Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement

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PREFACE

This volume examines the unintended consequences of top-down reforms in a semi-authoritarian country, the Islamic Republic of Iran. More specifically, this book looks at how the Iranian governments between 1997 and 2005 sought to utilise democratic gradual reforms to control independent activism, and how citizens responded to such a top-down disciplinary action. While the governments were largely successful in 'setting the field' of permitted political participation, part of the civil society that took shape was unexpectedly independent and autonomous. Ironically, the governments helped create a civil society they had little control over.

Despite being carried out by a minority, the political work of independent activists was not marginal: without them, in fact, the Green Movement of 2009 would have not taken shape. General comments and observations about the 'reformist period' in Iran tend to credit the government for the cultural liberalisation that occurred in the public sphere and for the creation of a more tolerant political environment. In this book, I wish to honour the work of grassroots activists and organisers. They have defended and kept safe the spaces for political participation in Iran. They have made sure that those spaces could exist, no matter how tight or small, working resiliently government after government and generation after generation. Therefore, while I engage with theories of political change, social movements, and power, I ultimately see this book as being about political hope: why and how do activists keep on organising, mobilising, and, above all, participating in elections, in spite of violence and frustration? My answer is that we need to look beyond the regime's elites and structures, into activists' hopes—and lives.

At a time when scholarship on contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa is increasingly interested in exploring the social movements and social non-movements that take shape at the margins of society, this book returns to the 'usual suspects'. I have worked in Iran's capital with overwhelmingly middle-class NGO (non-governmental organisation), student, and feminist activists, with whom I shared a common background as a university student first and as a university lecturer later. I do not see this as a weakness. On the contrary, I hope to add a fresh perspective on how 'usual' social and political actors can be studied, for they remain a crucial piece of the puzzle of state and social reproduction. Looking at how the 'usual suspects' of political change shaped the state through their actions, and how they have been shaped by the state in return, this book examines what happens to them when hope spreads through society. It investigates how, against all odds, hope survives and takes unpredicted turns to resurface in a more or less distant future—once hard times have yielded to a more favourable political context.

In this book, I attempt to explain how the Iranian state tried to discipline political participation via reformism, and to disentangle how such a project of political engineering ended up boosting hope for change and creating unanticipated forms of political agency. I focus on a specific country during a specific period, but I hope my analysis will be useful to colleagues working on different countries and historical eras, for similar dynamics can be observed and examined in other contexts too. I have taken inspiration for this book by living through, observing, and participating in social movements in three different countries: Italy, Ireland, and Iran. Certainly, I have found similarities between the three, and my experiences have helped me think of activism in Iran 'through' Italy and Ireland.

This book has been in the making for far too long. If I was eventually able to write it, it is thanks to the support of wonderful friends and colleagues in Iran, Ireland, Italy, and beyond. My biggest 'thank you' goes to Francesco Cavatorta. Although I understand nothing about football—let alone his favourite team, the unknown-to-most Parma AC—he has always been present, supportive, and incredibly generous. His patience with my sometimes convoluted thinking and passive form-dominated English is simply limitless. I owe him so much more than I can say here. Heartfelt thanks go to Shirin Saeidi, a true soulmate and a source of constant inspiration, and Erika Biagini, who teaches me a lot about determination and straight reasoning. Supervising Erika during her PhD was a learning opportunity for me, and so is working with her today. I am greatly indebted

to Francesco, Shirin, and Erika, and to those friends and colleagues who agreed to read early drafts of this manuscript: Arefe, Janne Bjerre Christensen, Kaveh Ehsani, and Jillian Schwedler offered extremely generous and constructive comments. I am deeply grateful to them for the time they dedicated to this book and their willingness to 'think with me'. Their criticism fundamentally improved the manuscript as well as the clarity of my thought. After numerous reads and edits, needless to say, the errors that lingered are my own.

I have been travelling to Iran since 2005 and I have benefitted from the kindness of too many people to mention. Crucial to my work and my emotional attachment to Iran are Arefe, Farid, and Pari, who have skilfully guided me through the complexity of the world of activism in Iran and the diaspora; Milad, who has always supported and helped me; and Farnaz, Hamed, Mersedeh, and Roya, who are good friends and have helped me with translations from Persian. I have been privileged to meet Mohammad Khatami, who gave me an interview, and a number of other 'big shots', who found the time to sit down with me. While I appreciated that, my work was literally made possible by other, less well-known people, who listened and talked to me, instilling doubts, offering interpretations, and challenging my views. They opened their houses and offices to me, patiently making sense of my precarious Persian and sometimes rambling reflections. While I cannot name them here, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to them. I hope I've respected your voices and honoured your fundamental role in my work.

I have been privileged to enjoy the support of the Irish Research Council to conduct research for this book, as well as the support of the School of Law and Government and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (through the book publication scheme) in Dublin City University (DCU). Gary Murphy, Iain McMennamin, and John Doyle have lent me support in their official capacities as Heads of School and Dean of Faculty. I am grateful to Maria-Adriana Deiana, who shared book-writing tips and material with me, and every single colleague in DCU's School of Law and Government. Among them, a special thank you goes to Walt Kilroy, who replaced me as director of our MA programmes while I was on sabbatical writing up this book. Maura Conway, Yvonne Daly, James Fitzgerald, Niamh Gaynor, Diarmuid Torney, Gëzim Visoka, as well as all other colleagues in the School, have supported me and offered advice during the years.

I would also like to thank the Department of Culture, Politics and Society in the University of Turin for hosting me during one semester in

2018/2019. It would be difficult to list all those who, within this department, left a mark on me, considering that the university is my Alma Mater and the department is my 'second home'. However, I wish to extend a special thank you to Sandro Busso, who enjoys my highest esteem, Valeria Cappellato, Rosita Di Peri, Enrico Gargiulo, Gianfranco Ragona, and Elena Vallino. They have immensely enriched my life and my work with their friendship and the many exchanges across the years. I am also grateful to the Département de Science Politique at Université Laval for welcoming me during one semester in 2017/2018. There, Marie Brossier, Aurélie Campana, Sule Tomkinson, Alessandra Bonci, and Pietro Marzo have made my *séjour* productive and pleasant. While in Quebec City, Francesco Cavatorta, Severine and their sons Raphaël and Alexandre alleviated my homesickness making me feel at home, as they did when I arrived in Dublin in 2011, alone and a bit lost.

In the past decade or so, I have been able to count on wonderful colleagues and friends, who have joined me in formative and fundamental conversations and in other more or less consistent exchanges, which have stayed with me to this day. This has been possible thanks to modern technology and so-called social media, and thanks to the fact that I could travel and meet them with no visa restriction (a privilege I have done nothing to deserve). Last but not least, my thanks go to Fariba Adelkhah, Enrico Bartolomei, Jean-François Bayart, Francesca Biancani, Koen Bogaert, Marina Calculli, Estella Carpi, Katerina Dalacoura, Vincent Durac, Masserat Ebrahimi, Béatrice Hibou, Shabnam Holliday, Angela Joya, Laleh Khalili, Hendrik Kraetzschmar, Matteo Legrenzi, Mark LeVine, Marilena Macaluso, Mohammad Maljoo, Serena Marcenò, Kamran Matin, Shervin Malekzadeh, Stella Morgana, Arzoo Osanloo, Nicola Perugini, Gabriele Proglio, Riccardo Readelli, Mahmoud Sariolghalam, Naghmeh Sohrabi, Lucia Sorbera, and Maaike Warnaar.

Thank you Riccardo James Vargiu for enhancing my English. Thanks to Alina Yurova, Mary Fata, and the editors at Palgrave Macmillan who have worked to keep me focused on deadlines while supporting me. Thanks to the book's reviewers too, who offered intelligent and encouraging comments.

Thanks to my very precious friends Beatrice, Hanna, Pina, and Simona for believing in me throughout, and for much more. During the writing process, Chiara has offered a listening ear while providing much needed supplies such as comfort food, drinks, and wild dancing-and-singing sessions. This book was written in three different locations. They outline a

geography of love: Tehran, Dublin, and my hometown Chivasso. As a high school student, I used to spend my afternoons studying in Chivasso's public library. It was such a great joy and privilege to be able to do the same two decades later.

I dedicate this book to my mother Pinuccia and my sister Marta, who have always encouraged me to be a free woman.

Chivasso, Italy   Paola Rivetti
31 May 2019

Acknowledgment

A Note on Translation, Transliteration, and Dates

All translations for Persian are mine unless indicated otherwise. I am using the transliteration system adopted by Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani in their *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* (2018). For purposes of readability, this book does not use any diacritics for the names of individuals or organisations, except for *ayn* and *hamza* which are represented by an opening quotation mark and an apostrophe respectively, and which are dropped only at the initial position.

Anglicised forms for foreign words, such as shari'a or Islam, and place names, such as Mashhad or Tehran, found in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* have been utilised in this book. Names of political figures known in the West have been used as found in the *New York Times* (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani, Mohammad Khatami, Ali Khamenei). Names of authors whose work is referred or cited in this book are written as indicated in the publications. To capture *ezafeh*, -e and -ye are used, with the exception of first and last names of individuals (*Hezb-e Kargozaran-e Sazandegi-e Iran* but not Mohammad-e Khatami). Where appropriate, colloquial Persian pronunciations have been preferred (Hojjatolislam, Ayatollah, hejab, Hezbollah, ku-ye daneshgah, Cheshmandaz-e Iran).

All dates are given as Western calendar dates. Iranian calendar dates are calculated using Iran Chamber Society's converter tool. Iranian dates are used for sources, publications (both in-text references and lists of references), and for temporal references during interviews, and are given with their Western calendar correspondent.

Praise For *Political Participation In Iran From Khatami To The Green Movement*

Paola Rivetti's fascinating study of the potential for revolutionary change in Iran links social movement studies theory to political science debates about elite-led liberalization and the potential for meaningful institutional reforms. While examining how government officials seek to utilize gradual reforms to deflate the revolutionary potential of challengers, Rivetti brings forth the agency of citizens and how they have independently imagined a trajectory for participation beyond what the regime intended. Based on years of field research with activists and civil society groups, this book offers a careful look at how regime-citizen relations have evolved and how even micro shifts in those relations—changes that seem insignificant in the near term—can create the potential for greater challenges down the road.

—Jillian Schwedler, *Hunter College & The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

This is a groundbreaking book on the complex internal dynamics of Iranian politics that led to the emergence of a reformist movement and the election of Khatami as president. Although reformist politics in Iran has proven its resilience during the Green Movement protests and subsequent elections, there are clear rifts among the grassroots whose agendas are diverging from the established formal leaders. Rather than focusing exclusively on formal institutions and ruling political elites, as most academic writings on Iran tend to do, this book questions how and why grassroots organizers and activists have managed to create and maintain autonomous political spaces of participation despite relentless state repression and attempts by reformist elites to co-opt and control their momentum. This is a major contribution to understanding how social movements create spaces of autonomy and popular counterpower from below.

—Kaveh Ehsani, *DePaul University*

In this remarkable book, Paola Rivetti sheds a light on how authoritarian reforms have produced an independent activist *milieu* in Iran. During years of immersion in the field, she has acquired an intimate knowledge of the activists' life stories, their fears and hopes. Through grounded analysis and patient observation, this book transforms our understanding of the interaction between institutional politics and political contestation in authoritarian contexts.

—Frédéric Vairel, *University of Ottawa*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paola Rivetti is Assistant Professor of Politics and International Relations in Dublin City University. She was awarded the 2018 Early-Career Researcher of the Year Prize by the Irish Research Council. In 2018, she also received the Dublin City University President's Award for Research. Her work has been supported by the Irish Research Council, European Commission, Gerda Henkel Foundation, Goria Foundation, and the Italian Ministry of University and Research. She has extensively published on social and political mobilisations, Iranian politics, migration, and academic freedom. She is co-editor of *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention* (2018) published by Edinburgh University Press, and *Continuity and Change Before and After the Arab Uprisings: Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt* (2015) published by Routledge.

ABBREVIATIONS

Bassij	(*Sazman-e Basij-e Mostaz'afin*)
Behzisti	State Welfare Organisation (*Sazman-e Behzisti-ye Keshvar*)
DAB	Students for Freedom and Equality (*Daneshjuyan-e Azadikhah va Barabaritalab*)
DTV	Office for the Strengthening of Unity (*Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*)
EC	Expediency Council (*Majma'-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*)
GC	Guardians' Council of the Constitution (*Showra-ye Negahban*)
IIPF	Iranian Islamic Participation Front (*Hezb-e Jebheh-ye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami*)
IRGC	Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Islami*)
IRP	Islamic Republic Party (*Hezb-e Jomhuri-ye Islami*)
JDK	Second of Khordad Front (*Jebheh-ye Dovvom-e Khordad*)
JRM	Association of the Combatant Clergy (*Jame'eh-ye Ruhaniyyat-e Mobarez*)
KS	Servants of Reconstruction (*Hezb-e Kargozaran-e Sazandegi-e Iran*)
MRM	Assembly of the Combatant Clerics (*Majma'-e Ruhaniyun-e Mobarez*)
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OM	Organisation of the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (*Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Islami-ye Iran*)
OMS	One Million Signatures campaign (*Yek Miliun Emza baraye Laghv-e Qavanin-e Tab'iz-e Amiz*)

Reformism and Political Participation in Iran

Political Change and Participation

Kaveh and Mohammad, activists from Tehran in their late thirties, do not know each other but have a number of friends in common. Both were active in Mir Hoseyn Musavi's electoral campaign in 2009 in Tehran and, after protests erupted in June 2009 upon the announcement of the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of the Republic, both became very active in attending, organising, and participating in the protests that came to be known as the Green Movement.[1] Kaveh and Mohammad enjoyed a certain degree of popularity within activist circles, because they had already been politically active as university students. They had a network they could mobilise and indirect access to other social circles outside Tehran. The marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins lasted into 2010, and were met with increasing state violence. In 2010, both left for Turkey where they became asylum seekers and where I met them in 2011 and 2012. Kaveh and Mohammad's words reflected the excitement and enthusiasm that characterised the days of the mobilisation in the

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[1] The Green Movement (*jonbesh-e sabz*) was the name by which the popular protests erupted in 2009 in several cities across Iran came to be known. The movement objected to the re-election of Ahmadinejad at the presidency and deemed it to be fraudulent. *Jonbesh-e sabz* was a contested name, however, because some activists considered it to be too connected to the reformist elite and excluding all other political traditions and subjectivities involved in the protests. See Holliday and Rivetti (2016).

summer of 2009: while the Green Movement was initially guided by the leaders Musavi and Mehdi Karrubi (the two reformist candidates competing against Ahmadinejad) and was born to protest against the electoral results, it had become more and more radical and independent of the reformist elite. Its demands extended beyond recounting the votes to target the entire political class, the regime, and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Sadri and Sadri 2010; Gheytanchi 2010; Naficy 2010; Reisinezhad 2015).[2] The radicality of the protests provoked both excitement and fear in Kaveh and Mohammad. On the one hand, the movement could radicalise and aspire to overcome all political boundaries the elite had set. On the other hand, boundless and unprotected, the movement could be crushed easily by violent state repression. Its fate rested with the protesters: those like Kaveh and Mohammad found themselves in a position of leadership.

In conversation, their rhetorical skills and charisma shine through. Both Kaveh and Mohammad fit the typical character of 'the activist' the media in the West like to describe: they are (relatively) young, tech-savvy, educated, extremely articulate, and liberal-minded. Political participation is a principle they cherish and defend as the foundation of a working democratic society. They understand political participation as the right of citizens to enter the public sphere, either individually or as members of an organisation, and make claims against and demands to the government and the state safely. As such, they denounce the Islamic Republic as a political system that punishes those citizens who want to participate or dare to do so.

Their frustration is the product of the authoritarian interventions of the state they have witnessed in 2009–2010 and earlier. It is no mystery that the Iranian state has usually reacted violently to protests and overt criticism, thwarting attempts at political organisation. Mohammad and Kaveh had witnessed state violence against peaceful protesters on several occasions. However, while they understandably describe the Islamic Republic as a system impenetrable to political participation, history clearly indicates just how crucial political participation actually was to the origin of the

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[2] While their work predates the Green Movement, Eliot Assoudeh and Debra J. Salazar reach similar conclusions in their longitudinal analysis (1997–2008) of the student and women's movements in Iran, which have progressively become more independent of the reformist elite in spite of their earlier association. This suggests that the shift towards radicalisation was already taking place before 2009 (Assoudeh and Salazar 2017), as I also discuss in Chaps. 4 and 5.

Islamic Republic. Indeed, the latter originated from sustained popular mobilisations, which, since the mid-1970s and despite the Shah's repression, resulted in a revolution in 1979. Because of its relevance to revolutionary history, the notion of political participation has been a crucial element in the state's self-representation, as well as in the rhetoric of state officials, regardless of their ideological differences. Furthermore, the very existence of the Green Movement, and of political activism of the kind Kaveh and Mohammad embody, is an indication of the fact that some degree of political participation is acceptable in and accepted by the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, this does not mean that political participation is unrestricted.

Is there a kind of political participation and activism that is viewed as legitimate by the regime? Are there 'good' and 'bad' activists, then? To which group did Kaveh and Mohammad belong? How and why have Mohammad and Kaveh found themselves in a position of leadership of the Green Movement? How and why has the latter radicalised? This book answers these questions. First, it explains how between 1997 and 2005 the state tried to discipline political activism by creating the possibilities for participation from above and how, unexpectedly, such disciplinary project forged independent paths to activism and agency from below, thus setting the field for the development of the Green Movement and its autonomy.

Second, the questions that underpin this work have a temporal dimension. While we understand authoritarianism as homogeneously repressive, authoritarian politics is dynamic and transforms according to environmental conditions, allowing for more or less freedom, more or less accountability of state authorities, and freer elections when necessary (Howard and Roessler 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Lust-Okar 2006; Blaydes 2011). The ways in which governments are authoritarian may change over the decades. Arguably, political participation has always been central to the politics of authoritarian control in Iran, but successive governments have had a different level of toleration for it. The Iranian reformist elite, namely a segment of the national elite that controlled the presidency of the Republic and, with varying fortunes, dominated the public sphere between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, looked rather favourably at the possibility of increasing political participation, *in certain conditions*. The so-called reformist era covered the two presidential terms of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2001 and 2001–2005) who, more than any other figure, symbolises reformism (*eslahat*). Reformism was, in the words of its proponents, about democratising the public sphere, encouraging political and

ideological diversity, and transforming the Islamic Republic from a marginalised ideological state into a modern country integrated in international politics and the global economy. While the reformist political project failed to fulfil expectations of change because of the opposition of powerful conservative forces, it did shape the political views of a generation, and beyond. *Eslahat* articulated a meaningful critique of the Islamic Republic that still has a considerable impact on Iranian politics and the public opinion. People like Mohammad and Kaveh, who were in their twenties during the 'reformist era', feel entitled to political and civil liberties. Mohammad and Kaveh belong to a generation that educated itself to political leadership and activism during a period of limited political liberalisation. Crucial to that education was the right to political participation.

The reformist elite, then, created spaces where participation, and contention, could take place. In this sense, *eslahat* was a social and political programme aimed at crafting a new public sphere and changing what politics and participation were about. The reformist elite was successful in instilling the notion that contentious political participation too ought to be legal and acceptable in a republic like Iran. The reformist elite set out to transform Iranian politics and society, with the twofold aim of broadening their support base and of establishing new, stable intra-elite alliances. The reformists, whose *nucleus* originated from the leftist factions of the elite (the so-called Islamic left), capitalised on the demographic and cultural transformations that the end of the Iran-Iraq war had eventually brought about. Indeed, in a post-national emergency context, according to them, the regime ought to see demands for political tolerance and change as legitimate. As a friend and feminist activist, Fatemeh, told me in 2017: 'The freedom we had to organise under Khatami is unimaginable today. We used to celebrate the Eighth of March[3] in the streets and public parks. We gave public speeches. Today, the celebration of the Eighth of March happens in private houses'. One of the objectives of the repression that hit, among others, the women's movement after the end of the reform era in 2005 was to push activists into invisibility, far away from the public space. While state repression worked and led to the shutting down of spaces for political participation, it did not manage to erase the 'political education' and 'taste for freedom' that people and

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[3] International Women's Day. On the celebration of the Eighth of March in Iran and on the significance of gender politics in national history more generally, see Najmabadi (1998) and Afary (2009).

activists had developed during the reform era. The impact of *eslahat* is long-lasting and resilient, especially for those who experienced their 'coming of age' during the reformist period.

The Short-Circuit

Reformism, however, was not exclusively about political liberty. It also was a project of social engineering that needed to foster political participation to reinforce the legitimacy of the government to withstand the counterpressure coming from powerful conservative forces, who feared losing the grip on state ideology, institutions, and popular culture. I understand *eslahat* as a project of engineered social and political change that segments of the national elite envisioned and promoted in the attempt to create a historical bloc through which to reconfigure the circulation of power in society and among state institutions in their favour. To secure popular support for this project, the reformist elites needed to allow *and* to control political participation at once, with the necessary corollary of co-opting civil society and political organisations embedded in such a top-down reform project.

The opening up of the public sphere, however, allowed for the participation of forces that countered elite co-optation, too. Certainly, the elite could not control political participation in all its articulations and unintended implications. Needless to say, the 'co-optable' nature of civil society groups became a criterion for selective inclusion: exclusion was operated against 'non-co-optable' groups and individuals. The reformist elite, who considered non-co-opted forces dangerous, often ended up legitimising the repression they had decried.

This book examines how the reformist elite actively promoted political participation as an instrument to elicit electoral support and renew state legitimacy, but eventually created spaces for radical and uncontrolled political critiques. While the government was largely successful in 'setting the field' of permitted political participation, part of the civil society that took shape was unexpectedly independent and autonomous. Despite being carried out by a minority, the political work of such independent activists was not marginal: without them, in fact, the Green Movement of 2009 would have not taken shape. This book offers a different perspective on *eslahat*, beyond the grand narrative of reformism as a step forward in the century-long struggle of the Iranian people against a tyrannical state and for democracy and freedom. The goal here is to offer instruments for

the analysis of Iranian politics—instruments that question the homogenisation that comes with grand narratives.[4] This book analyses *eslahat* as an elite, top-down project, and as a fundamentally contested idea, which enjoyed massive popular support, but also tried to limit and discipline the political imagination of a whole nation with unintended implications.

LOCATING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REFORMISM IN THE RELEVANT SCHOLARSHIP

The primary goal of this study is to examine how activists in Iran have escaped government-controlled spaces and opportunities for political participation forging autonomous political subjectivities. While analysing this, the book investigates the unintended consequences of top-down reforms in hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010): in fact, in reformist Iran, the civil society emerging from such projects of controlled change was not uniformly docile and could mount unexpected challenges to the very constellation of material and discursive powers that animated the reform project in the first place. Consequently, this study also asks how activists translated the abstract notion of political participation into a series of autonomous actions, exemplifying what being politically active entails in a semi-authoritarian[5] context going through limited political liberalisation (reformism).

[4] I am also inspired here by Naghmeh Sohrabi's (2018) analysis of the historiography of the Iranian revolution, which has traditionally taken a similar 'grand narrative' approach, revealing its caducity. At a more general level, and building on David Scott, Sohrabi reflects that the 'questions we ask, the answers we give, and the temporal dimensions of the ensuing discourse' do not last forever. 'Problems are not timeless and do not have everlasting shapes. In new historical conditions old questions may lose their salience, their bite, and so lead the range of old answers that once attached to them to appear lifeless, quaint, not so much wrong as irrelevant' (Sohrabi 2018, p. 2). On this, see also the section titled 'Non-insularity'.

[5] The Islamic Republic is often labelled as a 'semi-authoritarian' system because of its flexible political culture and accommodating structures of power (Keshavarzian 2012). The term 'authoritarianism' is also used to qualify politics in the Islamic Republic, although I avoid it and prefer more nuanced labels such as 'hybrid regime' or 'semi-authoritarianism' (Abdolmohammadi and Cama 2015). My understanding of these labels is that they apply to flexible yet heavily controlled political systems (Rivetti and Saeidi 2018), which are able to 'reorder and reconfigure instruments and strategies of governance, to reshape and recombine existing institutional, discursive, and regulatory arrangements to create recognizable but nonetheless distinctive solutions to shifting configuration of challenges' (Heydemann and Leenders 2013, p. 7).

Dealing with issues of political participation, activism, and political change in Iran, this book engages in a critical dialogue with the scholarship investigating the existence of demands for democracy in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries. More specifically, this book engages theories of democratisation versus authoritarian resilience—that is, the theories that translate how scholars have generally understood the tension between democratic change and authoritarian stability in the past two to three decades. The theories of democratisation and authoritarian resilience have dominated academic debates about political change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since the early 1990s (Pace and Cavatorta 2012; Salamé 1994; Aarts and Cavatorta 2013). The conversation between these two paradigms has been popular in comparative politics (Whitehead 2002; O'Donnell et al. 1986) and Area studies, from Central Asia and Russia to Latin America and South East Asia. The scholarship on Iran too has approached the study of political participation in the country through the lenses of democratisation and authoritarian resilience, resulting in works whose goal was to 'assess the state of' political participation. More specifically, most studies have attempted to assess 'how much' political participation the regime tolerated or allowed, if any at all, constructing taxonomies of liberalisation as a result. The general argument was that the post-Iran-Iraq war Islamic Republic was democratising, but little consensus existed on who the leading players of such a drive to democratisation actually were. While some scholars argued that change was elite-led (Ansari 2000; Mirsepassi 2011; Abootalebi 2001), others argued that social transformations ushered in political change thanks to the coming of age of a new, post-war youth with a more liberal-oriented sensibility (Gheissari and Nasr 2006; Khosrokhavar 1998, 2000; Hashemi 2010; Butel 1998; Azimi 2008). Some called this generation 'defiant' (Yaghmaian 2002; Khosravi 2008).

However, considering the stalling of the reform process since the early 2000s, questions then started to be asked about the ability of authoritarianism in the Islamic Republic (Keshavarzian 2012), as well as elsewhere in the region (Bellin 2004; Schlumberger 2007; Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004; Bank and Richter 2010; Brownlee 2007; Wiktorowicz 2000), to diffuse the potential for political change through repression and softer means of control such as co-optation. In general terms, this latter approach explained how and why authoritarian political structures are able to survive liberalisation (Heydemann 2007; King 2007). The mechanisms scholars surveyed ranged from the co-optation of civil society to the

replacement of potentially confrontational elite members and the use of administrative barriers against anti-government political activism (King 2003; Wiktorowicz 2002; Abdelrahman 2004), informing a rich body of scholarship. In the case of Iran, this scholarship also illuminated how the reformist elites have dealt with the criticism and challenges internal to the reformist front (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2013; Keshavarzian 2005). This book builds on this latter approach. It sees reformism and political participation as magnifiers that emphasise the political mechanisms at work in Iran *other than* authoritarian co-optation or democratic transition.

While theories of democratisation and authoritarian resilience have both contributed to our understanding of how political change occurs and how authoritarian politics works, their limitation is that both understand all aspects of social and political transformation as either a step forward in a democratic transition or a window-dressing tactic for more authoritarianism (Schwedler 2006; Pace and Cavatorta 2012). Research on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society in Iran and elsewhere has often reiterated such limitations by interrogating the politics of civil participation only in terms of opposition to or co-optation by the government (Rivetti 2013; Jamal 2009). While such an approach is important because it highlights the mechanisms sustaining broader authoritarian political structures, it inhibited other research questions.

The dichotomous debate between the resilience of authoritarianism and democratisation theories gained momentum between the 1990s and the end of the 2000s. Despite reflecting a normative understanding of political change, this conversation was important, albeit insufficient, to make sense of politics in Iran, for two reasons. First, theories of both democratisation and authoritarian resilience have offered insights into how and why institutional and political change does or does not happen. More specifically, these insights are important not because they tell us whether a transition to liberal democracy is likely to occur, but because they tell us what else happens in the meanwhile. The analysis of how rulers co-opt opposition forces is relevant to this book not only because it lists the mechanisms through which civil society is tamed, but also, above all, because it illuminates the *contours* of what the regime sees as legitimate political participation, or the conditions under which the regime is happy (or not) to be tolerant (or not) of a critical civil society. Indeed, the analysis of how potential social opposition is controlled or how the ruling elites avoid electoral competition speaks to the issue of what type of political participation is considered legitimate and acceptable—a crucial question

in this book—when, and in which context. It follows that in order to examine how the population, or segments of it, have engaged in political participation during the reformist period, we must first understand the context in which this has happened.

Second, the debate between democratisation and authoritarian resilience is important because it produced a fertile body of scholarship around regime type definitions, which in turn allowed for a profound rethinking of why and how we distinguish discrete regime types. Theories of democratisation and authoritarian resilience reinforced the idea that democracy and authoritarianism are two separate and opposite regimes. At the same time, they also provoked discussions about whether this is in fact so, generating new perspectives on how regimes—understood as the *ensemble* of institutions necessary to govern and administer a territory and a population—institutionalise and routinise (Hinnebusch 2016; Cavatorta 2010; Teti and Mura 2013).

Five Elements of Iran's Dissonant Institutionalisation

The Islamic Republic of Iran represents an interesting case study for those engaged in inquiries about democracy, authoritarian politics, and regime types. In fact, it features both democratic and authoritarian traits, which have resulted in what Daniel Brumberg (2001a, b) called the dissonant institutionalisation of the Iranian regime. This expression captures the existence of a multiplicity of competing ideational forces and visions of authority in the framework of a political system that is authoritarian in terms of restrictions to civil liberties and cultural expression, but also democratic in the sense of tolerating elections as well as negotiations over policies and power distribution—negotiations that primarily involve the elites, but also civil society (Brumberg and Farhi 2016, pp. 4–5). Although they did not include Iran as a case study, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's (2010) notion of competitive authoritarianism offers important insights to understand the interplay between democratic and authoritarian elements in Iran. Levitsky and Way define a political system as competitively authoritarian when competition over resources and power is tolerated and real, but significantly biased. As the two authors put it, the field of competition exists but is not even: not all political players have equal access to institutions and resources, and they do not enjoy equal freedom, yet they are allowed to participate and compete. It is an uneven competition, but a real one, which may generate a degree of uncertainty. Elections in the Islamic

Republic can be labelled as uneven competitions: while the Guardians'
Council of the Constitution (*Showra-ye Negahban*, GC) screens candi-
dates in advance, those who pass the preselection are real competitors,
and this generates a degree of uncertainty regarding the actual electoral
outcome (Alem 2016).[6]

Dissonant politics is the result of dissonant institutionalisation and
decade-long political dynamics. While the Islamic Republic is popularly
portrayed as a country ruled by one man with absolute power over a
supine, repressed population or as a totalitarian clerical system, it has
known harsh competition over both the distribution of power and state
ideology since its establishment after the 1979 revolution. Indeed, the
ideological background to the Islamic Republic transcends Islam and
finds inspiration in a variety of other principles and ideas, such as Western
constitutionalism and liberalism. Scholars such as Arzoo Osanloo (2008),
Naser Ghorbannia (2016), and Mehran Tamadonfar (2001) have dis-
cussed the origin and development of Iran's hybrid legal system, built on
multiple epistemologies. They explain that, after the revolution, the lead-
ers of the newly established Islamic Republic, considering the difficulty of
coming up with an original Islamic system of courts and tribunals, decided
to administer shari'a through the European civil law system, a vestige of
pre-revolutionary monarchy. Tamadonfar explains that religious scholars
could develop legislation in line with shari'a's primary sources only in the
area of private law, because shari'a had little to say about public law or
state affairs. Therefore, the new post-1979 revolutionary system had to
come to terms with both the shari'a-based provisions and the secular
remnants inherited from the pre-revolutionary regime, creating a hybrid
legal system based on a religious as well as a liberal and secular under-
standing of rights. Transcending the legal system, the Islamic Republic in
general builds on a number of ideological discourses, symbols, and values
beyond Islam. For instance, when it comes to political participation and
rulers' (limited) accountability, the justification of political repression on
the basis of religion or the attempts to exploit Islam to excuse the rulers'
totalitarian attitudes and policies are usually contested. Chapters 2 and 3
address how the Islamic left referred to the principles of liberal constitu-

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[6] Yasmin Alem (2016, pp. 166–194), however, nuanced this argument by observing that
uncertainty regarding the outcome of elections has progressively decreased since the election
of the sixth *majlis* (parliament) in 2000. Since then, the Guardians' Council has effectively
contained uncertainty about the result by disqualifying the reformist candidates *en masse*.
This has worked in favour of the conservative forces. On this, see Chaps. 2 and 3.

tionalism to protect its right to the freedom of speech, and how, even among the conservatives, the right to criticise the ruler was referred to as a reminder of the republican character of the Islamic Republic after the repression of the Green Movement (Rivetti and Saleh 2018).

Four elements—that is, democratic and authoritarian politics, religion, and secularism—combine to create the dissonant institutionalisation that has made, and still makes, space for political participation and intra-elite competition in Iran. There is however a fifth element that has contributed to shape the space for political conflict—namely, foreign political influence or interventions, both real and perceived. Iran's elites have an acute sense of foreign interference in domestic politics, and have used it as a tool to strengthen state authoritarianism. Accusations of being the mouthpiece of foreign interests may lead to the delegitimation of political and social players, eventually securitising the public sphere and limiting political participation. In their attempts at discrediting the reform process that the governments of Khatami and the reformist parliament tried to push forward, the conservative factions have often accused them of promoting foreign interests in Iran. These accusations targeted elite members, intellectuals, grassroots activists, NGO workers, and journalists (Tezcür 2012). Thus, foreign influence is another element that has contributed to model the space for and *mode* of political participation during the reformist period, defining what legitimate political participation is in the government's eyes and how defiant political participation can be.

APPROACHING *ESLAHAT*

Non-insularity

Across Muslim-majority countries in the MENA region, Muslim reformers emerged in the 1990s after previous generations in the 1970s and 1980s had worked, with little success, to translate the slogan 'Islam is the solution' into practice (Ayubi 2003). They believed that the promises of political Islam had remained unfulfilled, as immorality, poverty, and state inefficiency were still present. However, they turned their attention to the political *malaise* associated with authoritarian politics—repression, corruption, economic stagnation, nepotism—with a different eye: Muslim reformers realised that these problems did not originate from the failure of religious morality to penetrate the state and society. Instead, they emphasised the need for a legal framework to enforce

rulers' accountability, respect for human rights, and the right to dissent (Tezcür 2010, p. 61). At the same time, the collapse of the bipolar world order freed up the space for reformers and democratic leaders to 'speak up' and have international legitimacy. A few years later, in 2001, 9/11 and the growing global Islamophobia pushed Muslims and Islamists towards a discourse of moderation, with the goal of distancing themselves from violent Islamists (Mahmood 2006). Between the late 1990s and the 2000s, the word 'reform' (*eslah*) had become one of the *leitmotivs* in the speeches of religious and political leaders across the Muslim world, and beyond.

The notion of reform is rooted in the debates taking place within academia and intellectual networks transnationally about the compatibility between democracy, liberal values, and Islam. Scholars such as John Esposito and John Voll (1996, 2001), Esposito (1997), Charles Kurzman (1998, 2012), Michelle Browers (2006), and Browers and Kurzman (2004) investigated the transformations of political Islam after its encounter with globalisation. Possible developments were the radicalisation of religious identity, as examined by Olivier Roy (2006), or the revival of liberal interpretations of Islam. Intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Dalil Boubakeur, Abdou Filali-Ansary, Fatima Mernissi, Bassam Tibi, Soheib Bencheikh, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim argued in favour of a liberal, democratic and, in their words, modern reinterpretation of Islam and shari'a to make them compatible with modern-day values and norms, such as democracy and human rights. Variably referred to as reformed, modern, protestant, positive Islam, or enlightened Islam (Filali-Ansary 2003), liberal Islam emerged from the post-Cold War and 9/11 context, when 'insistent calls' for 'reform and liberalisation' came both from within and outside the Muslim communities (Filali-Ansary 2003, p. 22) to oppose two concomitant phenomena. On the one hand, the rise of Islamic radicalism and, on the other hand, the discursive and political animosity against Islam and Muslims epitomised by cultural essentialism and the theory of the clash of civilisations. Whether resulting from a reinterpretation of its own sources or the encounter with the 'Other', according to its proponents, liberal Islam accommodated modernity and its fruits, such as economic progress, democracy, equality of women, and the principles of social justice and human rights (Arjomand 2002, p. 723). Top-down reforms were the instrument to operationalise the social and political transformation that the principles of liberal Islam had inspired. The education of the masses to these

principles was fundamental, too. Paraphrasing Katerina Dalacoura's (2007, p. 179) observation ('It is only if Islamic reformism is successfully established in political culture that Islam will not hinder the development of a liberal polity in a Muslim society'), *eslahat* can be understood as a project of social engineering.

The advantage of a non-insular approach is to make the world 'safe for comparison' and, following Roxanne L. Euben (2010), 'safe for compatibility': in a world obsessed with the question of the compatibility between Islam and democracy—the 'wrong' question, Asef Bayat argues (2007)—comparisons keep us safe from falling into the trap of exceptionalism, Orientalism, and ahistorical perspectives. Iranian reformism is the localised, context-specific version of this transnational liberal, reformist Islam. In Iran too, *eslahat* was synonymous with tolerance and modernity, dialogue with the West, respect for individual rights and societal diversity, enhancement of women's rights and presence in society, economic policies encouraging private entrepreneurship, and the integration of Iran in the global free market. Crucially, this discourse of reform and modernisation was not new in the Iranian context (Tazmini 2018). In this way, the reformist intellectual and political elites could embed their discourse in Iranian national history, enhancing its legitimacy.

According to Farhang Rajaee (2010, p. 208), the reformist elite 'displays enormous confidence and actively presents its narratives of both modernity and religion, completely aware of the challenges involved in making tradition relevant in a globalized world'. It further strives, Rajaee continues, 'to blend religion and modernity in order to formulate a new paradigm for the future of the Muslim world' (Ibid.). Echoing the transnational discourse of liberal Islam, Rajaee reports an excerpt from an interview with Mohsen Kadivar, a leading reformist intellectual and former clergyman: 'I want to remain Muslim and live as a participant in the globalized world. [To do that], I feel I have a right to present a contemporary narrative of Islam and [the legacy] of the Prophet' (Ibid.). Kadivar positions himself as a reformist intellectual in the line of the Prophet, but at the same time operates an innovation in stating that the contemporary understanding of Islam must be updated and 'made safe' for globalisation. In the context of the Islamic Republic—whose identity and political *Geist* are informed by cultural nativism and the effort to 'return to the self', or to one's 'genuine' cultural roots (Al-e Ahmad 1982; Boroujerdi 1996)—such declarations are revolutionary.

Power and Reformism: Contesting Governmentality

Reformism is not only a discursive articulation of principles and ideals. While it displays distinctive rhetorical elements and recurring themes, analysed later in this book, reformism is also a social programme that has tried to discipline society, like modernisation, secularism, and nationalism have done (Al-Ali 2000a, b; Atabaki and Zürcher 2004; Zürcher 2010). This means that 'reform' includes not only official speeches and cultural artefacts, but also policies, institutional actions, laws, and parliamentary debates, which are all part and parcel of a political project that defines (and limits) the imagination of a population, or segments of it, when it comes to think and articulate what political participation looks like.

Michel Foucault called this normative effect the art of government—which he understood as the manifestation of the exercise of power, not as the executive branch of a political system—or *governmentality*. Foucault (1991a, p. 103) defines governmentality as the art and rationality of government, directed at disciplining and controlling the population. This government is about ensuring the well-being and welfare of the subjects, Foucault explains (1991a, p. 100), which translates into 'taking care' of the bodies and imagination of the people because, Foucault continues (1991b, p. 75), governing is about the practices, and not theories or ideologies only, that render the disciplinary power acceptable. In promoting the openness of the public sphere and civil society, the reformist governments in Iran indicated acceptable ways in which political participation could occur, identifying both the limitations and the possibilities for activists and civil society actors to activate politically—therefore disciplining their political imagination and practice. In this sense, government-led reformism, with its associated acceptable behaviours and political ideas, created what might be called a 'reformist subject'.

Reformism was not a widely accepted project, however. It was highly contested, and this contention did not take place only between opposed elite factions, as already mentioned, but also within the same faction, between reformist subgroups and between reformist elite and non-elite members. The intended reformist subjects, sometimes, resisted and rebelled. But how was this agency mobilised, and how did it form in the first place? Janne B. Christensen (2011) points us towards an inductive method to examine practices of resistance against reformist governmentality. Building upon Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) suggestion that resistance is a 'diagnostic of power', Christensen calls for us to consider every act

of rebellion as a clue through which to investigate the form of discipline being opposed. This prevents the romanticising of resistance—a trap in which it is easy to fall—and lays the groundwork for a serious consideration of what is being opposed, as well as the practices, origin, and implications of such an opposition.

The way contention unfolded among ideologically aligned groups within the reformist front had a lot to do with the situated and diverse understanding of what was considered to be legitimate participation, which varied across reformist subgroups and between elite and non-elite formations. It follows that political struggle materialised at different levels, both vertically (along the lines of the elite-non-elite conflict) and horizontally (between opposed factions within the elite). A situated understanding of such different forms of conflict helps conduct the diagnostic of power that Abu-Lughod and Christensen talk about: why and how did activists become disillusioned with reformism? What feelings or events have pushed them towards radical politics or political apathy? What do the activists' fatigue, frustration, and affective exhaustion (Saeidi and Vafa 2019) tell us about the reformist elite and the politics of participation in Iran? Foucault was aware of the fact that individuals do not conform to external expectations unquestioningly, but they form their own identity and subjectivity. On this basis, scholars have distinguished between subjection and subjectivation, outlining a distinction that allows for the unintended consequences of top-down discipline to be addressed (Bonnafous-Boucher 2009). By way of speech and policy analysis, as well as ethnographic work, this book examines how externally defined subjects have resisted subjection and activated otherwise, through the process of subjectivation. This helps unveil dynamics that might seem counterintuitive. For instance, contrary to received wisdom, the reformist governments had a conflictual relation with pro-democracy social movements and civil society. In fact, during the reformist era, social movements appropriated the call for extending political participation by insisting on civil society as a democratic counterpower, and opposed the reformist elites in power who favoured a more restrictive version of political participation.

In this sense, this book discusses how, on the one hand, the reformist governments shaped activism and political participation while, on the other hand, how the people (or activated citizens) independently imagined a trajectory for participation that went beyond those political options the elites offered to them, producing 'surpluses of participation'. In tracking the formation of such 'surpluses' during and after the so-called reform

era (1997–2005), this book explains how the Green Movement was able to mobilise despite years of political repression. In fact, many of those activists who forged unanticipated paths to political participation under Khatami's governments did not disappear after 2005, despite the increased state repression after Ahmadinejad's election. They continued to work, creating those networks that mobilised in 2009, forming and sustaining the Green Movement.

In order to examine how political participation was imagined and performed during the reformist period, reformism is framed as a multistranded object of investigation. First, reformism can be understood as a 'language of power', namely a notion appropriated by political elites and turned into a rhetorical device that projected the Islamic Republic as a revolutionary and a republican, democratic system—consistent with governmental reformism.

Second, reformism is understood as an 'attitude', a 'style', 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality', 'a way of thinking and feeling […], a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task' (Foucault cited in Le Renard 2014, pp. 4–5) which, consequently, creates subjects with specific characteristics—the 'reformist subject'—'collapsing the boundaries between politics, religion and the ethics of self' (Foucault cited in Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016, p. 64). Reformism as an attitude, a style, a relation to the present reality also identifies ways in which the subjects can, or must, activate politically through an architecture of ideology, discourse, and policies.

Third, reformism can be seen as a form of political activism against state authoritarianism: those who 'do' political participation—but not like the reformist elite would like them to—can reclaim reformism as an oppositional and anti-authoritarian political ideology.

Securitised Research: Navigating Fieldwork in Iran

The fieldwork observations and data that inform this book have been collected and analysed for over ten years. I have been conducting research in the Islamic Republic since 2005, experiencing dramatic variations in terms of personal safety, safety of research participants, access to archives, availability of officials and activists for interviews, and access to social spaces and circles for ethnographic work. Furthermore, I have experienced such diversity of access at irregular intervals. While I otherwise travelled to Iran yearly, I was not able to secure a visa between 2009 and 2017 and

consequently conducted research with Iranian political refugees and asy-lum seekers (some of whom, I had met in Iran before 2009) in Turkey and Italy. Such variations in access and safety were often determined by 'dis-tant' issues, such as George W. Bush or Donald Trump's bellicose declara-tions, the IRGC's (Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, or *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Islami*) military manoeuvres in the Gulf or Yemen, or Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric on Israel—all of which had the det-rimental and almost immediate effect of hyper-securitising the public sphere and, consequently, field research. Likewise, when factional strife raged or when political mobilisations occurred, the possibilities of con-ducting research decreased, leaving researchers with no possibility to secure a visa and few opportunities to analyse meaningful processes and dynamics. When that happened, reformist elites and activists became more difficult to access, and sometimes contacts with friends and participants had to be severed or interrupted.[7] What type of empirical data do research-ers have access to in such restrictive circumstances? How does access determine the findings researchers are able to gather, and consequently their analysis? The political and historical background of factional and contentious politics in Iran cannot be detached from such methodological reflections. During these years, I constructed an archive composed of the interviews I conducted, the field notes and documents I collected, the encounters I had, the mistakes I made, and the memories I formed. This archive includes precious material I could revisit and reinterpret as my work proceeded and my field access varied. This discontinuous access pushed me to revisit old material which, with the passing of time and the changing of context, revealed new insights, disclosing to me unexpected research trajectories.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer more detailed information about methodologi-cal choices as well as the organisations and individuals that participated in my work. In this section, I discuss some of the issues that field researchers encounter when working in environments and countries that heavily secu-ritise research, such as Iran. More specifically, I explain how such encoun-ters with securitisation have informed and transformed my approach to researching *eslahat* and political participation.

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[7] It is hard to think of a nation state that does not securitise research, including West European countries and the United States. On this, see Rivetti and Saleh (2018). However, for the purpose of this chapter, broader comparative considerations will be left aside.

The Geopolitics of Political Participation

During the 1990s, the United States reinforced its presence in the Gulf, waging war against Saddam Hussein, installing its military presence in Kuwait and Bahrain, and strengthening connections with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. At the same time, Bill Clinton's administration initiated the sanctions regime against Iran, targeting its exports. Relations between European countries and Iran expanded, however, and the same happened with Russia, China, and Japan. Trade and economic cooperation were the priority of the governments in Tehran, led by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1993 and 1993–1997), who adopted a pragmatic foreign policy oriented to diversify national economic opportunities. Successive governments followed the same strategy and tried to improve diplomatic connections with the West. Towards this end, Mohammad Khatami's governments (1997–2001 and 2001–2005) sponsored the 'dialogue among civilisations' initiative, aimed at contrasting the influence of Samuel P. Huntington's theory of the clash of civilisations. The initiative received international consecration as the United Nations declared the year 2001 the Year of the dialogue among civilisations—highlighting the success of Khatami's diplomatic *détente*. In Iran, foreign policy became a field of struggle among the different factions within the regime, with conservative forces disrupting the reformists' efforts to promote non-conflictual relations with the West, labelling them as anti-revolutionary and enemies of the nation.

There was no lack of political international tensions during the 1990s, but it was during the 2000s that they increased. This decade saw an aggressive promotion of regime change in Iran by George W. Bush Jr., along with the funding of milder, yet suspicious in Tehran's eyes, programmes of democracy promotion by the European Union. Such a policy change has to be contextualised in the transformation of international politics that followed 9/11. The Bush Jr. administration intended to export democracy in a vast land of non-democratic Muslim-majority societies, as reflected in the 'Greater Middle East Initiative' that Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell had designed. In this context, where Islam was often blatantly equated with terrorism and political violence, the Islamic Republic was elevated to the rank of a sponsor of terrorism and a rogue state.

Between 2001 and 2003, the United States initiated military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, two of Iran's neighbours. During the same years, the 'colour revolutions' overwhelmed Central Asian states. In such an

international context, Iranian elites considered Washington's calls for regime change a serious threat to national stability. Sanctions worsened the situation, contributing to further securitise the public sphere. Since the final years of Khatami's administration, the judiciary and the government became increasingly suspicious and hostile towards political participation, and every form of political opposition was assimilated into United States-sponsored regime change activities. Foreign and dual national researchers were also targeted. State authorities used national security to justify the repression of activists and restrict opportunities for political participation—and fieldwork, too.

The securitisation of political participation has an impact on field researchers' ability to conduct their research free from environmental constraints. Field researchers need to be aware and constantly ready to change their work plans in order to respond to potential state interventions, and, crucially, to protect themselves and the participants in their research. 'Methodological anxiety' is the expression that tries to capture this instability: the need for abrupt replanning and rethinking of research strategies does cause anxiety. However, 'methodological anxiety' also pushes field researchers to try and engage with diverse research methods, adopt different research approaches, disrupt routines, and enrich the range of knowledge and skills they have accumulated during the research.

For the purpose of this book, I have conducted extensive research with political activists (whose names have been changed for security reasons). This has come with a number of challenges. Not only are power dynamics at play here, notably in the imbalanced relationship between the researcher and 'the researched'. Security issues are also present when it comes to conducting research on current political affairs and contemporary society in securitised environments—and such security issues often link back to geopolitics. Both state authorities and activists easily mistook my research for something other than what it was. State agents saw my work as an attempt at inciting regime change, while activists at times interpreted it as an acritical project with the objective of rooting for the advent of democracy in Iran. I did not meet the expectations of either and this complicated my work.

Geopolitics does not only have a bearing when it comes to our ability to access participants. It also influences research in more subtle ways. Research is generated in a broader context that mirrors both specific and larger geopolitical dynamics, which have a direct impact on the ways we understand and interpret our findings, and on how research participants react to our presence. In my experience, participants have often reacted to

me on the basis of their assumptions about my politics. Many have assumed that, as a Western woman, I have a negative image of Islam. This sometimes has pushed them to overemphasise attitudes that challenge Islamophobic stereotypes, insisting on their liberal and secular beliefs, which in turn may have led researchers to simplistic analysis about Iranians' anti-Islamic (and anti-regime) views. It follows that unless a constant dialogue with participants is kept open and nuanced discussions about religion, identity, solidarity, and justice take place, the analysis may acritically reflect the participants' larger 'geopolitical anxieties'. Those anxieties remain a crucial part of fieldwork, but need to be interpreted as a mirror of the fears, hopes, and moral codes of the people we work with, as well as of our own.[8]

Searching for Political Participation

Working on *eslahat* after 2005 was revelatory of the contested nature of notions such as 'democracy', 'civil society', or 'reformism' itself, and of the widespread delusion of Iranian society at large with governmental *eslahat*. Between 2005 and 2009, it was rare to hear a positive assessment of Khatami and his presidencies. Oftentimes, civil society was indicated as the real motor behind social change (which everybody agreed had taken place), while the reformist government was seen as a brake, an obstacle to meaningful democratic change. Such attitudes, however, contrasted with the fact that most activists and participants I engaged with were part of organisations or professional groups that strongly supported Khatami. As I started to highlight what to me looked like a contradiction and have conversations about it, I realised that while *eslahat* symbolised great expectations of change (as Chaps. 4 and 5 discuss), it was part of a political trajectory *in continuity* with similar moments of hope and *expected* political emancipation. While I emphasised *eslahat* as a unique phenomenon, research participants were inclined to emphasise the transitional nature of it, rather than its uniqueness. This realisation helped me broaden my research perspective and shift from a narrower approach to *eslahat* and its

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[8] I have reflected on this in depth in Rivetti (2017). In this article, I suggest the expression 'methodological path-dependence' to define oft-repeated 'truths' about Iran that can be challenged only if broader hierarchies of knowledge production are taken into consideration. While those 'truths' lack methodological precision, they become 'true' by the virtue of repetition.

idea of democracy, towards a richer approach to political participation, political demands, hopes, disappointment, and their repetition over time. Subsequent fieldwork after 2014 confirmed that, indeed, *eslahat* represented one episode—although extremely relevant—of a longer history of political participation in Iran.

As I started enlarging my perspective and researching political participation, my initial approach was to get in touch with as many reformist elite members, activists, and civil society groups as possible. I was interested in exploring how groups mobilised and coped with the securitised public sphere after 2005 which—I had learnt from previous conversations—was one of the consequences of *eslahat*'s shortcomings. I selected formal and informal political organisations and reached out to them. Most of those who belong (or belonged) to the reformist camp were supportive of a democratic-oriented reform of the Islamic Republic. However, they voiced very distinct visions of what *eslahat* entailed as a political project. Initially, I listed differences and similarities, identifying alliances and ideological trends. I mapped and compared mobilisation strategies and discursive frames. As my work proceeded, however, I came to realise that my approach needed to be broadened again.

Working and living in different contexts, I have always been sensitive to how people around me self-identify, especially when it comes to political labels: these nuances are revealing of larger collective sensibilities and imaginaries. For instance, in Iran not everybody was comfortable with the label 'political activist' (*fa'ol-e siyasi*). Political activism is in fact popularly thought of as something dealing with elections, political factions, and the government, while social activism is commonly connected to grassroots organising and activities that help the progress of society holistically. These nuances were important to my interlocutors and urged me to shift perspective, moving from one approach focused on self-proclaimed activists or the members of a given political organisation, towards a more flexible and inclusive analysis of who participates, when, and how. This meant overcoming a 'fetishisation' of activism and opening up possibilities for letting my 'sociological imagination', as Charles Wright Mills would put it, blossom.

As I became more interested in how and when people think of themselves as political agents and the implications of such a politicisation, my research methods changed as a result. I moved towards a more ethnographic approach, focusing on the social lives of activists, the interactions they had with their broader non-political social environments, the cultural

products they consumed (books, movies), and what they considered to be 'cool' and 'uncool', both socially and politically. My methodological attention then shifted from activists, from whom I had previously wanted the 'expression' of political participation, to political participation as a discourse, as an *ethos*, an attitude, a trigger for political action, and, finally, a component of everyday life. This made it possible to frame my personal approach to *eslahat*, which I understand as a normative project of social engineering promoted by state elites but appropriated by individuals with unexpected consequences.

Consequently, this research builds on mixed methods ranging from semi-structured interviews with elite and non-elite individuals, to ethnography, archival research, and sustained participant observation in different environments and countries (Iran, Turkey, and Italy). Research was conducted between 2005 and 2017 on university campuses in Tehran, in NGO offices in Iran, in Tehranian public parks and coffee shops, private apartments in Iran and Turkey, asylum seekers' accommodations in Turkey and Italy, my own house in Italy, and disco-restaurants in Turkey. Non-elite research participants mostly fall within the category of activists, journalists, and/or NGO workers, including those who have become asylum seekers after 2009. They largely fall in the 20–40 age group and are both male and female. In terms of generational belonging, participants mostly belong to two generations: one reached adult life and entered university between 1997 and 2005 during Khatami's governments, while the other one is significantly younger and reached adulthood in post-2009 Iran. This difference is important because it allows to understand how dissent and grassroots activism have formed and survived in Iran, despite such dramatic contextual differences.

I included elite members in my research until 2008, but was able to do so only infrequently after 2014. I define elite participants broadly, including policy makers, 'experts' working in governmental institutions and think tanks, and politicians. All of them did belong to some strands of the reformist camp and the majority is male. Some of them spent periods in jail, while others have survived the post-2009 repression and are (or have been) part of Rouhani's administrations. Encounters and interviews with them were useful to outline the *contours* of *eslahat* as a normative, top-down project of social and political engineering. Accessing elite's ideas of reformism, political participation, and modernity was fundamental to understand what *eslahat* ought to look like in the plans of the reformist elite. I conducted archival research at the Parliament Library, where I

could access all parliamentary proceedings. Needless to say, I mostly focused on the debates' collections between 1997 and 2005. Material from magazines, academic journals, novels, and newspapers allowed me to reconstruct the 'social environments' in which ideas about political participation and political agency have taken shape.

I see my research methodology as 'multi-stranded' and including a multitude of interviews, experiences, conversations, documents, field notes, and encounters that occurred in different places and time. This material forges the 'field' I have been navigating and researching, giving shape to an archive I can refer back to when writing and questioning my findings. Earlier experiences have informed later conversations, and later findings have shed new light on earlier interviews. In this way, I could double-check and cross-reference my understanding of the Iranian state and politics, contrasting it against alternative views, historical references, as well as different contexts. The usefulness of this methodology is that the material can be read time and again, opening up the possibility for reinterpretation and revision. This was extremely helpful to me, considering that I am not of Iranian origin and that my knowledge of Persian has improved during the years and successive fieldwork periods. Being able to 'go back' to my 'archive-field' allowed me to progressively capture cultural and political nuances, and refine understanding, in the course of time.

Book Content

Chapter 2 discusses the background against which this research develops. It examines the history of factionalism in post-revolutionary Iran and analyses how political participation has related to it across the decades. The chapter proposes a historical analysis of when and how reformism has become a palatable political option for part of the elite, who needed to counter progressive marginalisation.

Chapter 3 looks at reformism as a 'language of power' and examines it as a technology of control over social mobilisations and political participation. More specifically, the chapter looks at how we can understand the reformist elite's call for democratisation, reform, and individual rights as an instrument that limits the possibility for political imagination. The chapter looks at reformism as a normative project, and examines how the reformist elite has articulated political participation with the goal of mobilising societal constituencies and political symbolism in support of the government. The chapter discusses how, although constantly mobilised as a

value, political participation was never conceived of as a form of political autonomy. Instead, it was promoted to create a 'style', a life conduct, and a mentality co-constructing a 'reformist subject'.

Chapter 4 focuses on the elite's promotion of 'civil society' as the arena where people could activate politically. The chapter, however, also examines how activists and civil society practitioners reappropriated the governmental policies and discourse, turning them into something else than the government's *desiderata*, to serve their own ethical and political purposes. The analysis is conducted in environments, such as NGOs, that emphasised specific 'reformist qualities' such as being modern, curious, and committed to serve the greater good for the nation—that is, saving the regime from a crisis of legitimacy, according to the elite, or helping the democratisation of Iran, according to activists. In conclusion, the chapter argues that the elite's call for participation created the conditions for the activists to experience the contradictions of *eslahat* and, eventually, develop independent political agency.

Chapter 5 discusses the formation of autonomous subjectivities that have transcended the political limitations as set by the elite's discourse and policies. The 'reformist subjects' turned into radical subjectivities because of the disillusionment at the reformist elite, who frustrated all attempts at pushing for a change by discouraging independent popular mobilisations and social movements. The chapter reconstructs the processes through which disillusion took root among the activists, and discusses their political imaginaries and hopes in contrast with governmental reformism. The analysis argues that such a 'residual' political capital produced by the reformists' call for participation constituted the foundations of the networks that allowed activists to remain connected and mount a challenge to the state during the crisis of 2009–2010.

Chapter 6 discusses the history of political participation as examined in this book, arguing that, in post-revolutionary Iran, it outlines a cycle of hope, which transforms political frustration into political action. Indeed, while *eslahat* created unmet expectations and unintended consequences, it also elevated popular political demands and hopes. Thus, the chapter discusses hope as a site of social reproduction and asks what implications hope—or the lack thereof—has for state legitimacy and for the reproduction of the state as a politically legitimate entity.

Chapter 6 concludes that top-down liberalisation is limited in the way in which it projects state legitimacy through reforms. It does not, however, deny or fragment stateness. In this sense, the state is reproduced by the means of constant criticism. In conclusion, *eslahat* and the political hope it created are just one phase of the longer-term process of state reproduction.

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