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Can women act as agents of a democratization of theocracy in Iran?

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Introduction

Religion has never been completely separate from the state in Iran, particularly since the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) when Shi'a Islam became the official religion of Iran. However, its complete unification with the state in 1979, after the successful popular revolution, represented a new experiment for Iran regarding religion and modernity. The coalition of conservative religious leaders who ascended to political power had not accepted either the primacy of democracy or the premise of the equality of men and women (or Muslims and non-Muslims) which was contrary to their reading of divine scripture. The large segments of society that had internalized the equality of all citizens, at least theoretically, found themselves in ideological collision with the state that many of them had helped bring to power. And the young state, itself, was a contested domain. Political players representing diverse social, political, and gender visions were in competition for access to power and resources. However, the creation of the novel dual state structure in which non-elected and non-accountable state authorities oversee the elected authorities allows only a limited role for women and the general public to play in these contestations. This state of affairs has led to lively, if contradictory, intellectual and political developments which continue to test the actual and potential capacity of the Islamic Republic to accommodate democracy and gender equality.

Eager to achieve their Islamicization of society by a realization of their gender ideology, the regime, within days of its ascendance to power, annulled many of the basic rights women had been enjoying under the previous government, as they considered them un-Islamic. Ironically at the same time, it was encouraging women to participate in street and electoral politics in support of their theocratic state. In this paradoxical context, while women lent their support to the Islamic state, they no longer felt like silent objects of politics. They thus took the state to task for the rights that they were conscious of as citizens, regardless of whether those rights were expressed through secular or religious perspectives. Furthermore, in pursuit of its Islamicization vision, the state has embarked on intensive social engineering. Women's responses to these interventions, however, have not always followed the patterns ideologues expected, introducing new complexity and intellectual and theological challenges to the ideology of the regime.

This paper will thus examine the following: the development of the Islamicization of education; struggles over contested family law, which remains at the heart of demands for gender equality, as well as of the conservatives' gender vision of an ideal patriarchal family; and women's role in politics and the public sphere. As religion in Iran has come to assume more importance in shaping the everyday life of women than ever before, we also examine the extent to which women, through their women-friendly reading of the Islamic texts, have reshaped theological gender discourse through their various strategies. Have the social and political developments in Iran led to a greater receptivity among religious leaders – inside and outside the state power structures – to the idea of gender equality? Have there been more women-friendly politics and policies in response to women's activism and popular demands? In short, have women been able to translate their demands for gender equality into legal reform? Another concern of the paper is to examine the role of secular forces in the political matrix of Iran. Given their differing political perspectives, what are the differences in their immediate demands? By analyzing the gathered data we assess the extent to which women have achieved gender consciousness and whether they have increased their sphere of influence and autonomy in their personal and public life under the Islamic Republic.

1. Historical background: Religion and Politics

By the middle of the nineteenth century the authoritarian rule of the Qajar monarchy was increasingly criticized by many modernists, who, influenced by discourses in Muslim intellectual centers¹, advocated the establishment of a constitutional, representative parliament. The religious leaders, *ulama*, marginalized by the Qajar monarchs, favored a representative government but with religious control over public morality and a significant role within the legal and educational systems.² It was in this context that a coalition of *ulama*, liberal intellectuals and modernists joined in an ultimately turbulent political relationship that has since colored Iranian politics. There were two major sources of irreconcilable contention between more conservative *ulama* and other modernists. Firstly, conservative *ulama* claimed a divine source for law, while modernists viewed law as a social creation. Secondly, modernists for the most part assumed a theoretical equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of social class (and, for some, gender or religion), while the conservative *ulama*, who were generally most outspoken, claimed greater rights for Muslim men than for women and non-Muslim citizens. While the modernists viewed the expansion of education and public roles for women (if not political rights) as integral parts of modernity (Afary 1996, 2009; Najmabadi 1993), the conservative *ulama* recognized the ramifications of an ideology of equality and citizenship and were extremely hostile to these ideas, pronouncing them contrary to Islam (Paidar 1995). On a national scale, while the idea of a new state decreasing the power of the monarch appealed to the majority of urban males, most had strong reservations concerning the extension of women's roles and their increased autonomy in the public sphere, recognizing that the effect on marriage and family institutions would inevitably translate into a loss of male positions of privilege and control over their women folk.

During and in the immediate years after the constitutional revolution (1906), conservative *ulama* were able to capitalize on these patriarchal tendencies to successfully mobilize support for their political vision (Paidar 1995; Afary 1996). This meant that women, along with criminals and the mentally ill, were denied political rights under the new constitution. However this political gain was temporary. With the establishment of the Pahlavi regime (1925-1979), which was committed to modernist ideals though not to democracy, the *ulama*, particularly conservatives, were largely marginalized from legal power structures. However, they continued to command moral authority and nurture alliances among conservative social groups and those excluded from the fruits of modernization. In particular, a sustained alliance with the *bazaaris*, whose diminished social and political prestige under the Pahlavi regime did not affect their significant power within Iran's economy, resulted in their handsome contribution to religious funds which the *ulama* maintained control over (Keshavarzian 2005). This alliance of conservative *ulama* and powerful patriarchal forces has colored Iranian politics and women's struggle for gender equity ever since, particularly regarding family law reform and women's political participation. Conservative *ulama* have continued to mobilize opposition to even the mildest reforms affecting power relations within the family or improving women's legal status.

Aside from the introduction of a minimum age of marriage and a 1936 decree, outlawing veiling, the most significant gender reform occurred in 1963 when women's right to vote was introduced as part of a package called the White Revolution, consist-

¹ Concerned with the reasons for the social, economic and scientific stagnation in Muslim societies while Europe was flourishing.

² Importantly, religious leaders were not a homogenous group. Many of the outspoken intellectuals of the 19th and early 20th centuries came from among the *ulama*.

ing of six major reforms, including the long-delayed land reform. The proposed reforms were massively approved in a national referendum in which only men voted. *Ulama*, who controlled large tracts of land under the *owqaf* institution of religious endowments, bitterly opposed the package, which would severely reduce their economic resources. Recognizing that land reform had massive support, the *ulama* tried to mobilize a conservative opposition, including that of key *bazaaris*, by focusing on changes to women's rights and their political participation as un-Islamic. Their unsuccessful uprising resulted in the exile to Iraq of the young Ayatollah Khomeini, the most outspoken political adversary of the modernist Shah.

During his exile (1963-1978), Khomeini developed his vision of a theocratic Islamic state, *Velayat-e Faqih*, where clergy would rule supreme as direct representatives of God and the prophet and would Islamicize the politics and society through the application of *Shari'a*.³ Khomeini's writings circulated secretly among his followers, thus, were not easily subject to scholarly or theological scrutiny.

In 1967, after decades of lobbying by women, moderate family law reforms were introduced and subsequently revised in 1973 (Sansarian 1982; Paidar 1995). The Family Protection Act modestly improved the position of women within marriage, with the right to divorce shifting from a husband's prerogative to a family court, and limiting polygamous marriages by making them conditional on the permission of first wives or the court. The Act also slightly expanded women's custody rights, based on a child's best interests. Despite their modest scope, the reforms were virulently opposed by the conservative religious establishment, who resented watching their sphere of influence shrink. Thus, Ayatollah Khomeini publicly announced that divorce under the new laws was not religiously recognized and divorced women who remarried would be committing bigamy, their children bastards, unable to marry Muslims.⁴

Women's rights continued to be used by both the modernizing Pahlavi regime and conservative religious leaders in their battle for power, though neither side was truly interested in the plight of women per se (Hoodfar 1999b). And while the conservative religious leaders had little formal political or economic influence, they retained a significant moral authority especially concerning the appropriate roles for Muslim women which they defined based on a restrictive reading of *Shari'a* with little attempt to adjust to social realities in Iran.⁵

³ Ayatollah Khomeini (1998). *Velayat-e Faqih* –Tehran Publishing House.

⁴ Khomeini (1947) *Resaleh*. This treatise is a book of reference and religious guidance, read by his followers although published illegally during the Shah's rule. Therefore its publisher and exact date are not clear. Also see Paidar (1995) for a detailed account of this debate.

⁵ Inevitably women's rights activists supported the limited legal and social advancement of the Pahlavi regime. Nonetheless, the Pahlavi quest for a monopoly on state power increasingly alienated so many segments of society, including women, that eventually it reached its downfall with the Iranian revolution of 1979.

2. The Islamic Republic: Islamicization Policies and Public Responses

2.1 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic

The Pahlavi regime, supported by vast oil money, had transformed Iran into a police state with few intellectual or political freedoms, whether from religious or secular camps. While many secular intellectuals and modernist social critics disapproved of a blind importation of European cultural practices and values, particularly by the political and economic elites, their voices were silenced. Further, unlike the religious opposition, secular forces did not have independent sources of economic or institutional support with which to promote their views amongst the citizenry at large. Nonetheless, publications like Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* (1962, translated variously as "western-struck", "westoxification", or "occidentosis"), criticizing the denigration of Iranian culture and mores in the name of modernity, struck a chord with many nationalists and discontented secularists and provided a framework for reclaiming a modernity and development beyond the Western pattern.⁶ The regime's uncritical importation of development policies devised in Europe and America economically marginalized the majority and greatly increased the income disparity between rich and poor, despite growth in the economy. The ranks of the dissatisfied continued to swell.

While the promotion of social justice and the transformation of women's roles were a focus for many secular critics, there was little interest in the 'women's question' by liberal and leftist social forces, despite the discrimination and injustice suffered by women within both domestic and political spheres.

Ali Shariati (1933-75), was one of the few intellectuals who publicly addressed the women's question. His writing and talks re-interpreted Shi'a Islam as revolutionary, with an emphasis on social justice. Extremely popular amongst students and intellectuals, Shariati came from a religious background but criticized the religious establishment as stuck in the past while society moved forward without guidance. In the 1970s his popularity grew with the publication of *Fateme is Fateme*, and *A Muslim Woman*, drawing on the life of the Prophet's daughter to critique the treatment of women in Shi'a Islam as dehumanizing; at the same time he decried the regime's western-style women's liberation as 'Hollywood', turning women into sexual objects (Hermansen 1983). Highlighting the women scholars and social activists trying to improve Iranian women's lives, he struck a chord with young women of all backgrounds. Shariati helped politicize masses of women intrigued by his reading of women's rights within Islam, and provided those from religiously inclined backgrounds a legitimate political avenue within their religious framework, contributing to women's mass participation in the 1979 revolution and beyond.

The 1979 Iranian revolution was one of the most popular revolutions in history. Iranians of vastly different backgrounds and political tendencies demanded an end to the monarchy. Yet there was no common political platform or program for establishing a new state and allocating power in the event of success. Democracy and social justice

⁶ Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (1923-1969) was an early political activist. However, after the CIA orchestrated a coup-d'état in 1953, he left politics and continued to write novels and anthropological observations of life in different communities in Iran. His critical view of the modernization process and its devaluation of Iranian mores is best reflected in *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. It was clandestinely published in Iran in 1962 and remained an intellectual milestone for Iranians of all tendencies; religious, nationalist or leftist. (See Roy Mottahedeh, 1985/2004, for a contextualized assessment of his role in the ideological framework of the revolution.)

were the common, if vague, primary demands, but the various constituencies never collaborated on any strategies for achieving these goals once the Shah's regime fell, nor was there any practical, unified vision as to how the state would be run. Moreover, due to the severe political repression under the Shah's regime after the CIA-engineered fall of democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, most of the oppositional groups had been forced underground or exiled (Risen 2000). Consequently, almost no organizations had effective national networks to facilitate communication. The exceptions were the conservative religious groups, particularly that of Ayatollah Khomeini,⁷ under whom diverse religious and conservative groups had united to share his vision of a theocratic state, *Velayat-e Faqih*. With a country-wide network of thousands of mosques, Khomeini had the infrastructure and material resources no other political group enjoyed,⁸ and within a few months of the uprising Khomeini and his followers took over the leadership of the anti-Shah movement.

Given the diversity of participants in the Revolution and the strong demand for democracy, Khomeini's vision of a complete theocracy could not be implemented. The emerging compromises resulted in a complex "republican theocracy". This system, enshrined in the new constitution, includes two structures: the Supreme Religious Leader, whose legitimacy rests on a claim of religious, divine power (though after Ayatollah Khomeini the Supreme Leader has been elected by the Council of Experts), and an elected parliament and president who have to be confirmed by the Supreme Leader.⁹ The Supreme Leader holds his position for life and is not answerable to any person or body. He controls the regular Army, the Revolutionary Guards, a military force created to counter the power of the regular military, and the *Basij* organizations (National Mobilization Organization), another institution charged with safe-guarding the principles of the revolution (Sadeghi 2009). The Supreme Leader appoints the head of the judiciary and controls the state-monopolized radio and television. The 12 members of the Council of Guardians, which oversees the elected parliament, ensure that any laws passed by parliament do not contradict their interpretation of Islamic law. Although not clearly stated in the constitution, the Council oversees the approval of political candidates and thus only ideologically conservative candidates are approved, eliminating any opportunity for competing political visions to emerge officially. While the members of the Council of Guardians are hand-picked by the Supreme Leader from among conservative allies, he ensures that various interests are represented. Thus despite their similar conservative views on gender, their views on many economic and other issues differ, resulting in some ideological clashes. In practice, Iran now has a theological political system in which a small, un-elected group oversees and controls the "elected" government and law-making bodies with considerable consequences for the development of democracy and gender equality, as we will discuss below. Thus a journey begun in 1501, when the Safavids declared Shi'a Islam the state religion, has culminated in the complete, formal fusion of religion and state in every dimension.

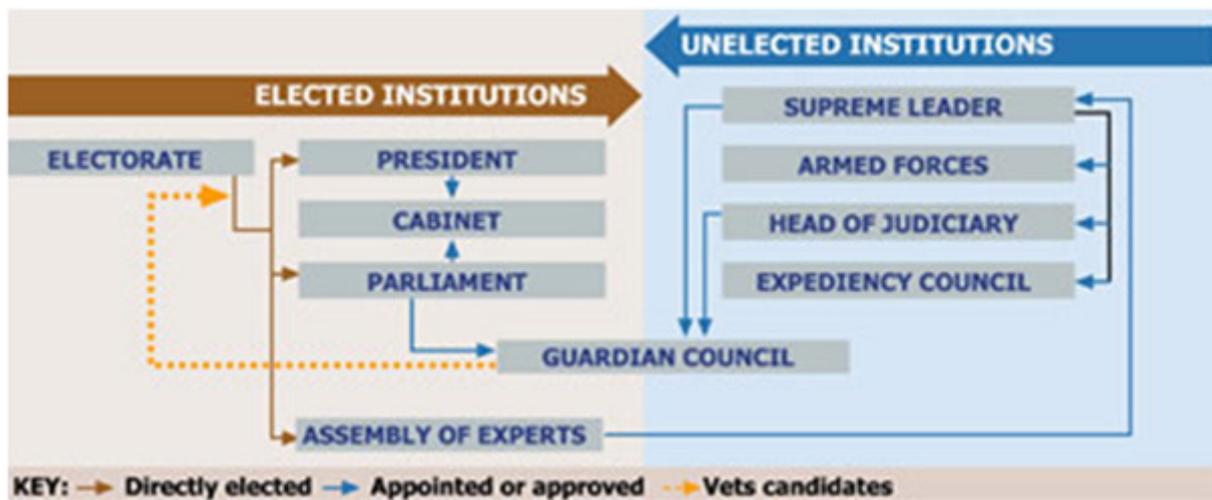
⁷ Ayatollah Khomeini 1373. *Velayat-e Faqih* –Tehran Publishing House.

⁸ However, there is no evidence that the mosque network was used for political mobilization in any substantial manner until the eve of the demonstrations in 1978, during a wave of funerals for martyrs.

⁹ The Council of Experts is elected from among religious leaders nominated by the Council of Guardians, which technically has final approval of all constitutional and legal revisions. However, the Council of Guardian's rigorous adherence to religious laws potentially undermined the practical functioning of the state. To address this, in 1987 Ayatollah Khomeini established the Council of Expediencies (formed in 1366/1986) to resolve disputes between Parliament and the Council of Guardians. In 1988/1368, when the constitution was revised, the Council of Expediencies' responsibilities were expanded (articles 112, 111, 177).

Following the Revolution, as tensions between the Council of Guardians and the bureaucrats actually managing the nation increased, Khomeini established the Council of Expediency (see footnote 9), which could override decisions of the Council of Guardians deemed impractical for the functioning of the nation. Thus the state, established to govern in accordance with the most conservative interpretation of “*Shari’a*”, was forced to acknowledge that administering a large, diverse nation required some ideological compromises in order to retain legitimacy. This opened the way for reformists to develop new approaches to *Shari’a*; as we will see, the Council of Expediency has been a very important vehicle for addressing gender issues.

The fact that the revolution resulted in a republican theocracy, structured to allow for mitigation of religious leaders’ rulings for practical purposes, suggests that political Islamists and religious conservatives did not achieve power without contestation and compromise. Scholars and political opponents agree, however, that the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) helped Khomeini and the religious councils avoid further compromises with democratic forces, using the rhetoric of war to suppress both secular and liberal religious opponents.



Source: Revised version of *One Minute World News*, BBC News Online.

2.2 Islamicization policies and women’s responses

The complete amalgamation of political and religious power has had considerable implications for women’s equality; the role of women in society was a significant platform in Khomeini’s opposition to the Pahlavi regime and was a rallying point for diverse cultural and religious conservative forces. Immediately following the Revolution, government steps toward reviving gender segregation and undoing family law reform began, in part to reward and ensure continuing support from conservative forces. The new regime’s ideologues envisioned an Islamic society based on a nearly complete gender apartheid, eradicating gains that women’s rights activists had worked to establish over seven decades.

The process of Islamicization, with a focus on women, began even prior to the formulation of the post-Revolution constitution. Reasserting the clergy’s authority, Khomeini annulled the Family Protection Law within two weeks. Men regained the uni-

lateral right to divorce and polygyny, and temporary marriage was encouraged.¹⁰ Women were barred from becoming judges in accordance with Shi'a tradition. Beaches and all sporting facilities were segregated. The age of maturity for girls was set at 9 and for boys, 14; this was later enshrined in the constitution. Sexual relations outside marriage became a crime against the state, punishable with stoning and lashes. Scores of prostitutes were condemned to death. Clearly, the regime took advantage of the post-Revolutionary euphoria to introduce, without referenda, laws that might later have met with resistance. Ironically, while implementing these regressive laws, the new regime continued to insist that Islam provided all rights that secularism had ever afforded women and more, and that only through Islam could women thoroughly achieve their human dignity.

Women's attempts to oppose these developments were immediately stifled by the new government, as well as a wide spectrum of political groups, who warned against creating divisions and weakening the "anti-imperialist" state (Sansarian 1983; Shahidian 1994). Though women had been politicized over the course of the Revolution, attempts to form a coalition women's organization following the Revolution were stymied by the combined social forces of the state, the left, and the religious forces, each opposed for its own reasons (Shahidian 1994).

Women achieved a temporary victory after Khomeini announced compulsory *hijab* on the eve of March 8th, International Women's Day, an occasion which normally would pass without much notice. Spontaneous demonstrations, the largest in the history of women's movements in Iran (Paidar 1995; Afary 2009) followed his announcement, surprising the religious leaders. The regime temporarily retreated, but re-introduced the compulsory dress code gradually over the next two years. Gradually, exclusion of women from the public sphere and from the formal labor market ensued.

However, realities on the ground soon interfered with the ideologues' planned gender segregation. Women's large-scale participation in the revolution, and the newly iconic status of the women's veil as a revolutionary symbol, rendered the authorities unable to ignore women as political agents. In addition, many of the religious leaders were politically shrewd enough to use women's support to establish and expand the legitimacy of the new state, particularly since some of the secular opposition to the Islamic Republic was based on what many citizens viewed as archaic views on women's rights. Public support of the new leadership by masses of women taking to the streets rebuffed such secular criticism (Hoodfar 1999b; Paidar 1995). Ironically, women's political agency and public participation, the target of Khomeini's harshest criticism when Iranian women gained the vote in 1963, significantly helped legitimize his leadership. By encouraging women to take to the streets in support of the Islamic Republic, it became clear that Khomeini's opposition to women's public participation had more to do with political expediency than with divine scripture.

Such developments were predicated entirely on pragmatism, not on reformed ideals concerning social justice. The discussions within the Assembly of Experts (including one token woman), responsible for writing the new constitution, are very telling

¹⁰ "Temporary marriage or marriage of pleasure" refers to an agreed union that can last anywhere from a few hours to a lifetime. Beside four permanent wives, men can enter into as many such marriages as they choose. Often temporary marriages serve as vehicles for wealthy men to exploit poor women, hence the social stigma attached to the women who enter into them. Though children resulting from these unions are legitimate, and legally entitled to the same protection and inheritance as children from permanent marriages, their social status is compromised. (For a detailed discussion of temporary marriage in Iran, see Haeri 1989).

in regard to the gender vision of the new state and the process by which conservative readings of *Shari'a* were woven into the constitution as the backbone of the emerging legal system.¹¹ The 64 volumes of constitutional debate include hundreds of pages on the question of women. Diverse experts dwelled at length over how to craft Article 20 to avoid suggesting women were equal or had equal rights to men, while making it palatable to the millions of women who gave their hearts to the revolution and supported the new government.¹²

In contrast to the post 1906 constitutional debates, no one argued for women's equal citizenship or rights (Paidar 1995; Afary 1996).¹³ Instead, it was argued that while women were due equal *protection* under the law, God had denied certain rights to women, and it was not up to any worldly bodies to change that.¹⁴ Monireh Gorji, part of the religious opposition for years prior to the revolution and the only woman who participated in the writing of the constitution of the Islamic Republic, argued that women, as the core of the family, which is the foundation of Islamic society, were due constitutional protection of their material and spiritual rights, including their political rights. Her suggestion was rejected.¹⁵ In fact, all sections addressing women's rights (these occur only in the context of motherhood and family), are qualified as being in accordance with Islamic values. "Islamic values" are never actually defined in the constitution or any other legal document. This is left to the Council of Guardians: six religious experts appointed by the Supreme Religious Leader and six lawyers elected by Parliament from nominees provided by the head of the judiciary (himself appointed by the Leader); thus far (over almost 30 years) the Council has struck down every law that diverged in the slightest from the most conservative interpretation of *Shari'a*. Had it not been for the Council of Expediency, no reform on family law would have materialized.

Thus, for example, the law continues to state that the value of a woman's life is half that of a man's; in court two women witnesses are equal to one man, and in the case of murder, there has to be at least one male witness regardless of how many women have witnessed the crime.

While legal regulation of sexuality in theory addresses both sexes, in practice primarily women are discriminatorily affected. Sexual relations outside marriage are a crime against the state, punishable by lashing and stoning; since men can practice polygyny and temporary marriage, it is most often women who are prosecuted under this law. *Hijab* and strict dress codes are enforced by a large, paid force of moral police; non-compliance results in heavy fines, imprisonment and lashes. With the revocation of the Family Protection Law promulgated under the Pahlavi regime and the constitutionally directed segregation of public life in most arenas, women are restricted from participating in many activities, sports and professions.

¹¹ Despite some differences in the way different deputies interpreted *Shari'a* as it applied to women, they nevertheless remained within very conservative perspectives.

¹² Article 20: All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, in conformity with Islamic criteria.

¹³ Most debates on women's political rights took place during the second parliament (Nov. 1909-Dec.1911)

¹⁴ Cf. the detailed account of debates during preparation of the constitution of IRI, the fifty-fifth session, published by the Public Relations and Cultural Affairs committee of Parliament, first edition, pages 6150-64.

¹⁵ See detailed constitutional debates in 1979 (vol. 1 pages 444-64) published by the Public Relations and Cultural Affairs committee of Parliament, first edition.

2.3 Expansion of education as a vehicle of Islamicization and its unintended consequences

The importance of inculcating a national ideology via the hearts and minds of the nation, and especially of women as producers of future generations, was not lost on the Islamic government. The religious leaders recognized education as a primary vehicle for the Islamicization of society, and the fostering of Islamic education quickly became another pressing preoccupation of the regime, to which it allocated a considerable percentage of its budget (Table 1 below). The regime’s critics had warned that an Islamic state would restrict female education, forcing women back to the dark ages. The expansion of education, particularly for women, would appear to refute these accusations.

Table 1: Budget allocation of regime

Ministries’ budget	1976 %	1981 %	1986 %	1990 %	1995 %	2000*	2006*
Education	8.5	16	17.6	22	13	13.6	7.8
Defense	28	10.5*	13*	10.5	5	13.6	7.5

*Note: The Iran-Iraq war continued from 1980 to 1988

**The 2006 budget allocations were organized separately for provinces. However, we have included the totals here for comparability.

Source: for the 1976 to 2000 Planning Organization and 2006 central Bank

A great deal of religious content was added to the curricula, particularly for primary schools. School history books were re-written to present the clergy as the redeemers of the nation. More schools were opened in rural and low income areas and staffed with the help of revolutionary volunteers.¹⁶ Primary school manuals were quickly revised to show “segregated gender roles” and pictures of women fully covered by their *hijabs* (Mehran 1991; Afary 2009). The apparent Islamic nature of the schooling, along with the government’s support for girls’ education (Mehran 1991; UNICEF 1995, 2005), disarmed many parents previously opposed to female education on religious grounds. A highly successful adult literacy campaign was launched (Mehran 1991, 2002). As Table 2 indicates, the net result has been a higher overall rate of female literacy, and a higher rate of educational enrolment among children, with a reduction in the gap between enrolment rates for girls and boys (UNICEF 1995). The Islamic Republic hailed these educational developments as indicators of their commitment to women’s rights and dignity.

Table 2: Percentage of Students who are female at Different Educational Levels

year	primary	High-school	University
1978	39.72%	36.36%	31.77%
1988	44.34%	42.38%	31.10%
2006	48.19%	49.16%	63.7

Source: The office of Women and Family. 2006. “The review of women’s advancement 1975-2005”.

¹⁶ During the early years of the revolution, many young men and women worked in the poorer districts as teachers or nurses for little or no pay, under the auspices of the *Basij* (mobilization) organization which saw itself as the guardian of the revolution.

Paradoxically, the expansion of education has had many unintended consequences and has presented the ideologues of the regime with serious dilemmas concerning women in the public sphere and labor market. The conjunction of gender segregation and expanded education has required a large number of female teachers, nurses and doctors; thus segregation meant an expansion in specific fields of job opportunities for women. Fifty percent of medical school and nursing school placements were allocated to women.¹⁷ Some engineering courses were closed to women after lobbying efforts by Islamist women who argued there was no Islamic basis for educating women in this field. Eventually most of them re-opened to women.¹⁸

The regime initially promoted education as an Islamic duty for all Muslims. Subsequent decades saw female students surpassing males as they studied hard to demonstrate their capabilities. Given the high value Iranian society places on educational achievement, schooling became a means for young women to demonstrate their worth. By the turn of the twenty-first century, women made up a majority of those entering university and other higher education institutions (see Table 2 above), even in the traditionally male fields of science and engineering. This engendered new expectations. Women began delaying marriage to complete their education and fully anticipated entering the labor market. In fact, recent research indicates that young women prioritize careers over marriage (Khatam 2006; Keddie 2007; Kurzman 2008). This unintended consequence has worried the conservatives who wish to limit the public role of women and has also raised concerns among policy experts as the government does not have the means of creating full employment for its very youthful population.

The IRI's push for education, along with an Islamic dress code and compulsory veiling, has shifted the female student demographic and brought many girls from conservative backgrounds into school and then into the public domain, including the labor market, street politics and activism. Parental objections to daughters' participation in public life have been annulled by the complete Islamicization of society, whereby properly covered females are participating in religiously sanctioned activities (education). This has engendered a continuous refining of the grey areas in relation to women's rights and social position in a way that had not been foreseen by the regime. All of these unintended developments have presented new dilemmas for the religious leadership, challenging conservatives to search for new ways to retain their gender ideology.

One result was a chorus of theocratic ideologues suggesting setting a quota for women entering university. While gaining some momentum, these plans met with strong objections from women, who were able to organize more effectively under reformist President Khatami (1997-2005), whose election they massively supported. However, with the election of a more conservative 7th Parliament (2003) and, later, the radical-political Islamist President Ahmadinejad, the conservatives have regained ground. They are quietly implementing policies that, on the one hand, curb women's access to higher education and, on the other, redirect them to more and newly expanded religious educational institutes as we discuss in the following sections.

As of 2006, the government has established a quota. To circumvent public criticism, especially since the idea of a quota for women in electoral politics was resisted on

¹⁷ Initially, men were barred from the school of gynecology as it was seen as a field for women only, though later this was revised to allow for a minority of men to enter this field. Several *fatwas* were issued stating that Muslims should see doctors of their own sex.

¹⁸ In recent years, because female applicants have had a higher success rate than males in the entrance exams, the government of Ahmadinejad has introduced a quota that keeps 40% of places reserved for male students.

the ground that meritocracy yields the most efficient system, a minimum quota of 40% for male students was introduced. As well, some measures have been introduced to limit women's access to some engineering fields. The justification for these new measures was the claim that the quotas are necessary for "gender equilibrium" in the labor market and at home, and for family stability. In other words, this policy was based on the belief that higher education will result in women contesting their subservient role in the family and the labor market.

What is new to these arguments for restricting women's options is the absence of a religious justification. Instead, they simply state what, in their view, are "appropriate gender roles" with regards to family stability and societal well-being. Furthermore, this view assumes that a patriarchal family structure is the only model for an Islamic society, regardless of time or context. This line of argument effectively eliminates the possibility for new interpretations of *Shari'a*, through which Islamist women have been advocating a legal improvement of women's rights in Iran.

The Islamic regime's original education policy inadvertently sidelined the priorities of motherhood and the domestic sphere roles as women eagerly embraced higher education and subsequent careers. The current regime's ideologues assert that young women have been misguided into embracing a secular world-view of gender equality. The state plans once again to produce 'gender appropriate' curricula for female students in primary and secondary schools (Zarabadi 2008). It claims that while religious studies were added to curricula after the Revolution, most other subjects remained secular and thus did not produce the desired effect. They are publicly discussing reducing the years of schooling required for female students, so that they graduate by the age of 15 or 16, ready to marry and start families. This would constrain women's access to many university programs as they would not have the science and math backgrounds needed to pass the national university entrance test for various fields (Zarabadi 2008).

The ascendance of radical political Islamists to power in 2005 has created a new set of obstacles to achieving women's rights. During the first 25 years of the regime, women had advanced various strategies based on the understanding that the goal of the regime was to Islamicize politics and policies. So women presented their demands within an Islamic framework using novel interpretations of the texts on women's rights. They secured support from more liberal minded *ulama* for their vision, popularized these interpretations within the wider society, and finally pushed for a realization of their demands (Hoodfar 1999b; Hoodfar and Sadeghi 2009; Paidar 2001; Mir-Hosseini 2006).

Under Ahamdinejad's current government, Islam and *Shari'a* have actually taken a backseat as the state pushes for legislation that promotes a patriarchal, conservative reading of gender roles in Islamic society. Since Ahmadinejad's 2005 election to power, women's organizations have been closed, the number of women activists arrested has increased, and thousands more moral police have been engaged to enforce compulsory *hijab* and control the public interactions of males and females. The government has produced Islamic fashion shows promoting a national *chador*. All this illustrates the government's determination to force women to comply with an extremely narrow, limited vision of 'Islamic' society. This gender ideology is clearly outlined in a series of documents called *Tarh-e-amniate-e- ijtemaie* (Social Protection Policy), which women activists and intellectuals refer to as *pardeh-neshinie* – roughly translated as imposed segregation and domestication.

3. Political and Civil Society under the Islamic Republic

3.1 The 'Women's Question' and the political landscape of the Islamic Republic

Women have consistently participated in street politics in Iran, particularly during: (a) the Tobacco Movement (1887) – Iran's first large-scale modern political demonstration (Keddie 1966); (b) the constitutional movements (1887-1906); (c) the nationalist movements under Prime Minister Mossadegh (1950-1953). Throughout these periods, however, conservative leaders strongly resisted recognizing women's legal right to political participation on the grounds that it is un-Islamic. Paradoxically, since the 19th century conservatives have had few qualms about organizing women to demonstrate *against* women's political rights, and of course later invited them to mobilize against the Shah. Hence Iranian women only gained the right to vote and run for office in 1963, almost thirty years after Turkish women did and ten years after Egyptian women. Even this was opposed by Khomeini, who in his writings from exile claimed that it was against Islamic law, and that the only women in Iran who wanted suffrage were the country's less-than-200 prostitutes.¹⁹

Although women were elected to Parliament in the post-1963 elections, their number remained limited (see Table 3). The 1963-1979 period also coincided with the increasing repression and dictatorial tendencies of the Shah's regime. While few legal reforms occurred, except in the area of family law; the table below nonetheless indicates that the number of women in politics was higher during this period than under the subsequent Islamic regime, despite the large participation of women in electoral and street politics under the Islamic Republic.

Despite women's massive participation in the revolution, many religious and conservative leaders pushed to exclude women from electoral politics in the immediate post-revolution years and in particular during the drafting of the constitution. But post-revolutionary realities and a desire by all factions to increase their political constituencies encouraged Khomeini and his more politically shrewd allies to include women in electoral processes. In fact, during the regime's first decade women were continually called into the streets in support of the regime, but systemic barriers kept their presence in Parliament and in the constitutional process minimal (see Table 3). The unification of state and religion meant that only those women with appropriate religious credentials could stand as candidates.²⁰ This limited 'democracy' was meant to be extended only to those committed to the *Velayat-e Faqih* vision of the state and who would be considered qualified. Furthermore, women were expected to toe-the-line in gratitude for being given any political rights.

Thus women such as Azam Taleghani, an anti-Shah activist, daughter of Ayatollah Taleghani (second in popularity only to Khomeini), and popularly elected to the first post-revolution parliament, was excluded as a candidate for subsequent election because she had criticized the lack of commitment to justice for women in Parliament.

¹⁹ Khomeini's speeches in exile (Sahigheh Nour.) Vol.1 Oroj Press.

²⁰ "Credentials" in this case meant strong links — by blood, marriage or, on rare occasion, years of devotion and activism to one or another religious school, organization or Ayatollah.

Table 3: Percentage of women in Iranian parliament 1963-2004

Parliament	Elected from Tehran	Elected from other provinces	As percentage of all MPs
1963: women gain electoral rights			
1963-1967	3	4	3.5 percent
1963-1971	3	7	3.5 percent
1971-1976	3	14	6.5 percent
1976-1979	3	15	7 percent
1979: establishment Islamic Republic of Iran			
1979-1983	4	0	1.5 percent
1983-1987	4	0	1.5 percent
1987-1992	4	0	1.5 percent
1992-1996	5	4	3.3 percent
1996- 2000	6	4	3.7 percent
2000-2004	6	7	4.4 percent
2004-2007	5	7	4.1 percent
2008	5	3	2.7 percent

Source: Updated from Hoodfar 1999b.

Women have not, however, acquiesced to this situation, but have used their votes to bring their demands to the seat of power. Below we provide an overview of some of the key developments in order to assess the impact the unification of state and religion has had on women's political rights and its potential for delivering reforms promoting gender equality.

Following the revolution the new regime was intent on shaping its identity as an Islamic state. Its extreme suppression of different political forces meant that the formation of political organizations was very slow (Abrahamian 1993; Moslem 2002; Keshavarzian 2005). Gradually, organizations that pledged loyalty to the IRI managed to obtain approval from the Interior Ministry; there are currently some 240 registered political organizations, 18 of which are women's organizations. Many of these organizations do not fit the conventional political party models, rather they are more like political and professional associations with a particular political program and perspectives. Many of them register under the Ministry of the Interior's Political Parties Act which gives them a wider scope of activism than allowed under other Acts on rights of assembly. However, the suppression of secular parties has meant that for all practical purposes, only religious parties, or those willing to pay lip service to Islam by adding a religious adjective to their name, can function. Thus while the regime appears to be mildly tolerant of forms of "plural Islam", secularists are entirely marginalized and only find voice as public critics.

Before the 1997 presidential election brought the Reformist Khatami (1997-2005) to power, the distinctions between the various registered parties were primarily in terms of economic policy: those favoring nationalization and greater regulation of the economy were referred to as “the left”; those favoring a liberal economy and more privatization were considered variations on “the right”. While there was some overlap on issues of culture and democracy, “the left” camp in Iran tended to be more regressive on issues of women’s rights. Conversely the liberals, particularly under Rafsanjani (1989-1997), were more attentive to improving women’s education and their legal status, and during his presidency women found more space to operate within political arenas both inside and outside government structures (Hoodfar 1999b). Nevertheless, the Rafsanjani government (1989-1997) did not articulate any gender policy programs.

During the 1997 presidential election women’s issues and democratization emerged as key concerns, and more liberal socio-political candidates drew the vote of a large female constituency; it appears that the criteria by which voters assessed political parties shifted from consideration of their economic platforms to analysis of their social and political perspectives. The brief discussion below should offer a deeper understanding of the various parties and their platforms on gender equality and democratization.

3.1.1 Conservative Political Islamist Parties (*Ahزاب-e-bonyadgra*)

Despite slight differences over strategies, these parties’ primary goal is to use the power of the state to run society according to *Shari’a*. Their policies are primarily concerned with reversing the secularization process. It was a coalition of such groups that played a major role in establishing the Islamic Republic under the leadership of Khomeini. Most of these parties existed before the revolution or emerged afterward. Party leadership tends to come from the ranks of well established *ulama*.

These parties do not have a women’s wing, even if they recruit female members. The major exception is the Islamic Coalition Party (ICP), *hazb-e-motalefeh-e- Islami*, founded in 1963. One of the oldest and more established conservative Islamist parties, it has branches in almost every town and city in Iran. Its primary concern is the promotion of an Islamic society through gender segregation. It has a division for women, but has never fielded a female candidate; rather its large female membership is very active locally, encouraging women to vote for the party’s male candidates. Despite its fairly extensive women’s network, neither the ICP nor the other conservative Islamist parties have any program or platform addressing women’s interests. However, in recent years, in response to the popularity of reformist parties among women, the ICP has created a women’s committee charged with addressing women’s concerns. They have also produced a publication aimed at women, *Political Feminism and the Mission of Muslim Women*, that warns against the evils of feminism and Western life styles wherein women are nothing more than sex objects. The party’s ideologues point to feminism as a significant source of corruption for Muslim societies. Thus aside from canvassing for women’s votes, the mission of the women’s wing is to fight the threat of feminism and women’s rights. It is evident that women’s activism has conservative forces worried that religious justifications are no longer adequate to gain public support for their patriarchal vision(s).

3.1.2. Reformist parties

The diverse reformist political organizations, some of which pre-date the Revolution, tend to be more open to re-examining interpretations of Islamic texts and traditional ju-

risprudence in light of modern developments, particularly those relating to democracy, civil society, governance, women, and minority rights (Mir-Hosseini 1996; Paidar 2001). Though fairly influential, their impact on politics and especially on gender policies remained indirect until the election of President Rafsanjani (1989-1997). Rafsanjani's associates created the *Hezab-e-Kargozaran* (badly translated as "Executives of the Construction Party"), promoting liberal and neo-liberal economic policies. The party has active female members, and has filed candidates in the past, yet there is no women's wing, no women on any decision-making committee, and no policy agenda regarding women's issues. Despite this, Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of the then President Rafsanjani and a popularly elected one-time member of Parliament, is an active party member who has vociferously challenged Iranian women's exclusion from public life, particularly the Olympics -- she has worked to create a Muslim women's Olympics. She also published a women's daily newspaper, *Zan*, in 1998 that was banned after a few months by the Conservative prosecutor.

Despite a considerable number of reformist parties, none but two have a women's wing or a gender platform of action. Neither Khatami's election nor the defeat of Reformist candidates in 2005 – caused in significant part by a large-scale female boycott of the election – have led parties to re-examine their gender platforms, or lack thereof. The two exceptional parties are the Islamic Workers Party (*Anjoman-e-iislami-e-kargran*) and the Participation Party (*Hezb-e-Mosharekat*) which formed after the election of reformist President Khatami in 1997. The Participation Party is unique in its policy statement that all of its decision-making bodies should have a 30% quota for women. Presently 5 of 30 members (16%) of the central committee are women. Four of the 15 members of their political office and two chairs of provincial branches are women. The party has a women's branch and an office dedicated to researching women's issues. Female Party members have initiated a coalition to bring together reformist women MPs and potential female political actors to promote women's political participation, particularly in smaller towns and cities where, they believe, inattention by progressive forces has helped conservative parties to mobilize women for their own ends. A more structural goal of the women's wing is to lobby other political parties to set a 30% quota for women members and eventually to do the same at the parliamentary level, a goal articulated by other women's political organizations, as well. The Participation Party actually has a charter guiding its women's platform; the document is one of the more women-centered texts to be found in larger political parties; most others are secular feminist organization charters and platforms that fall outside the formal political structure. When approached by activists, however, despite their slogan "Iran for all Iranians," the Party has refused to say it would eliminate compulsory veiling if elected to govern, even for non-Muslim women.²¹

When compared with the conservative Islamists, reformists use more slogans, paying lip service to women's concerns, yet even as the country geared up for the 2009 presidential election, little of this theoretical willingness had materialized into a platform of action.²² Although not necessarily articulated, the parties act as if women's issues will have to wait until the dawn of democracy, though it is questionable as to whether democracy can be cultivated in a context of gender apartheid, where an undemocratic, patriarchal family structure is the basic social institution of society.

²¹ On the other hand, the Coalition of Religious Nationalists (*Meli-Mazahbi* Front) has stated it would end compulsory veiling altogether. However, they did not run a presidential candidate in 2009.

²² However, as we will discuss below, the women's coalition did manage to make women's concerns a central topic of public discourse during the election, and even Ahmadinejad changed his gender platform.

3.1.3 The Radical-Political Islamists (*Ahزاب-e-nou-bonyadgra*)

Radical political Islamist groups have existed on the fringe of various Islamist parties since the Revolution, but formerly had little influence on national politics, especially with regard to gender issues, one of their central preoccupations. Although they use “Islam and Islamic values” to validate their platforms, they are less bound by *Shari’a* than conservative Islamist parties. Like most radical Islamists in other contexts, they are dismissive of an interpretive approach to Islam, and are impatient with reformists. Although there are a few more senior clergy among them, their leaders and adherents have come primarily from among technocrats and younger theologians whose voices carried little weight in Qom, at least until their ascendance to political power. In their youth many joined the *Basij-e-mostazafin* (the mobilization of the oppressed) and Revolutionary Guards, the two organizations established after the Revolution to guard the revolution’s principles (sometimes by brutal means). They function directly under the Supreme Leader. In their early years these small groups often joined forces to increase their clout. The largest and most influential of the radical Islamist parties is *Abadgran*, literally “those who bring about advancement”.²³

In the late 1990’s, conservative Islamists, unhappy with what they viewed as the secular, Westernizing tendencies of the Reformists, particularly concerning gender issues, began providing moral and material support to the radical Islamists, who in turn began successfully mobilizing in low income and rural-urban migrant neighborhoods. They worked to revitalize religious based community social programs, including those aimed at women, and their organizational prowess, networking skills and the vast resources at their disposal propelled these successful populist strategies and moved radical Islamists from the margin to the center of Iranian politics. They, together with conservative Islamist parties, captured a majority of seats in local councils in 2001, in the national Parliament in 2003, and, with promises of economic justice and Islamic piety, won former Tehran Mayor Ahmadinejad the Presidency in 2005 – and again in 2009 although the victory has been bitterly disputed (Ehsani et al., 2009). The ascendancy of radical Islamists to power has deeply affected Iranian economic and gender policies. They have revitalized the moral police who rigorously impose more restrictive dress codes for women. Once again the government is emphasizing motherhood as the most appropriate role for women and are introducing policies designed to push women out of the public domain. The *Abadgran* Party claims a commitment to promoting ethics and “healthy Islamic social relations”, strengthening the family and improving women’s position. In accordance with their definition of improvements for women, the stricter dress code is said to be promoting women’s moral integrity and a culture of modesty (Khatam 2009). They have closed many women’s NGOs which they view as a source of Western influence. The government has closed down *Zanan*, Iran’s premier feminist magazine and one of the few platforms where both secularist and Islamist women engaged in dialogue for over 16 years.²⁴ As discussed earlier, their proposed family law would annul all women’s gains since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. On the positive side, the women’s movement has mobilized in opposition to these developments, bringing women of many different political stripes together to make sure their concerns were a central focus of the controversial presidential election of 2009. Indeed they were largely successful. As a result, to quell the perception that his Party and supporters are regres-

²³ Abadgran is the newest major political party in Iran. They won a majority of seats in the second round of national municipal elections in 2001, thus coming to the political forefront for the first time.

²⁴ The New York Times, 7 February 2008 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/07/opinion/07thu1.html>).

sive patriarchs who want to keep women locked up at home, Ahmadinejad nominated three women as part of his Cabinet in August 2009, a first in the Islamic Republic, though two were ultimately not approved by Parliament. Given that radical and conservative Islamists have always had reservations about placing women in political positions of high authority, such a development is an indication of the power of democracy. In much the same way, Khomeini had reversed his judgment on women's political participation and re-introduced the national marriage contract -- in order to ensure the legitimacy of the regime and support of women. In the light of these paradoxical developments, one may conclude that a more vital question than degree of integration of religion and state may be the extent to which a state structure is open to civil society and is responsive to democratic development.

3.2 Women's Political Parties

The overriding lack of interest in women's issues in mainstream politics has led women from both reformist and political Islamist camps to form political organizations dedicated to lobbying for reform and women's rights. Some women suggested forming *Hezab-e-zanan* (women's political parties), but this idea was not generally well-received by activists and civil society generally. It was seen as playing into the regime's gender apartheid policies, with the potential to further marginalize women's issues. There were fears that female-based political parties would divide the reformist and liberal votes to the benefit of the conservatives. However, given that even in the face of the Reformists' defeat by the radical political Islamists in the 2005 presidential election, mainstream political parties' have resisted opening their platforms to women's concerns, women have concluded that for the realization of their agenda they cannot count on support from their male counterparts. Consequently, if not ironically, this has meant that women's political organizations have assumed more importance since the Reformists' defeat.

There are currently 18 formal women's political associations across the political spectrum (with the exception of the Radical Islamists) registered with the Ministry of the Interior's House of Political Parties.²⁵ In effect they enjoy the same status as political parties. Many, most notably the Islamist women's associations, were registered in the 1980s and early 1990s when political parties were outlawed, as discussed earlier.²⁶ Secular women do not have a comparable political organization, since all registered parties and associations must declare their commitment to work within the current constitution. While some secularists do collaborate with women in the reformist camps, they tend to favor working with civil society organizations. A brief review of the primary demands and strategies of women's political associations will help us understand how women assess their options at this particular historical juncture under the Islamic Republic.

²⁵ It is important to note that the women's movement is much broader and includes many more organizations and perspectives. Here we are focusing on the formally registered political organizations with an explicit focus on gender issues.

²⁶ As noted earlier, organizations registered with the House of Political Parties benefit from political party privileges. Organizations which intend to formally participate in Iranian politics register with this body.

3.2.1 Islamist women's political organizations (Political Parties)

The largest, one of the oldest and perhaps most active Islamist women's political organization is the Zeinab Society (*Jameh Zeinab*), chaired by former three-time MP Maryam Behrouzi, and founded by anti-Shah activists, many of whom received theological education in Qom.²⁷ Many founding members were previously part of the National Islamic Republican Party, established immediately after the Revolution and subsequently closed down by Khomeini in 1987 ostensibly to prevent a national political schism. The Zeinab Society has branches in two provincial centers, 60 towns, and 22 areas of Tehran. The organization oversees eight women's *Houzeh Elmieh* (seminaries) in Qom and some Qur'anic centers. Among the women's political organizations, the Zeinab Society most resembles a conventional political party and members clearly see their organization as such.²⁸ The Zeinab Society leaders consider themselves a political party and claim their party was established at the suggestion of Ayatollah Khamenei during his presidency (1981-1988)²⁹ in order to address women's concerns. The party platform is based on the principle that Islam sanctions an equality of men and women, and that the injustices women are subject to are the result of a patriarchal reading of Islamic texts. Thus, they attempt to address gender inequalities from within the Islamic framework. According to their constitution, only women who are committed to the principles of Islam, the Islamic revolution, and *Velayat-e Faqih* can join the party. All members must participate in training workshops and be active in the political, cultural and religious life of their communities while working to bring about change. The party is not interested in passive membership. The party's motto is a quotation from Ayatollah Khomeini: "Women should not assume that they can sit home and let men do the work. Everyone, wherever he/she is, should work to improve his/her community."

In terms of political strategy, they generally adopt one issue at a time, lobbying within the political structure and especially with religious leaders. Members engage in public discourse using their legitimacy and contacts with the media, and the party was behind some of the earlier reforms concerning marriage contracts and child custody during the 1980's. It was also the first women's political organization to formally introduce the idea of a female quota for elected offices in post-revolutionary Iran. The abysmal representation of women in Parliament (as indicated in Table 3) has been a major concern for all women activists in Iran. Prior to the 7th Parliament in 2004, the Zeinab Society announced it would send at least 10 women from Tehran and one from each province for a total of 38, in contrast to the 6th Parliament under the Reformists, where there were only 13 women out of 290 MPs. Prior to this both Reformist and Islamist women had focused on specific demands of women but had not promoted female candidates. However, since 2004 the promotion of women in electoral politics has remained their most prominent and on-going concern.

Although male Islamist politicians were not supportive of the Society's push to elect women MPs, which was ultimately unsuccessful, the effort did open the debate on the question of quotas and female political representation. They put forward, for the first time in the history of the IRI, six women candidates for the historically all-male Assembly of Experts, normally selected from among religious leaders. The Assembly's most important responsibility is to choose the Supreme Leader. Although the candidacy of the six women was rejected by the Council of Guardians without explanation, the move

²⁷ The other important party is the Islamic Women's Association.

²⁸ Authors' interview.

²⁹ Personal interviews with Maryam Behrouzi.

was groundbreaking, creating public debate and awareness that inspired a more serious consideration of women's equality nation-wide.

Generally the Zeinab Society's strategy has been the incremental elimination of discrimination justified in the name of Islam. The system of inheritance has been a key symbolic and practical issue for women activists working within an Islamic framework. The Society recently tackled the unequal inheritance situation of wives vis-à-vis their husbands, historically justified with Islamic text.³⁰ To pre-empt rejection by the Council of Guardians on this contentious law, they first secured the support of several influential *ulama* and the Supreme Leader, as well as the head of the Council of Expediency. In effect, it was to be a *fait accompli* by the time it was tabled in Parliament. The Zeinab Society's strategy for legal reform is not unlike that of the Women's Organization of Iran under the Shah; they spend a lot of energy persuading the political elite, and perhaps not enough time cultivating a female constituency.³¹

What has made the Zeinab Society particularly successful is its ability to bring other Islamist women's organizations, both formal and informal, on board for its lobbying campaigns. The Society is adept at mobilizing its links with power brokers in the state machinery. They also have a very charismatic leader in Behrouzi, one of the few members actually known to the general public. In the long run, the lack of public familiarity undercuts the Society's influence. Arguably, if they had prioritized the mobilization of a larger constituency of women outside the political sphere behind their female candidates during the parliamentary election, they might have secured not only seats, but also the support of the male Islamists with whom they continue to work closely.

3.2.2 Female Reform Parties

There are a few small but very active Reformist women's political associations. Many existed prior to the rise to prominence and power of Reformist political parties. Others were established more recently as women members of mainstream parties realized that working within existing parties to convince male counterparts to address women's concerns was not fruitful. Broadly, women activists have two divergent views: first, to remain in the mainstream parties to change men's perspectives from within, and second, that women's political organizations are the most effective avenue for change. Some women have tried to establish women's branches within their party. Regardless, there is no disputing that women's organizations play a major role in keeping women's concerns at the forefront of national debate, despite increasing harassment by the authorities, particularly since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005.

Women's Reform associations have a bold history. The Association of Islamic Revolutionary Women, for example, the oldest women's political organization under the IRI, was founded a few months after the revolution by Azam Talaghani, an anti-Shah activist and an MP during the first Islamic Parliament. The daughter of Ayatollah Talaghani, a popular leader of the Islamic Revolution, she registered the Society of Women's Islamic Revolutionary Islam in 1979, to fill the need for a political organization focusing exclusively on women's concerns. The organization provided services for

³⁰ According to Iranian *Shari'a*-based law, daughters inherit half as much as sons from their parents. A wife inherits 1/8 of her husband's wealth. If there are several wives, the 1/8 is divided among all the wives. In contrast, a husband inherits 1/4 of his wife's wealth, and even more unfairly, women are not allowed to inherit real estate, which, in effect, means that most widows are left with very little since the bulk of material wealth often resides in the home and property.

³¹ Brought to our attention during a private conversation with Shahra Razavi (June 2009).

poor women, including legal and psychological counseling, but viewed its contributions to public discourse and the advancement of women's concerns as its most important role. Talaghani frequently stated that there can be no Islamic justice without gender justice. The organization published the journal *Payam Hajer* for two decades, including critical reports on polygyny, family law and the lack of democracy. The organization continues to push for women's legal equity. In fact, Talaghani was the first woman to formally talk about CEDAW and the need for its ratification by the Islamic Republic.³² The organization was from its early years also a training ground for many emerging women activists who went on to other arenas.

Talaghani, with the Association behind her, was the first Iranian woman to announce her candidacy for president, arguing that according to *Shari'a* there are no Islamic injunctions against a woman becoming president. Although her candidacy was rejected by the Council of Guardians, the act created national debate. Other women have since announced their candidacy; all have been rejected by the Council of Guardians without explanation, but the discussion has permeated all layers of society and increased the critical questioning of the gender conservatism of Iranian leaders. After meeting with religious leaders in Qom, Talaghani published their contradictory explanations for excluding women from political office in *Payam Hajer*. Not surprisingly, the journal was banned in 2002. Though her prominence precluded her arrest, many of her female colleagues were arrested. These developments have dampened the association's activities. Talaghani and her cohorts have been key players in keeping legal reform, democratization, and women's issues on the public agenda, if not on those of the government and political leaders.

There are several other established Reformist women's political organizations whose founders had strong family or marriage ties to influential religious-political leaders. Farida Mostafavi, daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini, and her associates set up the Society of Islamic Revolutionary Women in 1986, though they began activities several years earlier. Their mandate is to remove every type of discrimination against women, improve women's position within the family, promote the presence of women at all top decision-making levels, promote women's well-being at all levels, and promote contact and communication within and outside the country among women's organizations. They have consistently put forward candidates for national elections and published the magazine, *Neda*, whose public position is rather conservative. Their activities have diminished in the post-Khatami period.

Also associated with *ulama*, the Islamic Association of Women publishes a monthly magazine, *Irاندokht*, whose editor-in-chief is Fatemeh Kahrobi, wife of Ayatollah Kahrobi, former Parliamentary Speaker and a presidential candidate in 2005 and 2009. The magazine publishes on women's issues from an Islamic point of view, and tries to address women's rights issues. Given the policy of banning pro-women's rights publications in recent years, the existence of such a magazine outside the direct control of the regime is very important for keeping gender discussion in the public sphere.³³

Many of these organizations were founded by women from prominent Islamist families, making it difficult for the conservative authorities to call for their arrest. They have played an important role in keeping the public discourse on women lively and pre-

³² In Geneva, in the winter of 1992 she participated in the first NGO meeting entitled "Women's Rights are Human Rights".

³³ During the writing of this paper, the feminist monthly magazine that was published for 16 years, *Zanan*, was closed down by the government. One of the topics our research examines is the variety of ways in which women's political parties might expand public debate.

senting different interpretations of women's rights within an Islamic framework, in order to preempt those who justify the oppression of women on divine rules. Relying on their social capital and elite status, they have paved the way for other women to pursue demands for gender justice. This has created significant gender consciousness which in turn encourages political parties to at least pay lip service to the concerns of women. However, thus far women's political organizations have not achieved any major legal changes, and it is not clear that the current constitutional state structure would enable them to do so.

3.3 New developments in women's politics

Despite their near exclusion from national electoral politics, women continue to field candidates and to challenge the state's gender policies through their own political organizations. But with radical Islamists now controlling almost all government institutions, the candidacies even of Islamist women with impeccable political credentials are being rejected, leaving many activists questioning whether there are any viable strategies for women's advancement within the current constitution. Others feel that there is no alternative but to continue working through existing channels in order to retain some access to the state-controlled media and the public. Debates around national elections offer the best arena for promoting gender discourse, influencing gender politics and challenging conservative Islamic discourse(s) on gender issues.

During the 8th Parliamentary elections of 2007, Reformist and Islamist women each formed coalitions to rally around the push for a 30% quota of female candidates. They organized training sessions for lobbyists and potential female candidates. For the first time in the IRI, an action platform for promoting women's rights was formally announced. The platform included a) the promotion of rights of women in all spheres and support for their central role in the family; b) the promotion of access for women to economic and social opportunities; c) the removal of discriminatory laws against women; d) the institutionalization of gender-sensitive development and planning; and e) the allocation of decision-making positions to women at the national level. The platform cited the high rate of unemployment for female graduates and women in general, and favored increasing resources for health and economic needs of older women, reducing the length of family court proceedings, improving and expanding affordable sport facilities for women, and improving and expanding women's national institutions. For the first time, these long-standing issues were addressed in a coherent policy package.

The Islamist women's coalition announced that should the Islamist candidates do not include 30% women, they would issue their own list. The threat caused the Islamist parties some discomfort, given the importance of the female vote. The coalition's stance generated much criticism and a reiteration of the evil influences of feminism on pious women. Neither coalition's efforts yielded concrete results. The candidacy of some 1000 women, including incumbent MPs, was rejected by the Council of Guardians and the various parties' candidates included very few women. However, the coalitions successful launching of a discussion of a minimum quota for women in Parliament was an important step, and communicated that parties could no longer count on unconditional support from women.

Having gained strategic lessons from their 2007 efforts, women from various Reformist political organizations, joined by some secular women's networks³⁴ and

³⁴ www.meydaan.org and www.zanschool.net both sites are primarily in Farsi but do have some English documents.

scores of unaffiliated women, formed a coalition for the June 2009 presidential election. Islamist women did the same. Both coalitions intended to use the pre-election lobbying period to press for female representation at the highest level and to re-introduce the 30% female candidate quota. While initially the four presidential candidates barely addressed gender issues, pressure from these groups soon shifted their focus significantly. The Reformist coalition reminded its two candidates that their failure to consider women's concerns had led to a large-scale boycotting by reform-minded women, losing the Reformists the presidential election in 2005, and again for the same reasons in 2007 the low turnout of women voters in the parliamentary election resulted in a landslide victory for the Radical Islamists. They demanded the candidates announce their platforms concerning women's issues and the percentage of ministerial posts and decision-making positions allocated women. All this took place very publicly and garnered media coverage, forcing the candidates to respond. As a consequence female advisors to the presidential team assumed a much more prominent role and Ahmadinejad was forced to revise his platform, ultimately nominating three women as cabinet ministers, one of whom was confirmed by Parliament, becoming the first female minister in the IRI. Ironically this occurred under a Radical Islamist government intent relegating women to the domestic spheres as housewives. The credit for this change, of course, goes to the unceasing efforts of women political leaders and activists to promote progressive gender policies.

4. Women, religion and the loss of public space

4.1. *Public sphere and development of civil society*

Despite state control and often harsh oppressive counter-measures, the public sphere in Iran has remained highly relevant to political developments since at least the mid-nineteenth century (Keddie 1966; Bojnurdi 2002). Even at the height of the Shah's dictatorship, activists continued to try to harness public support. Print media have continued to be a crucial channel, pre- to post-Revolution, though after 1979 print media became increasingly restricted and closed to most secular expression. During the 1990's a gradual easing of the conservative ideology opened some media space, and during this period cinema also emerged as a venue of public dialogue. Reformist President Khatami's (1997-2005) motto, "dialogue of civilizations" brought hope for a new era. However, with Ahmadinejad's election and Radical Islamist forces controlling the government, scores of news papers, weeklies, monthlies and publishers were closed down, along with many reformist and secular NGOs and civil society organizations. This stifling of the public sphere has led women's organizations and activists to integrate new technologies, including the internet and satellite television, currently outside the regime's control, as a strategy for political advocacy (Terman 2009; Hoodfar and sadeghi 2009).

4.2 *Secular women's politics:*³⁵

For secular activists the loss of public space has been significant since the establishment of the Islamic Republic; the public pursuit of justice from a human rights position has been almost impossible under the Islamic regime. While some secularist women activ-

³⁵ We have defined as secular those who want to see the separation of religion and state and prefer to engage in activism from within a human rights perspective.

ists have left the country, the majority has continued its activities through informal gatherings, usually in their homes, and has tried to strengthen networks with Iranian expatriates and the transnational women's movement. Strategies have included documenting the worst of the many women's human rights abuses, such as stoning and public lashing, and publicizing them internationally to create pressure on the government, as well as documenting the dismal situation of women in the family court system, publishing the stories in women's and other magazines. Without direct channels of communication with the government, which in any case remains hostile, they continue to try and direct information and debate to the general public and to Islamist women. This has contributed greatly to influencing the demands of Islamist women towards a rights-based approach to the democratization of gender in Islamic discourse and Iran's legal system.

Rafsanjani's liberal government (1989-1997), eager to reconcile with the international community, eased restrictions somewhat leaving more opportunity for secular women to publish their writings. To refute the image of Iran as a dictatorial theocracy, the Rafsanjani government was supportive of service-oriented NGOs, which operated primarily under the leadership of wives and daughters of officials, though secular women also managed to set up some, albeit 'non-feminist', organizations. Khatami's Reformist government (1997-2005) encouraged limited expansion of civil society and public participation, and secular women began writing more openly for Islamist women's magazines, engendering more direct communication and collaboration between ideologically diverse women. Websites and blogs set up by younger activists promoted legal reforms. It was during this period that Shirin Ebadi received the Nobel Peace Prize for her promotion of democracy and women's and children's rights. She brought recognition and energy to the Iranian women's movement as a whole, but especially to the secular women's movement, which was now firmly a force to reckon with. In fact, in June 2005, secular women collaboratively organized the largest oppositional protest since the early years of the Revolution, demanding an end to legal discrimination against woman and revision of the constitution (Ahmadi-Khorasani 2006).

The 2005 election of Ahmadinejad and the complete control of government by radical Islamists dampened women's open activism. The government's agenda included ending women's NGO activities, which was achieved through harassment including the imprisonment of NGO members. By 2008 the institutional base of women's activism, particularly secularists', had all but vanished, and most activity now takes place through websites, blogs and virtual networks. Although Iran's government, like China's, has found ways of controlling or disrupting web-based activism, it has not yet mastered the art; thus new technologies have created new avenues for public engagement, particularly for younger reformist and secular women.³⁶

Regardless of the difficulty of public activism, the tension between the daily realities of women's lives and aspirations and state imposed roles, values, and ideology is unacceptable for a majority of women regardless of class, and activist women continue to find ways to resist and to push for reform (Hoodfar and Sadeghi 2009). An example is the face-to-face collection of signatures for the "one million signatures" campaign to reform the constitution and remove discriminatory laws, launched by a broad collection of secular women. The campaign's goal was to increase awareness of legal discrimina-

³⁶ Iran is one of the largest users of internet and mobile communications, though the first internet connection was only established in 1993. This may change, however, in the aftermath of massive internet use to transfer news and images of violent state suppression of protesters during the June 2009 rallies over election fraud. The government has done its utmost to control expanding internet use. For further details see the new study released in April 2009 by Freedom House, ("Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media" <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=383&report=79>).

tion against women and its impact on society as a whole, and thus extend the base of support for reform. The campaign, launched on August 25, 2006, has gained considerable momentum, attracting a lot of interest from young, educated, urban women as well as an older women constituency, though many activists have been arrested approaching people in public places for signatures (Ahmadi-Khorasani 2006). The campaigners have Nobel Peace Prize-winner Shirin Ebadi's support; this has helped them cultivate linkages with transnational women's and human rights organizations, and expedited the international exposure of their writings and images and resulted in more attention from the Diaspora and the global community on the Iranian government.

Based on women's sad experience following the 1979 revolution, there has been an increasing desire among activists to create a "collective aspirations" document outlining the most pressing of women's demands for justice. The means to create such a charter under repressive conditions has been widely discussed since 2002. The charter's intended inclusivity would require aggregating women activists from every political, social and religious association and affiliation. In 2004 and 2005 more systematic discussions took place in Tehran and other major cities to address methodological and logistical strategies. The charter project was publicly announced in October 2006, and is coordinated by the Meydaan site (see footnote 34). Research and consultations are ongoing; findings have been presented publicly on four occasions and the documents circulate to various women's groups for feedback. The final draft was publicly launched in May 2009 during the presidential campaign. The long-term plan is to launch a separate site for the Charter, which will be used as a lobbying tool and a roadmap for future demands.

Secular women continue to find ways to campaign and engage public awareness and support. One success has been the "Stop Stoning Forever" initiative. A revival of stoning, temporarily curbed during Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), was a rallying point for many women and caused wide-spread public aversion, undermining the government's legitimacy. A small committee, including human rights lawyer Shadi Sadr, launched the initiative, attracting international media attention and greatly embarrassing the regime to the point that it has developed a legal and theological argument for stoning to be removed from the legal system of Iran. It is expected to be tabled in Parliament shortly after the presidential election.

While the Reformist period opened public space to women, little noticeable legal reform occurred. However, it was a period of increased gender awareness and politicization of gender issues, and taking women voters' support for granted also ended. All the mainstream political parties are keenly aware of the need to mobilize women as a political constituency, though to date none of this has been accompanied by any democratization process. Furthermore, since religious conservatives now control state resources (including oil income) and social services, they have managed to mobilize women at the grassroots and secure their support by offering more services and material benefits (Sadeghi 2009).

4.3 Women, religion and public politics

A preoccupation of the Islamic Republic has been the creation and promotion of a single, national ideological discourse. This has included the expansion of formal religious education centers - *Houzeh Elmieh* - for male and female *talabeh* (students) in various Iranian cities. Often overlooked in the discussion of women and politics in Iran is the role of the theological center of Qom and other major religious centers in defining the State's gender vision. Although technically outside the political structure, in practice the

religious centers are highly influential political players. In the aftermath of the Revolution many of those in decision-making positions had had at least some years of training at one of the *Houzeh*. Lately this is again evident as membership in one of the Qom seminaries appears essential to gaining occupancy of any significant decision-making post. From the Supreme Religious Leader to the Council of Guardians, most of the MPs, and many of the ministers, all have significant ties with the *Houzeh Elmieh* Qom.³⁷ The *Houzeh's* direct link with the state and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei (who allocates significant funds to the various *Houzeh* and their educational affiliates) has engendered changes in the *Houzeh's* role in society.

In the past, *ulama* used alms and religious dues from their followers to help support the *Houzeh* and *talabehs*, many of whom came from modest backgrounds (Shirkhani and Zare 2004). In post-revolutionary Iran, religious education can pave the way to high-paying, secure government jobs and to social prestige, hence the increase in applicants to study at the *Houzehs*. Concurrently, the *Houzeh* views itself as responsible for training civil servants in order to Islamicize the state. Substantial, undisclosed funds are now directed to the *Houzeh* from the government budget, for which no accounting is available, along with large sums from a huge, confidential budget the Supreme Leader can draw from at his discretion. The committee of *ulama* who manage the *Houzeh* in Qom are, for obvious political and financial reasons, followers of the Supreme Leader. Not only do they control the curricula, but they also play a major role selecting applicants. Studies indicate that over 80% of all *talabeh* in Qom are from the countryside or small towns. The assumption is that they are more conservative and pious and so will better serve the ideology of the Islamic Republic (Shirkhani and Zare 2004).

The considerable financial and personal linkages with the state came at a cost. The *Houzeh* and many *ulama* have lost their independence. This loss has changed the intellectual role of the *Houzeh*, severely interfering with the academic freedom of the *ulama* and curtailing the once considerable degree of tolerance for diversity of religious ideas. A great number of *ulama*, many of them highly respected in theological circles and with hundreds of thousands of supporters, have been put under house-arrest. Those who have questioned the legitimacy of the *Velayat-e Faqih* have faced criminal charges in a special religious court, often resulting in being defrocked and imprisoned.³⁸ Clearly we can no longer consider the religious arena as the autonomous public space that it was in Iran prior to the revolution.

In effect the Qom seminaries have become a wing of the state. In practice they are charged with construction and promotion of the national ideology, a central concern of which is the role and position of women in Islamic society. Without a thorough examination of the role they play in the training of large numbers of men and women for positions of influence, our understanding of women's position in the Islamic Republic cannot be complete. As Arat's (2009; in this project) study of Turkish society indicates, many conservative men who are socialized to believe women should not be in public and feel uncomfortable interacting with them at work or in public, when placed in a decision-making position they will negatively influence the opportunities for women even if there are no blatant discriminatory laws against them.

³⁷ http://www.aftab.ir/news/2008/jan/13/c1c1200215142_politics_iran.php

³⁸ The long list of Ayatollahs either marginalized or put under house arrest include Ayatollah Montazari, first chosen by Khomeini as his replacement but later removed due to political differences. Others were Ayatollahs Shariatmadar, Saeed Hassan Shirazi, Said Mohhammad Rohani, Saeed Qomi, Shabastri Khaghnie, Saeed Sadeq. There were many others. Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, Ayatollah Boroujerdi, Ashkevari and Ayatollah Hadi Ghabel were among those who received criminal charges and lost the right to teach in *Houzeh Elmieh*.

The *Houzeh Elmieh* is concerned not only with training ranks of male students to “man” the Islamic state. It also pays considerable attention to expanding its ideology among the general public, particularly among women who can subsequently proselytize for the state, undermining the informal women’s religious gatherings which they had failed to bring under control.³⁹ Although there were no religious restrictions on training women in Islamic theology, until ten years before the revolution there were no *Houzeh* where women could study theology, and *ulama* resisted private teaching for women. Small groups of women struggled to change this, envisioning the training of women *mojtaheda* who could pass their knowledge to other women. Leading up to the Revolution, Khomeini supporters began to appreciate that women, especially those from the more religious and conservative strata, who were unlikely to be active in public life,⁴⁰ could play a major role in mobilizing support for their cause through religious activities.

This led to the establishment of the first religious school for women by Ayatollah Ghodosi. The female students there fell into two distinct tendencies. First were those whose interest lay solely in theological education, with the radical goal of becoming female *mojtaheda* under the guidance of Mojtabehs Zohra Safati and Nosratolmoluk Amin Isfehani. Although their goal is not a conventionally political role, they can be considered pioneers in breaking into one of the strongest male bastions. These religious activists lobbied tirelessly to receive Khomeini’s consent to establish the first completely female *Houzeh Elmieh, Al-zahra*, five years after the revolution.⁴¹ It continues to operate and is one of the few remaining independent centers of religious studies, and its mandate continues to be the training of female *ulama*.

The second group was women who joined the seminary to become proselytizers for political Islam through women’s religious gatherings, popularizing the idea of revolution and a religious world order. Among them were Monireh Gorji (the only female member of the Constitutional Experts); Maryam Behrouzi, a post-Revolution MP in several Parliaments and founder of the most active Islamist women’s party, the Association of Zeinab; and Marzieh Dabagh, head of the Revolutionary Guards in the city of Hamadan, who was also an MP several times. Thus their goal from the beginning was more political than religious.

Beside the *Al-Zahra* center, a total of five theological schools for women were in operation during Khomeini’s leadership. Under Ayatollah Khamenei this expanded to 270 schools across Iran. Between 2003 and 2007, the number of women in the seminaries increased by 50% from 20,000 to 30,000. In 2007 alone, 13 new women’s *Houzeh* were established. It is hard not to make a link between these developments and conservatives’ attempt to counter the influence of the Reformist gender ideology – which they attempt to denigrate as Western feminism and a threat to Muslim societies.

A new management institution was created to run most of the new women’s *Houzeh*. This institution also creates the curricula for the centers, with the goal of training religious proselytizers to promote the official religious line. Students have a set period after which they must pass an exam to go to the next level; the male seminaries have no time limits for each level of study. The female theological students graduate after five years. According to the most recent statistics, 5000 of them now work at vari-

³⁹ In Iran women traditionally have organized many informal religious gatherings often in their private homes where they learned about religion and participated in some religious rituals (Hoodfar 2001; Kamalkhani 1993; Torab 1996).

⁴⁰ Many of the jobs and public opportunities were legally closed to women who observed *hijab* (Hoodfar 1997).

⁴¹ *Houzeh Elmieh, Al-zahra* website: <http://www.jz.ac.ir/web/>

ous centers and schools. Although there was no formal research conducted, some of our interviewees indicated that these women played a major role in mobilizing women to vote for Ahmadinejad,⁴² the presidential candidate supported by the *Houzeh- Elmieh* Qom in 2005, holding nationally-organized meetings around the country during the celebration of the birthday of Fatemeh, the Prophet's daughter, which is also officially Women's Day in Iran.⁴³ These celebrations are very popular among conservative segments of the population and are also joyous occasions for women to gather. Religious organizations allocate considerable funds for this occasion, which are then used to promote the radical Islamist candidates.

Another very significant development has been the establishment of the Center for Islamic Women's Studies in Qom in 1998 under the leadership of Hojatol-Islam Zibaienezhad. Theoretically, the center is part of the network of women's *Houzeh*. In practice, because of its direct connection with the management of the male *Houzeh* and because it has strong ties to the government office of "Women, Family and Children's affairs", it is largely independent and is very influential in terms of gender policies. Its mission statement is: "to theorize and operationalize Islamic perspectives on women and family; the training of researchers and experts in the area of Islamic women's studies; the publicizing of religious analyses of current concerns in relation to women and family; and active defense of religious boundaries in the areas of women and family." In practice, the center's most important mission is to develop and justify theories for the discriminatory treatment of women in Islam. In our interview with its director, Hojatol-Islam Zibaienezhad, he insisted that many of the reforms promoted by women activists after the Revolution were not Islamic. In his view, the Islamic Republic was pushed toward a kind of feminism and this is a trend they hope to reverse. The center aims to promote a single discourse as the only possible definition of the role of women in the Islamic Republic.

The significance of the center is not its research and academic activities, but the role it envisages for itself in wielding political influence concerning state gender policies. For instance in 2003, just as the signing of the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was about to be debated in Parliament (after much lobbying and admittedly with great reservations), the center arranged for publication in a conservative and influential newspaper published by close associates of the Supreme Leader, of a set of *fatwas* from the most conservative *ulama* in Qom.⁴⁴ They also instigated a demonstration by male *Houzeh* students against the consideration of CEDAW, which they claimed would lead Muslim women to disgrace and faithlessness. The debate was withdrawn from Parliament's agenda.

The *ulama* of Qom and other major theologians exert powerful political pressure over key government people and are often able to drown out contesting voices from the public and civil society. We can only speculate on the long-term effects of this for women and gender relations; in the short-term the opening of women's theological centers has provided opportunities for many women to be active in public life. However, these come at the cost of a hegemonic, systemic justification for gender inequality.

⁴² <http://hawzahnews.org/showdata.aspx?dataid=4952>; but also see <http://www.edu.blogfa.com/post-7497.aspx>.

⁴³ Since the historians have given two different dates, ten days apart, for the birthday of the Prophet's daughter, religious women tend to celebrate and organize meetings on every one of the ten days.

⁴⁴ The extent of their influence was illustrated when three of the Qom-based *ulama* (Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani, Ayatollah Tabrizi and Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi) announced that joining CEDAW and moving toward gender equality contradicted Islamic values. The whole public debate was stifled (Ebrahimi 2008: 22).

What kind of changes, ideologically and practically, might a mobilized and religiously legitimized force introduce at the societal level? Perhaps, as some Islamist women have done, they will attempt a more liberal reading of the Islamic texts. As social scientists we need to examine to what extent such a vast mobilization of historically underprivileged women might promote a democratization of society and even of religion. Will a collective consciousness emerge, as happened with thousands of women in Chile who were mobilized to support Pinochet's military government (1973-90) but who later mobilized for democracy against the regime and played a significant role in its downfall (Baldez 2002)? It is much too early to know, and if the recent history of Islamist and Reformist women's trajectory is any indication, it is possible that the religiously-trained women, who work daily with neighborhood women and their myriad oppressions, may eventually move towards the Reformist interpretation of women's Islamic rights. However, graduates who join the state apparatus and enjoy greater privilege will have little incentive to turn against the system that has afforded them social mobility, and more control over their lives. Furthermore, these women who promote motherhood and domesticity as the primary role of women, hardly any of them play such a role themselves, as their busy social agenda will not leave much time for family and child care.⁴⁵

To recapitulate

While religion in Iran had never been entirely relegated to the private sphere, it was not until the success of the Iranian Revolution (1979) and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, that religion and state intertwined completely. The conservative religious leaders emerged as more influential in designing the structure of the state. Of great importance, of course, was Ayatollah Khomeini who had advanced the *Velayat-e Faqih* thesis, according to which only the most established and learned *ulama* have the right to rule in *Shi'a* Muslim societies. He and his religiously and socially conservative allies, despite differences in their political perspectives, shared a rejection of the discourses of secular modernity: that is, representative government, separation of religion and state, and equality of men, women and religious minorities before the law. Their source of legitimacy would be God and not the people, and *Shari'a* would be the basis for the law. In short, they intended to take over the state in order to Islamicize politics and society by applying *Shari'a*. They envisaged a gender segregated society in which women belong to the private sphere of family and its reproduction and live under the guardianship of their kinsman. The exclusion of women from public life and a reversal of the gender reform that had taken place under the previous regime formed a central pillar around which conservative forces, whatever their differences, had formed an alliance against the Shah. Their objections often focused on the unveiling of women, the mild reform of family law and women's political rights that had occurred under the previous liberal regime (1925-1979) and which they viewed as contrary to Muslim norms. On the other hand, the major demand of the democratic forces that had participated in the revolution was the establishment of a democratic system where the political freedom of the public was guaranteed through the constitution. These contradictory demands resulted in a novel design of a state with two parallel but unequal structures in which a relatively

⁴⁵ Payam-e-zan (the women's message) which is published by the Qom seminary Muslim women's studies has interviewed score of the Islamist women activists about their lives and political roles. They were intended to provide role models for the Muslim women. The interesting aspects of their lives are that almost all of them regardless of their life cycles are so busy in their public activities that they have little time for the children and family despite the fact that they insisted the primary obligation of Muslim women were their family.

small coterie of religious leaders and their appointees would oversee and control the democratically elected sector of the state.

It was to honor the conservatives' common platform and to reward allies that Khomeini swiftly canceled the previously reformed family law, removed female judges, and attempted to impose the *hijab*, even prior to the formal establishment of the new regime. An exception however was made on women's political rights, once objected to by conservatives, because they realized that women could form a strong political constituency for them, and thus should not be alienated.

However, the implementation of the conservative gender ideology proved to be very controversial. Until 1979, both the *ulama* and conservative forces had considered women as the object of politics rather than as engaged citizens conscious of their citizenry rights, whether arguing from within religious or secular perspectives. Religious leaders were forced into a dialogue they were not prepared for. Having sanctioned women's political rights and even encouraged them to participate in pro-regime political rallies, already an ideological compromise, the regime was happy to arrest the dialogue there. Women, however, demanded more – even as they declared their support for the regime. Documenting the injustices of the so-called Islamic family law, women from all strata volubly questioned whether the regime's motto of Islamic justice applied only to men. Secular women, who wielded no influence with the Islamic regime, launched their dialogues publicly, addressing the state and Islamist women. Women's quest for gender equality and justice challenged the conservative male reading of the Islamic rights of women. They presented their own version(s), leading to a more diverse reading of women's role according to Islam, a salient factor ever since in Iranian politics in general, as well as gender politics.

Within a few years, in response to the demand of its female constituency, the young state had to reinstate some of the reforms that they had eagerly annulled, by adjusting their reading of *Shar'ia*. These ideologues who occupied the state in order to islamize politics through *Shari'a*, now in response to civil society had to move towards democratizing *Shari'a*. The voice of conservatives continues to dominate state structures. But there is little dispute that women have brought a new gender dimension to theological debates. Thus, considerable numbers of *ulama*, both inside and outside the state power structure, cautiously incorporate that dimension in their interpretations and Islamic perspectives, thus obviating the singular and ahistorical vision the regime had propagated both before and immediately after the Revolution (Mir-Hosseini 1999). Yet the conservative forces, who continue to insist on their singular ahistorical gender role model in Islamic society, view these developments as creeping secularism and intend to reverse it through using the state structure.

The conflicting views on gender, women's rights, and the role of democracy and public participation encouraged women and the general public to use their political rights to elect those relatively liberal minded parliamentary candidates who had already passed the conservative Council of Guardians' check-point. Then under President Rafsanjani (1989-1997) many small but significant reforms that advanced women's rights were introduced. However, given the strong hold held by conservative *ulama* in the Council of Guardians, many of these laws had to be ratified through the Council of Expediency, made up of a more pragmatic religious-political elite and set up shortly after the state's establishment by Khomeini; its mandate had been to ensure the survival of the Islamic regime rather than the supremacy of the "conservative *Shari'a*".

While these minimal transformations were a long way from the development of a woman friendly and pluralistic political society, it nonetheless created an "up-to-me-ism" from within an Islamic framework for reform: on the question of women and for

the expansion of democracy and public participation. Thus, between 1997 and 2005, Iran witnessed the birth of a modern civil society (though not necessarily one based on Western models). It was supported by the Reformist President Khatami whom citizens, particularly women, had overwhelmingly elected in 1997 and 2001. This period also witnessed an expansion of political organizations including many women's political parties whose *raison d'être* was to advance women's cause and keep gender justice at the center of public discourse. Although the Reformist period boasted a diversity of dynamic social and political ideas and an increasing tolerance for difference, the existing state structure, in the grip of non-elected conservatives, proved to be too formidable for these ideas to be translated into legal reform and greater democracy.

The most significant forces of resistance were conservative *ulama* headed by the Council of Guardians. They oversee legislation, a powerful position they had struggled for since the constitution of 1906, and they would not easily relinquish their hold on it. They viewed the Reformist movement as a creeping, secular *coup d'état*. Thus they have used their rather vast and somewhat uncharted sphere of influence in support of their conservative constituency by stifling hundreds of reformist newspapers and other publications, closing down reformist civil society organizations, arresting reformist intellectuals and, above all, using their right to veto candidates for election to eliminate reformist candidates. The conservatives have formed an alliance with the somewhat eclectic Radical Islamists who strongly object to the Reformists' gender vision and are committed to reversing those developments. This alliance has gained them considerable moral and material support from the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, which has enabled them to mobilize support among low income communities through the *Basij* organization and its volunteer wing, as well as financial support for many religious celebrations such as the Prophet's daughter's birthday.

Nonetheless, despite their claim divine legitimacy, conscious of the importance and public support and the weariness of attraction of democracy, they have focused on developing a committed constituency, with vested interest in the existing state. They have embarked on training tens of thousands of male and female theologians, from primarily rural and modest small-town backgrounds, to propagate their gender apartheid ideology in part through the provision of segregated services and facilities. From oil income, large undisclosed sums are allocated to the office of the Supreme Leader. While the men are being trained to "man" the state bureaucracy, the astronomic increase in female seminaries and their thousands of graduates are intended to proselytize the conservative gender views among the population at large. Their primary mission is to undercut Reformist influence. Regardless, training and mobilizing thousands of women to be politically active, even if it is to support conservatives, goes against the grain of their gender vision which views women as belonging to the realm of family. Clearly this program, in itself, represents a compromise, while its unintended consequences are as yet uncharted.

This coalition has brought to power the radical Islamists under the leadership of Ahmadinejad, elected President in 2005, and who also officially won the recent 2009 election, though the victory is highly controversial and disputed. In his first term as President, the government imposed a more restrictive version of *hijab* and exercised greater control over public interactions between the sexes using a larger and better paid moral police force. They implemented a quota system to limit access of women to higher education and the labor market, and have proposed a new family code which if passed would nullify almost all the reforms women managed to gain over the previous decades. Moreover, through a policy of harassment and the arrest of women activists, they have either closed or paralyzed most civil society establishments developed during the Reform period and have closed down many of the print media on dubious charges.

These developments have raised the question as to whether under the existing state structure and constitution hold possibility for democratizing the legal and political system even if a more women friendly *Shari'a* is widely accepted by the Muslims and sizeable *ulama*.

On the other hand, these restrictions brought women activists of diverse tendencies together to prevent a reversal of the reforms and to push for a large representation of women in Parliament and in high decision-making offices. They formed effective coalitions to put forward women's demands and insist that different candidates announce their gender platform of action. In fact, the 2009 presidential election campaign demonstrated the power of women's collective activism, as candidates indeed felt obliged to announce their gender programs. Even Ahmadinejad, to deflect accusations that his program is regressive toward women, felt obliged, to the dismay of his conservative allies, to nominate three women for ministerial posts, though only one was confirmed. This in itself indicates the power of what little democracy and accountability can deliver.

Our observations indicate that religion, like many other ideologies, can be manipulated, shaped and reshaped by those who adhere to it. What seems to be pivotal to the question of gender equality is not whether a religious state is amenable to such development, but rather whether there are mechanisms by which any theological transformation can be translated into legal reform. Our observations in Iran indicate that religion and theological debate have lent themselves to accommodating gender equality, or at least gender equity, once women began to raise their voices and presented their women-centered readings of texts. However, the translation of these developments into actual laws to benefit women has been slow and has been stifled by the existing undemocratic state structure. Based on the experience of Iran, we can stipulate that the existence of a minimally democratic and accountable state structure, whether religious or secular, which promotes a vibrant civil society and a public sphere, is essential for the advancement of gender equality and any expansion of democracy and accountable government. At the present, given the subordination of the democratic sector to the undemocratic bodies of state in Iran, freedom of expression and the formation of civil society are easily suppressed if they contradict the interests of the conservative wing of the state.

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Glossary

Bazaaris: Traditional merchants.

Chador: A chador is a full-length semicircle of fabric open down the front, which is worn over the head and held closed in front of the body.

Fatwa: A fatwa is a religious judgment/opinion issued by a *mojtahed* or *Ayatollah*, which his followers are expected to follow.

Hijab: The covering that Muslim women are expected to observe. In the context of Iran it is defined as a head-to-toe covering with the exception of face and hands.

Houzeh Elmieh in Qom: Refers to the Qom seminary, which is the most influential seminary for the study of Shi'a Islam.

Ijtihad: The right to use individual independent reasoning in deciding a question of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

Imaman: According to Shi'a Islam, the Imaman are direct relatives of the Prophet, and therefore his rightful successors.

Jaleseh: Refers to meetings of religious learning and communication for women. These are frequently organized inside homes, though occasionally, women may also meet in the Mosque or other religious institutions.

Khoms: Means 1/5th; it is a tax that Shi'a Muslims are expected to pay or directly spend on the poor. Usually intended as one fifth of the profit they have made in any current year.

Mahr: The religiously required gift from a husband to a wife at the time of marriage in all Muslim marriages.

Meelaad: Refers to the celebration of the Prophet's birthday. It is usually a festive occasion, often with music and gifts for children.

Mojtahed: A top ranking and learned religious leader who also has the authority to issue a *fatwa* which his followers are expected to observe.

Mojtaheda: A female *Mojtahed*.

Owqaf, also spelt Awqaf: The religious institution that oversees land, properties and/or wealth of religious organizations and shrines. The income from this source provides for many religious charities and seminaries.

Reformist: In the context of Iran it refers to those who are willing to reinterpret Islamic texts in the context of the modern world, particularly as it relates to concerns of democratic citizenry.

Resaleh: A treatise or reference book of religious guidance that is written by an *Ayatollah* and consulted by his followers.

Rozeh: Is a religious session usually taking place at home, normally presided over by a male preacher.

Shari'a: Refers to the body of Sacred Laws in Islam, which have been translated into legal frameworks by which to govern public and private lives of those living in Muslim theocratic states. Rather than a standard set, there are diverse schools and interpretations of these 'Sacred Laws', depending on the context in which they are applied.

Shi'a: Refers to the second largest denomination of Islam (after Sunni).

Sofreh: Refers to a special religious ceremony exclusively for women, which takes place in the home and is traditionally presided over by a woman preacher. In the urban context of Iran, sofreh were probably the most popular collective religious activities for women.

Ulama: Religious scholars (it is usually, and in this paper, used inter-changeably with *mojtahed*).

Velayat-e Faqih: Refers to the vision of an Islamic theocratic state where spiritual religious leaders exercise complete authority. In the context of Iran, this was promoted by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Zakat: The religious alms that Muslims are expected to pay for the poor or to give to a religious leader who in turn would spend it for the poor.

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