

## Chapter 9

# Co-opting civil society activism in Iran

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### Introduction

The issue of civil society activism and its supposedly positive role in fostering political transitions to democracy is a long-standing debate in the democratisation literature and has been analyzed by scholars and explored with interest by donors and politicians too. Traditionally, civil society activism has been viewed as crucial in bringing about the democratic transformations of authoritarian regimes, but more recent studies have highlighted how civil activism may paradoxically lead to ‘authoritarian upgrading’<sup>1</sup> rather than democratic advancement.<sup>2</sup> Such findings run counter to the ones postulated by the democratisation paradigm, but the current dichotomous debate should not overlook other potential lines of inquiry, linked in particular to the functions civil organisations have in a specific political system. By examining what meanings are behind the banner of ‘civil society’ and its uses, it is possible to provide a clearer picture of the dynamics at work between ruling elites and civil activism in an authoritarian context like Iran. The objective of this chapter is to capture such dynamics going beyond the traditional representation of a country simplistically divided between ‘civil society’ and the state by focusing on their interaction. Exploring the nature of civil activism and in particular the relations between state and civil organisations during the two last presidencies, this study offers an account of the techniques displayed by the regime in order to set up and govern a ‘system of obedience’ *through the control of* civil organisations.<sup>3</sup> This highlights how the Iranian regime considers violence and repression only one among the many tools of political control.<sup>4</sup> Recalling Michel Foucault, the way the Iranian regime exercises power and perpetrates soft coercion<sup>5</sup> will be explored. Such an ‘operation of alignment’ can be channelled through the official bureaucracy and through any kind of organisation, with little importance for their legal or supposed status – dependent or independent.

In addition, the study will also address how those civil organisations which accepted such a ruling system enjoyed significant benefits. The civil organisations' behaviour will be explored, beyond the idea that the relation between them and the government is over-determined by the latter. In the game of state-society relations, the regime is only one of the players and civil organisations, even those very close to the power, can find an independent path to raise their voice and make 'unintended' and problematic demands. This means that the option for civil society groups is not simply between repression and collaboration. As a matter of fact, there is a long list of possibilities to be included in. Through the analysis of both government's actions and organisations' reactions, organisations become a tool in the researcher's hands to highlight the mechanisms of consensus and mutual political strengthening.

Following on from this argument, the distinction between NGOs and 'GONGOs' is not considered a useful analytical tool to explore the relations between the government and civil society groups. Although the normative difference is not questioned, even the independent and 'liberal-looking' NGOs – which, in the Iranian case, may be better labelled 'reformist-oriented' and 'human rights-oriented' – have served the government's interests, thus protecting their interests too. In order to highlight the terms of such closeness, the essay compares a context of 'authoritarian enhancement', namely Ahmadinejad's times, with a context of political liberalisation, or Khatami's times.

### **Iran: The Mainstream Narrative of Civil Activism**

For a number of years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been depicted as being on the verge of political change and, more specifically, of a process of democratic transition. Khatami's election to the presidency in 1997 galvanized these expectations. His relaxed style and good-natured criticism of the harsh attitudes of the conservative establishment caused a common and almost universal wave of support for the 'smiling mullah' among ordinary Iranians. More significantly, his political discourse, focusing on effective and forceful key words such as 'democracy', 'civil society', 'rule of law', and 'dialogue among civilisations,' appealed to the wider public. Thus, even when the 'demo-crazy'<sup>6</sup> wave in the literature on political change in the Arab world subsided due the fact that the genuine regime changes were just not taking place in the Middle East,<sup>7</sup> the Iranian case still excited a number of scholars and policy-makers who

believed a radical change towards democratic governance to be imminent. The shared assumption was that, despite all the difficulties and the fierce conservative opposition, Khatami was ruling a dynamic country, whose active and autonomous civil society would lead to a more liberal and democratic exercise of power thanks to the strength of young people and women's engagement.<sup>8</sup> Such a representation of reality became popular both in scholarly and policy making circles, promoting the conflation of the concepts of civil society, personal engagement, democratisation, and human rights NGOs, whose activities were assumed to help a democratic transition.<sup>9</sup> It is sometimes even suggested that there is an ongoing confrontation between 'modernity and tradition' in the field of social engagement,<sup>10</sup> where NGOs play a modernizing social and political role, educating to civility and citizenship.

The strength of this narrative, focused on people's political struggle, social resistance, and engagement, is not understandable without considering past stereotypes portraying Iranian society as submissive, politically homogeneous, and socially static. The reaction to this cliché has caused, however, a shift from representing Iran as a homogeneous society to one portraying Iran as 'schizophrenic.' This understanding of Iranian reality is also present in non-academic literature. Here, the contrast between a public sphere dominated by a strict Islamic code of behaviour and a private life characterized, on the contrary, by crazy parties and sexual libertinism is popular.<sup>11</sup> Such a binary representation moulds the representation of the social and political life of the country too, seen as deeply divided between a dynamic 'civil society' and an authoritarian state-system.<sup>12</sup> Following the logic of this comparison, the country has often been perceived in the middle of a confrontation between 'modernity and tradition'<sup>13</sup> – which has sometimes been understood as the struggle between 'democracy and Islam.' Claiming the existence of a 'civil society' was thus perceived as a way to defend the idea of Iran as a diverse and tolerant country; and more precisely, in this context NGOs were the distinctive mark of modernity, distinguished from the forms of popular solidarity or informal welfare that already existed in Iran.

## **Civil Organisations as a Device for Support and Discontent Control During Khatami's Era**

In Khatami's era, the rhetoric of civil society and the establishment of NGOs reached an unprecedented popularity.<sup>14</sup> Khatami – a rather weak president, caught between powerful opponents and an impatient electoral base – directed his efforts in establishing a strategy based on a number of key words such as reform and a diffused and supportive base of political activism. As the reformists' motto stated: 'pressure from below and negotiation (*chuneh*, also translated as 'bickering') at the top.' This project was reflected in the reformists' idea of 'civil society': a bottom-up movement supporting the upper level, which would have been thus defended by the emerging societal consensus in favour of reform. In order to build up such a system, Khatami and his allies facilitated through the legislative process the creation of associations and civil organisations. A special and dedicated bureaucratic apparatus was created to promote the establishment of NGOs because, as stated in the Third Development Plan (2000-2005), 'the government, by necessity, depends on the NGOs [...] which by their sheer nature are in constant contact with the people.'<sup>15</sup> For its part, 'the government must provide necessary support, create opportunities and facilitate an empowering environment for the work of NGOs.'<sup>16</sup> Such governmental support for civil society support was demonstrated through the establishment of a Central Supervisory Board, composed of NGOs representatives in continuous contact with the Social Affairs Sector of the Ministry of Interior. The shared idea was that 'an organised society is a developed society'<sup>17</sup> and this should have constituted the first step toward the creation of a *pasokhguy* government<sup>18</sup>: accountable government. Through the structuring of independent associations, according to a widespread opinion, it would then be possible to lead the change towards democracy, even if indirectly.<sup>19</sup> This 'organised civil society' was both independent and integrated in the state's institutions and it is no coincidence that many positions and names on both sides overlap.<sup>20</sup> For instance, many politicians and governmental officials headed non-governmental organisations, 'independent' newspapers, or governmental offices for legal initiatives while being 'independent' critics.

The Khatami government did not only encourage the development of civil society, but took very direct action in sponsoring the establishment of 'NGOs.' According to some opinions, this is the reason why the NGOs network was established in 1998 and

‘setting up civil organisations was a means employed by Khatami’s administration to divert the attention from the crack-down of internal dissent. In this way, the government was proving that the goals stated in official statements and speeches [namely, the strengthening of ‘civil society’ and organisations] had a practical application too.’<sup>21</sup> The birth of this network of organisations was the outcome of a conference held in the same year, which saw the participation of many among the parliamentary deputies, international organisations representatives, and some representatives of the Iranian associations sector, paradoxically headed by an influential deputy of the Interior Minister. The foundation of this network had the consequence of setting a *de facto* model for NGOs, justifying the government’s ‘politics of participation’<sup>22</sup> which put forward the criteria to be followed in order to be a trusted and accepted organisation.

The duties of this network included managing and regulating NGOs’ relations with the government on the one side, and with transnational channels of fundraising on the other. From this position, the network was able to control almost all the relations every association had. The member associations were under close scrutiny, and, furthermore, the Deputy Interior Minister remained a key member of the NGOs’ network management for many years. The members of this network often enjoyed indirect advantages. For some, the advantage was prestige: for instance, the president of one of the most important women’s organisations in Tehran was nominated head of the Presidential bureau for legal initiatives on women’s condition. Another member, who left Iran shortly after Ahmadinejad’s victory, became a leading member of the Presidential bureau for NGOs initiatives, an experience which allowed her to accumulate a high degree of credibility among Iranians both at home and abroad. For others, the advantage was increased political credibility. Engaged in associations and *Khatamism*, some people gained a high level of social recognition and credibility – something that Daniel Gaxie called the ‘rewards for militancy.’<sup>23</sup> This is something they enjoy today too, although they escaped from Iran, and foreign governments and journalists look at them as important stakeholders to be consulted and whose views should be considered when issues about Iran on the international stage are raised.<sup>24</sup> For others still, advantages were more direct: help from the presidency, support and protection from eventual juridical harassment, faster administrative track to obtain permissions or documents. For instance, some organisations received eviction notices for their offices due to the activities and this was taken care of by the presidency.

Specifically, this was the case of a women organisation which offered shelter and legal assistance to women victims of harassment. The organisation was told to leave its headquarters, yet managed to gain informal presidential support and avoided eviction.<sup>25</sup>

These techniques of ‘taming’ civil organisations paradoxically engendered however a desire of political independence. Thus, a relevant part of civil organisations were among the most vocal critics of the government and accused Khatami of being weak and too willing to compromise. In some cases the reformist government reacted to this criticism by resorting to mechanisms of soft coercion, such as undermining the political credibility and trustworthiness of individual activists and through a propagandistic use of the information apparatus. This was the strategy enacted for instance in the case of the student organisation *Tahkim-e Vahdat*, which became a group of ‘hooligans’ when too vocal in their criticism.<sup>26</sup> Before then, Khatami had extensively celebrated it as the ‘forerunner of democratisation.’

The reformist governments also tried to improve Iran’s international and diplomatic position through NGOs because the latter can be more welcome interlocutors than the government of the Islamic Republic itself, a problematic partner for many countries. This was one of the functions of the NGOs’ network and also of the Centre for the Dialogue among Religions, an NGO headed by Khatami’s former Vice President in the Parliamentary Legal Affairs. The Centre formally helped the inter-religious dialogue and informally kept contacts and fostered diplomatic ties. The Center for the Dialogue among Civilisations, another NGO headed by Khatami, also had similar goals. Many initiatives and meetings were organized<sup>27</sup> with the goal of

‘enhancing the cooperation between governmental and international agencies, and concerned NGOs both domestically and abroad. The most interesting thing is that the network became a tool in the reformists’ hands, whilst their image abroad was the one of an independent organisation, whose credibility was not questioned thanks to the political legitimacy they enjoyed domestically.’<sup>28</sup>

The NGOs network succeeded in imposing itself as a reliable representative of the ‘democratic, independent and good’ Iranian associations in the world’s eyes, and in particular in the Iranian diaspora’s ones. In fact, it became a tool for the recruitment of consensus and volunteer summer-workers among Iranian expatriates who very often

are English speakers, well-educated, committed, and represented for many organisations ‘a considerable pool of resources’<sup>29</sup> to be had for free. Young people were attracted by the opportunity of going back to Iran, helping its development, democratisation, working for a NGO.<sup>30</sup> This shows the strength of the rhetoric of ‘civil society’ and ‘NGOs for good’ all over the world.

The construction of a coherent universe of references for social activism needed the establishment of a cultural hegemony too. The intellectual apparatus that the reformists set up has been perceived as a signal of the independent advocacy of ‘civil society’ and democratic pressure from below.<sup>31</sup> Yet when checking the names of those involved in the reformist intellectual circles and journalism, we find many members of the political elite, whose career is very long and linked to the Islamic left before and to reformist political circles later – not really outsiders. Musavi Khoehinia, Sa’id Hajjarian, Mehdi Karroubi, Mohammad Reza Khatami, Hamidreza Jalaipour, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, Hashem Aghajari are just some of the names of those who distinguished themselves as politicians during the eighties, and later became editors, journalists, intellectuals, university professors, writers, sociologists, members of professional associations, while maintaining an active role in the political life of the country. The government and the reformist elite could thus define what ‘being reformist’ was and how ‘civil society engagement’ had to look like. The success of this soft coercion was clear: ‘being an activist’ was fashionable among young people, and in particular, ‘being a reformist journalist’ was a real status-symbol playing an important role in social reputation and self-representation.<sup>32</sup>

The structuring of political participation can be seen in the call for the establishment of political parties too, considered as a mark of ‘political modernity.’ In the inaugural speech of the first national congress of the Front for the Iranian-Islamic Participation (*Jehbe Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami*), the reformist coalition supporting Khatami’s governments, Mohammad Reza Khatami, the president’s younger brother and leader of the group, declared that ‘the constitution of an open, rational and effective political system is our goal. It must be accessible to all the activists [*bacheha fa’olliyat*], who will in this way be able to continue their work... Thus we must become a real party, as this is the first step toward a broader transformation.’<sup>33</sup> A similar position was expressed by the Islamic Labour Party (*Hezb-e Kar-e Islami*), which urged all the active political groups in Iran to state clearly their choices and opinions, ‘for not creating confusion among the population.’<sup>34</sup> In 2002, with the

objective of helping and supporting the establishment of parties, the reformist administration created the House of Parties (*Khane-ye Hezbha*), which registered all the political formations in the country. In 2008, their list counted 168 parties,<sup>35</sup> while the Interior Ministry's statistics considered 240 political organisations (*tashakol-ha siasi*).<sup>36</sup> Both the difference in the counting and the organisations' names deserve attention: for instance, the registered organisations are the Islamic association of pathologists, the Front of Iranian youngsters, the Islamic medical association of Iran, or the Azeri graduate association. A huge number of participants were also seen on the occasion of the 2000 parliamentary elections, when the reformist coalition, the *Dovvom-e Khordad Front*, listed 232 candidates.<sup>37</sup> From this the question arises whether participation is a synonym for carrying weight and influence. 'We could hardly suggest that these organisations [and nominees] are independent or powerful. Instead, I would say that they are elements of a diffused network of support for well-known candidates,'<sup>38</sup> which channel, govern and structure in this way the political engagement. The call for participation also aimed at orienting the requests and governing 'modes of participation.' This testifies to the fact that even within the institutional political sphere, the much celebrated 'pressure from below' was not free indeed, but was more an expression of organised consensus emanating from the top. Ziba Jalali Na'ini observed that the efforts made by the then-government to protect and assist women's organisations in the preparation of the 1995 Beijing conference was the embodiment of the paradox of being seen by many as a step toward women's empowerment, but being in reality a mean to flatten women's requests on the government's will.<sup>39</sup>

### **Civil Organisations' Control and Interests During Ahmadinejad's Era**

If Khatami's governments have been associated with the expectation of a political *ouverture*, Ahmadinejad's Iran is associated with social oppression and control. Analyses on political activism during the last five years in Iran underline the governmental repression of NGOs on the one side, and the rise of GONGOs on the other. Such analyses emphasize the elements of co-optation and social control, suggesting the existence of a 'code of conduct' which becomes the condition to



escape renewed repression. These accounts correctly report the violent coercion enacted by Ahmadinejad's governments and the security apparatus on civil society groups. Restrictions however are not only imposed through violence, but can be implemented through less overt means: stricter interpretations of the law or new administrative obstacles limiting social activism. Finally, new restrictions to political agency can be imposed through new definitions of what 'social activism' is or how it should look like. Once in office, Ahmadinejad took control of the ministries and related offices and he proceeded swiftly to replace deputies, amend laws and to transform the functions of official posts into duties and rights. The attempt to exercise a much stricter control over civil activism was clear from the beginning of his mandate.

The law on civil organisations was changed under the pressure of the Information Ministry, with the new text introducing a new name for NGOs and allowing for a more restrictive interpretation of the organisations' legal spaces of action. A new Deputy of the Social Sector Affairs, the one dealing with NGOs representatives, was nominated and this change caused tensions with the Central Supervisory Board. As a matter of fact, the new director decided a general review of the permits issued to NGOs, and lobbied 'with individuals and institutions that previously issued permits, for centralizing all the required work at the Interior Ministry.'<sup>40</sup> He also accepted the interference of the security apparatus into the process for issuing permits to civil organisations.<sup>41</sup> In 2007, the goal of centralisation was achieved through the establishment of a Department of Community-based Organisations within the Ministry of Interior,<sup>42</sup> as all the administrative and legal incumbencies concerning civil organisations passed on to it. This new environment first 'disoriented the NGOs community',<sup>43</sup> but more significantly it later had the effect of breaking up the unity of the NGOs representatives at the Supervisory Board:

'there has been a strong pressure on the single members of the board [...]. There had already been cases of arrests, detentions, violent irruptions in the offices of some organisations, and people were worried... Families of NGOs workers were harassed... some members almost enthusiastically embraced the new *diktat* of the government, and it was exactly what they did before, with the reformists' one... They just adapted to the new course... so, for many the board stopped to be a trustable organ,'

said a witness.<sup>44</sup> This account reports the strong pressure exerted on the community of civil organisations. The aim of the government was to divide the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’: some NGOs lost their licenses and their workers lost the work permit because they didn’t accept the governmental pressure. Many fled the country and re-established their organisations abroad. The aim of establishing a new environment for NGOs was however the *normalization* of organisations’ behaviour, not necessarily their definitive exclusion. If the organisations were ready to correct their positions and follow the new governmental conservative line, they would be re-integrated in the social and economical life of the country. Such a difference is of great importance, as it portrays a model where the ‘surveillance’ doesn’t aim at excluding *per se*, rather at gaining loyalty and affiliations.

In early 2006, after few months that Ahmadinejad started to govern the country, the name ‘non-governmental organisations’ was changed in *sazmanha-ye mardom-e nahad*, SAMAN, normally translated as ‘community-based organisations’ or ‘people’s organisations.’<sup>45</sup> Such a change was accompanied by a shift in the institutional approach to the organisations. According to some witnesses, even if ‘the law hasn’t drastically been changed, we are under much closer scrutiny: our budget and our personal opinions are deeply scrutinized, we’re under perpetual stress. Many people have passed the last few years trying to convince the government that they are not American or Israeli spies.’<sup>46</sup> It is reported that during the first year of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, almost one hundred organisations lost their permit because of ‘the lack of photos and incorrect bureaucratic language in their documents.’<sup>47</sup> The current attitude of the government is characterized by a securitarian outlook, which has become more pronounced since the contested June 2009 election. New limitations and bans have been set and imposed not only through legal actions but also by exploiting the political public discourse, designing a smaller and smaller room for political agency and expression for civil organisations. Twenty days after the disruption of the 2009 protests, the Tehran prosecutor declared that NGOs are the instrument used by international imperialism to carry out *coups d’état*.<sup>48</sup> Similar remarks have been later confirmed and repeated by Alireza Afshar, former *bassij* commander and current head of the social and cultural section of the Interior Ministry (and thus part of the apparatus controlling SAMANs), who added that the organisations do not have the right to publicly criticize the government.<sup>49</sup>

Among the civil society community in Iran, the change of the name from NGOs to SAMANs has been perceived as a fundamental step in the effort of changing the nature of civic activism, as ‘SAMAN does not imply, at a theoretical level, a specific relation with government. SAMAN just means popular organisations, and it has a very general meaning.’<sup>50</sup> The government did not only introduce a new name and imposed it on civil society, but attempted to also shift the focus towards themes, such as economic development, that the government itself wants to push. According to a representative of one of the biggest civil society organisations in Iran, which also serves as ‘facilitator’ for the relationships between the SAMANs and the government, ‘there is a growing interest in the topic of development. We work in this field, and our mission is to keep alive the spirit of *bassij* (mobilization) among the people, so that people themselves understand that we can develop.’<sup>51</sup> The government’s actions have induced a substantial change both in the shape of civil organisations, transforming their name and in their contents, promoting development concerns over liberal matters. Undoubtedly, a shift has taken place in the symbolism and meaning that the expression ‘civil organisations’ vehicles. If ‘NGOs’ in the common sense refers to liberal matters and independent agency, ‘SAMAN’ has no such meaning, and the regime has worked to establish another universe of reference for this kind of associations. The ‘politics of participation’ selects certain organisations fitting the criteria of choice, like loyalty and technical skills, engendering competition among the organisations, because those perceived to be more trustworthy by the regime are promoted to the detriment of others. These ‘regime-sanctioned organisations’ impose their activities and views the others by means of the legitimacy they enjoy, as demonstrated by the exacerbation of conflicts, in particular in rural settings, with the so-called ‘traditional organisations’ which feel that the government imposes its presence through the ‘skilled’ ones. The high estimated value of technical skills is another aspect of the efforts made by the government to change the nature of the relations with civil organisations. Through the transformation of the organisations’ names, their field of action and political agenda, the regime aims at changing them, since, by realigning the ‘shape’ of the organisations, what their ‘essence’ should be is also suggested. It should be noted however that the emphasis placed on technocratic issues is not only due to ‘the fear of human rights-related activities’, but it is also a way of re-allocating resources through development projects to constituencies close to the regime. As a manager of an organisation involved in a rural project in the province

of Southern Khorasan, close to the Afghan border, declared: ‘these projects always see the participation of economic actors close to the regime.’<sup>52</sup>

The ‘politics of participation’ considers different forms, well beyond the divide between exclusion/inclusion and beyond violence, to normalize the organisations’ behaviour that can vary from delaying the issuing of permits to undermining the credibility of activists through violence and intimidation. For example, there are different ranges of time to get a permit for establishing an organisation. It may take some weeks, or many years, thus making it possible for someone to give up on the project. In contrast to such administrative obstacles, filmed confessions, which are widely used, carry a significant degree of psychological or physical violence. In the case of Shirin Ebadi’s husband, who talked about the couple’s private life and declared that his wife abused him during episodes of domestic violence,<sup>53</sup> the objective was clearly to destroy her credibility as a human rights activist. What is more, ‘soft’ and ‘testimonial’ coercion are not the only ways to force organisations to obedience: arrests, detentions, arbitrary irruptions and searches have been reported by various sources in the last years. This situation mirrors the efforts of the regime to build up a sanctioned and loyal base, as associations are an important topic in the national political discourse, providing a social base for development projects.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Ahmadinejad’s executives attempt to turn it in their own favour. Rather than shut down ‘civil society’ entirely, the regime gradually adopted a range of strategies to reassert state control over civil activism, ‘getting closer’ to it and following a corporative model, which has been accepted by the organisations when coherent with their interests and goals.

SAMANs are ‘considered to be the strategic partners for the government in carrying out the activities in which they are specifically experts ... without imposing astronomical expenditures upon it [the government],’<sup>55</sup> but SAMANs also have another important function that goes beyond the management of the distribution of resources. Together with professional associations, they increasingly are the channel of communication between the different sectors of the elites, in so far as they act as political entities. This indicates the importance of ‘the politics of connections.’ In a country like Iran, where there is a contested and ambiguous legislation on political parties and where even former legal (and governmental) political groups can become illegal very quickly – as it happened to the *Mosharekat* Party and *Mujaheddin* of the Islamic revolution – SAMANs are one of the vehicles to select the élites of tomorrow

and reinforce the partnerships of today. According to a member of one of the biggest organisations working in the field of development in the country, ‘in the last few years, one of the most evident changes is the unprecedented involvement of public and semi-private sector managers in our field.’<sup>56</sup> According to him, it becomes ‘mandatory to establish a collaborative relation between the government and skilled people, in order to become active and carry out the projects.’<sup>57</sup>

One of the most effective means to enhance this connection is the organisation of big conferences and workshops. These conferences have seen the constant expansion of the presence of managers and professional associations, entrepreneurs and businessmen. ‘The reason is to make the notion of development more concrete thanks to the participation of people potentially interested in investments, whilst before we were used to deal with Ministerial functionaries and politicians’<sup>58</sup>. The presence of semi-public managers reinforces the symbolic private-public connection and the involved actors become closer. The advantages of such closeness exist for the organisations too. Engaged in the field of development, it might happen that SAMANs themselves are interested in the construction of some infrastructures which are included in the projects of development of an area; and it might as well happen that the interested SAMAN is ruled by a person close to one of the ministries linked to that project. This is what happened for instance,

‘in the case of a urban regeneration initiative, launched in 1995 in the city of Tehran, which saw the involvement of a professional association whose duty was to carry out part of the project with public funds. According to the inhabitants, who opposed the project, there was no need for that intervention and finally the project was stopped. Yet the government decided to restart it again two years ago, after a strong action of lobby and pressure made by the association whose head, someone said, was a [Interior] Minister’s close friend.’<sup>59</sup>

### **Civil Organisations and the ‘Unintended’ Consequences of Being Close to the Government**

Khatami and Ahmadinejad had different aims in promoting a corporatist model of state-society interactions. Khatami set up an administrative and bureaucratic apparatus

for promoting the establishment of a network of loyalty and ‘political’ support which was composed of numerous civil society organisations. When Ahmadinejad gained power, he found these social networks and civil organisations established and working. He had to deal with them in some ways, and shape them according to his interests, which fundamentally diverged from Khatami’s. In some ways however Ahmadinejad followed Khatami’s example, as Khatami indicated the road to be followed in dealing with societal expressions, offering new meanings and intellectual elaboration to the concept of civil society. Ahmadinejad also strongly relied on administrative and legal devices to shape social activism, targeting both its ‘form’ and its ‘essence.’ He changed the organisations’ objectives by targeting their names, their topics of interest and the space for them where they would be politically relevant. Ahmadinejad’s efforts have been directed to the creation of a homogeneous society of *khodi* (insiders, meaning loyal people), whilst Khatami wanted to create a supportive, organized society in order to carry out his reform plans and channel the protest potential his reforms would have caused.

However, for the ‘politics of participation’ to work all the actors have to be involved and not only the government. Civil organisations therefore are not merely ‘victims’ but actively participate in this system of incentives and disincentives. It is clear that the standard for being included is the acceptance of a corporatist model of state-society relations. Such collaboration does not always reinforce the government, as it also provides civil organisations with a certain ‘bargaining power’ and with the possibility of getting an independent dynamics going. If the idea of full-scale disappearance of civil society activism is ruled out to begin with by the regime, then margins for negotiations exist and it is within these margins that some civil society groups can become more autonomous even if formally linked to the and accepting of the framework the regime has put in place to regulate their activities.

This is what happened, for instance, in the case of the student association *Tahkim-e Vahdat*, which has historically been very close to leftist and reformist political circles. Shortly after the 1999 unrest,<sup>60</sup> it decided to follow an independent path from the reformist government paying the price for its desired autonomy with political marginalization. After the adoption of the *gozar az Khatami* (‘transition from Khatami’, the expression used to indicate that the student movement had to become more independent from the Khatami’s government), the organisation was more and more marginalized but still the most important student organisation in the country,

and a prominent critic of Khatami's administration. After Ahmadinejad's electoral victory the organisation encountered further difficulties, yet was able to survive and show its strength during the 2009 electoral crisis. In the complex game of state-society relations, civil organisations can get a dynamic on their own, bargaining with the government from a position of quasi parity, thanks to the level of closeness they enjoy.

This is what happened in the case of professional organisations as well. A small businessman, who works as consultant for foreign companies willing to invest in Iran, said that 'professional associations are today, more than ever, full of 'indulgent' people and split over government pressure.'<sup>61</sup> They may not be 'the right means for channelling the diffused discontent existing in Iran,' he continued, reflecting on the situation of his professional *milieu*. However the discontent of the businessmen, caused by Ahmadinejad's economic policies and sanctions, has succeeded in imposing some of its requests as well. 'The UN sanctions, together with the sanctions of the USA and the EU, have had a real impact on trade and investment in Iran. A number of Iranian banks are blacklisted which prevents the allocation of ... services to Iranian businessmen. This situation results in growing stress among the new Islamic capitalism ... in Iran and in Dubai, Malaysia and Europe where Iranian businessmen are particularly active.'<sup>62</sup> In July 2010, the grand bazaar of Tehran organized a huge strike after the government announced a hike in the income tax for merchants, already hit by the sanctions and macroeconomic difficulties. According to the journalists Becky Lee Katz and Ramin Mostaghim, 'local merchants don't trust the government,'<sup>63</sup> a situation which could get an independent and more confrontational dynamics against the government. For the moment, the associations of merchants succeeded in obtaining the abolition of the tax hike.

Moving away from a narrow definition of 'civil activism' as synonym for formal organisation focused on human rights and pro-democracy issues solely, activism has proved to be a fundamental force within Iranian society. It has exploded in the context of the 2009 events, going well beyond reformist parties and other formal organisations. A broader definition of 'civil activism' is indeed needed in order to make sense of the wide participation in the 2009-2010 protests and of the general discontent with the political system that the protesters conveyed. In some way, the presence of 'unusual' actors voicing their claims against the regime is a consequence of Ahmadinejad's determination in re-shaping the more 'usual' civil activism, notably

devoted to human rights and similar issues. The entrance of new actors within the realm of ‘civil society,’ as it was set by Khatami some years before, has strengthened this trend which sees ‘non-traditional actors developing new dynamics of interaction between society and the regimes, leading to a reconfiguration of the role and objectives of activism.’<sup>64</sup> The ‘domination thesis’ indeed explains the strength of the limits imposed by the regime in shaping and setting the ‘rules of the game,’ but does not prevent ‘unusual’ organisations from acquiring capacity, prestige and bargain power for negotiating almost *au pair* with the regime.

In this perspective, the government is not the only master, which decides the sorts of civil organisations, creates them and directs their action. Rather, the government becomes one of the actors in the political economy of state-society interaction. This is the crucial similarity between Ahmadinejad and Khatami management of civil activism. Their efforts for control, structuring and coercion resulted in an effective mastering of organisations on the one side, whilst on the other side they engendered dynamics of independent advocacy, which have often taken their strength from the closeness to the government the organisations enjoyed.

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<sup>1</sup> Heydemann, “Upgrading authoritarianism.”

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*.

<sup>3</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Civil society.”

<sup>4</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Civil society” and Hibou, “Domination & Control in Tunisia.”

<sup>5</sup> The concept of soft coercion is from Courpasson, ‘Managerial strategies of domination,’ p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> Valbjørn and Bank, “Examining the ‘Post’ in Post-Democratization.”

<sup>7</sup> Albrecht and Schlumberger, “Waiting for Godot. ”

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Butel, “L’individu post-islamiste”; Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran*; Paivandi, *Religion et éducation en Iran*; Paivandi, *Vers un système éducatif*



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*advantage islamisé?*; Khosrokhavar, "Towards an anthropology of democratisation"; Khosrokhavar and Nikpey, *Avoir vingt ans au pays des Ayatollah*.

<sup>9</sup> Camau, "Sociétés civiles réelles et téléologie de la démocratisation."

<sup>10</sup> Amirahmadi, "Emerging Civil Society in Iran".

<sup>11</sup> Zolghadr, *Softcore*; Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad*.

<sup>12</sup> Kamali, "Civil Society in Islam," p. 460 and Abootalebi, "The struggle for democracy."

<sup>13</sup> Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia* and Jahanbegloo, *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*.

<sup>14</sup> Sadeqi, "Siasat zaday az jome' madani; Nirumandrad," and "Sazmanha-ye gheir-e doulati dar ravand-e jahani-ye shodan. "

<sup>15</sup> Namazi, *Iranian NGOs: Situation Analysis*, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. See also, Katirai, "NGOs Regulation in Iran."

<sup>17</sup> On this see the editorial article by Mohammad Soltanifar, former director of the newspaper 'Iran News,' who on December 11, 1999 called for the establishment of political parties in order to promote an integrated, more efficient and democratic political system. The lack of such 'facilities,' in Soltanifar's opinion, leads the country to intolerance.

<sup>18</sup> Jehbe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami, *Bianeh be monasebat salgard-e qatlha-ye zangurey va elham-e tashkil-e dadgah motehman-e in parvande*.

<sup>19</sup> Saghafi, "Aqaz va paian-e jome' madani," p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> Similar findings are presented in Liverani, *Civil Society in Algeria*.

<sup>21</sup> Personal interview with one member and worker of the NGOs network, Tehran, August 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Bank, Richter, *Neopatrimonialism in the Middle East and North Africa*, p. 7.

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<sup>23</sup> Gaxie, “Economie des partis et rétributions du militantisme.”

<sup>24</sup> There are many examples. Many people are now research fellows or consultants at American foundations such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy or the National Endowment for Democracy or received support from foreign governmental institutions (two examples are Akbar Ganji and Hasan Yousefi-Eshekevari, who both received support and hospitality from the Italian Regional Government of Tuscany, and continued their political and social activism). For many among them, for those who resisted Ahmadinejad’s oppression, this is the sole alternative, as their permanence in Iran would have caused the denial of the work permit and the jail or worse.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview and visit, Tehran, August 2005. The NGO was funded by a European NGO. Today the Iranian organisation doesn’t exist anymore and many among its members are out of the country because of personal security reasons.

<sup>26</sup> On 16<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> June 2003, the Islamic Republic News Agency reported two declarations on the issue of the student protests. Mehdi Karroubi accused the rallies to be full of foreign spies, and Abdolvahed Mussavi-Lari, the Interior Minister and leading member of the League of Militant Clerics, accused the student to be ‘hooligans’ and to hold ‘illegal gatherings.’

<sup>27</sup> For example, the conferences held at the Wilson Woodrow Center in November 2003 and in Tehran at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002 and in 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interview with one member and worker of the NGOs network, Tehran, August 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Personal interviews with a worker of the NGOs network, Tehran, July 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview with two volunteers from the United States. They came to work for the Iranian organisations through one of the biggest American organisation of

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Iranians, which offers summer stage and volunteering opportunities in Iran. Tehran and Bam, July-August 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Samii, “Sisyphus Newsstand.”

<sup>32</sup> This consideration is an outcome of my fieldwork in Iran. For instance, many young people I met defined their own occupation as ‘journalist’ – even if the reality was that they only intermittently had published articles on non-officially recognized reviews or journals.

<sup>33</sup> *Iran’s Reformers seek to forge political parties*, ‘Iran News,’ July 22, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> *Parties must adopt clear-cut strategies*, ‘Iran News,’ April 8, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> The House of Parties, *Tashakolha-ye eslami*.

<sup>36</sup> The Ministry of Interior, *Moshakhsat-e Tashakolha-ye siasi*.

<sup>37</sup> *Khordad 2 Front nominates 2000 Common Candidates*, ‘Tehran Times,’ February 7, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Personal interview with a representative of the *Jehbe Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami* at the House of Parties, Tehran, September 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Jalali Na’ini, “Doulati ia gheir-e doulati?,” pp. 106-108.

<sup>40</sup> Personal interview with the president of a Tehranian NGO working in Bam. Tehran, June 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>42</sup> Alamooti, “Progress Report: The First Round of Representation of the Community-based Organisations at the Central Supervisory Board.”

<sup>43</sup> Personal interview with the president of a Tehranian NGO working in Bam. Tehran, June 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem.

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<sup>45</sup> See the ‘disposals for the establishment and activities of SAMAN’ redacted by the Ministry of Interior, Islamic Republic of Iran,

<http://portal2.moi.ir/portal/Home/Default.aspx?CategoryID=af44a651-6ea4-4518-8052-9f58402b351a> Accessed November 9, 2010. I am grateful to Amir and Farahmand for their help with translation.

<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with the head of the economic section of a Tehranian NGO, September 2008. For the current law see: Ministry of Interior website, <http://portal2.moi.ir/portal/Home/Default.aspx?CategoryID=a39fcad9-06e6-4eb3-973e-5226d70bd350> Accessed November 9, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with the head of the public relations office of a Tehranian NGO, Teheran, July 2008. This account has been referred to by many people and many reports dealing with this subject.

<sup>48</sup> Mahjob, *Sazmanha-ye gheir-e doulati dar mezan-e eteham*, August 2, 2009, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2009/08/090802\\_nm\\_iran\\_ngo.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2009/08/090802_nm_iran_ngo.shtml) Accessed October 27, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> *NGOs barred from political activity in Iran*, Radio Zamaneh website, October 16, 2010. Accessed November 9, 2010

<sup>50</sup> Personal interview with a SAMAN worker, Tehran, August 2008

<sup>51</sup> Personal interview, Tehran, August 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Personal interview, Tehran, July 2008.

<sup>53</sup> The film has been commented by Shirin Ebadi in Paris. This video is available on You Tube (displayed by Jensedigar.com, a feminist website):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFECieUQkPs&feature=related> Accessed November 7, 2010.

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<sup>54</sup> See for example the dedicated page on the Interior Ministry website:

<http://nezarat.moi.ir/default.aspx>

<sup>55</sup> Alamooti, 'Progress Report,' p. 50.

<sup>56</sup> Personal interview, Tehran, August 2008

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Personal interview with the head of the economic section of a Tehranian NGO, September 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Personal interview with a member of the Iranian network of civil organisations, Tehran, July 2008. Similar dynamics are explored by Kaveh Ehsani, *Survival through Dispossession*.

<sup>60</sup> In July 1999, the students protested against the closure of the newspaper *Salam*. The protests resulted in some days of urban guerrilla in Tehran and other big cities. The Tahkim was one of the protagonists of the unrest. The students protested in support of Khatami's reform plan, but Khatami's reaction wasn't very supportive of the students.

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview with the head of a medium-size business counseling firm based in Tehran, September 2008. The man, who is in his middle forties, has grown abroad and came back to Iran persuaded by the expectations for 'democratisation' and 'liberalization' suggested him by Khatami and reformist governments.

<sup>62</sup> Mozaffari, *The Iranian Green Movement*, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Katz, Mostaghim, *Bazar strikes triumphs as government retreats from tax hikes*, *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Aarts and Cavatorta's introduction, p. 9.

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