.⁴⁶⁰ This approach reverberated in the lower levels, with the DoE's abandonment of expert sub-committees, e.g. Air Pollution Committee, which was responsible for creating sectoral regulations. An ENGO activist referred to these changes as 'the project of clearing the road for anti-environment development'.⁴⁶¹

In parallel, the DoE relaxed the procedure of obtaining environmental clearance for development and construction for state-funded and private companies, even in sensitive areas such as coastlines, forest zones and river margins (Nili, 2009). This action notably led to the consent of the DoE for the Cabinet's controversial projects such as constructing the National

⁴⁵⁷ Etemaad newspaper, 2015 new-year special issue, Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁵⁹ Deutsche Welle website, August 2013, Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

Petrochemical Station in the northern regions' protected zones.⁴⁶² Even the technical complaints and dissatisfaction of the expert in administrative units in the DoE did not stop this.⁴⁶³

The conservative-led Parliament facilitated the progress of the Cabinet's development plans. In the Fifth Development Plan, MPs increased the measures of environmental assessment but 'the articles became obscure and created space for evasion' (Aslipur & Sharifzadeh, 2015, p. 257). As for the role of ENGOs, the conservative Parliament reduced the articles in number and, besides that, regarding approach, generally alluded to the phrases such as 'public actions for protecting nature'.

With the mentioned developments, the IRGC increased its economic and developmental projects such as dam-building, as well as military actions such as marine and ground manoeuvres, which came with environmental footprints like setting forests and pastures on fire, cutting down trees and releasing chemical and petrol waste into rivers (Thaler *et al.*, 2010; Mehrabpour, 2013). This became a frequent practice over time and since it was a result of securitised politics, 'the cost for challenging it escalated for critical ENGOs'.⁴⁶⁴

Therefore, during the conservative period, the prevailing discourse of the policy network provided for exploitation and utilisation of the environment, with the Cabinet, Parliament and security forces being consistent in their approach and the DoE accompanying them. This came with the abandonment of official access points and the closure of venues for evaluating and pressuring policymakers. As a result, the environmental policy community became resistant to competing actors and discourses.

4.3. The Relational Aspect of the Policy Community

The amendments in the formal procedures and rules paved the way for change in the arrangement of relationships. Ahmadinejad's abolition of the High Council for Environment broke the ENGOs' link with the Cabinet and the President, as well as their minimum connection to Islamic and security institutions, e.g. the Judiciary.⁴⁶⁵ With this channel blocked, the President

⁴⁶² Interview: journalist, 2015

⁴⁶³ Hossein Nik-Khah, the reformist advisor to the DOE, *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Interview: ENGO member, 2015

⁴⁶⁵ Deutsche Welle website, August 2013, *Ibid.*

and ministers finalised and implemented several developmental projects and policies without facing further pressure from ENGOs. The most notable example of this was the case of Maskan-Mehr (House of Generosity):

In 2006, the Cabinet passed, and the Parliament approved, the Maskan-Mehr project that aimed at building 4 million residential apartments in suburbs of major cities across the country, e.g. Tehran and Isfahan.⁴⁶⁶ For the Cabinet and Ahmadinejad, this policy was critical to maintaining the policy of housing for poor classes within their justice for poor slogan framework. In Tehran, through the process of identifying the location for buildings, the Ministry of Road Construction and Transformation selected Pardis Zone, on the northeast of the city (Figure 9.5).⁴⁶⁷ Critical ENGOs objected to it because of the potential dangers to wildlife and animal species in that mountainous area. Due to the disconnection with the state cabinet, critical ENGOs raised their criticisms about this issue through reformist newspapers and websites which captured the public opinion. In response to these criticisms, Ahmadinejad reluctantly arranged an aerial survey on the location, yet, he insisted on the same location and ordered his Minister to start the project, regardless of the environmental concerns.⁴⁶⁸



Figure 9.5. Maskane-Mehr was built on the heights of Pardis zone, Tehran/ photo credit: Mehr website

⁴⁶⁶ BBC website, April 2014, Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Maskan-Mehr project's website, available at: <http://www.kuzugrup.com/en/maskan-mehr-project>

⁴⁶⁸ Interview: ENGO member, 2015

Moreover, the DoE, from the first days of Fatemeh Javadi in office, changed the attitude and pattern of relationships with ENGOs, upholding her Islamic discourse. Loyal ENGOs that had conservative members on board promoting their religious conformist stance on the environment were given convenient and frequent access to the office and subcommittees. This development took place whilst critical ENGOs with protectionist profile were ignored and blocked by officials.⁴⁶⁹ From 2006, 'the Security Unit of the DoE even physically restrained the critical protectionist ENGOs from entering the central building', an ENGO member claimed.⁴⁷⁰ Also, the organisation expressed reluctance towards the environmental research institutes and independent think-thanks, 'because of not believing in their universal standards'.⁴⁷¹

Another development was that the DoE also increased its interaction with the IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence, on the one hand, and the Judiciary, i.e. the Court for Environment, on the other hand.⁴⁷² As a result, their security restrictions extended to ENGOs, for example, 'all ENGOs were banned from any contact with, or receiving funds from, international organisations and NGOs, e.g. the UN'.⁴⁷³

During the second term of the conservatives, the IRGC increased confrontational relationships with ENGOs, as well as more suppressions of their public contestation, especially street demonstrations. The intensity of suppressions depended on several factors, including the size of demonstration; proximity to the capital; the significance of the policy issue; and the targeted interest or policy.⁴⁷⁴ For example, in 2005 the Cabinet planned to 'construct inter-provincial roads through northern forests—notably in Semnan province'. This plan stimulated multiple strikes and demonstrations of ENGOs in that province during 2005–2008 without any intervention. Simultaneously in Tehran, the protests of ENGOs against the construction of drug rehabilitation camps in neighbourhood parks were cracked down by the Police.⁴⁷⁵ The earlier was far from the capital and unobservable to people, whilst conservative institutions were not involved in the project; in the latter, the case was in Tehran, and Mayor Bagher Qalibaf was implementing the project, who was a radical conservative and a former IRGC commander. Despite these undemocratic consequences, the close relationship between the DoE and the

⁴⁶⁹ Interview: journalist, 2015

⁴⁷⁰ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁷¹ Interview: scholar, 2015

⁴⁷² Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

Judicial and security forces led to some constructive environmental actions too. For instance, in 2013, through an agreement, the DoE and the Special Court for Environment introduced more legal fines on illegal hunting.⁴⁷⁶

Within this policy community, conservative MPs had cooperative relationships with the DoE and the Cabinet, as well as political parties and companies, whilst they were unwilling to accept relationships with ENGOs.⁴⁷⁷ The close relationships of MPs with companies and cartels, within the policy community, had some policy results such as changing the official designation of natural land to commercial ones for economic projects.⁴⁷⁸ As noted by an ENGO president: ‘conservative MPs and the Committee opened the doors of their office when we had the support of public opinion with us, such as in the area of air pollution in Tehran which was always a significant issue’.⁴⁷⁹ This trend can be seen in the example below:

In 2013, in response to ENGOs pressures on media, the Committee for Environment drafted a legislative bill that would oblige all state companies to take technical consent from the DOE beforehand any construction and projects. Whilst the bill was welcomed and supported widely in the reformist websites and newspapers, in the General Session of the Parliament, conservative MPs took an opposition stance and rejected it. The rejection of the bill, according to ENGOs, was because of the support of reformist figures and media, such as Masoumeh Ebtekar, the reformist Head of the DoE for the bill, as well as the close relationships of MPs with large companies and conservative parties.’

The example above implies that the policy community was politically resistant to political competitors’ pressures—even if the controversy was entirely technical.

Whilst the government consolidated the network of relationships in the policy community, critical ENGOs extended their joint networks and organised more public action.⁴⁸⁰ These actions were tolerated by the core of the policy community as long as it was moderate and insignificant.

⁴⁷⁶ Tabnak website, March 2013, available at: <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/306792>

⁴⁷⁷ Interview: ENGO president, 2015

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

The Urmia Lake in the northwest of Iran, which experienced severe drought and became a national crisis from 2000, provides an example:⁴⁸¹

In 2011, the national ENGO Network issued a public statement warning about the consequences of Urmia Lake's environmental crisis. Also, more than 600 civil activists signed an open letter to President Ahmadinejad. The letter requested new measures to revive and protect the Lake. However, the government completely ignored these requests. In response, a group of ENGOs held protests near the Lake (Figure 9.6). The government, through the close cooperation of the Ministry of Intelligence and IRGC, perceived the gathering as a political threat and deployed the Police to suppress the demonstration and prevent further actions.⁴⁸²



Figure 9.6. The protest of environmental activists and NGOs near Urmia Lake, Northwest Iran/
photo credit: Green Messenger website

The critical ENGOs had to develop their relationships with journalists and media in order to sustain their influence over the policy community despite having a small chance of success. A case of cooperation between them occurred regarding the national project of constructing

⁴⁸¹ BBC Persian website, October 2011, available at:
http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2011/08/110827_178_orumieh_lake.shtml

⁴⁸² Kaleme website, August 2011, available at: <http://www.kaleme.com/1390/06/05/klm-70935/>

roads through the Abr Forest; an old and rich forest also enlisted as part of the National Heritage.⁴⁸³

In 2005, Ahmadinejad's Cabinet, during a provincial trip to northern regions, floated the idea of constructing a road cutting through the Abr Forest in order to shorten the distance between two provinces in the Northeast of Iran⁴⁸⁴. In 2006, the plan was compiled and finalised by the Ministry of Road Construction and Transformation. In public it was advertised and justified as a welfare and justice project. However, from the beginning, it became controversial due to its potential harms to the plants and animal species present in the forest. Despite ENGO criticism, the DoE issued the environmental clearance of the project, claiming that no tree will be cut down for this road, which sounded implausible to ENGOs. For over ten years, during the processes of preparation and implementation, ENGO activists and journalists kept this issue in the first pages of the national newspapers, .e.g. Etemaad, and on popular websites.⁴⁸⁵ Also, several demonstrations were held on the forest road (Figure 9.7). Nonetheless, the project started and continued, until the following government, Rouhani's, cancelled it in response to ENGOs' concerns.⁴⁸⁶



Figure 9.7. Protests of the environmental activists in Abr Forest/ Photo credit: Mehr website

⁴⁸³ IRNA website, August 2015, available at: <https://www3.irna.ir/fa/News/82216945/>

⁴⁸⁴ Mehr website, September 2013, available at: mehrnews.com/news/2159074

⁴⁸⁵ Interview: journalist, 2015

⁴⁸⁶ Asriran website, June 2012, available at: <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/220520>

Concerning the case above, the editor of the Iranian environmental news agency in 2012 revealed that the reason why ENGOs and public protests did not succeed in their campaigning was the strong lobbying behind the policies, referring to the close relationships between construction companies, cartels, the DoE, and conservative MPs.

In the second conservative term, 'the rise of social media and weblogs increased the opportunity of making virtual contacts between ENGOs and policymakers', but it was not a guarantee of influence until it had public support in the real world.⁴⁸⁷ Moreover, it reduced the organisational activities and subsequently the presence of ENGOs on streets.⁴⁸⁸

In compensation to this loss, critical ENGOs approached political parties since environmental activists required partisans to transmit their pressure to the policy community, especially MPs, whilst reformist parties perceived ENGOs as their shelter of activism and organisation.⁴⁸⁹ 'Environmental activism was not a major target of frequent security pressures compared to political activism. As a result, some critical partisans moved to ENGOs, especially after 2009', a political activist said.⁴⁹⁰ This move, in practice, provided some ENGOs with the opportunity to hold political events under environmental pretexts, with a journalist observing 'environmental workshops that in reality were diverted to political meetings for members of reformist parties'.⁴⁹¹ During the same period, conservative parties had a low level of interest to engage with this domain.

Therefore, over the conservative period, by engineering relationships, the Cabinet and the DoE formed a resistant and consistent policy community with the inclusion of allied ENGOs, albeit in a top-down way. This policy community, whilst inaccessible and impervious for outsiders, spread its spectre of authority over the whole domain, thanks to the cooperation between the IRGC and security forces. Thus, it synchronised the policy approach and the climate of the domain.

⁴⁸⁷ Interview: journalist, 2015

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Interview: member of reformist party, 2015

⁴⁹⁰ Interview: 2015

⁴⁹¹ Interview: journalist, 2015

4.4. The Agency of ENGOs in the Policy Community

During the conservative period, along with the decline in the profile of the domain, the official access points, as well as the decision-making, were closed to protectionist ENGOs, so they lost the opportunity to get their demands transferred and heard in the organisation. Conservative ENGOs, however, were obedient and included in the projects of the DOE and supported Cabinet policies.

Moreover, by limiting governmental support as well as hardening the official and security procedures, establishing a new ENGO became difficult for critical actors, though it remained possible. Furthermore, by imposing the exploitation discourse, the government reduced the scope of the protection discourse and isolated it. In the public sphere, despite various degrees of securitisation, developing critiques, as well as objecting to policies through events and meetings, or through the use of national newspapers and online press, was possible and tolerated in general. However, depending on the significance of the objected policy or issue there was always a chance of suppression from the government.

5. Conclusion

Khatami's political reform was incorporated into the domain by Masoumeh Ebtekar's DoE, which facilitated the rise of hundreds of critical ENGOs, alongside mass media and political parties. This formed a vast diverse issue network. This issue network was consistent in terms of the protection discourse. Nonetheless, the technocratic ministers and organisations maintained their exploitation discourse. Simultaneous with the growth of the issue network, access points were established in the state apparatus, which made the issue network competitive and extended the relationship between ENGOs and state. However, the accumulation of relationships was unequal, as the DoE was closer to allied ENGOs, whilst the Parliament and the Cabinet were less amenable to frequent contacts with them. The DoE had a central position and accordingly mediated the relationships between governmental and non-governmental actors, including security and Islamic institutions, in order to promote environmentalism. Furthermore, due to the political strategy of the reformist State, the climate within the policy network was often open to competition and participation of critical actors.

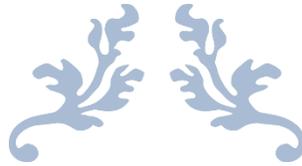
The developmental approach and exclusive attitudes of the conservative Cabinet and Parliament reversed the structure of the issue network during 2005–2013. The religious approach of the DoE not only reduced the authority of this organisation but instead of allying with the protectionist ENGOS, made DOE reposition itself closer to the Cabinet. This attitude increased during the second term. As a result, there was a drop in the number of ENGOS and consequent reduction in the size of the policy network.

Whilst a smaller number of protectionist ENGOS were still active, the conservative government pushed them outside of the policy community. Therefore, the DOE dropped its resistance to development projects and prepared the ground for exploitation. The official access points and mechanisms of interaction between ENGOS and policymakers were also closed to opposition ENGOS. Furthermore, the close relationship of the DoE with the IRGC and the alliance of conformist ENGOS media made the policy community resistant to external pressures.

The table below demonstrates the trajectory of the policy network across the periods. Although the theoretical framework expected the degree of structural changes in the environmental policy network to be lower, the trajectory shows large changes:

Table 9.1. The trajectory and features of national environmental policy network across 1997–2013

Period	Structure	Climate	Policymaking style
Reformists	Issue network	Competitive	Integrative
Conservatives	Policy community	Consistent	Exclusive



CHAPTER TEN

**PROVINCIAL POLICY
NETWORKS IN THE
ENVIRONMENTAL DOMAIN**



1. A Province with a Rich Nature

'Instead of comparing ourselves to European NGOs, if we compared our ENGOs with those a few decades ago, we would see significant achievements.'

— A Golestani journalist, 2014

The previous chapter demonstrated how, in the national environmental domain, which in theory was defined as being non-political, the structure of policy network shifted over time, as a result of the policies of the reformist and conservative states, and therefore changed the scope of ENGOs. In Golestan, environmental issues have regularly been amongst the most discussed issues in the media.⁴⁹² National and international experts regard Golestan Province as a distinguished region concerning its diverse ecosystem with valueable species of animal and plant (Figure 10.1).⁴⁹³ Several factors have threatened the Golestani environment including the government's developmental projects, rapidly growing in the agricultural economy, the establishment of industrial parks, petrochemical plants and power stations,⁴⁹⁴ illegal construction, and wood-smuggling and lumber-jacking.⁴⁹⁵

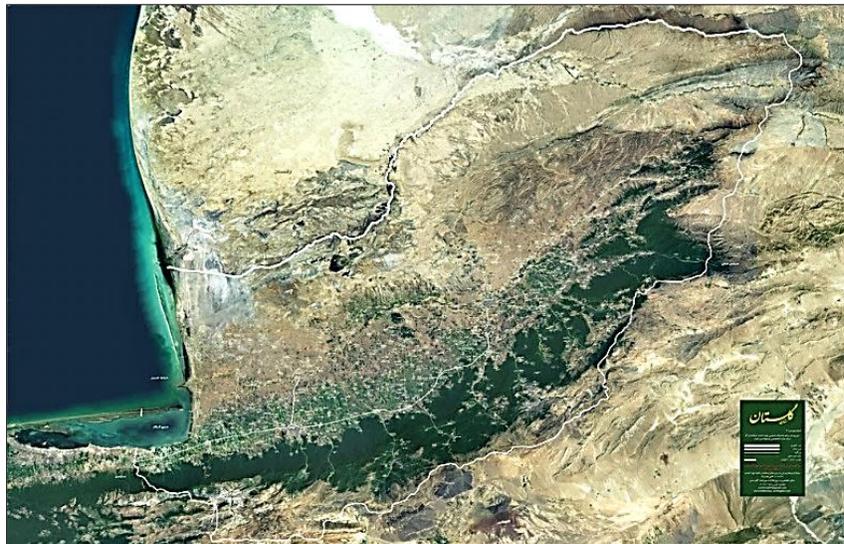


Figure 10.1. The Caspian Sea and green mountains of Alborz, as well as deserts, make the ecosystem in Golestan/ image credit: Kahkeshan website

⁴⁹² Interview: journalist, 2014

⁴⁹³ Mehr website, April 2015, available at: <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2295834>

⁴⁹⁴ The website of Governor-General's Office, March 2015, available at: <http://golestanp.ir/moarefi-ostan/>

⁴⁹⁵ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

Golestan's civil society has often monitored these threats and organised volunteer activities to protect its nature.⁴⁹⁶ However, these efforts remained unsophisticated, unorganised, and sporadic until the second half of the 1990s. From that time, formal environmentalist groups emerged. This chapter will discuss the rise of the environmental policy network as a result of the rise of ENGOs during the reformist era and trace changes in its structure during the conservative period, which in opposition to the theoretical expectation, were large. It will compare the status and scope of ENGOs across these periods too.

2. The Reformist Period: the Rise of an Issue Network

After the 1997 presidential elections, when the reformist camp took office in Golestan, their agenda was focused on social and political development. Nevertheless, their policies gradually caused several shifts in the environmental arena, which formed a small but vibrant issue network across the eight years.

2.1. The Composition of the Issue Network

State Actors: The Office of Governor-General, together with the Office of Director-General for Environment (DGE), led the environmental policymaking. Across the first reformist term, 1997–2002, the province was ruled by two Governor-Generals, Ebrahim Derazgisu (1997–2001) and Aliasghar Ahmadi (2001–2002); the former had a diplomatic profile whilst the latter was a former IRGC commander, though both could also be regarded as technocrats. They handpicked senior officials and deputies from the pool of reformist bureaucrats and technocrats. Since the central government assigned them with the mission of developing the local government organisations, 'they emphasised wholly on economic development and considered the Office of DGE, a luxury'.⁴⁹⁷ Therefore, in practice, they both maintained minimal finances, facilities, and personnel for this office.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁶ The personal weblog of Sadeghian, the environmental scholar, retrieved on July 2018, available at: <http://sadeghijahan.blogfa.com/post/9>

⁴⁹⁷ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁴⁹⁸ Interview: Mojtaba Hosseini, the former Deputy DGE, 2014

Ebrahim Derazgisu, the first Governor-General in the reformist period, appointed Esmael Mohajer (1997–2005) to the Office of DGE, who was a partisan affiliated with the Islamic Union—the traditional reformist party in Golestan. In parallel with his political profile; he was a university lecturer in Natural Resources. Thus, this appointment had both technical and political aspects. However, an ENGO activist noted: ‘Esmael Mohajer had no established connections with NGOs before his appointment’.⁴⁹⁹ Whereas the reformist Cabinet and DoE in the capital chose participative and conservative environmentalism as their main strategy in this domain until 2001, in Golestan, the vibrancy and profile of the Office of DGE did not grow considerably.⁵⁰⁰

From 2002 to 2005, the then Governor-General Hashem Mohimani, affiliated with Participation Front, a radical reformist party, ‘although had no environmental background’, upgraded the environmental and political profile of the Office of Governor-General alongside.⁵⁰¹ He renewed Esmael Mohajer as the DGE but assigned him with a participatory blueprint for the new period. Also, Mohimani increased the budget, organisation and personnel of the Office of DGE, according to the reformist Deputy DGE.⁵⁰² The Governor-General also established the Environmental Council in his Office. This Council had most of the senior officials as members whilst the then Director-General Esmael Mohajer was granted a wide range of authority and discretion over other members within it, such as managing the meetings and the right to veto.⁵⁰³ These changes elevated the position of the Office of DGE despite ‘technocratic officials and bureaucrats having limited enthusiasm for the environment’.⁵⁰⁴

Golestan’s MPs in the 6th term of Parliament were traditional reformists generally interested in civil society as it was the core discourse of the then government but ‘none of them had environmental knowledge or profile’, a journalist said.⁵⁰⁵ Nevertheless, concerning the environmental profile of the province, in practice, ‘they had to maintain a minimum environmentalist profile in order to maintain their political prestige’.⁵⁰⁶

⁴⁹⁹ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Mojtaba Hoseini, Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Interview: former governor, 2014

⁵⁰⁵ Interview: 2014

⁵⁰⁶ Interview: journalist, 2014

From the Islamic institutions, Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader (1979–present), had a more active status in this domain.⁵⁰⁷ Initially, he was not willing to play an active role but from 2000 onwards, corresponding with the rise of environmentalism in the government and concerning unexpected natural disasters, e.g. floods during 2000–2002, he made an environmental profile. However, from many years before the reformist period, he and some senior officials in his Office had been involved in different industrial projects, such as the Chipboard Company, which was controversial in public due to its ecological footprint.⁵⁰⁸

Civil Society Actors: local ENGOs began to bloom from 1997—consistent with the government’s enthusiasm and national mood. This growth in the first reformist term, i.e. 2001, was slower due to the less attention paid by the first two technocratic Governor-Generals, and that of Esmaeel Mohajer, the then DGE. However, during the second term, the political enthusiasm and financial support of the Office of Governor-General for ENGOs increased the number of registered ENGOs from three in 1997 to more than 40 in 2005.⁵⁰⁹ Golestan ‘was often ranked as a top province concerning the number and vibrancy of ENGOs’.⁵¹⁰

The composition of the emerging ENGOs was politically and socially diverse. Nonetheless, they were questionable due to their affiliation and independence. Regarding affiliation, most of the ENGOs were small groups—fewer than 20 people—comprising interested volunteers. Some of them had an overt link with government officials or their friends and family members; for instance, an ENGO activist revealed: ‘Many of the members were at the same time officials in the Office of DGE and partisans in a reformist party’.⁵¹¹ Regarding their independence, the majority of emerging ENGOs were objectively funded by the Office of Governor-General or the Office of DGE. These offices, for example, delivered seasonal donations to environmental activists, as well as material facilities, such as buildings, offices, stationery. A conservative ENGO activist criticised the growth of ENGOs as ‘artificial political project’ rather than a ‘spontaneous environmental movement’.⁵¹²

Moreover, the founders of the majority of the ENGOs were lowly skilled and knowledgeable concerning the environmental issues but ‘creating an ENGO for them was a matter of passion

⁵⁰⁷ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview: ENGO members, 2014

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Interview: 2014

and respect for the environment'.⁵¹³ An environmental journalist criticised this, stating: 'I remember that neither did they know what the environment is, nor they had an idea of NGO as a modern organisation'.⁵¹⁴ Nonetheless, many of these activists had first-hand information about the status of the local environment and wildlife across different areas due to their daily contacts with local people and access to the field.⁵¹⁵

In parallel with ENGOs, the number of newsweeklies and periodicals increased from 3 to 15 during the reformist period, with 'a few reformist newspapers establishing a specialised page or column on environmental issues'.⁵¹⁶ A journalist said that 'from 1999, on average, every week there was at least one environmental issue highlighted on the front pages of local newspapers', which meant that environment became a part of their profile.⁵¹⁷ There were a number of reasons for this: (i) the growth of ENGOs and environmentalism; (ii) the environmental profile of the province, and (iii) natural disasters during the reformist period, e.g. destructive floods between 2000 and 2002.⁵¹⁸ Also, regarding the increasing popularity of online media among the public, more than 15 websites and individual weblogs were created by environmental activists and journalists that 'were inspired by the environmental news-agencies in European countries, for example, Germany'.⁵¹⁹ However, no independent print media specialising in the environment emerged across this period. Also, the political parties and groups did not express interest in developing an environmental wing even though during the eight years their number increased from three to eight.⁵²⁰

Therefore, during the reformist period, with the push of the Office of Governor-General, coupled with the DGE, fast growth in the number of ENGOs occurred. This corresponded with the willingness of the local media, which increased the size and diversity of the policy network. As a result, a medium issue network formed gradually. The vast majority of non-state actors in this policy network were affiliated with the reformist camp, whilst the IRGC and Islamic institutions were almost absent or passive.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Interview: 2014

⁵¹⁵ Interview: ENGO member, 2014

⁵¹⁶ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Interview: former official, 2014

⁵²⁰ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

2.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Issue Network

Discourse: The reformist local government of Golestan advocated the same discourse as the central government, albeit at different paces over the period. Ebrahim Derazgisu and Aliasghar Ahmadi, the first two reformist Governor-Generals in the 1997–2002 period, maintained the minimum level of environmental rhetoric. Besides, owing to their technocratic background they did not show rhetorical interest in supporting political participation.⁵²¹ During their period, economic development was the dominant discourse of the Office. However, from 2002, the then Governor-General, Hashem Mohimani, turned this technocratic discourse towards a political one, which also advocated environmental protection more seriously.⁵²² For instance, in different speeches, he addressed ‘the necessity of intensifying judicial measures and stern actions against anti-environment projects and exploitation, especially construction’.⁵²³ In the same vein, his deputies and senior officials supported NGO activism in their formal communications.⁵²⁴ Thus, during the second term, the environmentalism rose in their official discourse.

The reformist DGE followed the same direction of discourse. Esmaeel Mohajer, the then DGE, whilst being attentive to the protection discourse during the first term, had a low contribution to public conversations in media and public events. His discourse was seen to be less critical as it did not have the serious support of the first two governor-generals.⁵²⁵ However, from 2002, he upgraded his discourse since the then Governor-General Mohimani’s rhetorical stance. Mohimani claimed that ‘he obliged the then Director-General to be more active and society-oriented’.⁵²⁶ The formal discourse was focused on the issue of illegal construction—as more significant than other issues— for example, the unauthorised apartment-buildings in Ziarat, which is a small mountainous village in the centre of Golestan Province. From 2003, the then Director-General, Mohajer, focused his public speeches and press conferences on this matter, issuing warnings and made it a top agenda in this domain.⁵²⁷ It received steady coverage by reformist newsweeklies affiliated with reformist governors. However, ‘senior officials and

⁵²¹ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Fars website, February 2003, available at: <https://www.farsnews.com/news/8311010059>

⁵²⁴ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵²⁵ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁵²⁶ Interview: 2014

⁵²⁷ Interview: journalist, 2014

technocratic managers were either unfamiliar or reluctant towards this environmental discourse', some ENGO members argued.⁵²⁸

As per reformist MPs and Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader, 'the environment was not emphasised in their terminology, and if they alluded to it, it was only for their social prestige and political credit'.⁵²⁹ Whilst Sobhan Hosseini, the then reformist MP of Gorgan (2001-2003), the capital county, claimed that MPs supported the environmentalist narratives in their public speeches, an ENGO president denied this claim. A journalist claimed that this lack of active contribution and interest of MPs was due to 'the conflict of their personal interest with environmentalism, which they could not help'.⁵³⁰ In this relation, a reformist partisan revealed, 'some MPs, and Ayatollah Noormofidi had their private apartments built in the forest near Ziarat'.⁵³¹

Whilst defining legal measures in the official discourse of the Office of Governor-General was a chance for their involvement in this domain, the security and paramilitary forces did not demonstrate an interest in environmental issues and participation.⁵³² This meant that they were absent from environmental conversations.

Alongside state actors, in civil society, the vast majority of emerging ENGOs were protectionist in rhetoric and also more critical than officials. The leading ENGOs adopted confrontational narratives, which reformist officials such as Hossein Rafati, the reformist Governor of Gorgan County (2002–2005) disagreed with. He said: 'In meetings, or on media, ENGO members were aggressive, and tended to dispute us unfairly'.⁵³³ Nonetheless, ENGOs were sometimes divided into their standpoints due to their political affiliations.⁵³⁴ For example, a journalist pointed to an ENGO named Female Environment-lovers that included women from reformist parties, such as Participation Front, which 'in many cases, their statements were determined based on their reformist stance'.⁵³⁵ However, political parties themselves—even reformist ones—were usually silent when it came to environmental issues.

⁵²⁸ Interview: 2014

⁵²⁹ Interview: 2014

⁵³⁰ Interview: 2014

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵³³ Interview: 2014

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

Journalists and media advocated the ENGO's critical voice. This discourse pushed back governors and politicians in several cases, as in the case of the Forest Exploitation Scheme of the Office of Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader. Here's an example that illustrates the point:

From the rise of the Islamic Republic, the licence to exploiting the Northern forests, including in the Golestan Province, was granted to Ayatollah Noormofidi, who was appointed as the life-long Representative of the Supreme Leader in the region. This permit and the environmental threats of the exploitation projects were condemned verbally by a few environmental activists but never had the chance to be expressed on the media due to the cost of questioning the religious legitimacy of the post of Ayatollah Noormofidi and his actions. In the 1990s, and corresponding with the shifts in the climate of the policy domain and the rise of critical ENGOs, environmentalist journalists brought this issue in the media and pressurised Ayatollah Noormofidi's Office. In reaction, in the last years of the reformist period, his Office quietly gave up the project since the public mood had turned against it, and after a few years announced it in public.⁵³⁶

Although the environmentalism and protection discourse prevailed within this domain, a journalist, nonetheless, stated: 'It was limited to observable problems such as forest-destruction; whereas more special issues that needed expert knowledge to spot, such as wildlife welfare, were neglected'.⁵³⁷

Rules and Practices: Consistent with the steady growth of the environmentalist discourse, the then reformist Governor-Generals also increased punitive and preventive practices and measures in environmental regulations, as the example below shows:

An unauthorised apartment building in forest areas, which was causing forest clearance, was a growing issue in different regions of Golestan Province. Ziarat village was an outstanding case (Figure 10.2). In 2003, in response to the campaigns waged by ENGOs in the capital city of the province, Governor-General Mohimani put the issue on the agenda of the province's Security Council, which included delegates of the Police and Intelligence Office, as well as the Head of the

⁵³⁶ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵³⁷ Interview: journalist, 2014

Judiciary. After several meetings and listening to ENGOs' concerns, the Security Council passed a strict ban on the building in the village and also ordered that the Police put checkpoints on the road towards the village in order to stop transporting construction materials. As a result, all ongoing buildings became forcefully suspended for one year.⁵³⁸



Figure 10.2. Constructions damaged the environment in Ziarat village/ photo credit: Fars website

In the centre of the province, ENGOs' pressures were more intensive than in other cities and the response of the government was also quicker.

In addition to creating regulations, the reformist governors implemented severe practices. For example, during the second reformist term by order of the then Governor-General, Mohimani, and the permission of the then Attorney-General, the Police demolished a number of unauthorised apartments in forest areas and at the margins of rivers in Gorgan, the capital county.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ interview: Hashem Mohimani, the reformist Governor-General, 2014

Moreover, the Office of Governor-General established an institutional position for ENGOs in policymaking. For example, it gave a seat to the delegate of the Golestan's ENGO Network, which was a spontaneous non-state association in the Committee for the Environment of the Office of Governor-General.⁵⁴⁰ However, when consideration centred on large development projects, governors demonstrated lesser compliance with the environmentalist approach. For example, in 2002, despite ENGOs' criticisms, the Office of Governor-General finalised the plan for building a large tourism complex in Ashuradeh Island, in west Golestan, whilst it was officially marked as a 'sensitive area'.⁵⁴¹ In such cases, the development had the potential to outweigh the environment.

In line with the reformist Governor-Generals, Esmael Mohajer, the then DGE, introduced several new practices. First, he developed regulatory procedures for obtaining environmental clearance, with the then Deputy Director-General stating: 'Over time, we purposively delayed the process and decreased the number of environmental clearances for companies'.⁵⁴² Second, with the inclusion of ENGOs from 2002, the DGE ran strict supervision programmes on the developmental projects across the province.⁵⁴³ The reformist DGE also allowed the sharing of facilities of the Office with ENGOs in order to facilitate joint environmental cooperation with them. For example, the state-owned cars were made available to ENGOs in different cities and they in return were requested to explore and report the environmental issues across the region to DGE.⁵⁴⁴ Third, the Office of DGE held training courses on environmentalism for senior officials with the collaboration of ENGOs. Moreover, in order to develop ENGOs' institutional policy role, the Office gave membership to the delegates of the ENGO Network in the special subcommittees of the Office of DGE. Fourth, Esmael Mohajer utilised his administrative discretion and established an Advisory post for the delegate of the Golestan's ENGO Network in his Office. The Advisor post was provided with a dedicated room with office equipment, such as telephone, desk, stationery, and printing machine. A journalist argued: 'Unintentionally, this post in the government demolished a part of independence and courage of ENGOs in criticising the DGE's policies'.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁰ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁴¹ BBC website, December 2014, available at: http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/12/141211_nm_ashouradeh

⁵⁴² Mojtaba Hoseseini, *Ibid.*

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁴ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁴⁵ Interview: 2014

From 2000, the Intelligence Office increased its security practices in the processes of obtaining permission for ENGOs and monitoring their performance. However, the then Governor-General, Mohimani, said: 'we did not let the security forces cause securitisation in the governmental procedures'.⁵⁴⁶

Therefore, the rise of environmentalist discourse and the introduction of new rules within this issue network over the eight years steered it to an inclusive, participatory, and consistent issue network. Relaxing the official procedures and the establishment of new mechanisms of participation facilitated the growth of ENGOs and their inclusion in the policy network. The reformist policies made the issue network competitive and flexible around the protectionist policies.

2.3. The Relational Aspect of the Issue Network

Along with the rise of ENGOs, the local government managed the process of development of relationships. Whilst, in the first term, the relationships of ENGOs with the Office of Governor-General was not officially recognised, during the second term the establishment of the Environmental Committee in the Office made relationships with ENGOs institutional. As a result, 'over a three-year period, the interactions between ENGOs and the senior officials in the Office became weekly', an ENGO president said.⁵⁴⁷ In parallel with the formal mechanisms, ENGO members had personal linkages with the senior officials. These linkages were of benefit to some ENGOs, 'particularly those with reformist members'.⁵⁴⁸

Despite the growth in the frequency of relationships, reformist governors had a top-down perception towards ENGOs, and did not like them being critical. For example, Hossein Rafati, the reformist Governor of Gorgan County, said in his interview: 'Unfortunately, they did not know their inferior position in relation to us'.⁵⁴⁹

In the framework of environmentalism, the Office of Governor-General also increased its supportive relationships with the Office of DGE. Concerning this, Hashem Mohimani, the third

⁵⁴⁶ Interview: 2014

⁵⁴⁷ Interview: 2014

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Interview: 2014

reformist Governor-General, said in his interview: 'I did this with the purpose of resisting and pushing back the anti-environmental tendencies of technocrats'.⁵⁵⁰

On the other side of the network, the then Director-General, Esmaeel Mohajer, 'kept the doors of his Office's building open to ENGOs'.⁵⁵¹ ENGOs' technical information and skills on the field advantaged them in their relationships with the sub-committees of the Office of DGE. This advantage was also the ENGOs' reason for sustaining and extending informal influence over the decisions of officials.⁵⁵² However, their dependence on the governmental funds weakened their position in relation with officials.⁵⁵³

Whilst the reformist DGE was receptive of ENGOs, in order to manipulate the pressure of the independent ENGOs, the then Director-General, Mohajer, established a parallel network with allied ENGOs having its membership.⁵⁵⁴ The members had close contact with the Office when compared with the independent network and, in some cases, counteracted its critical actions. For example, an ENGO president said: 'In 2002, we organised some gatherings in front of the DGE's building to object to the passivity of the Office in relation to illegal constructions in forest areas. But, unexpectedly, we saw the members of the parallel network gathered at the same time and only a few meters away from us with counter-slogans and banners supporting the Office's policies as an effort to nullify our action'.⁵⁵⁵ This made the arrangement of relationships uneven and unjust.

In this arrangement of relationships, reformist MPs had a low frequency of relationships with ENGOs. Sobhan Hosseini, the former MP of Gorgan, said: 'It was often limited to taking part in their public events, such as seminars'. Nevertheless, when the then MPs were requested to help ENGOs by lobbying the governors, they did not reject that 'due to the informal aspect of relationships i.e. personal or family linkages'.⁵⁵⁶

The relationships between ENGOs and Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader, had a friendly but not stable character. An ENGO president said: 'When the governors rejected our demands, we contacted Ayatollah Noormofidi's Office and he helped us

⁵⁵⁰ Interview: 2014

⁵⁵¹ Mojtaba Hosseini, the former Deputy DGE, Ibid.

⁵⁵² Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁵³ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Interview: 2014

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

through amplifying our demands or reading our statements in his public speeches such as Friday prayer sermons'.⁵⁵⁷ An example of this was the case with the tourism project in Ashuradeh Island.

Ashuradeh is the only Iranian island in the Caspian Sea that has been registered as an International Natural Resource (Figure 10.3). As a protected zone, it hosts unique animal and bird species.⁵⁵⁸ In 2003, the then Governor-General, Mohimani, finalised a project to construct a tourism complex on this Island. Several ENGOs and environmental journalists objected to the project. Although, since the project had the support of President Khatami and his Cabinet, the central DEO in Tehran and the Office of DGE in Golestan did not support the critical views of ENGOs. Nonetheless, ENGOs continued their efforts and resorted to Ayatollah Noormofidi, while at the same time, took the issue to the local and national media. As a result, the subject became controversial in public. In response, the Cabinet and the Office of Governor-General after a year of resistance eventually had to listen to Ayatollah Noormofidi's advice and ENGOs and reluctantly suspended the project.⁵⁵⁹



Figure 10.3. After 2003, Ashuradeh was spotted as a suitable area for tourist purposes/ photo credit: Mehr website

Whilst the networks of relationships were developing, from 2001, the Intelligence Office increased its contacts with governors in order to develop controlling measures over ENGOs,

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ BBC website, December 2014, available at: http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/12/141211_nm_ashouradeh

⁵⁵⁹ Interview: journalist, 2014

which did not achieve a positive response, as General-Governor Mohimani said.⁵⁶⁰ The Intelligence Office instead contacted ENGO activists directly. An ENGO activist said: 'They either met us face-to-face or called us on the phone in order to admonish us for the radical rhetoric and actions in public. Nonetheless, they were friendly to us because we knew them personally'.⁵⁶¹ The IRGC did not confront ENGOs directly or frequently.

In civil society, ENGOs developed their relationships with one another through the ENGO Network. From the first reformist term, they established monthly gatherings and also invited the then Governor-Generals and the DGE officials to take part in their face-to-face discussions. For example, a seat for network's delegate in the subcommittees of the Office of Governor-General resulted from these discussions in 2000-2001.⁵⁶² Despite some technical disagreements and political contestations between members, the reformist Deputy DGE said: 'Reformist and conservative ENGO were cooperative in environmental issues'.⁵⁶³

The relationships between ENGOs and political parties did not become frequent owing to their reciprocal disinterest and mistrust.⁵⁶⁴ ENGOs did not want to be seen as 'related to political parties since, in public, the politicisation of environmental issues was not accepted'.⁵⁶⁵ On the other hand, partisans 'perceived ENGOs usually as baskets of votes and had no genuine interest in environmental issues'.⁵⁶⁶ Nevertheless, their members sustained their personal linkages in order to extend relationships to governors but 'rarely any joint action was organised by them in public'.⁵⁶⁷

In contrast to political parties, ENGOs were very close to local media and journalists, as they needed each other. Even the IRIB provincial TV channel broadcaster, despite its affiliation with conservatives, accepted occasional relationships with ENGOs—including the reformist ones, for example on the Environment Day.⁵⁶⁸ Reformist newsweeklies and ENGOs met weekly and achieved results, for example, in the case of objecting to the Judiciary's policy of granting land to judges in Gorgan, the capital city:

⁵⁶⁰ Interview: 2014

⁵⁶¹ Interview: 2014

⁵⁶² Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁶³ Interview: 2014

⁵⁶⁴ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

⁵⁶⁵ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

In 2002, the conservative Head of Judiciary Office decided to grant the ownership of some pieces of forest land to some loyal judges, in order to reward their loyalty and hard work. The lands were chosen from Naharkhoran area which is very popular and sensitive in the eyes of environmental activists and local people (see figure below). Due to its environmental value, Naharkhoran is called 'the lungs of the province'.⁵⁶⁹ Whilst this decision was still confidential, it was leaked to ENGO members learned about it and revealed it to the reformist media by objecting aggressively. Alongside ENGOs, *Gorgane Emruze* (Today's Gorgan), the radical reformist newsweekly published a critical report, which at the same time had political incentive as opposing conservatives in the Judiciary. The issue captured the attention of the reformist governors and became controversial in the public sphere too. In reaction, the Judiciary, reluctantly, abandoned the decision and judges returned the ownership of the lands. However, later they imprisoned the then Editor in Chief of *Gorgane Emruze* and revoked the license of the newsweekly as an act of revenge.⁵⁷⁰



Figure 10.4. Naharkhoran Forests is a destination for local and international tourists/ photo credit: Pars news

⁵⁶⁹ 'Illegal buildings in Naharkhoran Forests', Mardomsalari newspaper, March 2014, available at: <http://archive.mardomsalari.com/Template1/News.aspx?NID=214109>

⁵⁷⁰ Interview: journalist, 2014

As the case above shows, whilst the effect of ENGOs–media relationships was high within the issue network, it was sensitive to Islamic and security institutions and was subject to red lines the breaching of which provoked harsh reactions.

Therefore, during the reformist period, the network of relationships in the policy network developed and became almost frequent and friendly, whilst also being flexible and loose. Personal linkages and political affiliations of ENGOs with officeholders influenced their proximity to policymaking centres, with reformist and environmentalist ENGOs privileged.

2.4. The Agency of ENGOs in the Issue Network

In the environmental issue network, as the reformist local government privileged the protection discourse, also prepared the ground for the critical voice and actions of ENGOs. The liberal strategy of reformist governors also pluralised this policy network. Furthermore, the resistance of the then reformist Governor-Generals to the Intelligence Office and the passive position of the IRGC increased the overall tolerance of the policy network. Moreover, the increase in the mass media's attention conducted demands to the public sphere. However, the passive role of political parties reduced the opportunity to access high-profile policies and policymakers. Nonetheless, the personal involvement of governors and the interests of Islamic and security institutions in anti-environment activities was a barrier to the influence of the critical ENGOs.

3. The Conservative Period: Towards a Policy Community

The rise of the conservative camp to the local government in 2005 reversed the formal political and environmental approach of the policies. As a result, the environmental issue network gradually shifted in structure towards 2013.

3.1. The Composition of the Policy Community

State Actors: The change in the composition of the policy network stemmed from the Office of Governor-General. Three Governor-Generals with different profiles ruled the local government

during the conservative period. Ali Muhammad Shaeri, the first Governor-General of Golestan (2005–2007), was a conservative technocrat who took office promising industrial development consistent with the central government’s justice and development slogan.⁵⁷¹ With a PhD degree in Agricultural Studies, and as a former Head to several ministerial committees in the area of natural resources, he ironically had an environmentally unfriendly profile.⁵⁷² During his two-year tenure, he handpicked his deputies and senior officials from the pool of conservatives in the security and Islamic institutions, such as the IRGC and Guardian Council.⁵⁷³ He also appointed a moderate technocrat, Ghorban Shahriari, as the Director-General for Environment (2005–2007), who was a university lecturer in Environmental Health. Whilst his field of education was relevant to the environment, ‘he was an unfamiliar face to local ENGOS’, an ENGO president said.⁵⁷⁴

In 2007, consistent with the growth in the securitising tendencies of Ahmadinejad’s Cabinet, the Ministry of Interior appointed Yahya Mahmudzadeh (2007–2009) to the Office of Governor-General in Golestan, who was a former commander in the IRGC. He filled the main posts in his Office with former IRGC members. In the environmental domain though, he continued the technocratic profile of the Office of DGE by appointing Sasan Alinejad who earlier served as a DGE in Qazvin province. Considering that he came from a province located far from Golestan and had no social or political association with the province, an ENGO said: ‘In fact, by this choice, the then Governor-General tried to depoliticise the domain and distanced the Office of DGE from civil activists’.⁵⁷⁵

In the second conservative term, Javad Ghenaat, who had an affiliation with the Intelligence Office, was appointed as Governor-General (2009–2013). He renewed the tenure of Sasan Alinejad as the DGE until the end of the period, i.e. 2013. Across the conservative period, the senior officials and bureaucrats of the local government organisations, including those in the Office of DGE, were completely replaced ‘with political and technocratic approaches, which came at the expense of the environmental issues’, as stated by a journalist.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷¹ Shomalnews website, April 2006, available at: <http://www.shomalnews.com/view/598>

⁵⁷² Personal website of AliMuhammad Shaeri, retrieved in May 2018, available at: <http://drshaeri.com>

⁵⁷³ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

⁵⁷⁴ Interview: 2014

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶ Interview: 2014

The Office of the DGE neither grew in organisation nor technical resources i.e. income and personnel.⁵⁷⁷ Concerning the organisation, once Ghorban Shahriari (2007-2013), the conservative Director-General, admitted to the lack of resources by referring to the usual case of unpredicted fires in the forests, ironically saying: 'Spades and water are the only equipment we have for saving our protected forests'.⁵⁷⁸ In compensation for this shortage, the Office of DGE decided to exchange cooperation and resources with the military forces, such as the IRGC, which had the needed equipment, such as helicopters.⁵⁷⁹ In relation to exchanging resources with environmental NGOs, an ENGO president said: 'Governors overtly told us that they were not interested in ENGOs!'⁵⁸⁰

Moreover, from 2006, the governmental position of the DGE began to decline since the Office of Governor-General abolished the Environmental Council following President Ahmadinejad's abolition the High Council for the Environment in the central government. As a result, the Office of DGE lost a part of its institutional power in setting provincial strategies, especially versus technocratic organisations, such as the Roads and Transportation Organisation.⁵⁸¹

In parallel, the composition of Golestan's MPs in the 7th and 8th terms of Parliament were conservative with no connection to the environmentalism, rather they were affiliated with Islamic schools, the IRGC, and conservative parties.⁵⁸² An ENGO president said: 'In the conservative ideology, the environmental domain was sentimental'.⁵⁸³ Moreover, politically, 'they did not have any knowledge about or belief in the role NGOs'.⁵⁸⁴ Nonetheless, with a more charismatic position, Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader, sustained its moderate political profile and maintained semi-active status in this domain, which to a certain extent balanced the MPs' non-environmental profile.⁵⁸⁵

Harmonious with the ongoing developments, the IRGC increased its political profile and vibrancy, consistent with the strategies of chief-commanders in Tehran (Thaler et al., 2010). As a result, this paramilitary force contributed to different developmental and construction

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Sarmayeh newspaper, 13 August 2006, p.16, available at: magiran.com/n1171308

⁵⁷⁹ Deutsche Welle website, August 2006, available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/A3yE>

⁵⁸⁰ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

⁵⁸³ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

projects, which sometimes had environmental threats.⁵⁸⁶ These projects engaged it with the environmental policy network. Besides that, the Intelligence Office, with radical conservative figures managing it, increased its political vibrancy in relation to ENGOs too.⁵⁸⁷

Civil Society Actors: The developments in the composition of local government ‘spread disappointment amongst the environmentalist ENGOs that had sympathy for reformists’.⁵⁸⁸ In addition to this, ending governmental funds to protectionist and reformist ENGOs caused a decline in their organisation and, in some cases, led to their closure. As a result, almost 15 ENGOs from this category terminated their activities, albeit gradually.⁵⁸⁹ However, at the same time, the Office of DGE and the Office of Governor-General encouraged religious and conservative activists to submit a request for establishing an ENGO, and the process of registration was relaxed for them.⁵⁹⁰ This development led to the rise of a new group of ENGOs with founders and members that adopted a traditional approach towards environmentalism. These ENGOs became the new recipients of government funds and facilities, such as cars, office space, desks and stationery. Accordingly, whilst the composition shifted in favour of conservatives, the number of registered ENGOs did not change a lot, as estimated by the former Advisor to the DGE.⁵⁹¹

On the one hand, political parties remained disinterested in environmental issues.⁵⁹² Local newspapers and media, on the other hand, continued to grow both in terms of volume and environmental profile (Rajae, 2006, p. 40). The number of newsweeklies reached 20 as a result of enthusiasm towards print media between reformists and conservatives, with most active and popular newsweeklies having an established page or column on environmental issues.⁵⁹³ Over time, the number of environmental journalists also increased. Despite this growth, corresponding with the securitising policies of the conservative government from 2009, most of the independent and reformist press decreased the frequency of publication—down to monthly, or even became inactive, with the number of active print media declining to half.⁵⁹⁴ At the same time, ‘since they found it safer’, opposition journalists and environmentalists moved to

⁵⁸⁶ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁵⁸⁷ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁹¹ Interview: 2014

⁵⁹² Interview: member of political party, 2014

⁵⁹³ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

the virtual space, with the number of weblogs and websites going up to more than 30 until the end of the period.⁵⁹⁵

Therefore, across the conservative period, the Office of Governor-General first reduced the profile of the Office of DGE and subsequently downgraded the environmental domain, with the conservative officeholders then appropriating the composition of the ENGOs by manipulating the procedure of resource-allocation. The fall in the number of critical ENGOs decreased the environmental and political diversity of the policy network.

3.2. The Institutional Aspect of the Policy Community

Discourse: The conservative governors advocated an opposite stance to reformists in the environmental policy network. All three conservative Governor-Generals advocated the discourse of social justice and articulated the rhetoric of construction and industrial development that downgraded the environmentalism, whilst generally ‘alluding to environmental protection to keep their prestige’.⁵⁹⁶ Ali Muhammad Shaeri, the first Governor-General of Golestan in the conservative period, promised the creation of 20,000 jobs by developing local industries in his inauguration speech.⁵⁹⁷ The same rhetoric was sustained throughout the period. Javad Ghenaat, the third conservative Governor-General in that period, announced his plan to ‘sustain and complete the large ongoing construction projects in the province such as the inter-provincial roads and petrochemical power station’.⁵⁹⁸ Consistent with this developmental discourse, senior governors and officials put the protectionist stance aside, unless they were expected to speak about it at specific occasions or events.

Furthermore, as Javad Hosseini, the then Advisor to the Office of Governor-General pointed out, conservative governor-generals sought to downgrade the political scope of NGOs, including in the environmental domain.⁵⁹⁹ In this vein, Governor-General Javad Ghenaat stated: ‘The environmental issues must not become politicised or influenced by political interests’.⁶⁰⁰ To ENGO activists, this sentence meant ‘a warning to abandon their policy role’.⁶⁰¹ In parallel,

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁶ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁵⁹⁷ Salim newsweekly, September 2005, p.1, Golestan

⁵⁹⁸ Mehr website, December 2012, available at: <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/1755896>

⁵⁹⁹ Interview: 2014

⁶⁰⁰ Mehr website, June 2012, available at: <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/1624319>

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

consistent with their security and military background, the conservative Governor-Generals termed NGOs as ‘Western phenomenon which could threaten Islamic values’, a member of the reformist party said.⁶⁰²

Along with this development at the top, the Office of DGE synchronised its discourse. The director-generals in the conservative period expressed the lowest enthusiasm for ENGOs.⁶⁰³ Furthermore, when speaking about ENGOs, they limited it to executive roles rather than political. However, from time to time, they alluded to ENGOs in their speeches. Nevertheless, they remained protectionists concerning the technical aspect, albeit less than in the past due to the decline in the profile and authority of the Office.⁶⁰⁴

Conservative MPs advocated the exploitation discourse of the Cabinet and conservative governor-generals, which accelerated its spread in the policy network. In this relation, Isa Emami, the then conservative MP of Gorgan (2011–2015), the capital county, confirmed in the interview: ‘For us, the development agenda of the government was more necessary than anything else’.⁶⁰⁵ In practice, during the eight years, ‘MPs did not criticise, nor did they warn about the environmental consequences and threats of the policies, except in a few cases where ENGOs pressured them, such as the plan to construct a road that bypassed Golestan National Park in 2006’, which will be discussed in detail later.⁶⁰⁶

However, Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader, maintained his semi-protectionist stance. A journalist said: ‘On significant environmental issues, which had widespread reactions, he used critical rhetoric against the conservative governors’.⁶⁰⁷ However, his rhetorical effort did not impede the growth of the exploitative approach in the domain.

In this new climate, whilst the IRGC was more present in public conversations, the commanders and members did not express statements about environmental issues, or concerning ENGOs, in public (Thaler et al., 2010). The same was evident in the Intelligence Office. Nevertheless, they

⁶⁰² Interview: 2014

⁶⁰³ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁶⁰⁴ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁶⁰⁵ Interview: 2014

⁶⁰⁶ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

'expressed their security scepticism about vocal and reformist ENGOs through their communications with governors'.⁶⁰⁸

In reaction to the government neglecting the environmental discourse, the protectionist ENGOs 'radicalised their demands and toned up their voice' and focused on large-scale projects, such as road-building.⁶⁰⁹ In response, 'governors only ignored them'.⁶¹⁰ The conservative ENGOs, on the other hand, often kept cautiously silent concerning controversial policies and, where needed, even advocated the social justice slogan of governors in order to counter the opposition ENGOs. To them, environmental protection was a 'practice for protecting natural parks without interfering with the state's affairs', a member of a conservative ENGO explained.⁶¹¹ Over time, this traditional approach grew significantly in civil society.

However, the few independent newsweeklies kept up their critical voice in this domain.⁶¹² Journalists usually highlighted popular issues 'otherwise their chance of influence on other issues was small'.⁶¹³ From 2009, due to security pressures on reformist print media, weblogs and websites became the base for critics, whilst conservative newsweeklies remained loyal to the conservative government's policies. The outreach of environmental weblogs was not as much as print media. Nonetheless, ENGO activists had 'the chance of continuing the protectionist stance and discussing a wide range of environmental issues on their weblogs'.⁶¹⁴ Even small projects were under the scrutiny of environmental bloggers who were unanimous in their criticism, for example:

In 2007, the Office of Governor-General decided to change the official designation of Sugoleh land, in Gorgan, from agricultural to industrial. Whilst it was in the centre of the province, people were not sensitive about the area. Tens of weblogs, hand-in-hand with ENGO activists, focused on the issue and publicised it as a big problem. They named the responsible officeholders in this area and made them suspend this policy.⁶¹⁵

⁶⁰⁸ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Interview: journalist, 2014

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Interview: 2014



Figure 10.5. Sugoleh was protected until the conservative period/ photo credit: Iranview website

The example above shows that the environmentalist discourse, which remained active in virtual spaces, had a deeper influence on low-profile policies.

Political parties—both reformists and conservatives—were commonly seen to be silent in relation to the majority of environmental issues, unless there was a chance for ‘taking political advantage of it’, an ENGO activist said.⁶¹⁶ For instance, in the case of making a petrochemical power station in Gomishan County in 2006, ‘when the ENGOs succeeded in making the public opinion attentive to it, the reformist partisans, notably from the Participation Front party, seized it as a chance, thus contributing to public conversations through statements and criticised the then conservative Governor-Generals.⁶¹⁷ In reaction, conservative parties also played politically by defending the social justice and development approach of the conservative government.⁶¹⁸ However, these occasional contributions did not influence the success or defeat of the competing discourses.

Rules and Practices: Along with advocating the exploitation discourse, the conservative Governor-Generals stiffened the formal procedures and manipulated the official access points. The Office of Governor-General abolished the seat of the delegates of ENGO Network in the

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁶¹⁸ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

environmental committees.⁶¹⁹ In parallel, the Office increased security measures in the process of obtaining a license for ENGO and accordingly changed the documents about the operational scope of ENGOs to religious and executive activities.⁶²⁰ This was an effort to remove their institutional policy role.

Concerning environmental rules, the Office abandoned the formerly defined stringent practices. For example, in 2005, Ali Muhammad Shaeri, the then Governor-General, removed the 'checkpoints' put on the roads leading to Ziarat village—located in the mountains of the capital county of Golestan, for blocking illegal construction, which allowed construction to recommence.⁶²¹ Furthermore, the Office cleared the way for environmentally-unfriendly projects such as the petrochemical power station in Gomishan, bypassing environmental regulations:

In 2005, during a trip to Golestan, based on a local plan, the Ministry of Oil passed the project of building a petrochemical power station in Gomishan County in the west of Golestan near the Caspian Sea.⁶²² Several protectionist ENGOs objected to the project from day one which was also reported in the media.⁶²³ The ENGOs' concern was about the proximity of the location of the project to Miankaleh Island, in the western region of the province, and therefore the risks of the project for wildlife and nature on that island. This project was also a violation of regulations from the 1970s, forbidding pollutant and contaminant industries in sensitive environmental zones.⁶²⁴ This regulation included Golestan Province too.⁶²⁵ However, because of the multilateral agreement between the DoE and the Ministry of Oil in Tehran with the Office of Governor-General in Golestan, critics of the policy were wholly ignored, and the project was implemented.⁶²⁶

At a lower level, the Office of DGE changed its practices concerning ENGOs. In 2005, Ghorban Shahriari, the DGE, abolished the Bureau and the Advisor post of the delegates of ENGOs in the Office. Moreover, he manipulated the rules of the government-sponsored ENGO Network in

⁶¹⁹ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Hashem Mohimani, the reformist Governor-General, Ibid.

⁶²² Mehr website, July 2013, available at: mehrnews.com/news/2328919/

⁶²³ Jam-Pars environmental weekly, February 2015, p.1, Golestan

⁶²⁴ Deutsche Welle website, June 2009, available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/I0KP>

⁶²⁵ Etemaad Newspaper, November 2006, p.8, available at: magiran.com/n1532021

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

such a way that it only recognised the members of the conservative and allied ENGOs.⁶²⁷ This parallel Network, in just a few years, became the only and exclusively recognised network that was allowed access to the subcommittees of the Office.⁶²⁸

The DGE Office also removed several stringent rules that impeded construction and development projects, such as the one of issuing an environmental clearance, notwithstanding the disagreement of the bureaucrats.⁶²⁹ In practice, this development came with reducing the resistance of the conservative DGEs to the environmental violations of local government organisations. The example of the road-building through Golestan National Park demonstrates this trend.

In 2006, by the approval of Ali Muhammad Shaeri's office, the then Governor-General, the then Director-General for Roads and Transportation facilitated the implementation of the project of broadening and extending the highway from Golestan Province to Khorasan province, which passes through Golestan National Park. The project required cutting down 3,000 trees and removing plants, as revealed by the local media. The experts and junior officials in the Office of DGE openly objected to the policy in the reformist local media such as *Salim* newsweekly. Whilst the project was started in the Forest, the meetings concerning its controversial aspects were still going on in the Office of Governor-General. In these meetings, the delegates of the conservative DGE severely criticised the project. However, the Office of Governor-General pushed back and ignored the critics, including the Office of DGE, and the project continued.⁶³⁰

In the case above, whereas the Office of DGE sustained the minimum protectionist stance, the political power of conservative governors overruled it.

Consistent with the prevailing discourse of excluding critical ENGOs, the IRGC and Intelligence Office also increased their security measures in the procedures of auditing ENGOs and issuing a permit for them.⁶³¹ Also, developments in the technical practices of the Office of DGE relaxed the technical barriers on the IRGC—that was seeking for developmental projects—and the Judiciary

⁶²⁷ Interview: ENGO presidents, 2014

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

⁶³⁰ Interview: ENGO presidents, 2014

⁶³¹ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

in the environmental domain. The case of the Museum of War Martyrs in Gorgan, the capital city, is a good example.

In 2005, the IRGC, together with the Office for Iran-Iraq War's Publications, finalised the joint project of building a Museum of the War's Martyrs in Gorgan.⁶³² The location chosen for this project was at the heart of Naharkhoran Forest, which is popular and sensitive due to its environmental significance. The project required trees to be cut down and removed from the area (Figure 10.6). The independent and protectionist ENGOs in Gorgan stood against the project, albeit cautiously due to the involvement of the IRGC, as a paramilitary force, and the ideological aspect of martyrdom, a concept considered holy in Islamic culture. With the same rationale, the Office of DGE too remained silent. Nonetheless, some reformist figures and leading partisans took the issue to the mass media. In this vein, one reformist figure, who was the veteran of the War, sent a letter to the Office of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, criticising the project.⁶³³ However, none of these objections worked out. Eventually, whilst the issue generated some local and national reaction, the implementation was completed because of the higher leverage of the IRGC. Later, in response to the vocal critics, the IRGC sued a critical environmental journalist, and the Judiciary issued a verdict against her in order to impede further objections.⁶³⁴



Figure 10.6. The IRGC erected the museum monument in Naharkhoran Forests/ photo credit: DEFA website

⁶³² Mehr website, April 2012, available at: mehrnews.com/news/1596505

⁶³³ Shargh newspaper, April 2012, p.13, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=2489901>

⁶³⁴ Interview: journalist, 2014

Despite limitations, the opportunity for ENGOs' criticism of environmental degradation was still available, notably if the issue could be reported on media and advocated widely. For example, in the case of extending a highway through Golestan National Park-in the east of the province-because of the several years of pressures of local ENGOs and the escalation of the issue in the national mainstream media, the Attorney General in Golestan officially accepted the public criticism and issued a verdict temporarily suspending the project.⁶³⁵ The conservative security and judicial offices were able to cater to environmental issues under public pressure.

Therefore, during the conservative period, the Office of the Governor-General imposed the non-environmental development discourse from the top, which along with the changes in the access points and official procedures, restricted the scope of protectionist ENGOs. These changes also led to limitations in the access and membership of the policy network. Over time, the policy network became a policy community with consistency and resistance to rivals.

3.3. The Relational Aspect of the Policy Community

From 2005, the Office of Governor-General reduced the overall frequency of relationships with ENGOs from weekly to seasonal or occasional meetings. Nevertheless, it 'remained tolerant of their criticisms and actions'.⁶³⁶ The relationships of the Office with conservative ENGOs, through both personal and official linkages, remained established, albeit in a top-down direction due to their dependence on government funding.⁶³⁷ The delegates of the larger and more loyal conservative ENGOs were selectively and sporadically present at the meetings of the subcommittees of the Office. Simultaneously, the distance between the Office and critical ENGOs increased over time, and later intensified, especially in the second conservative term, this was notable in the case of the roadbuilding project through Golestan National Park.

Whilst the government triggered this project in 2005, for several years, public criticisms and lobbying continued against it. In March 2010, a group of independent and protectionist ENGOs in the capital city of the province called for a demonstration in front of the building of the Office of Governor-General. It was located in the administrative town, which was guarded by the security forces. Thus,

⁶³⁵ Kayhan newspaper, August 2011, p.2, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=2398127>

⁶³⁶ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

only a small number of ENGO activists succeeded in getting into the area. After a few hours of chanting and holding placards, a delegate of the protesting ENGO stepped into the building of the Office in order to approach Javad Ghenaat, the then Governor-General, and discuss their demands with him face to face. However, unexpectedly, the Office rejected him and even later despite various efforts, the then Governor-General did not meet him.⁶³⁸

In the new atmosphere, the adverse effect of political affiliation was significant, as a reformist ENGO president said: 'Before accepting any personal contacts from us, officials used to investigate our political affiliation and orientation'.⁶³⁹ This tendency limited the network of relationships to a closed cluster of actors at the centre of the policy community.

The Office of the Governor-General also reduced its established supportive relationships with the Office of DGE as an effort to remove technical obstacles facing development projects. In several cases, this tendency became obvious, such as the project of road-building through Golestan National Park, which in spite of environmental concerns raised by the Office of DGE, the then Governor-General, Ali Muhammad Shaeri, allowed the then Director-General of Roads and Transportation implement the removal of 5,000 tonnes of sand and soil from the national park.⁶⁴⁰

At the same time, the Office of Governor-General increased its relationship with the Intelligence Office and the IRGC, which subsequently influenced its behaviour against ENGOs. For instance, from 2005, the Office of Governor-General banned all ENGOs from establishing their relationship with international ENGOs and organisations.⁶⁴¹ This arrangement also made security forces, such as the IRGC, the core members of the policy community. As a result of this arrangement, 'whilst, on paper, radical actions such as street protest were allowed', protectionist ENGOs came under the scrutiny of security forces and, therefore, became reluctant to accept the risk of undertaking radical action in public. An ENGO member referred to the examples of the petrochemical power station and roadbuilding through the Golestan National Park, saying: 'We did not succeed in convincing many ENGOs to join us in demonstrations, which was owing to their security concerns. Thus, we normally had gatherings with fewer than

⁶³⁸ Kooshan weblog, March 2010, available at: <http://kooshan.blogfa.com/post-218.aspx>

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Peyda-Penhan weblog, December 2006, available at: <http://peydapenhan1.persianblog.ir>

⁶⁴¹ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

30 people in most of the circumstances'.⁶⁴² Nevertheless, outside of the public domain, critical and independent ENGOs sustained their internal contacts through family and friend linkages and by also holding fortnight house parties and private events.⁶⁴³

A similar trend dominated relationships between the Office of DGE and ENGOs. The interactions between protectionist and reformist ENGOs with the subcommittees of the Office of DGE decreased over time. According to an ENGOs president: 'The seniors in the Office perceived us as aliens who should not be given access to the government's papers and policies'.⁶⁴⁴ For example, in the case of illegal apartment buildings in Ziarat village, in Gorgan County, in spite of the critiques of ENGOs and their communications with junior officials, as well as raising the issue on local newsweeklies, the conservative DGEs and the subcommittees of the Office refused to entertain their entreaties. As a result, according to the Judiciary Office, during the conservative period and after that, more than 6,000 illegal apartments were built in the village, some of them belonging to high-profile politicians and officials.⁶⁴⁵ The exclusion of ENGOs from the Office of DGE also facilitated the more personal involvement of politicians and officials in the anti-environmental projects.⁶⁴⁶ This occurred whilst conservative ENGOs had frequent official and personal contact with officials.

In this close network of relationships, conservative MPs maintained their relationship with ENGOs limited to their presence and face-to-face contacts in public events and programmes, and also irregular personal contacts with some of them.⁶⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the protectionist ENGOs took advantage of these relationships in some circumstances, such as in the case of the project of road-building through Golestan National Park. In this case, parallel with other efforts, few critical ENGOs at the centre of the province had personal linkages with Ayatollah Taheri, the then conservative MP of Gorgan (2007–2015). They convinced Taheri to negotiate with the Head of Judiciary about the issue, which eventually concluded in 2012 when the Attorney General ordered the government to cease action on the project.

A similar condition applied to the ENGOs' relationships with Ayatollah Noormofidi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader. The protectionist ENGOs needed him more than ever

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ Interview: ENGO president, 2014

⁶⁴⁴ Interview: 2014

⁶⁴⁵ Tasnim website, January 2017, available at: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/10/17/1621062/>

⁶⁴⁶ Interview: journalist, 2014

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

before, and therefore resorted to his religious positions. For example, when the national Cabinet passed the petrochemical power station project, in response to the request of a few active ENGOs, Ayatollah Noormofidi alluded to the issue in his Friday prayer sermon and addressed the then conservative Governor-General, advising him to consider and listen to critiques. Nonetheless, this did not stop the local government from the construction project.⁶⁴⁸

The developments in the arrangement of relationships also influenced inter-ENGOs relationships. First, in the post-2009 more securitised atmosphere, the political affiliation of members fractured between the reformist and conservative ENGOs; and second, the rise of the government-supported ENGO Network and the privilege of conservative ENGOs in it intensified the fracture. This 'interrupted the collaboration between ENGOs, especially when it was about objecting to the government', an ENGO president said.⁶⁴⁹ An example of this could be seen in the case of the water-pipeline project in Aliabad County, mentioned below:

During the second conservative term, the local government passed the project of piping water from Zarringol River in Aliabad County to the neighbouring province, Semnan. The local ENGOs criticised it, claiming that this project would have adverse environmental impacts, including drought.⁶⁵⁰ However, conservative ENGOs refused to take part in a demonstration in front of the Office of Governor-General, when called to do so by a leading protectionist ENGO.⁶⁵¹

The relationships of ENGOs with the local media remained cooperative and close. However, as a journalist said: 'We had to be more cautious not to provoke the security forces and the Judiciary'.⁶⁵² Bloggers were even closer to ENGOs and, as a result, were keen to support their neglected causes, especially during the second conservative term. An example was the policy to change the designation of a piece of land in Sougoleh Hill in Gorgan County, to build a tourism complex, as discussed before.⁶⁵³ In that case, the extensive virtual pressure exerted on the Office of Governor-General led to the suspension of the project.⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Zarrinnameh website, November 2015, available at: <http://zarinnameh.ir/special/14756>

⁶⁵¹ Interview: ENGO activist, 2014

⁶⁵² Interview: journalist, 2014

⁶⁵³ Mehr website, July 2010, Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ Interview: journalist, 2014

However, when the economic interests of companies or executive offices were endangered by public pressure, the cooperation and relationships between ENGOs and the local media became risky and were subject to harsh reaction, as the example below demonstrates:

In 2010, based on a report received from ENGOs, a reformist journalist published a critical article on *Salim*, a reformist newsweekly, concerning the illegal harvesting and cutting down of trees in some forests by a local private chipboard company.⁶⁵⁵ In response to this article, the owner of the company, which notably had good relationships with the conservative offices, resorted to the Judiciary Office, and sued the journalist. The journalist said in her interview: 'Because I was also a reformist critic of the conservative government, the Judiciary Office took advantage of the plaintiff and eased the official procedure for the owner of the company in an effort to push me back'.⁶⁵⁶ This action finally led to a verdict against the journalist.

Contacts between ENGOs and political parties remained infrequent—at times quarterly during the conservative period and reduced further due to security restrictions coming in place. In practice, ENGOs were banned from contact with political parties because the conservative government interpreted it as a political action from which ENGOs were banned according to laws.⁶⁵⁷ After 2009, the securitising policies affected these relationships, with some reformist partisans moving to active ENGOs in order to 'survive the security pressures and sustain their social activism'.⁶⁵⁸ This move intensified the critical discourse and further changed the composition of ENGO members.

Therefore, during the conservative period due to the growing relationships between the Office of Governor-General with the security institutions, and the top-down direction of relationship with the allied ENGOs and the Office of DGE, the policy community became closed and hierarchical. This closed the arrangement of relationships and formed a stable core, running the policy domain with the exploitative approach. The frequency of relationship was high within the policy community, whilst the protectionist ENGOs maintained their relationships outside of it. Nonetheless, the policy community remained tolerant of outsider ENGOs that maintained their pressures on it.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁷ Interview: member of reformist party, 2014

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

3.4. The Agency of ENGOs in the Policy Community

The drop in the size of the policy network, especially the protectionist stream of ENGOs, as well as the dominance of the Office of Governor-General, reduced diversity and competition within it, which, limited the freedom of action for critical ENGOs. Also, the non-inclusive and exploitative approaches of the conservative governors reduced the opportunity for protectionist ENGOs to be heard and included. Whilst conservative ENGOs were the privileged insiders of the policy community, their status was allied with and dependent on conservative officeholders.

Despite the closure of access points in the local government, the public sphere continued to feature the critiques and causes of protectionist ENGOs, albeit with the possibility of harsh behaviours from the government when a conflict of interest was involved. Relationship with local newspapers and weblogs provided ENGOs, especially critical ones, the chance to pressure the policy community from outside.

4. Conclusion

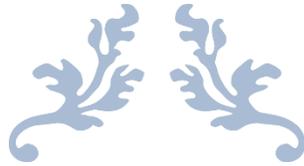
In the reformist period, generous funding of environmental activists and flexible registration procedures led to an influx of ENGOs and mass media. Structural changes in the Office of Governor-General and the Office of DGE facilitated regular and direct contacts between ENGOs and officeholders. This also increased the size of the network. Furthermore, the enthusiasm of Governor-Generals and their participatory discourse diversified the atmosphere of the issue network. The issue network was flexible regarding membership and policy change. Due to the reformist government, the protection discourse came to prominence alongside the development discourse.

However, from 2005 onwards, the conservative Governor-Generals charted a new course. By advocating the non-participatory and exploitative discourse of development, the conservatives engineered the shift of relationships and rules which was opposite to the direction taken by reformists. There was a considerable drop in the number of protectionist ENGOs and some were replaced by new conservative ENGOs. The closure of access points reduced opportunities for new actors and restricted diversity. Moreover, with the active involvement of the IRGC and the Intelligence Office, the circle of insider actors was reduced to ENGOs allied with the

government. At the core of this policy community, relationships developed in a top-down direction, with allied ENGOs receiving their agenda and funds from the government. Whilst this policy community was stable and exclusive, it remained tolerant of rivals and critics. The table below provides an overview of the environmental policy network in Golestan. Although the theoretical framework of the study did not expect large changes across the two periods, the scale of a shift in the structure of the policy network was large.

Table 10.1. The trajectory and features of Golestan’s WR policy network during the 1997–2013 period

Period	Structure	Climate	Policymaking style
Reformist	Issue network	Plural	Integrative
Conservative	Policy community	Consistent	Exclusive



CHAPTER ELEVEN

**COMPARISON AND
DISCUSSION**



1. Introduction

The review of the case studies of this research demonstrates that the rule of the reformist and conservative camps in two consecutive eight-year terms, interacting with differences of policy domains and levels of government—all as independent variables—shifted the structure of policy networks in Iran. This following section describes the trajectory of the structure of four policy networks and whether the presence of issue networks or policy communities matches theoretical predictions. The subsequent section looks at the influence of the political opportunity structure on more detailed aspects of the policy networks. The third section will discuss the interaction between the independent variables. The fourth draws out the theoretical implications for the policy network literature and the agency of advocacy NGOs in hybrid regimes. The conclusion answers the central question of the thesis.

2. The Relationship between Variables

The theoretical framework predicted that the political opportunity structure (POS), composed of three factors, would explain the structure of policy networks (PN) across policy domains and government levels. The findings, at first glance, suggest that this anticipated causal relationship between macro variables and meso variables existed. In line with the shift in the POS from 'open' during the reformist period to 'closed' during the conservative period, the structure of all policy networks shifted from issue network to the policy community. This implies that the openness, resilience, and tolerance of the macro-level politics are related to openness and resilience of the policy networks, albeit with variations discussed later. Prior studies have noted the importance of the POS factors, particularly in the area of social movements, but without tracing systematic variations at the domain and government levels (Porta and Diani 1999). In this research, the same trajectory of change in the structure of policy networks was observed within both the women's-rights and environmental policy domains, in addition to both national and provincial levels (Table 11.1).

Table 11.1. The relation between POS and PN in this study

Open POS		Closed POS	
Women's-rights issue network	Environmental issue network	Women's-rights policy community	Environmental policy community
Women's-rights issue network	Environmental issue network	Women's-rights policy community	Environmental policy community

The theoretical framework predicted that the effect of the state's political ideology would be different across the political and technical domains, as well as national and provincial levels. This is not borne out by the results in terms of issue network vs policy community. However, this does not mean the policy domain and government level are irrelevant. Instead, the findings show the considerable effect of these two factors to be on individual aspects of the policy networks' structure, as well as their character-as will be discussed in details.

3. Variation between Structural Aspects of Policy Networks

Whilst the political opportunity structure explained the transformation of the policy networks between issue network and policy community, each of the POS's contributing factors individually customised the individual aspects of the PN's structure. The compositional, institutional or relational aspects of policy networks vary within the overall classifications of issue network or policy community. These differences are associated not only with the state's ideology and strategy but also with government levels and policy domains. In this respect, the theoretical framework is consistent with the data. This finding of the present study fills a gap in the literature which Dowding stated (1995). He criticised the absence of an explanatory theory in the policy networks literature.

The descriptive aspects of the policy network structure proved useful in tracing the effects of this explanatory relation between POS and PN (Figure 11.1).

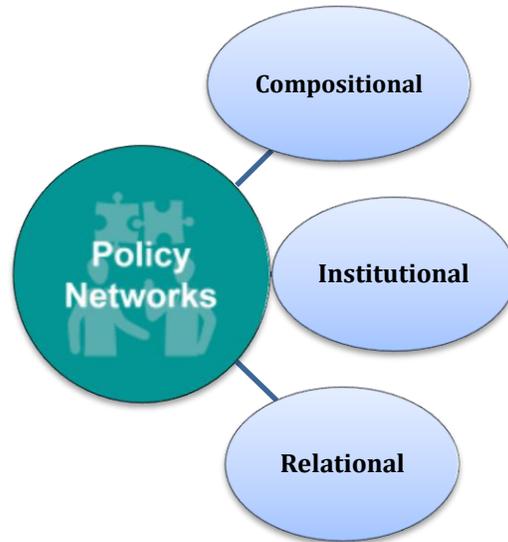


Figure 11.1. The three factors of a policy network's structure

3.1. The Composition of Policy Networks

The policy network theory not only helped to identify the arrangement of actors in each policy domain but also pointed to the focal positions in the networks. Both the reformist and the conservative governments, as focal actors, purposively intervened in the social composition of policy networks. In the PN literature, this intervention has been associated with the 'steering role' of the state and its ability to adjust the number and composition of actors (Dassen, 2010).

The Reformist Period

The reformist government extended its liberal strategy across both environmental and women's-rights domains with the intention of expanding the borders of policy networks to include civil society. This strategy, in the women's-rights policy network, increased the number of women's-rights NGOs (WRNGOs) by almost ten times both in Tehran and Golestan, while in the environmental domain resulted in a sharper increase in the number of environmental NGOs (ENGOS)—by almost thirty times. At the provincial level, the data showed a smaller growth amounting to 14 times. This is striking in the context of Western literature. The WR policy domain is relevant to about 50 per cent of society. Therefore, it was expected to involve a larger number of non-state actors than the environmental domain that remained insignificant in the social and governmental context of Iran (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). Political suppressions by

authoritarian institutions and the risks of political activism in Iran may impede this growth in the WR domain.

Moreover, mass media and political parties did not respond to the stimulating policies of the reformist government in the same way. At the national level, the WR domain saw much more significant growth in political parties and mass media than the environmental domain. At the provincial level, network size was smaller in both policy domains. This meant the effect of the reformers’ policies was more dramatic in the capital.

The reformist strategy for expanding policy networks received different reactions from conservative unelected state institutions across the two policy domains. In the WR domain, the security and Islamic organisations developed their own offices at the national level, while in the environmental policy network, only Islamic institutions played a generic role. At the provincial level, however, both security and Islamic organisations were passive until the final years of the reformist period when vocal NGOs began to worry them. As a result, in both domains, the size of the national policy networks was much larger and more diverse than the provincial medium policy networks—by almost 10 times in each domain.

The issue networks that formed across the four contexts differed, even though they all met Rhodes & Marsh’s (1992) criteria: large and encompassing a range of affected interests. At the national level, the WR issue network was polarised between the liberal and conservative streams of actors. In the environmental domain, on the other hand, the issue network was diverse, meaning actors with different, though not necessarily contradictory profiles co-existed. Actors in the polarised issue networks were ideologically contradictory; whereas in the diverse issue network, they were competitive at the technical-policy level. At the provincial level, all issue networks were diverse and not polarised. The table below compares these issue networks.

Table 11.2. The compositional aspect of Issue networks during the reformist period

Policy sector	Women’s right		Environmental	
Government level	Central	Provincial	Central	Provincial
Composition	Large and polarised	Medium and diverse	Large and diverse	Medium and diverse

The Conservative Period

The conservative government, together with allied unelected institutions, implemented an exclusive strategy to reduce the size and homogenise the social composition of both the political and technical networks. This was the policy of consciously excluding some groups to steer networks towards policy communities (Rhodes and Marsh 1992, p. 187). In the national WR domain, this policy harmonised the policy networks' membership without reducing its size, as the number of NGOs rose by three times. In the environmental domain, conversely, the policy fulfilled its purpose as both the number and diversity of NGOs reduced. However, the trends differed at the provincial level. Whilst in the WR domain the number of WRNGOs dropped down by half, in the environmental domain, owing to the environmental significance of the province, the government reluctantly maintained the size of the policy network large while homogenising its composition.

A similar policy was observed in relation to the mass media and political parties. As a result, at the provincial level across both domains, the number of mass media and political parties decreased gradually. However, at the national level, they managed to sustain their activities until the conservative government increased suppressions from 2009. Therefore, with higher pressure in the capital, the government steered the issue networks towards consistent and closed policy communities across all contexts, albeit with different characteristics. At the national level, the WR policy community was large but ultimately uniform in terms of political affiliations; on the other hand, the environmental policy community was smaller and less uniform. The conservative government focused its attention more on the social composition of the policy networks than their size.

At the provincial level, while the diversity of policy communities decreased in both domains, the size of the environmental policy community remained larger than the WR domain. Furthermore, in the environmental domain, since authoritarian institutions did not develop their offices, in their absence, the policy community became less strict regarding homogenous membership. The table below compares the composition of the policy communities.

Table 11.3. The compositional aspect of policy communities during the conservative period

Policy sector	Women's rights		Environmental	
Government level	Central	Provincial	Central	Provincial
Composition	Large and uniform	Small and uniform	Medium and uniform	Medium and uniform

Implications

The development of conflict or consistency between offices of the authoritarian and republican institutions in each policy domain and government level determined the compositional aspect of the policy networks. They were the focal positions. However, variations in the policy domain and level of government caused different reactions from policy actors.

The policy network literature maintains that interactions between actors inside the network are the mechanism of change in the composition of the policy networks; however, in Iran, the state outweighs this internal mechanism (Dassen 2010). In all four cases, state agencies managed the membership and composition policy networks. The focal position of the state in the policy networks has also been highlighted by several scholars (Waarden 1992; Wright 1988). It is interesting that the steering role of state agencies in policy networks observed in Iran is evident in the democratic countries too. Despite the disaggregation of the state apparatus, the centrality of individual state agencies in managing the composition of policy networks is unchallenged (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992).

We can also consider that change in the number of actors has a limited effect; while diversity plays a more critical role in determining the nature and structure of the policy networks. The case of the large but uniform national WR policy community during the conservative period illustrates this.

3.2. The Institutional Aspects of Policy Networks

The offices of both reformist and conservative government interpreted and imposed the formal discourse of the central government on policy networks, and synchronised the sectoral rules and laws.

The Reformist Period

The reformist government imposed its liberal ideology on both policy domains and, to a certain extent, politicised them accordingly. In the WR domain, the President's Office incorporated an egalitarian discourse in order to expand women's social rights and political participation, whilst in the environmental domain, the Department of Environment articulated the sustainable development discourse and emphasised the expansion of the environmental movement. However, at the provincial level, officials adopted a more moderate version of the same discourses as a result of social and religious conservatism in the local society. Moreover, due to its inclusive approach, the reformist government opened the access points, and further relaxed the rules and practices of national and provincial administrations. Nevertheless, developments were slower at the provincial level with most changes taking place in the reformists' second term (2001-2005).

In contrast to the environmental domain, in the WR domain, and parallel to the reformist republican institutions, the conservative unelected institutions imposed a traditional Islamic discourse. In practice, they initiated stringent security rules to counter the growth and action of liberal NGOs in both domains, but with higher intensity in the WR domain. As a result, the environmental issue networks became battlefields between the diverse policy preferences of actors that shared a basic consensus on environmental protection, whereas there was contention between fundamentally opposing ideologies in the WR issue network. Thus, the WR issue network lacked the minimum consensus at the national level and was conflictual and confrontational. This conflictual character of the WR issue network was more intense than Rhodes & Marsh's formulation (1992, p. 187), who stated: 'a measure of agreement exists but the conflict is ever present'.

At the provincial level, the WR issue network was the venue for the friendly confluence of the Islamic and liberal discourses owing to the higher religiosity of the local society and the moderate liberal attitudes of the local government. While competitive, the environmental issue

networks were found to have a greater capacity for consensus since the Islamic institutions were passive and even cooperative with the reformist governors. Therefore, the reformist government succeeded in imposing its environmentalist discourse to a certain extent.

The difference in the character of policy networks meant that, in the political domain, the sets of actors clashed over their core beliefs. However, in the technical domain, their competition was over policy preferences. The table below shows the character of institutional aspects of the issue networks.

Table 11.4. The institutional aspect of Issue networks during the reformist period

Policy sector	Women’s rights		Environmental	
Government level	Central	Provincial	Central	Provincial
Institutions	Rules: inclusive Discourse: contentious	Rules: inclusive Discourse: competitive	Rules: inclusive Discourse: competitive	Rules: inclusive Discourse: competitive

The Conservative Period

The government adopted the Islamic approach to both domains during the conservative period. In the WR domain, the President’s Office translated this approach into a traditional discourse, which relegated women’s roles and rights to housemaker and motherhood. In the environmental domain, the Department of Environment limited environmental protection to simple executive tasks, which facilitated exploitative developmental projects. At the national level, the harmony between authoritarian and republican institutions steered the policy networks towards ultimately consistent policy communities with regards to both ideological beliefs and policy preferences. The national WR policy community was also intolerant towards radical rivals. However, at the provincial level, these policy communities were more tolerant.

Moreover, the central government, hand-in-hand with authoritarian institutions, abolished participatory practices and further closed off public access in both policy domains. At the national level, the government suppressed vocal NGOs, particularly in the WR domain. This increased the degree of ideological consensus and harmony between actors that had the same core-beliefs in the policy communities: ‘all participants share basic values and accept the

legitimacy of the outcomes' (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992, p. 187). Nonetheless, at the provincial level, the discourse of policy communities, as well as their rules and practices, were not as harsh. This meant that they still had some degree of tolerance for adversary NGOs and their preferences. The table below shows the institutional aspects of the policy communities.

Table 11.5. The institutional aspect of policy communities during the conservative period

Policy sector	Women's rights		Environmental	
Government level	Central	Provincial	Central	Provincial
Institutions	Rules: exclusive Discourse: harmonised	Rules: Exclusive Discourse: consistent	Rules: exclusive Discourse: consistent	Rules: exclusive Discourse: consistent

Implications

The findings of this research contrast with policy network theory in terms of identifying relationships amongst member actors as the mechanism of change in the rules and policies of a policy network (Dassen, 2010). The four case studies in Iran suggest that, in the centre of the network of relationships, state offices exert influence over rules and practices, and further play a key role in setting the formal discourse. Furthermore, by managing the institutional aspect of the policy networks, the reformist and conservative governments also managed the direction and output of policy networks.

The governments' strategies affected the institutional aspect of the policy networks in two different regards: the policymaking style and the policymaking climate. Regarding style, the inclusive versus exclusive styles of decision-making further characterised the policy networks' structure throughout the reformist and conservative periods. Moreover, through the discourse and rules, the state agencies adjusted the climate of the policy network as regarding its formal agenda. These two aspects further validated the dominance of specific approach in policy networks in the four cases (Wright 1988; Klijn 1996).

Howlett (2002) distinguished between incremental and sudden change. In Iran, the pace of developments in policies and rules, as well as the prevalence of discourses at the provincial

level, was found to be 'incremental' as opposed to 'disequilibrium', as the national level after a change of president. Furthermore, the scope of developments in the provincial network was often limited to official practices and administrative procedures, whilst in the capital, the Executive and Parliament changed laws, policy documents and strategies.

3.3. The Relational Aspects of Policy Networks

Whilst competing actors always existed in the policy domains, what determined their inclusion in policy networks was the arrangement of relationships, as the literature has confirmed too (Dowding, 1995; Rhodes, 1992). The four cases of policy networks demonstrated the mechanisms and practical strategies of the reformist and conservative governments in managing the arrangement of relationships. Shifting the arrangement of relationships led to a shift in the policy direction and distribution of resources as well.

The Reformist Period

The reformist government translated its liberal ideology and inclusive strategy into the policy of expanding the network of relationships, particularly between the state agencies and NGOs in both women's-rights and environmental domains. This policy resulted in integrative networks of relationships in the issue networks in both domains (Tandon, 1987). The government also distributed financial, organisational and physical support amongst non-state actors, albeit with some degree of discrimination. In return for these supports, whilst in the WR domain WRNGOs provided social capital and political support for the liberalising reforms of the government; in the environmental domain, ENGOs exchanged technical capacities and human resources for promoting environmentalist policies. At the provincial level, however, the networks of relationships developed at a slower pace, notably during the second term i.e. 2001-2005. At both national and provincial levels, the political affiliation of actors was the most critical factor which unbalanced the relational aspects in terms of character and frequency of relationships between actors. At the provincial level, personal linkages and friendships were the unbalancing factors in this area. Nevertheless, the government allowed networks to remain open so that outsiders had the chance to enter them.

An outstanding difference between the two domains was the presence of the conservative authoritarian offices during the development of relationships. In the WR domain, their

relationships with conservative WRNGOs led to the rise of a competing coalition of actors at both government levels. This made the relationships in the WR issue networks competitive and erratic. At the national level, the relationships between the liberal and the conservative coalitions were confrontational, meaning they held negative perceptions about one another. On the other hand, at the provincial level, they were friendly and tolerant owing to proximity and personal linkages. Also, in the national WR issue network, being related with one coalition meant being necessarily distant from the other. In the environmental issue networks, the government was the central actor, and authoritarian institutions adopted a lower level of intervention in the arrangement of relationships, notably at the provincial level, where they were even seen to be cooperative with the reformist government. As a result, the relationships in the environmental issue networks were more stable and friendly. The table below shows the relational aspect of issue networks throughout the reformist period.

Table 11.6. The relational aspect of Issue networks during the reformist period

Policy sector	Women's rights		Environmental	
Government level	Central	Provincial	Central	Provincial
Relationships	Array: erratic Character: confrontational	Array: erratic Character: friendly	Array: erratic Character: friendly	Array: erratic Character: friendly

The Conservative Period

Using its exclusive strategy, the conservative government closed the networks of relationships in both policy domains. In addition to terminating access points, state offices gradually closed their doors to NGOs. This restrictive and exclusive style can be explained using Waarden's argument (1992). In the environmental domain of Iran, this style was used with the justification of 'technical efficiency'; whilst in the WR domain, the government used the 'ideological compliance' justification which is political. Nevertheless, both led to the same result: a decrease in the size of WR and environmental policy networks. Whilst this occurred quickly at the national level and led to impervious policy communities, at the provincial level, conversely, the

established local and personal linkages impeded this process, thereby leading to greater flexibility in accepting relationships, especially in the environmental domain.

Moreover, in the national policy communities, the close relationships of the government with security institutions made the network's behaviour stringent over time. In the WR domain, this network of relationships was impervious as the chance of letting rivals or outsider actors in was almost zero, whereas, in the environmental domain, it demanded obedience from actors while at the same time allowing a low level of deviation or external intervention. A significant point in this area was that the articulation of relationships was hierarchical in both domains as the non-state actors were obedient of state actors owing to receiving funds and agenda from them. At the provincial level and in the environmental domain, while the nature of network or relationships was closed—i.e. they tended not to include rivals—the flexibility of relationships to allow interventions was more than at the national and in the WR domain. The table below shows the character of relationships in these policy communities.

Table 11.7. The relational aspect of policy communities during the conservative period

Policy sector	Women's rights		Environmental	
Government level	Central	Provincial	Central	Provincial
Relationships	Array: hierarchical Character: impervious	Array: hierarchical Character: strict	Array: hierarchical Character: closed	Array: hierarchical Character: closed

Implications

Both the reformist and conservative governments managed the network of relationships, which was referred to as 'game management' strategy in the literature of PN theory (Dassen, 2010). This intervention of the government had a determinative effect on the structure of policy networks.

However, in contrast to what the literature, the findings in this study suggest that 'game management' strategy of the government did not facilitate relationships in mind of maintaining the equilibrium and continuity; instead, state offices used this strategy as an instrument to co-

opt and adjust the policy networks in both periods (Dassen, 2010). Whilst several scholars, such as Smith (1992) and Marshall (1995), have suggested that the state tends to exchange relationships with non-state groups in technical domains more than political domains due to lack of resources and more needs, this study has shown a different result. State offices in Iran politicised their relationships in both domains because the political and ideological affiliation of actors outweighed the state's technical needs in managing relationships.

Moreover, the data also showed that the arrangement of the relationships and the resistance of the policy networks were influenced by the status of competition or unity between the authoritarian and republican institutions in Iran's hybrid regime. During the reformist period, these institutions competed with, and confronted each other, thus issue networks encompassed competing coalitions. During the conservative period, conversely, these institutions maintained closer relationships, which developed uniform policy communities across all domains. Also, personal relationships were found to complement official contacts, albeit in different ways, which is consistent with the recommendations of Marsh & Marsh (1992). In the reformist period, personal relationships intensified the frequency of relations in the issue networks; in the conservative period, in contrast, they impeded the government's policy of closing networks of relationships.

To conclude this section, this study shows that the policy network is not only a metaphor; it is also an analytical tool (Dowding, 1995). This means that networks of actors within different contexts are specific entities that have particular structure and aspects. Also, this theory in this study demonstrated to be potent to describe the systematic differentiation and disaggregation of the policy arena in the hybrid regime of Iran, despite the criticisms (Dowding, 1995). Comparing the three structural aspects of the policy networks across the political periods, government levels, and policy domains demonstrate a pattern of variation. This pattern in the findings can be inferred to the policy networks that are formed across political or technical domains, and at the national or local levels. The table below summarises the findings concerning the compositional, institutional, and relational aspects of policy networks in the case of this study.

Table 11.8. The comparative table of policy networks

	National level		Local level	
	Liberal ideology	Conservative ideology	Liberal ideology	Conservative ideology
Technical domain	<p><i>Issue network</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Large and diverse -Inclusive and consistent -Erratic and friendly 	<p><i>Policy community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Medium and uniform -Exclusive and consistent -Hierarchical and closed 	<p><i>Issue network</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Medium and diverse -Inclusive and consistent -Erratic and friendly 	<p><i>Policy community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Medium and uniform -Exclusive and consistent -Hierarchical and closed
Political domain	<p><i>Issue network</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Large and polarised Inclusive and -contentious -Confrontational and cooperative 	<p><i>Policy community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Large and uniform -Exclusive and harmonised -Hierarchical and impervious 	<p><i>Issue network</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Medium and diverse -Inclusive and competitive -Erratic and friendly 	<p><i>Policy community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Small and uniform -Exclusive and consistent -Hierarchical and impervious

As illustrated in the table above, while the general structure of policy networks is similar across different contexts, they vary in terms of individual aspects of their structure. The next sections will discuss the implications of this similarity, and variation for the area of this study.

4. The Interaction between Independent Variables

Concerning the aim of the research, and in consideration of the first question centred on ‘the independent exogenous factors’, a closer inspection of the influence mechanism of the political opportunity structure in the data demonstrates that the three independent variables did not function separately nor similarly across the four cases studies. In one respect, this means that there was an interaction between the independent variables while influencing the structure of the policy networks. This interaction is despite the hypothesis of this study. One essential implication of this study concerns the interaction between these three factors, as follows:

Policy Domain vs. Government Level

The theoretical framework of this study predicted that political policy networks involve the interest of a more significant portion of society and as being larger than technical ones

regarding size—consistent with Rhodes & Marsh (1992). Overall, the findings of this study suggest that this trend is evident. However, the government level showed to be intervening by intensifying or hindering this influence. The number of state and non-state actors in the women's-rights domain was found to be greater than in the environmental domain, whilst its diversity in terms of actors' interests and affiliations was also seen to be more. Remarkably, from the state side, both republican and authoritarian institutions, and from the non-state side, conservative and liberal WRNGOs, media, and political parties had organisation and role in the political domain, whilst the latter two of them were absent or passive in the technical policy networks.

At the provincial level, the effect of the policy domain was weaker as the number of actors in all policy networks was smaller. As a result, the size and diversity of provincial policy networks were relatively smaller than at the national level, regardless of the issue of the policy domain. Furthermore, in the environmental domain, the diversity of actors' profile was lower at the provincial level. Nonetheless, the environmental aspects of Golestan Province were found to be a counter-effect, as Golestan's environmental policy networks were more extensive than its WR policy networks.

Another indicator of the interaction between the policy domain and government level is the political profile of policy networks across the national and provincial levels, especially in the WR domain. Whilst the political profile of the WR domain made the relationships between competing coalitions more contentious; the intensity of the contention was lower at the lower levels of governments, both hierarchical and regional. For example, in the WR domain, the conservative Judiciary set up several joint projects with feminist WRNGOs during the reformist period. This trend was even more easily noticeable in the environmental domain, as Golestan's environmental policy networks were the most cooperative and least contentious across both reformist and conservative periods. The effect of the interaction between these two factors was similar to the stance that, as one moves from the national level to the provincial level and from the political domain to the technical domain, the structure of policy networks demonstrates greater flexibility and less contentiousness, whether issue network or policy community.

However, the interaction between the government level and policy domain factors was ineffective in the legislative area. Unexpectedly, the data showed that Parliament was less accessible and acceptant of non-state actors when compared with the Executive in all policy networks. The theoretical framework in the second chapter discussed this matter, with

Ingraham (1987) stating that this is owing to the consensual and non-administrative structure of decision-making in the legislature.

State's Political Ideology vs. Government Level

This thesis hypothesised that the state's ideology and strategy should be the main factor structuring the policy networks (Kriesi *et al.*, 1995). The cases of the study confirmed the significance of this factor; however, it also revealed that the government level could intervene in its causal influence.

In both the environmental and women's-rights policy domains in Iran, it was apparent that the reformist and conservative governments demonstrated a more radical discourse and strategy at the national level than at the provincial level. Therefore, the more immediate effect on the relationships, rules, and composition of actors was seen in the national policy networks. Whilst the shifts in the structure of policy networks was abrupt in the capital, similar shifts occurred incrementally at the provincial level. This trend was observed during both political periods.

A similar pattern of interaction between these two independent variables was evident across the administrative levels of government. Thus infers that, whilst the policy networks changed in contrary directions across 1997–2013 at the political level, the administrative level experienced more stability in terms of character and attributes. As a result, during the reformist period, the administrative levels did not become entirely liberal and, therefore, did not allow issue networks to be radically liberal. Furthermore, throughout the conservative period, the administrative level did not become entirely conservative, therefore, the policy communities did not become completely closed.

State's Political Ideology vs. Policy Domain

One hypothesis of this study was that, in the political domains, the government tends to show a less tolerant face to social pressures and critical actors than in the technical domains, as per Bashirieh (2016). The findings of this study confirm this tendency, albeit with variations. The reformist and conservative governments tried to politicise both the environmental and the women's-rights domains, though to varying degrees. The WR domain was under the immediate and more intense pressure of the state's political ideology across both periods. As a result, two contrary types of policy network were observed across the two periods, especially at the national level: contentious issue network and consistent policy community. Nonetheless, the

range of change in the environmental policy communities was less radical owing to the lower intensity of the state's political ideology and the more moderate behaviours of it in this domain.

In general, the findings concerning the interaction between the independent variables suggest that the theoretical framework in the area of the influence of political opportunity structure on policy network should be revised, and finalised, as below.

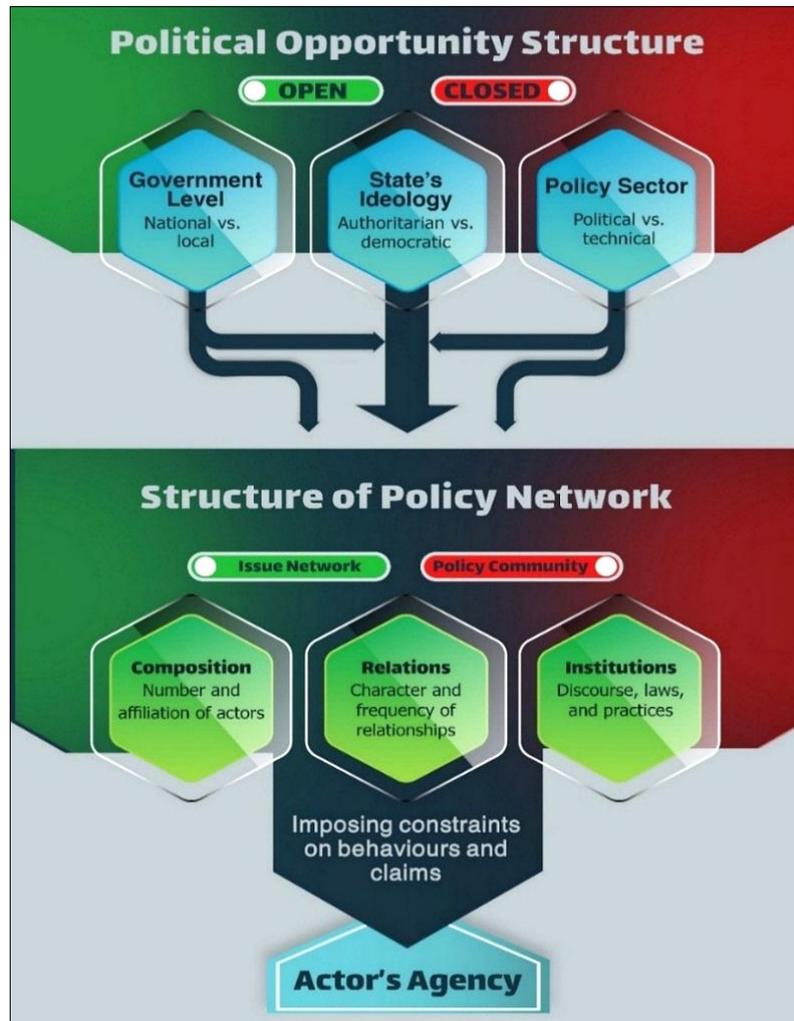


Figure 11.2. The revised theoretical framework

With regard to the first question of the present research, it can be said that the influence of macro-level factors on policy networks is not the same in terms of significance. In Iran, the development of issue networks or policy communities was the result of the interaction and contribution of all three factors, albeit with a more significant contribution of the state's political ideology, as the literature of policy network theory has also suggested (Dassen, 2010).

4.1. The Significance of the Individual Aspects of Policy Networks

At the meso level, the cases have shown some variance and inconsistency between one or two structural aspects of policy networks. This implies that a specific type of policy network can be formed with the variance or deviation of one structural aspect. In the issue networks, for example, the diversity in composition was observed to be inconsistent with the structure of the policy network. Nonetheless, the influence of the relational aspects was more significant in terms of determining the structure of policy networks. For example, in the environmental domain, the national policy community was large, and its institutional aspect was, to a certain extent, tolerant of critical actors, which meant a potential of becoming an issue network. Nonetheless, closing the network of relationships and restricting the borders of the policy network pushed it towards a uniform policy community. This is in line with Dowding's recommendations (1995) regarding the significance of policy networks' structural aspects. The policy networks in the case of Iran demonstrated that, whilst compositional and institutional aspects are influential, the relational aspect is the necessary and critical one. The literature of the policy network also revolves around the importance of relationships, which confirms the findings of this study (Dassen, 2010).

5. Policy Networks and the Agency of NGOs

The present study took a distinct line than the literature of policy network, and instead of focusing on policy outcomes, used the PN theory to specify the climate and style of policymaking of the sub-polities in political regimes, and how they enable or constrain the scope of advocacy NGOs. In this regard, the present study shows that, despite critiques against its usefulness and explanatory power, the policy network theory and meso-level analysis have intellectual and analytical power (Dowding, 1995).

Using the findings concerning three structural aspects of policy networks together shows that the policy networks, though distinguished by two general types of issue network and policy community, had further variations in their characters, which provides implications for the agency of actors. Looking at the climate and policymaking style can be a base for distinguishing between two sub-categories of policy networks in this study. Based on the inclusive or exclusive style of policymaking, the friendly or confrontational aspect of the climate, as well as the extent

of ideological and policy consensus between members, particularly in relation to the 'belief system' theory developed by Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier (1994), different characters can be assigned to policy networks, including: (i) 'diverse', 'competitive', and 'contentious' for issue networks, (ii) 'consistent', 'uniform', and 'strict' for policy communities.

By closing decision-making process and increasing the harmony of actors' ideology and policy preference, the frequency of relationships, and the rigidity of rules, a policy community transforms from a 'consistent' one to a 'uniform' or a 'strict' one. On the other hand, by increasing the diversity of actors' ideology and policy preference, the flexibility of relationships, and the tolerance of rules, and opening decision-making processes, an issue network may transform from a 'diverse' one to a 'competitive' or a 'contentious' one. These six characters of policy network in the case of Iran are demonstrated in the table below.

Table 11.9. The comparative table of the character of policy networks

		National level		Local level	
		Liberal ideology	Conservative ideology	Liberal ideology	Conservative ideology
Political	Technical	<i>Competitive</i> issue network	<i>Uniform</i> policy community	<i>Diverse</i> issue network	<i>Consistent</i> policy community
	Political	<i>Contentious</i> issue network	<i>Strict</i> policy community	<i>Competitive</i> issue network	<i>Uniform</i> policy community

Regarding the relation between political opportunity structure and policy networks, the above sub-categories of policy networks in terms of their character can be reoriented to highlights the effect of government level and policy domain (Table 11.10). In the category of issue network, when a liberal ideology runs the government, moving from the technical to the political domain and from the local level to the national level corresponds with an increase in diversity, competition, and contention. On the other hand, when a conservative ideology runs the government, in the category of the policy community, moving from the technical to the political

domain, as well as from the local to the national level, corresponds with an increase in the consistency, uniformity, and strictness.

Table 11.10. The influence of government level and policy domain on the character of policy networks

	Political domain	Technical domain
National level	- <i>Contentious</i> issue network - <i>Strict</i> policy community	- <i>Competitive</i> issue network - <i>Uniform</i> policy community
Local level	- <i>Competitive</i> issue network - <i>Uniform</i> policy community	- <i>Diverse</i> issue network - <i>Consistent</i> policy community

With regard to Iran, the character of policy networks provides implications for the array of offices of authoritarian and republican sections of the regime within policy networks, as well as their behaviours, interrelationships, and attitudes towards NGOs. This study adds that this variation is even evident when the structure of policy networks across different contexts is the same. Therefore, specifying the character of policy networks better explains the climate and environment in which advocacy NGOs played a role. As the four case studies demonstrated, policy arena in the hybrid regime of Iran, during the liberalising reforms (1997-2005) and after that (2005-2013), became the ground for the development of the two major types of policy networks: issue network and policy community.

Despite the overall consistency of the characteristics of Iranian policy networks with the characteristics that the literature of policy network recommended, the cases in Iran have nonetheless shown some deviances. The following sections provide the implications of this study for the theoretical research framework regarding: (i) issue networks; (ii) policy communities; (iii) the agency of NGOs within them.

Issue Networks

Issue networks in Iran were large, diverse, erratic and competitive, with an uneven network of relationships, as per the typology of Rhodes & Marsh (1992). However, they had some essential qualifications. Firstly, whilst the literature suggested that interrelations are expected to be non-systematic and varied in the issue network, the liberal strategy of the reformist government in both environmental and women's-rights domains elevated the relationships to a frequent level,

i.e. systematic. However, it was not equal for all non-state actors. Secondly, as expected, actors in the issue networks were not similar in terms of interest and beliefs; therefore, no consensus existed between them. Despite this, state offices used their authority to impose their intended discourse onto the issue networks, which made protectionism privileged in the environmental issue network, and egalitarianism the primary approach in the women's-rights issue network.

Policy Communities

Actors in policy communities were consistent in Iran, and they had a high level of consensus within networks, as Marsh & Rhodes suggested (1992). Nonetheless, Iranian policy communities had several deviations. Firstly, state offices were the ultimate and dominant actors in policy communities, regardless of the policy domain and government level. The articulation of relationships was hierarchical, and non-state actors were inferior to the state and dependent on the support of its offices. Secondly, the size of the policy communities was large in some cases, which was unexpected in terms of the implications of the literature of PN theory (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992), in the environmental domain, for example. Thirdly, despite the consistency in policy communities, owing to the non-integrative tendencies of the conservative government, even for insiders, members did not have frequent or equal access to policymaking centres.

The Agency of NGOs

The central issue that this study has sought to deal with is the agency of advocacy NGOs within policy networks. As the theoretical framework suggested, and as the cases further proved, the choices of action and the claims of advocacy NGOs in every context—i.e. policy domain and government level—depended on the structure of policy networks to a great extent but not in isolation.

In the issue networks, NGOs benefited from a more flexible climate and a broader scope than policy communities. In fact, the competitive climate of issue networks made room for the liberal actions and critical voices of advocacy NGOs. In policy communities, on the other hand, the structure was confining and consistent, and the treatment of outsider NGOs was harsh and stringent. Nevertheless, these tendencies varied across contexts, as previously discussed.

However, while the scholarship seeks to infer the relationship between the structure of the policy network and the agency of NGOs, this study implies that two points should be taken into account. Firstly, the technical issue networks were found to be more flexible and friendlier to

NGOs than the political issue networks. Secondly, in the policy communities, critical outsider NGOs had more options but a lower guarantee of not encountering backlash afterwards, whereas insider NGOs were privileged with inclusion but were ideological prisoners of the government (Grant, 1989). Moreover, whilst the literature suggested that actors in the policy community have regular and convenient access to and relations with state actors, the case of policy networks in Iran suggested that access to and relation-making with state agencies were more likely in the issue networks. This meant that, whilst the chance of NGOs' voices being included in policies was not guaranteed in either case, the opportunity was more considerable in issue networks.

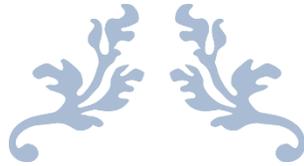
6. Conclusion

The data analysis in the thesis has demonstrated that, in hybrid regimes, policymaking has been fragmented into sub-polities with structural variations. Regarding the literature of civil society and democracy, the thesis offered that instead of using the binary of authoritarianism-democracy in analysing the macrostructure of undemocratic regimes, the scholar should bring the focus down to the day-to-day processes of policymaking and interactions among policy actors in policy networks. Respecting this, the present research used the policy network theory to explore and explain the democratic and authoritarian aspects of politics in terms of providing opportunities for the agency of advocacy NGOs within different sub-polities of the hybrid regime of Iran. The lesson learnt from this approach is that, while the political regime is not a fledged democracy, sub-polities of it, i.e. policy networks, come with a variety of democratic opportunities and undemocratic constraints for non-state actors, depending on their structure. The policy network theory also explained the distribution and relations of power between state and civil-society actors, as well as between the offices of elected and unelected institutions, across policy domains and levels of government.

The case of Iran specifically showed that policy networks are complicated, paradoxical, and dynamic in hybrid regimes. Iranian policy networks across local and national levels, as well as policy domains, functioned systematically different across the reformist and conservative periods. These policy networks knit together different positions and actors, including conservative and liberal streams from the non-state side, and, authoritarian and republican offices from the state side. These actors influenced each other in a very opaque way throughout

the processes of policymaking (Thaler *et al.*, 2010, pp. 40-43). The use of three factors of policy domain, government level, and the state's ideology helped to explore the pattern of variation between policy networks, as well as change in interactions in the opaque politics within policy networks.

In general, the multi-level and multi-domain perspective of this study of politics in hybrid regimes provides a systematic framework to study the agency of NGOs. The policy arena of hybrid regimes is dynamic and multi-layered, depending on the changes in the political opportunity structure. When scholarship moves from the regime level to the sub-polity level, a variation across domains and levels of government, is evident even if the overall structure fits into a single category like issue network or policy community. This validates the starting point of this research: the sub-polities of hybrid regimes vary and this variation constrains the agency of NGOs differently.



CHAPTER TWELVE

CONCLUSION



1. Introduction

This thesis studied the agency of advocacy NGOs in the policy networks of hybrid regimes. By contrasting two Iranian policy domains across a turnover of government, and two levels of government, this study assessed the extent to which the political opportunity structure explains variations in policy networks, and the scope of NGOs within them.

2. Findings

This thesis argued that the policy arenas of undemocratic regimes, especially in the MENA, after a period of political reforms, or regime transition, and subsequently the rise of NGOs have been differentiated like in liberal democracies. Based on this argument, the study aligned its approach with the scholarship that focuses on the post-transition period and the day-to-day interactions between state and non-state actors.

Levels of government and the issue of policy domains, as well as government turnover, should be considered as different contexts for policy networks in order to identify the scope of advocacy NGOs in undemocratic regimes. The political ideology of the state, dynamically over political periods, in an interaction with the issue of policy domain and level of government, influences the configuration and the structure of policy networks. This structure systematically varies between issue network and policy community. Accordingly, it was anticipated that the opposite types of policy networks constrain NGOs' choices of claims and actions differently.

By picking the Islamic Republic of Iran as a case study, the thesis showed how the authoritarian and republican institutions have interacted and constituted the political dynamism depending on the ideology of the government. Data was collected on both state offices and non-state actors from both liberal and conservative political camps, in the capital and Golestan local government, as well as the two different policy domains of women's rights and the environment. The use of process-tracing enabled the identification of the trajectory of policy networks across the two 8-year political terms of the 1997–2013 period when the reformist and then conservative camps ruled the country.

During the reformist period, the cases of women's-rights policy networks at the national level demonstrated that, as a result of the participatory policies and egalitarian discourse of the reformist government, an extensive and contentious issue network formed in Iran. This issue network became the battlefield of liberal and conservative actors. Simultaneously, in the Golestan local government, the practice of the reformist discourse and strategies allowed the development of a medium-sized issue network, albeit more cooperatively and at a slower pace. Nonetheless, the conservative discourses of authoritarian institutions resisted the overall dominance of the liberal stream at both government levels, which owing to the rise of conservatives in 2005, finally dominated the liberal discourse and reduced the size of the policy networks to a policy community that excluded rivals. In Golestan, with the similar restrictive and exclusive policies, participatory rules and egalitarian policies were abandoned, and, parallel with a decrease in its size, the issue network changed to a consistent policy community alongside the national level.

During the reformist period, environmental policy networks developed into a large vibrant, but friendlier issue network, mainly because authoritarian institutions left this policy domain to the reformist government. The issue network was almost consensual in terms of agreeing on the basic concept of environmental protection, but competitive regarding policy preferences. At the local level, the case study of Golestan showed that, at a slower pace, the reformist government developed a medium-sized diverse issue network. However, during the conservative period, due to social welfare programs, the government excluded the protectionist ENGOs in an effort to decrease the size and diversity of the policy network to a uniform policy community and making it an obedient. Similar trends and policies at the local level in Golestan led to a consistent policy community.

In general, the four case studies, while showing a dynamic trajectory of transformation in the structure and character of policy networks, demonstrated a correlation between this trajectory and the status of the political opportunity structure across the two political periods.

3. Contribution to the Literature

The literature on the political participation of NGOs has been either optimistic (Tocqueville, 1835) or pessimistic (Liverani, 2008; Norton, 1996). This thesis rejects this dichotomy for several reasons.

First, classic regime typologies cannot provide an accurate understanding of the agency of NGOs in the dynamic politics of hybrid regimes. This study, therefore, adopted the 'change-within-the-regime' instead of the 'regime-change' perspective and emphasised policy networks rather than just micro-political interactions.

Second, this study advocated the adaptation of meso-level theories of public policy to policymaking in hybrid regimes (Hecló 1978; Marshall 1995; Rhodes 1992, 2007). By doing so, it demonstrated that the process of decision-making and the structure of policy networks across policy domains and levels of government could vary and shift dynamically in undemocratic regimes, as it does in democratic ones.

Third, in opposition to the pessimist literature, this study revealed how in an undemocratic regime, especially the hybrid one that has institutional mechanisms of political shift established, the political structure is resilient and dynamic. It may shift between closed and open structures as the function of government turnover, which relocates the regime political character between liberal and authoritarian. In Iran, the interaction and struggle between authoritarian and republican institutions affected the direction of policymaking processes within policy networks. It can be said that, while the elected state institutions provided NGOs with mechanisms of influencing the policymaking process in Iran, the authoritarian institutions functioned like a 'lighthouse' that spread lights across the policy arena to warn and contain societal pressures. However, this lighting and containing mechanism varied fundamentally across domains and levels, and therefore, affected the distribution of political opportunities for NGOs. In this area, the thesis took inspiration from theories of social movement and the concept of political opportunity structure (Porta & Diani, 1999; Kriesi, 2007).

Regarding the second and third points, the present study takes a critical stance against scholars that argue Western-originated theories cannot apply to undemocratic regimes like Iran because of unsystematic or arbitrary government (Katouzian; 1997; Ganji, 2008). The circulation of power through regular elections showed predictable variation in the policy setting of this country.

Fourth, this research study contributed to knowledge of the advocacy role of NGOs as pressure groups in politics, as opposed to their executive roles in development (Grant, 1989). It addressed the bias of the current body of scholarship towards the executive function of NGOs (Mercer 2002), while also accounting for the role of NGOs in executive and technical areas, such

as environmental protection; notably, however, this was done from the perspective of public representation in policy formulation. The comparison in this thesis showed that while at the national level of policymaking hybrid regimes impose more constraints on advocacy NGOs, across technical and political areas the severity and harshness of the constraints differ. Also, while in technical domains more political freedoms allow a broader range of both moderate and confrontational actions by NGOs, in political domains, regardless of the state's ideology, there is always a chance of suppression, which however varies across levels of government.

Fifth, this study well captured and explained the diversities and variations that exist in the civil society of hybrid regimes, particularly Iran. The use of policy network theory helped here. From one perspective, the composition of Iranian civil society organisations in policy networks included conservative and reformist NGOs that confronted each other with opposing ideologies and discourses in each domain and level of government. From another perspective, NGOs were allied with or rival to the ruling elites regarding the co-optation and recruitment of NGOs by the government during both the reformist and conservative political period. NGOs, also, differed in terms of size, resources, membership, organisation that led to variations in their character, discourse and behaviour.

Sixth, this study contributed to public policy theory. It demonstrated the descriptive power of the policy network theories in hybrid regimes. In this area, it also developed the policy network literature in particular by explaining the political opportunity structure as the independent variable causing a change in the structure of the policy network. This fills a gap in this area as brings the scholarship's focus from the endogenous factors to exogenous factors in explaining the transformation of policy networks (Marshall, 1995; Dowding, 1995). Also, it was shown that the internal arrangement of relationships and members' properties within policy networks are not the only, nor the principal, cause of change, instead the circulation of power alongside the decentralisation of power across government levels and policy domain have a significant influence from on policy networks.

Seventh, the comparison of policy networks showed that across political and technical domains, the same type of policy network, i.e. policy community or issue networks, can present very different environments for the agency of advocacy NGOs. This finding is also an implication for Rhodes & Marsh (1992), as it adds to their theory that the structure of the policy network by itself does not entirely explain the scope of actors within it.

4. Implications for Policymakers

Supporting and developing civil society has been a widely accepted aim at the global level in recent decades. Large amounts of money, along with training and support programmes, are delivered to NGOs with the intention of advocating democracy and enhancing political participation in undemocratic countries. However, not only has the dream of democracy not been realised, but advocacy NGOs have failed to promote the anticipated political agendas. This thesis provides policymakers and politicians with a better understanding, especially in Western countries, such as the US, as well as specialists on civil society in international organisations such as the UN and EU.

The first implication of this study is that the capacities and scope of NGOs in practice vary from one field to another. Policymakers, especially reformist leaders, cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach and expect the same results from NGOs. Technical fields provide NGOs with the freedom they lack in political fields. The theoretical framework of this study can be adopted as a guide to identify the structure and climate in which advocacy NGOs play a role. By doing so, the level of expectation from NGOs can be readjusted.

This study provides a better understanding of the real politics of undemocratic regimes for diplomats and foreign policymakers in Western countries that adopt 'regime change' as a policy. This study has illustrated the democratic capacities of the hybrid political system, such as participatory rules and established a civil society, besides their already-known undemocratic aspects. A closer look at the public policy fields can create better understanding concerning the degree to which people and NGOs are engaged with day-to-day politics and policymaking, as well as how, instead of paying the cost of regime change, Western politicians can enhance the position and scope of people's organisations in the current settings of policymaking.

The second implication of this research may be useful for NGOs and civil activists. While NGO activists may be the ones that know the best practices on the field, by establishing systematic variation between the profile, behaviour and attitudes of state agencies within different types of policy domain and also across government levels, advocacy NGO activists can adopt more efficient political strategies to maximise their influence.

There are also implications for political actors in Iran. By understanding the multifaceted configuration and dynamism of politics, political camps can learn that representing public demands and democratising processes of decision-making can be fulfilled through gradually

shifting the arrangement of sub-polities in different fields and through domain-specific strategies instead of confronting authoritarian institutions and leaders. Choosing contextual strategies in policy networks and making more effective coalitions can democratise governance processes more quickly and at a lower cost.

5. Further Academic Research

Political science needs to integrate the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis when studying hybrid regimes. This study can help adapt public policy theories to hybrid regimes so as to understand the way in which democratic and undemocratic institutions and characteristics are combined systematically across sub-polities, and how this conditions the agency of advocacy NGOs.

First, there is a need to study the same policy domain across different undemocratic countries. For example, a study on women's-rights policy networks in Iran and Turkey would provide an essential insight into the similarities and differences between the two regimes in the same field.

Second, comparing the most similar policy network structures, e.g. policy communities, across democratic and undemocratic countries can provide comparative implications regarding the nature of these regimes. Given the dominant position of state agencies in policy networks of both democratic and undemocratic countries, further studies can help to explore further similarities and differences in different regimes, as well as the extent of authoritative vs democratic attitudes of state agencies.

Third, further studies can also adopt the comparative design and theoretical framework of this study with a focus on the role of other policy actors, both state and non-state. For example, the same research can be performed on the role of media or political parties in women's-rights or environmental policy networks in other undemocratic countries.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this study seems to be an adaptable model for both democratic and undemocratic regimes across the world. This study has prepared the ground for future comparative studies across countries, policy domains and government levels through meso level analysis. The higher the number of focused case studies, the more scholarship can provide accurate implications on the variations in policymaking between different sub-polities in hybrid regimes.

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Appendix 1. The List of Respondents in Golestan

Resp	Affiliation	Status	Policy Domain	Background
1	Civil Society	NGO: president	Women's-rights	Civil activist, political activist, senior advisor to the government
2	Civil Society	NGO: member	Environmental	Civil activist, journalist
3	Civil Society	NGO: president	Environmental	Civil activist
4	Civil Society	NGO: president	Women's-rights	Civil activist
5	Civil Society	NGO: president	Women's-rights	City council member, civil activist
6	Civil Society	NGO: member	Environmental	Civil activist
7	Civil Society	NGO: member	General	Senior manager to governor general, civil activist, political activist
8	Civil Society	NGO: president	General	Civil activist, political activist
9	Civil Society	Freelance activist	General	Political activist, lecturer, journalist
10	Civil Society	Party member	General	Director general, political activist
11	Civil Society	Party member	General	Governor general, political activist
12	Civil Society	Journalist	General	City council member, press editor, political activist

13	State: reformist	Senior advisor and manager	Women's- rights	Civil activist, senior manager in governor general office
14	State: reformist	Senior advisor	Environmental	Civil activist, journalist
15	State: conservative	Director general	Environmental	Head of city council, director general, civil activist
16	State: reformist	Director general	Women's- rights	Director general for 'Women Affairs'
17	State: conservative	Senior advisor	Women's- rights	City council member, civil activist
18	State: reformist	Director general	General	City council member. director general for NGOs office, political activist
19	State: conservative	Senior manager	General	Civil activist, senior civil servant, senior manager
20	State: conservative	Director general	General	Director general for 'NGOs office'
21	State: reformist	Governor general	General	Governor general, political activist
22	State: conservative	Senior advisor	General	Civil activist
23	State: reformist	MP	General	Political activist
24	State: conservative	MP	General	Political activist

Appendix 2. The List of Respondents in the Capital

Resp	Affiliation	Status	Domain	Background
1	Civil Society	NGO: president	Environmental	Civil activist, advisor for government organisations
2	Civil Society	NGO: member	Environmental	Civil activist, party member, Journalist
3	Civil Society	NGO: member	Environmental	Civil activist, political activist, journalist
4	Civil Society	NGO: member	Women's-rights	Civil activist, human rights activists
5	Civil Society	NGO: president	Women's-rights	Civil activist, student activist, political activist
6	Civil Society	NGO: member	Women's-rights	Civil activist, political activist, a scholar on women area
7	Civil Society	NGO: president	Women's-rights	Civil activist
8	Civil Society	NGO: member	Women's-rights	Civil activist, political activist
9	Civil Society	NGO: president	Women's-rights	Civil activist, human rights activist, student activist
10	Civil Society	Freelance activist	General	Civil activist, political activist
11	Civil Society	Scholar	General	Civil activist, political activist, scholar
12	Civil Society	Journalist	General	Civil activist, press editor, political activist

13	State: reformist	Senior advisor	Environmental	Advisor to the 'National Organisation for Environmental Protection', political activist
14	State: conservative	Senior manager	Women's- rights	Senior manager and advisor in the presidential 'Deputy for Women Affairs', political activist
15	State: reformist	Deputy president	Women's- rights	Former president deputy for 'Women Affairs', political activist
16	State: conservative	Senior advisor	Environmental	Advisor to the 'National Organisation for Environmental Protection', political activist
17	State: reformist	MP	General	Former MP, former governor general, political activist
18	State: conservative	MP	General	MP, political activist
19	State: reformist	Governor general	General	Governor general, political activist
20	State: conservative	Director general	General	Director general for NGO in the Ministry of Interior

Appendix 3. The Questions of Interviews

The main questions of the interviews/questionnaires were as below. Based on the position and area of interest/career of the policymakers and NGO activists, the questions were adjusted while interviewing. Also, further questions were extracted from the responses of respondents.

Part 1-ideologies, discourse, and perceptions

- What is the perception of conservative and reformist camps about democracy, civil society, and freedom in Iran?
- Regarding the political ideology of the regime in Iran, please state your opinion about perception and view of the reformist and conservative camps and governments concerning advocacy NGOs.
- How political leaders perceive NGOs in Iran? How do they think about women's-rights/environmental NGOs?
- Describe the position of NGOs in the government structure. To what extent governors usually recognise NGOs in decision-making?
- Using your personal experience, please evaluate the status of local/national governors and policymakers' view, perception, and knowledge about civic activities and political participation in Iran. What is their definition of NGO? What is their definition of women's-rights/environmental NGOs?
- How do the high-rank politicians define women's-rights/environmental domain? How the reformist and conservative cabinet and Parliament defined these domains? How in the administrative levels bureaucrats and officials treated NGOs, and through what mechanisms?

Part 2-priorities and agendas

- What were the more important issues in the environmental/women's-rights in Iran? What priorities your organisations sought in the environmental/women's-rights domain?
- What were the priorities of the reformist government in the environmental/women's-rights domain?

- What demands and causes were regarded as legitimate and accepted? What demands and causes were not tolerated?

Part 3-NGOs, decision-making, and participation

- What is your opinion about the scope and power of NGOs in term of promoting people participation in public policymaking? How much difference did NGOs make during the 1997-2013?
- To what extent NGOs have improved the influence of people on public decision-making? How different was the participation of NGOs in legislation and policymaking? How this influence varied between political and technical domains? How it varied between the two periods?
- What are the main offices and organisations that regulate the activities and participation of NGOs in Iran? what are the legislative offices that play a role in policymaking in women's-rights/environmental domains? Which offices and organisations are responsible for the women's-rights and environmental areas?
- How regular policymakers and offices in the women's-rights/environmental areas accepted NGOs in meetings and committees during the reformist and conservative periods? How regular were the contacts reformists and conservative MPs with NGOs?
- What are the subjects and areas in which NGOs are more powerful and effective in terms of influencing public policymaking? Please take into account the formal ways of participation in policymaking.
- How did the reformist and conservative offices try to employ or co-opt NGOs? How much the governmental donations undermined the independence of NGOs?
- What security offices and organisations frequently made contacts with NGOs? During the reformist and conservative periods, how different were security forces in their behaviours? Please present examples of interactions with security offices? How in the environmental/women's-rights security forces interacted NGOs?
- What were the Islamic organisations and offices that play a role in the women's-rights/environmental areas? How did they interact with NGOs?
- Please point out some of the decisions, policies or projects that were made jointly with NGOs included?

Part 4- opportunities and obstacles

- What are the main opportunities and obstacles of NGOs in legal and formal rules? What formal procedures and Islamic codes impede or enable NGOs in women's-rights/environmental areas?
- What were the social traditions that enabled or impeded NGOs participation in the reformist/conservative Iran?
- Which features of the government of Iran restrict and limit NGOs in term of policy participation? Please take into account the bureaucratic features, rules and laws, political trends, and controlling mechanisms of the state.
- How the reformist and conservative governments changed the structure of offices and regulations and rules concerning the inclusion of NGOs in decision-making? How did the reformist and conservative Parliaments act differently in this area?

Part 5-relationships

- What is the type of interaction between the government and NGOs in Iran?
1. Cooperative
 2. Competitive
 3. conflictual

Other, please explain:

- How different were the relationships during the reformist and conservative periods? How it varied between the two levels of government and areas of activities?
- To what extent did NGOs make relationships with political parties and mass media? On what areas they cooperated more than others? How do you evaluate the character and frequency of relationship of NGOs with political parties and media? Please name some of the parties and the media that made regular relationships with NGOs.
- On what areas NGOs made relationships with mass media? How effective was the relationship of NGOs with media? How different was this relationship during the reformist and conservative periods?
- How different reformist and conservative governors confronted NGOs?
- How was the relationship of NGOs/state offices with Islamic organisations? In what areas they had relationships? How close were they?
- On what online or media platforms NGO activists made a relationship with partisan and journalists during the two periods?

Appendix 4. The Consent Form for Interviews

Before the interviews and questionnaires, the researcher sought the consent of all the participants of the research project. This was done either verbally or written. The translation of the consent form is as below:

Dear Participant, hi

I am a PhD student in Political Science and International Relations at Dublin City University in Ireland. I am researching the role of advocacy NGOs in Iran during the two periods of the 1997-2005 and 2005-2013. I seek to identify NGOs' opportunities and constraints during those periods. Regarding your experience, background, and knowledge I would like to ask you to attend this academic research as a respondent. This interview/questionnaire includes a number of questions that are organised in several sections. They focus on the various issues related to the position and relationships of NGOs. I have been interviewing policymakers, NGO activists, and experts in this project. The outcomes and information of this research will be employed for revealing the political opportunities of NGOs in the 1997-2013 Iran and will present some implications for improving the political participation in Iran. In addition to submission to Dublin City University as a PhD thesis, the outcomes of the study will be shared and presented in academic and scientific journals. For this, however, the information and name of respondents will not be shared or disclosed to any organisation, person, or government. It is only for the purpose of the thesis. I guarantee that the personal information and contents of interviews will not be identified. Also, I promise not to share any information that identifies you with anyone outside my research. I promise there won't be any risks for participants in this project. All the recordings and questionnaires will be deleted 6 months after the research project. Participating in this questionnaire is entirely voluntary for you. I am so thankful to you because of allocating time to respond to the questions.

Mohsen Moheimany