

# CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAN AND ITS FUTURE PROSPECTS

## A CASE STUDY

# Table of Contents

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Preface	4
Executive Summary	5
Main Findings of the Research Project	5
1. Methodology and Research Procedure	8
Methodology and Data Collection	9
Limitation of Representation in this Analysis	9
Defining Civil Society	10
2. Historical Analysis	12
3. Civil Society Main Actors and Builders	16
Government	17
Civil Activists and Social Forces	17
Political Parties and Groups	17
Private Sector	17
United Nations' Agencies in Iran	18
International Organizations and Overseas Iranian CSOs	18
4. Mapping of Civil Society in Iran	20
Topical Map of CSOs in Iran	21
Geographical diversity map of CSOs	22
Sensitivity and risk factor of CSOs in various fields	24
5. Situation Analysis of Civil Society in Iran	26
Political Environment	27
Social Environment	28
Cultural Environment	30
Economic Environment	31
International Environment	32
6. Restrictions of Civil Society in Iran: Freedom and Autonomy of CSOs	34
Autonomy of Civil Society Organizations	35
Legal Criteria	36
Financial Criteria	38
Freedom to Establish and Operate a Civil Society Organizations	39
Field Examples from Restrictions on Establishing and Operation of CSOs	42
Labor Unions and Worker Associations	42
Journalists' Association	43
Teachers' Association	44
Student Associations	45
Environmental NGOs	46
Women NGOs	47

<b>7. Driving Forces and Restraining Forces Reshaping Civil Society</b>	<b>50</b>
Driving Forces behind Iranian Civil Society	51
Cultural Middle Class	51
Journalists, Bloggers and Social Network Activists	51
Civil Activists and Social Movements	51
Reformist Groups and Religious Intellectuals	51
Secular and Democratic Intellectuals and Groups	52
The Private Sector	52
Overseas Iranian Civil Activists	52
International Organizations	52
Restraining Forces Opposing Civil Society In Iran	52
Civil Society Organizations dependent on the Government	52
Bureaucracy	53
Traditional Conservative Groups	53
Traditional Conservative Groups	53
Islamic Seminaries and Disciples of Mesbah Yazdi	53
Clergy and Friday Prayer Imams	53
Anti-Western Intellectuals and Fardid Circle of Intellectuals	53
Orthodox Leftist Groups	54
Traditional Bazar	54
Basidj Militia	54
Supreme Leader and Dependent Institutions	54
<b>8. Influential Trends within and around Civil Society</b>	<b>56</b>
Emergence of a New Generation of Civil Society Activists	57
Reification of Social Relations	57
Growth of Social, Labor and Union Protests	57
Expansion of Civil Society as a Technical Instrumental instead of Civil Society as a Social Force	57
Constant Violation of Freedom of Associations	58
Continuous Citation, Arrest and Imprisonment of Civil Society Activists and “Starred” Students	58
<b>9. Strategic Concerns of Civil Society Leaders and Activists</b>	<b>60</b>
Transitioning from a Weakened and Disjointed Civil Society to a Strong and Coherent One	61
Counteracting Government Policy of Building a Quasi-Governmental Civil Society	61
Creating an Appropriate Legal Foundation for Civil Activism and Associational Life	61
Encouraging Peace-Building and Democratization	61
Representing Stakeholder Groups and Holding the Government Accountable	62
Promoting Associational Life, Coalition and Online/Offline Social Networks	62
Fostering an Efficient Capacity Building Strategy for Activists and NGOs	62
<b>10. Future Scenarios for Civil Society in Iran</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>11. Recommendations</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>72</b>

# Preface

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It has now been four decades since civil society organizations entered the socio-political life of Iranian society after the 1979 Revolution. Throughout these years, and under the influence of the dominant discourse of each period as well as general conditions of the country, Iranian civil society has seen ebbs and flows. The 2013 Presidential election and inauguration of a new President opened a new window of opportunity for civil society after eight years of suppression and destruction. Social hope is returning to society, and socio-political forces are returning to the social arena. Civil activists are seeking to resuscitate demolished social networks and reconstruct Iranian civil society. The present study is a research project by Volunteer Activists Institute with the aim of recognizing and understanding Iranian civil society in recent years, its position in Iranian society, its restrictions and challenges, as well as its prospects.

Volunteer Activists<sup>1</sup> is an independent non-profit, non-governmental, and non-political institute seeking to build capacity among activists and organizations of civil society, facilitating free exchange of knowledge among activists, and advocating democracy, human rights, and peace building within Iranian society and communities in the MENA region. This research project follows the mission statement of the Volunteer Activists Institute, and the findings and recommendations presented here serve to support the freedom to establish and operate such associations, form international networks for exchange of knowledge and experience, as well as design capacity building programs for Iranian civil society organizations (CSOs). We hope that with the support of global civil society networks as well as Iranian socio-political forces, Iranian civil activists and CSOs can secure autonomy and the freedom to respond to their stakeholders. We hope that our work here is helpful for democratization processes in Iranian society.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.volunteeractivists.nl/en](http://www.volunteeractivists.nl/en)

# Executive Summary

The following report is the result of a research project by the Volunteer Activists Institute about the situation of civil society in Iran and its prospects. The research phase of the project was conducted between September 2017 and May 2018 and covers a variety of Iranian civil society organizations (CSOs) such as women's NGOs, environmental NGOs, youth NGOs, social pathology NGOs, charities, workers unions, and journalists' associations. The main purpose of this research was to explain the current situation of Iranian CSOs, the challenges and restrictions they face, as well as highlight the position of CSOs in Iranian society (opportunities and threats), understand dominant trends in Iranian civil society, and outline its future prospects.

This research paper is made up of 11 chapters on the following topics:

- Methodology and Research Procedure
- Historical Analysis of Iranian Civil Society in the Last Four Decades
- Situation Analysis of Civil Society in Iran
- Mapping of Civil Society
- Restrictions of Civil Society in Iran: Freedom and Autonomy of CSOs
- Civil Society Main Actors and Builders
- Driving and Restraining Forces of Civil Society in Iran
- Influential Trends Within and Around Civil Society
- Strategic Concerns of Civil Society Leaders and Activists
- Future Scenarios for Civil Society in Iran

## Main Findings of the Research Project

The main findings of this research can be listed as followed:

- Civil society in Iran has various facets and faces, and it is not coherent and homogeneous. One of its facets is its instrumentalization, which is very effectively at work in rescue work and services. One can find both traditionally structured as well as modern associations here, including charities and health- and hygiene-related CSOs. This branch of civil society has a long history and enjoys an extensive social base. They are politically apathetic and usually adapt to government policies and programs. The government also favors this branch and encourages its expansion and development. Another aspect of civil society is its use as a domination tool. Iranian government uses civil society as yet another domination tool along with other suppressive measures and its ideological apparatus in order to legitimize its policies and plans. The most important feature of this aspect is to marginalize independent civil society, occupy civil spheres, and advance government policies. Presently, this version of civil society controls vast public spheres in Iranian society. The third facet of civil society is its acting as a force of emancipation and equality in society. This aspect of civil society is based on the premise that civil society is a social force for change based on principles of justice, non-discrimination, and non-violence. This is the face of a civil society that is aware of its socio-political responsibility and strives for a shift from civil society in itself to civil society for itself. The dominant discourse of this facet of civil society is democracy, human rights, and peacebuilding, and its main mission is to protect citizen and union rights and advance

associational life in society.

→ Under Rouhani's government, civil society evolves in a top-down, greenhouse style and is being harnessed as a technical toolkit for domination and advancement of government policies. As a result, we have seen a growth in the number of such instrumentalized CSOs in fields like women, youth, and the environment, whereas the formation and establishment of associations and trade unions or independent social movements for women, students, or workers is prohibited. In other words, civil society as a social force that drives change and transformation is not accepted, and like the governments before him, Rouhani's government follows two main strategies against independent civil society; suppression and marginalization as well as replacement of independent CSOs and associations with quasi-governmental ones.

→ The biggest challenge to this aspect is the lack of autonomy and freedom to establish and operate associations and civil society organizations in Iran as well as government interference with their every procedure, thus stalling the formation of associational life. Using legal as well as illegal mechanisms, the government blocks their activities, their access to free exchange of information, and freedom of speech, and outlaws citizens' and associations' rights to public gatherings and demonstrations.

→ The legal system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a preventive system requiring permission before action. In other words, citizens must observe certain rules before they can enjoy their rights and liberty. With regard to CSOs, this system entails that in order for CSOs to acquire the status of a legal entity, citizens need to fulfill two prerequisites: 1. obtain an operating license from relevant authorities, and 2. register the CSO in the National Registry Bureau of Companies and Non-Commercial Organizations. The first step is a prerequisite for the second one, which opens a window of opportunity for government institutions to manipulate and interfere with the establishment and operation of CSOs.

→ A significant development of Iranian civil society in recent years has been the emergence of a new generation of civil activists in fields such as women's rights and youth. Although the numbers are not large, the new generation has taken upon itself to expand civil society and challenge government policies on matters such as social pathology and women's rights. They have launched a number of creative civic initiatives, both online and offline, such as *I am Urmia Lake*<sup>2</sup>, which mobilized huge efforts to prevent the Urmia Lake from completely drying out, *Wall of Kindness*<sup>3</sup>, which created spaces (walls) across neighborhoods where citizens would hang unneeded clothes for those in need to take, *Changing the Masculine Face of the Parliament*<sup>4</sup>, a campaign to shine light on the scarcity of women MPs and to get more women elected to parliament, *Girls of Enqelab Street*<sup>5</sup>, a spontaneous and unorganized women's protest against compulsory hijab, etc. These movements pursue a bottom-up model of civil society. A significant characteristic of this new generation of activists is their civic courage and audacity, which has successfully torn into the power myths of the past.

→ Online and virtual social networks are an important asset for Iranian civil society. Despite the enormous censorship apparatus of the Islamic Republic, Iranian citizens have been increasingly attracted to social networks and have been using them to exchange news and information, initiate civic actions, and communicate. Expansion of virtual social networks in Iran has given civil activists a unique opportunity to pursue their rightful civic actions. Instagram and Telegram are the two applications and platforms most used by Iranians in general and activists, in particular. Telegram has a double significance for activists as it not only serves as the most prominent media channel of blocked or marginalized groups in society, thus breaking the news monopoly of the regime, but it also connects members of various circles and social groups regardless of time and geography. These types of connectivity reinforce civil society and strengthen the foundation of democracy.

<sup>2</sup> <http://gapgraphic.com/blog/urmia/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMi3PJ39wRw>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/women4parliament/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://fa.euronews.com/2018/01/29/as-girl-of-engehlab-street-is-released-in-iran-they-continue-the-protest-free-hijab>

→ This cumulative growth of social protests such as labor and syndicate protests in Iran in recent years, which has been increasing since Rouhani's inauguration in 2013, is now an undeniable trend in Iranian society. Although many of such protests lack organization and proper execution, they indicate a general discontent with authorities as well as the government's inability to meet its citizens' social demands. A growing number of sit-ins and gatherings against poverty, discrimination, unemployment, and extensive embezzlement and corruption of authorities indicate a general discontent in society, stemming from various groups and different directions.

→ Iranian civil society is made up of various actors and players. The intellectual middle class, religious and secular intellectuals, and reformist groups encourage and advocate an expansion of civil society towards a dynamic, democratic, and development-oriented society. On the other hand, restraining forces such as the clergy, anti-modernity intellectuals, leftist and orthodox Marxist-Leninist intellectuals, some of whom have a powerful social base, work hard to undermine civil society and stir a phobia of civil society.

→ Considering the future prospects of civil society and the range of capabilities of Iranian CSOs, their current situation in Iran, the driving and restricting forces, as well as main trends in civil society, we can predict five possible different scenarios for Iranian civil society by 2020:

1. The collapse and dissolution of Iran
2. A military takeover of power centers and the formation of a security state
3. A continuation of the current situation
4. A socio-political and economic reformation
5. The collapse of the Islamic regime and transition to a democratic system

According to activists and thinkers interviewed for this study and opinions collected in two different strategic meetings Volunteer Activists held with activists from Iran in the last two years, scenarios 2, 3 and 4 are more probable than 1 and 5.

# 1

# **Methodology and Research Procedure**



In this section, we will discuss the methodology, data collection methods, and limitations of this research paper. We will close with a conceptualization of civil society in order to create common ground for the audiences of this research paper

## Methodology and Data Collection

This report is based on independent research into civil society in Iran that was conducted by Volunteer Activists experts and analysts between 2013 and 2018. VA has extensively and accurately observed and analyzed the current situation, opportunities, and challenges facing various branches of Iranian civil society, such as women's NGOs, environmental NGOs, youth NGOs, charities, medical, hygiene and social pathology associations, scientific clubs, labor and employer unions, as well as students, teachers, and journalists' associations. Our extensive research addressed the concerns of activists and leaders of civil society in Iran as well as the conditions, threats, and challenges CSOs in Iran must tackle. We also monitored government plans and policies as well as activists' policies with regard to civil society during this period.

In the last three years (2015-2017), VA also organized four strategic meetings <sup>6</sup> with 48 experts and civil activists from Iran in a third country to help these activists to draft roadmaps for expansion and development of civil society in Iran. During these meetings, women's rights activists and student activists, among others, discussed and exchanged opinions on Iranian society's transformation and transition, a return of civil society to the social and public arena, and dominant trends in civil society in Iran. In the present report, we also used some of the outcomes of these four strategic meetings.

For a deeper understanding of the current changes in the Iranian civil society, VA conducted in-person interviews with 12 civil activists inside Iran. The interviews took place in the last quarter of 2017 and were conducted through VA's safe network inside the country. The activists represented a variety of civil society branches such as women's NGOs, environment, workers' associations, teachers' unions, students, and journalists.

For this paper, the VA team also conducted a library research reviewing and evaluating all regulations regarding the operation of CSOs in Iran based on the criteria of autonomy and freedom of operation.

## Limitation of Representation in this Analysis

We faced a number of restrictions while working on this research project, the most important ones being listed below. It should, however, be added that the opportunity to interview experts and activists in person and to have those strategic gatherings were extremely helpful and enlightening.

→ Despite the changes that have taken place since Rouhani's inauguration in 2013, Iranian society is still under extreme surveillance, and activists and CSOs are in a constant Hobbesian state of fear. Some activists therefore declined to attend our strategic gatherings or to give an interview.

→ The lack of a comprehensive database of CSOs in Iran to help map civil society was one of the grave limitations for this project. Civil society databases do not meet the minimum requirements and are incomplete and inaccurate. Moreover, certain government institutions such as Ministry of Labor and Ministry of Science refuse to provide information on this matter.

<sup>6</sup> Workshop Strategic Planning "Building a Shared Vision & Roadmap for Iranian Civil Society Activists (1), February, 2015.

Workshop Strategic Planning "Building a Shared Vision & Roadmap for Iranian Civil Society Activists (2), February, 2016

Workshop Strategic Planning "Building a Shared Vision & Roadmap for Iranian Women Movement Activists, June, 2016.

Workshop Strategic Planning "Building a Shared Vision & Roadmap for Iranian Student Movement Activists, April, 2017.

→ Another challenge we faced as we conducted this research was the large number of CSOs which exist only on paper. Official statistics claim the existence of more than 45,000 CSOs and 4,000 student associations in Iran, but in reality, a considerable number of these organizations and associations exist only on paper and conduct no actual operations. A considerable number of such paper-only organizations and associations are in the fields of women's rights, youth and environment. Another restriction of this project was the presence of quasi-governmental CSOs and their faked authenticity. It seems that more than half of CSOs in Iran are currently linked to the government and are not independent.

## Defining Civil Society

As a prerequisite for this project, we must first define the concept of civil society. Obviously, there are various definitions available, but for the purpose of this research, we chose the definition provided by World Economic Forum, which defines civil society as "the area outside the family, market and state", encompassing a spectrum of civil society actors and entities with a wide range of purposes, structures, degrees of organization, membership, and geographical coverage. We chose this definition as it is one of the most comprehensive ones and offers a concrete definition and discrimination of civil society and political society. While descriptions vary across institutions, the "civil society ecosystem" typically includes:

- NGOs, non-profit organizations, and CSOs with an organized structure, which are typically registered
- Online groups such as social media communities that may be organized, but do not necessarily have any physical, legal, or financial structures
- Social movements of collective action or identity, which may be virtual or physical
- Labor unions and labor organizations representing worker
- Grassroots associations and activities at the local level

This report focuses, among other topics, on those civil society actors working positively to reduce social pathology such as substance addiction, suicide, divorce, and prostitution, relieve poverty, protect the environment, and increase societal benefits. These actors aim to improve social cohesion, increase levels of economic and socio-cultural development, promote the interests of marginalized groups, extend the protection of social, civil, union, and political rights, and provide services such as health, education, and other forms of community development.

\* [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_FutureRoleCivilSociety\\_Report\\_2013.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FutureRoleCivilSociety_Report_2013.pdf)



# 2

# **Historical Analysis of Civil Society in Iran**

Independent civil society has been one of the most vital sources of democracy, peace, human rights, civil resistance, and social struggle against power centers in Iran. It is therefore not surprising that civil society has had its ups and downs during the last four decades given the socio-political circumstances of Iran. For a better understanding of its development, it is necessary to have a historical overview of the turning points of Iranian civil society.

**Revolutionary Moment (1979-1981):** The fall of the Pahlavi dynasty marked the first historical watershed for Iranian civil society between the years 1979 and 1981. This period is known as the revolutionary period because the 1979 revolution, which brought about the fall of the Pahlavi regime, affected every aspect of social change in Iran and a radical, revolutionary mood reigned everywhere. Nevertheless, civil society gained momentum in this period; and Iranian citizens formed a broad range of dynamic civil society organizations and associations. The downside was that almost all such associations were affiliated with political groups and parties such as Islamists, Marxists, Leninists, etc., and only few were independent.

**Populist Moment (1981-1989):** The second turning point can be labeled as the revolutionary populist period of Iranian society. In 1981, following a period of armed conflict between some dissenting groups and the new government, a populist, ideological regime was shaped which dominated both the economic and political spheres of society. This unified powerhouse government then tore into the socio-political freedom of Iran, arresting a large number of citizens, and executing thousands in the summer of 1980. The new regime also suppressed and weakened civil society organizations and instead mobilized the masses in its favor. The mass society of these years, in turn, fed revolutionary populism and destroyed civil society in favor of a centralized political power. This period is the underground period of civil activism, in which civil activists tried to work undercover in closed informal circles and continued to help the families of those arrested or executed. This period can be labeled as the dark ages of post-Revolutionary civil society in Iran.

**Return-to-Development-Discourse Moment (1989 to 1997):** This is the third chapter of Iranian civil society, which coincided with the end of the Iraq-Iran war. As the revolutionary turmoil and the government's ideological crisis calmed down and the Berlin Wall and Socialist Block fell, a new discourse of a return to development gained strength in Iran. These years also mark the formation of a new middle class in Iranian society, with intellectuals at its heart and clear and specific democratic demands. Under such circumstances, and synchronously with the third wave of global democratization, civil society made a slow, cautious return to Iranian society, although its developmental model was top-down. The government launched a project to build civil society because it saw civil society as a tool for its own purposes rather than a social force to create change. As a result, these years saw the formation of civil society organizations with a limited and controlled field of activity on topics such as environmental issues, women's issues, etc. These organizations were all affiliated with the regime, even though their scope of activity was extremely limited. The most prominent feature of this period was the return of society to a nonideological state, where civil society and democratic discourse found common ground again.

**Liberalization and Reform Moment (1997-2005):** This period can be called the political liberalization of Iran. The June 1997 Presidential election which brought Mohammad Khatami to power created a new socio-political sphere in the country, which initially allowed for social forces to tame the political powerhouse of the regime by placing an emphasis on the Constitution and attempting to change the dominant oligarchy within Iran into a limited democracy. This new opening also allowed for a certain extent of participation and political competition and an attempt to establish and strengthen independent media. Efforts were also made to foster a political culture of democracy. The press enjoyed a relative freedom in this period, and socio-political forces had access to free exchange of information. This, in turn, meant that the intellectual middle class had a unique opportunity to express its cultural, social, ideological, and political demands, and democratic discourses gained attention. But perhaps the most significant characteristic of this period

is Khatami's campaigning for the concept of a civil society project. Once he won the election, the civil society project officially became a political government project. Despite opposition centers and enormous restrictions on trade unions, social forces successfully organized in the form of associations and civil society organizations. As a result, this period is known as the Spring of Civil Society in post-Revolutionary Iran. These years witnessed a boom in NGO activity in fields such as women, environment, children, substance addiction, and human rights. Social movements, especially student and women's rights movements, also became increasingly active. Thousands of civil society associations and organizations were created throughout the country and significant steps were taken to reinforce Iranian civil society. The topic of civil society became present in the public discourse.

**Return-to-Populism Moment (2005-2013):** The 9<sup>th</sup> Presidential election in 2005, which brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power, represents the fifth chapter for Iranian civil society. Between 2005 and 2013, a garrison state was formed, populism made a return to the political stage, the ideological discourse became predominant again, and the intellectual middle class was marginalized. The rise of a new anti-democracy and populist political class, which promoted a phobia of civil society and viewed civil society as a Trojan horse, is the most significant feature of this period. It should be no surprise, then, that the Spring of Civil Society under Mohammad Khatami soon turned into the Winter of Civil Society, the climax of which came as massive political unrest following the disputed 2009 Presidential election. The Green Movement, whose main demand was to know: "Where is my vote?", resulted in the arrest, detention, and long-term imprisonment of thousands of civil activists on the one hand, and the destruction of social networks and overseas migration of hundreds of journalists and activists on the other hand. An important development of this period is the metamorphosis of civil activism. Due to the precarious security situation in this period, civil activism returned to its closed-circle gatherings among socio-political activists and some even turned to underground civic movements, reminiscent of the circumstances of Iranian civil society in the 80s.

The government pushed the siege to all civic spaces, as a result of which civil society shrank considerably in this period and civic, political freedom dropped to a new low in Iran. Another government strategy in this period was to use culture as a civic domination tool to manipulate the identity of socio-political groups and their members and homogenize their mission and voice, and to silence the remaining voices of dissent in civil society. Consequently, the press, the guild of journalists, and universities were under constant attack from the government. In order to advance their own narrative, the government also blocked free exchange of information, advocated a culture of stagnation across society, and spread cynicism and distrust among social groups. Other than suppression and crackdown, Ahmadinejad's government sought to replace independent and authentic civil society organizations with quasi-governmental NGOs.

**Return-to-Development-Discourse Moment (2013- to date):** Following the 11<sup>th</sup> Presidential Election in 2013 and the taking of office of the new government, the sixth historical chapter of post-Revolutionary Iran took shape and continues to date. Rohani's assumption of office has gradually changed the arrangement of socio-political forces. Some of the marginalized social groups have experienced a limited and controlled comeback, and an atmosphere of societal hope is taking shape in Iran. Scarce openings for democracy, civil society, as well as civic rights discourses are becoming available, although in sensitive areas such as women's rights, labor rights, and minority rights, the circumstances are still very tense and closed. These very minor changes, however, have created an atmosphere of hope, and civil society is cautiously coming back onto the social stage. Like in the 90s, the civil society development model of this period is top-down, and the driving forces behind civil society are governmental organizations, which view civil society as a tool rather than a social force to effect change. Some social fields such as environmental issues, youth, or societal inequities have seen an increase in civic action, whereas the social movements that were suppressed following the 2009 controversial election, such as the women's rights movement, the students' movement, and the labor movement are still being blocked. This period has also seen organized civic action replace the small, closed-group or underground activism of the last period, and recent years have seen the rise of civil society organizations and associations all across the country. Some societal networks such as environmental NGOs that were blocked in the previous period are now regenerating and gaining force again.

Another significant recent development that must be included here is the unprecedented broad-spectrum movement

we witnessed in Iran in the very last days of 2017 called Movement of the Poor, which took all actors and observers of Iranian society by surprise. For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, widespread mass protests suddenly erupted in over 80 towns and cities across the country, bringing thousands of citizens to the scene. What significantly distinguishes this movement from the 2009 Green Movement is its distinction regarding the actors, diversity of participants, slogans, chants, and demands of protesters as well as the methods of protesting. Although the Movement of the Poor was thwarted early on by severe crackdowns, it illustrates the formation of a new social force in Iran, which could play a vital part in forming the future of the country if it were organized, strategized, and given a roadmap.

# 3

## **Civil Society Main Actors and Builders**



Various domestic as well as international actors are engaged in Iranian civil society, and they each try to shape civil society in Iran according to their ideas. In this section, we would like to take a look at the main actors of civil society in Iran.

## Government

The Iranian government is a dominant actor in the arena of civil society. The government's main strategy has been to suppress and replace influential civil activists and to marginalize the less influential activists. The government of Iran views civil society as a technical toolkit to advance its own projects and policies, and it follows a top-down strategy to expand civil society in Iran. Several ministries are involved in the so-called expansion of civil society in a way that meets the government's standards. The entities responsible for expanding civil society and associational life in Iran are: for cultural aspects, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in social matters, the Ministry of the Interior, in labor and employer affairs, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, in scientific matters, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology as well as the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, and in matters related to social pathology, the Social Welfare Organization. In addition, the government dedicates a large annual budget to civil society capacity building in line with its own standards, which means the government has occupied vast civic spaces in Iran.

## Civil Activists and Social Forces

Civil activists and social forces are other major players working hard to develop a bottom-up civil society, advocating associational life, demanding accountability of authorities, reflecting civil voices across society, and representing stakeholders. It must be noted that Iranian civil society is not a homogeneous and consistent entity and one can observe deep divisions in its body which prevent it from reaching its full potential and stall its dynamism. The most significant cleavage in Iranian civil society is between activists who do charity and rescue work with traditional methods versus activists who seek to implement modern methods and bring about change in Iranian society. The other noteworthy rift exists between those activists and social forces who serve government policies and programs, promoting civil society as a domination tool for the government, and those activists and social forces who seek freedom and liberation and aim for an independent and dynamic civil society. Although many social movements and their actors were marginalized during and after the Green Movement, and in spite of all current restrictions on civil activists, they continue their work on a national scale.

## Political Parties and Groups

Although there are no powerful political parties and groups in Iran and political society is generally weakened, political forces are active players of civil society. Regardless of their political tendencies to the left or right, these parties interfere with the workings of civil society and try to promote their own agenda through CSOs and civil associations. In some cases, they have even gone as far as establishing satellite CSOs and associations. Overall, political parties also view civil society as a tool to their end. Presently, conservative right-wing parties are well connected with charities and religious associations, whereas reformist parties are in touch with syndicates and unions such as journalists and artists, as well as CSOs working on youth, women's, and environmental issues.

## Private Sector

In recent years, we have seen increased levels of engagement from the private sector in civil society, including trade unions. They have tried to increasingly engage business and employers' organizations in the advancement of civil society. Currently, the Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mining has been assigned the task of establishing and organizing business and employers' forums. The Chamber has also implemented various capacity-building accelerator

projects for such entities to improve their negotiation skills with the government and holding tripartite talks. On the other hand, the private sector has begun investing in charity organizations to commit to its social responsibility. The private sector deems investments in charity causes very low-risk.

### United Nations' Agencies in Iran

UN agencies have been an active player on the Iranian civil society stage over the last three decades. Agencies like the UN Development Program, Unicef, and UNHCR have always been actively engaging with Iranian CSOs and the Journalists' Association in order to empower civil society. During the 8 years of Ahmadinejad's presidency, however, their collaboration with Iranian CSOs was severely restricted. Since then, UN agencies have changed their strategy to cope with Iranian government policies and have therefore been collaborating with quasi-governmental CSOs rather than independent ones. Due to this unfortunate situation, UN agencies have ended up playing the biggest role in advancing civil society as a domination tool for the government in recent years.

### International Organizations and Overseas Iranian CSOs

European and American international organizations have been collaborating with Iranian civil society directly and indirectly, trying to empower and expand them in both online and offline programs. Through these training programs, international organizations seek to accelerate capacity building and free exchange of knowledge among activists and CSOs. These international organizations have established a number of cyber-schools such as *Afrooz*, *Parto*, *Tavana*, *Yarikadeh* and *Khorshid* in order to train civil activists of all fields. In addition to these organizations, there is a large number of Iranian activists who, in the aftermath of the 2009 election and the Green Movement, are now in exile and have established CSOs from abroad. Organizations like *Volunteer Activists*, *Iran Human Rights Documentation Center*, *Tavana*, *Small Media* and *Justice for Iran* operate from overseas and assist civil activists inside Iran.



# **4 Mapping of Civil Society in Iran**

There are several ways to map out Iranian civil society. For the purpose of this study, we mapped out the civil society of Iran from three different perspectives.

- Topical map of CSOs
- Geographical diversity map of CSOs
- Sensitivity and risk factors of CSOs of various fields

First, however, the following points need to be clarified:

1. Since there is no comprehensive database of CSOs in Iran, we had to use various official as well as unofficial statistics for the purpose of our research.
2. Due to the lack of a comprehensive database, certain CSOs might feature several times in a given database.
3. A considerable number of associations and CSOs are paper-only entities with no actual operations, and there are also many family-based associations with only 2 or 3 members.
4. The statistics used for this research paper only account for those CSOs and associations that are officially registered in Iran. There is, however, a considerable number of CSOs and associations that operate informally and unofficially, i.e. without registration.

### Topical Map of CSOs in Iran

The following chart maps CSOs and associations inside Iran based on their area of activity. The biggest group of registered associations and CSOs do charity work and the smallest group is business/trade-related. It should be noted that the data here was collected from various sources due to a lack of official data and the information might therefore contain some overlap.

Cultural heritage NGOs (7)	916	Youth NGOs (14)	1,477
Medical associations (8)	183	Environmental NGOs (15)	673
Charity (9)	14,619	Women NGOs (16)	2,722
Employer associations (10)	1,595	Worker associations (17)	12,774
Economic associations (11)	161	Anti drug associations (18)	2,365
Culture and art associations (12)	2,420	Student associations (19)	4,000
Scientific associations (13)	189		

<sup>7</sup> [http://omtm.ir/pid\\_53700-utab](http://omtm.ir/pid_53700-utab)

<sup>8</sup> <http://ima-net.ir/Default.aspx?AllCommunities>

<sup>9</sup> <http://khairieh.ir/index.php/%D8%AE%DB%8C%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87%D9%87%D8%A7>

<sup>10</sup> <http://payamekarfarmayan.com/spip.php?article623&lang=fa>

<sup>11</sup> <http://iccima.ir/province-formations/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://tmsh.farhang.gov.ir/fa/list>

<sup>13</sup> [https://isacmsrt.ir/association\\_record\\_list.php?&slct\\_pg\\_id=55&sid=1&slc\\_lang=fa](https://isacmsrt.ir/association_record_list.php?&slct_pg_id=55&sid=1&slc_lang=fa)

<sup>14</sup> bureau of youth social participation. 2017, Youth NGOs database. Ministry of Sport and Youth.

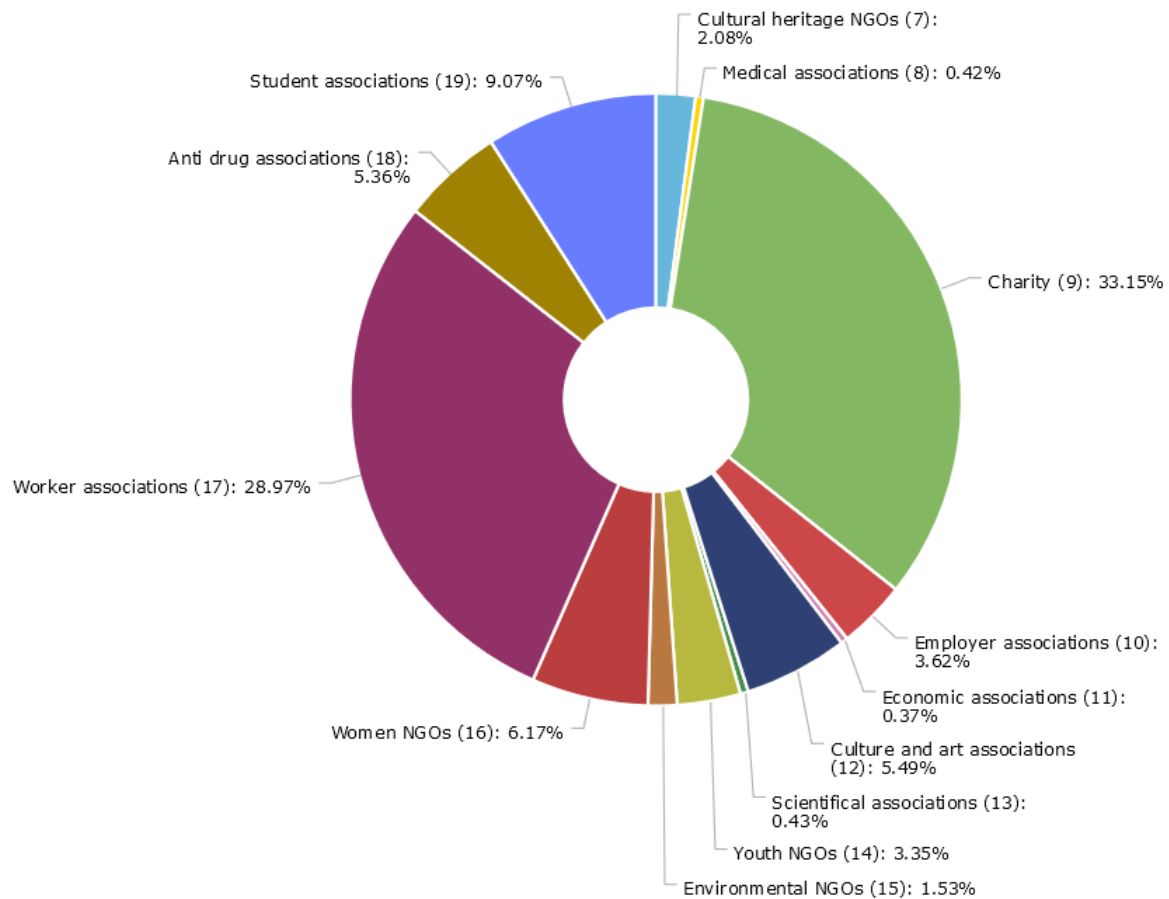
<sup>15</sup> <https://www.doe.ir/Portal/Home/Default.aspx?CategoryId=5A3BB286-F122-4D41-AED7-3CA6EB7E7D41>

<sup>16</sup> <http://women.gov.ir/home/atlas/257>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82715759>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.irna.ir/fa/news/82720557>

<sup>19</sup> <http://adiban.ac.ir/sites/11/324/anjomanelmi.html>

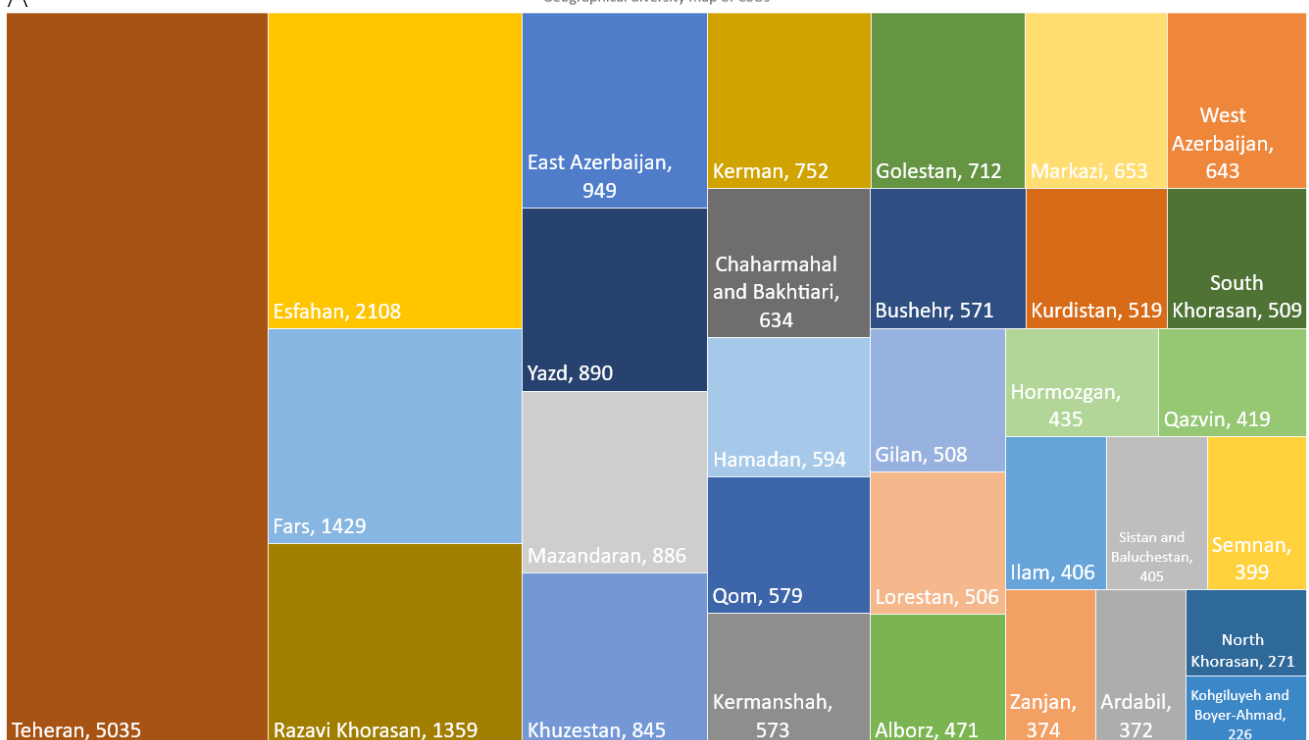


## Geographical diversity map of CSOs

According to available statistics from different states, Tehran has the largest population with 5,024 registered associations and CSOs. North Khorasan ranks last with 271 associations and CSOs. It should be noted that statistics on student and anti-drug associations and labor unions of various states are not available and, consequently, not included in the charts below.

A

Geographical diversity map of CSOs



B Geographical diversity table of CSOs

Province	Organizations									
	C.H. NGOs	M.A.	Charity	Em.A.	Ec.A.	C.A.A	S.A.	Y. NGOs	E. NGOs	W. NGOs
East Azerbaijan	12	4	601	59	1	40	N/A	74	45	113
West Azerbaijan	16	2	460	N/A	1	35	N/A	52	14	63
Ardabil	14	3	248	N/A	0	15	N/A	41	9	42
Esfahan	42	2	1528	109	0	140	N/A	90	31	166
Ilam	11	2	223	11	0	23	N/A	47	33	56
Alborz	10	2	169	42	4	41	N/A	114	10	79
Bushehr	15	2	353	15	1	8	N/A	18	38	121
Tehran	171	183	2348	203	109	1427	189	69	103	233
Chaharmahal & Bakhtiari	16	2	319	26	0	7	N/A	32	18	214
Razavi Khorasan	20	11	861	171	1	91	N/A	24	25	155
North Khorasan	28	2	125	24	0	10	N/A	35	7	40
South Khorasan	12	2	336	25	0	13	N/A	12	13	96
Khuzestan	28	2	596	68	1	24	N/A	59	19	48
Zanjan	12	3	199	19	1	6	N/A	63	12	59
Sistan & Baluchestan	7	2	226	28	0	8	N/A	65	10	59
Semnan	17	2	232	29	6	19	N/A	45	21	28
Fars	48	3	1051	70	11	57	N/A	57	44	88
Qazvin	46	2	169	46	3	7	N/A	58	25	63
Qom	4	2	283	31	3	174	1	30	5	46
Kurdistan	9	2	400	26	4	9	N/A	22	22	25
Kermanshah	17	2	336	42	4	24	N/A	46	21	81
Kerman	19	2	451	58	2	43	N/A	51	13	113
Kohgiluyeh & Boyer-Ahmad	9	2	134	13	2	3	N/A	27	10	26
Golestan	185	2	303	N/A	4	18	80	35	15	70
Gilan	20	2	248	78	1	35	N/A	70	10	44
Lorestan	22	2	266	45	0	9	N/A	16	14	132
Mazandaran	10	2	535	143	0	42	N/A	73	18	63
Markazi	23	2	364	28	0	29	N/A	43	12	152
Hamadan	21	2	412	38	2	12	N/A	55	7	45
Hormozgan	12	2	251	18	0	11	N/A	18	42	81
Yazd	40	4	592	50	0	40	N/A	36	7	121
Total	916	259	14619	1515	161	2420	270	1477	673	2722

C.H. NGOs

Cultural heritage NGOs

M.A.

Medical associations

Em.A.

Employer associations

Ec.A.

Economic associations

C.A.A.

Culture and art associations

S.A.

Scientific associations

Y.NGOs

Youth NGOs

E.NGOs

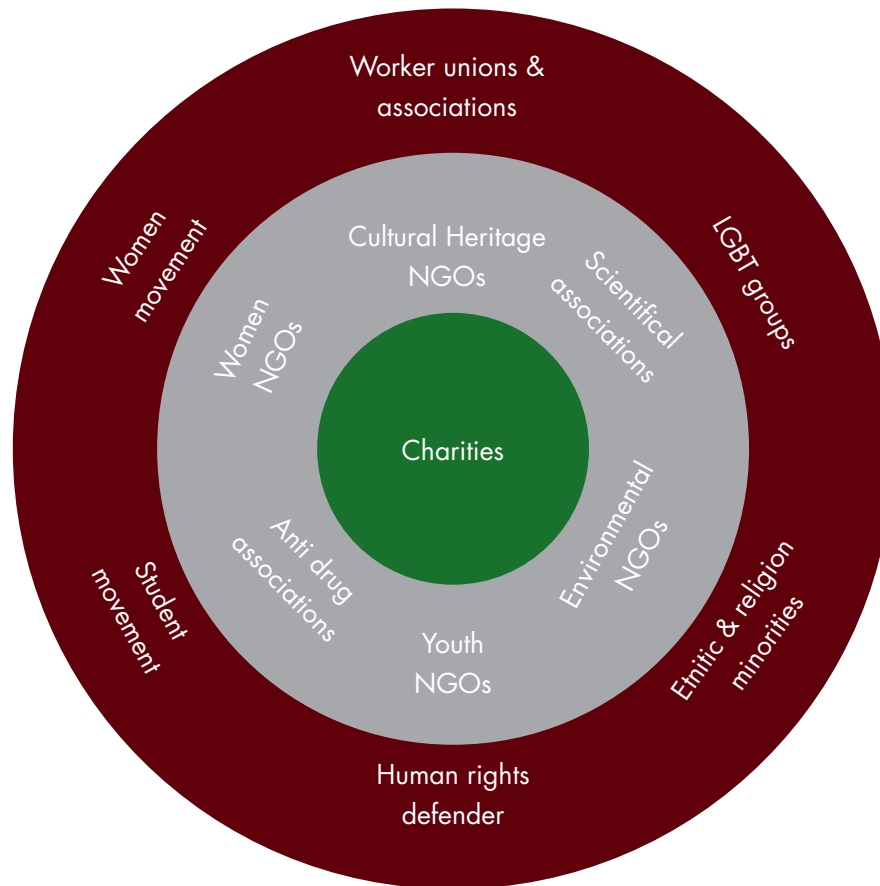
Environmental NGOs

W.NGOs

Women NGOs

## Sensitivity and risk factors of CSOs in various fields

The following sensitivity and risk-factor map of civil society in Iran is drawn based on interviews and talks held with civil activists in our strategic gatherings. The three colors show various levels of risk for different areas of activity with red signifying high risk, gray signifying medium risk, and green signifying little to no risk. According to the activists, risk factors are arrest and detention, imprisonment, confiscation of passport and travel documents, constant security surveillance, shutting down of offices and centers, and cancellation of CSO operation licenses, among others.







# 5

## **Situation Analysis of Civil Society in Iran**

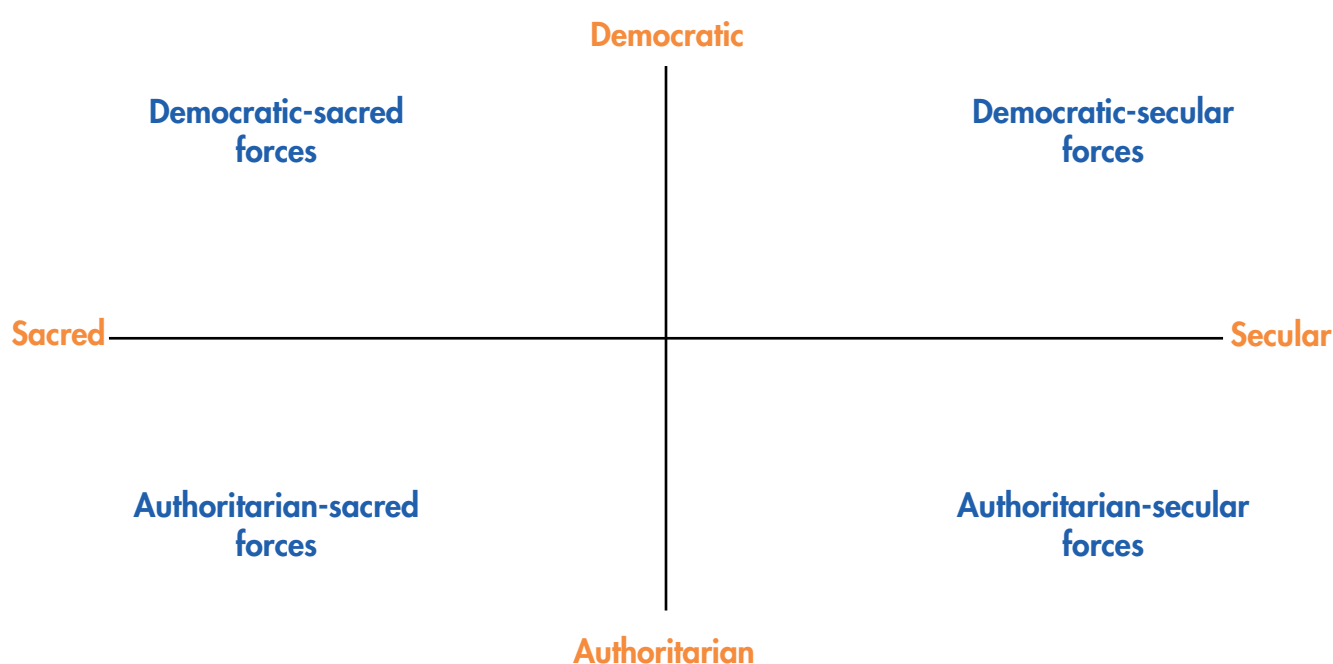
Iranian civil society operates in a highly hazardous environment and faces constant challenges and threats. Nevertheless, it has possibilities and opportunities to transition into a strong civil society. In this part, we will unpack the current circumstances of civil society in Iran and analyze the possibilities as well as the threats it faces.

## Political Environment

The political environment surrounding Iranian civil society is authoritarian, dominated by the ideological tenets of political Islam. Moreover, interactions and relationships in this environment are highly clientelist, which results in bias and inequities among socio-political groups. The political society of Iran is currently divided by two major schisms which overshadow all socio-political groupings and spars. The arrangement of socio-political forces in Iran can also be traced along these two disparities.

The first cleavage is that of the secular versus the sacred in society. This conflict can be observed in both the legal structure and the Constitution of the Islamic Republic as well as in Iran's political, social, and cultural life. In other words, this is a schism between two lifestyles; the secular way of life versus the Sharia- and Islam-based way of life. The other cleavage is the conflict between authoritarian and democratic forces and their respective methods of governance in society.

The most vital and sensitive clashes in the socio-political lives of Iranians occur along the lines of this above-mentioned division. The resulting rift creates four distinct quadrants into which we can place any and all socio-political forces in Iranian society: 1. Authoritarian-Sacred forces, 2. Authoritarian-Secular forces, 3. Democratic-Sacred forces and 4. Democratic-Secular forces. Groups and forces in the second quadrant have been politically inactive over the last decades and failed to step up in the power game. On the other hand, the first and the third quadrants have dominated the power arena of Iran in the last 30 years, and the bulk of political clashes and conflicts occurred between them. The fourth block has made appearances during historic watershed moments like the 1997 presidential election, the 2009 controversial election and the consequent Green Movement, or the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> presidential elections and Rouhani's subsequent victories, where they backed up democratic-sacred block. These groupings and blocks can be mapped as follows:



Based on the above introduction, we can now analyze the opportunities as well as the threats to Iranian civil society.

### Opportunities

- One of civil society's biggest opportunities is the Third Generation entering the political environment. The Third Generation is the generation born after the 1979 Revolution, which has now grown up and entered society and politics. They question their identity and experience and explore other ways of living and other intellectual tenets than the country's dominant official discourse. This generation is the biggest challenge to the dominant power structure of the regime in Iran and, therefore, the civil society's best opportunity is to attract them and expand through them.
- The 2013 presidential election and the victory of Hassan Rouhani created a relative opening in the socio-political environment, which allowed for some groups and forces to organize themselves and appear, though restrictively, in certain socio-political areas. If civil activists were to seize this window of opportunity to effect change, there would be hope for a restructured and strengthened civil society.
- Another circumstance that Iranian civil society actors can use to their advantage is the duality inside the country's power structure. The disparities in the approaches, policies, plans, and projects in various socio-political spheres is an invaluable opportunity for civil activists to team up with certain groups inside the power structure and thus reinforce democratic approaches and trends and counteract undemocratic tendencies from inside the government.

### Threats

- Despite the relative openings mentioned above, certain spheres of civil society such as labor, students, women's rights, teachers, etc. are still under strict surveillance. Arrests, detentions, and crackdowns on socio-political forces, as well as violations of rights and international norms are still rampant. The stakes for civil activism in these fields, especially, are very high and hazardous, which causes many citizens to avoid civil society circles and not to join activists.
- Another serious threat to civil society is the cohesion and expansiveness of authoritarian forces in Iran's power structure. These forces control the majority of the resources (political, economic, cultural, etc.) and they have the apparatus to suppress any group they target. Authoritarians oppose the notion of civil society and use all their resources to block gatherings that may garner any social power or help form an independent civil society.
- The behemoth-like domination over and governmental presence in various aspects of Iranian socio-political life in civic spheres is another threat to civil society, which undermines and curtails the freedom to form and establish CSOs and associations among the civic forces of the society. It also restricts the right to political competition among groups and does not allow for a healthy participation and competition of various socio-political projects. Under such circumstances, only those forces that are tied to the government can compete in a predefined framework. Over the years, this fact has prevented the formation and maintenance of a dynamic and goal-oriented civil society in Iran.

### Social Environment

From a societal perspective, Iranian society is a modern, yet asymmetric, unbalanced society. On the one hand, it is a diverse and dynamic society with high levels of social mobility, but on the other hand, it is a tattered and disjointed society full of social animosity and hatred. The major social problem of Iran today is an epidemic of social pathologies such as drug abuse and trafficking, prostitution, the age-crime curve, etc. On the other hand, social groups have been marginalized and their inaction in social and political spheres is problematic. Based on these premises, we can now turn to the opportunities and threats civil society faces in the social environment of Iran.

## Opportunities

→ Since the 1979 Revolution, the rise in population growth, expansion of academic institutions and universities throughout the country, and a rise in literacy levels have shaped a new cultural middle class in Iran. This group has raised public awareness for democratic mechanisms and methods, human rights, and civil society, which in turn has empowered Iranian citizens. This cultural middle class is the leading force of protest movements against the dominant ideological system in Iran, and civil society has basically outgrown its own base from which it originated. Protest movements such as women's rights, students, youth, and intellectuals all stem from this cultural middle class. Access to free exchange of knowledge is another accomplishment achieved by this group's fight against filtering and censorship. They have also created behavioral and discourse models of change and they have constantly challenged the power myths of the Iranian regime. This group is, therefore, one of the most significant carriers and supporters of civil society in Iran.

→ Online social networks provide another important opportunity for civil society. Despite the regime's strict filtering policies, online social networks have become increasingly popular among Iranians. These platforms offer enormous opportunities for civic action, social dialogue, as well as information and news exchange and entrepreneurial ventures. They provide civil activists with a unique opportunity to pursue their rightful demands. Social networks have been indispensable in the recent elections of 2009, 2013 and 2017 as well as in the One Million Signature Campaign, the Green Movement, etc. Activists and citizens both use networks such as Facebook and Twitter to connect and interact with each other. Over the last couple of years, smartphone apps have also become increasingly popular in Iran, even more than social networks, and applications such as Telegram have large user numbers. Telegram, in particular, is very popular among civil activists as well as citizens and has a double significance. Firstly, it provides suppressed social groups with an opportunity to communicate with society, which is significant because it cuts through the news monopoly of government-related media. Secondly, it bridges the temporal and geographical gap between different circles, associations, and social groups, which strengthens civil society and promotes a transition to democracy.

→ From a social perspective, Iranian society is faced with two mega-crises: environmental (pollution, water shortage, etc.) and social pathology. It is clear to all fronts that the future of Iran's natural ecosystems and social life is in serious danger if policy and decision makers fail to act promptly and find a strategy to overcome these crises. As a result, the government is invested in finding solutions and has put these crises on its agenda. They do, however, know that these problems are the result of their own mismanagement and misguided policies of the past, and that at this point, they cannot overcome them alone, so they have reached out to socio-political forces for strategies on environmental and social pathological issues. This is a unique opportunity for activists of these two fields to not only build up their own capacity and generate power, but to participate in political decision-making and administrative procedures.

## Threats

→ Ethnic, religious, gender, class, and cultural differences have created huge schisms in Iranian society, and the existence of so many cross-cutting and mutually reinforcing cleavages pose a threat to civil society in Iran. Some of these gaps are potential threats, while others are actual threats and feed into ethno-religious conflicts. These gaps and fault lines undermine a consistent civil society in Iran and obstruct a goal-oriented vision for civil society.

→ The expanding anomic state of Iranian society is yet another threat to civil society. The moral value system and traditional values have been eroded, leaving the younger generation, in particular, with an identity crisis. Statistics show that over 6 million Iranians are dependent on antidepressants<sup>20</sup>, 2,808,000 people suffer from drug abuse, the prostitution age is as young as 11, and addiction sets in as young as 10<sup>21</sup>. However, no strategies are being considered or devised to counteract this anomie.

→ Societal nihilism is also a threatening factor for Iranian civil society. Especially after the 2009 disputed Presidential election and crackdown of the Green Movement, nihilism spread took a hold of Iranian society. Many of today's social pathologies are the result of this type of nihilism, especially among the younger generation of Iranians who suffer from

<sup>20</sup> [goo.gl/UbDTEk](http://goo.gl/UbDTEk)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-40400293>

socio-political inertia, political hopelessness, and social insensitivity. These trends have weakened civil activism in Iran and resulted in a political deconstruction.

## Cultural Environment

The cultural environment of Iranian society is the main battleground of formal versus informal culture, i.e. the clash between the two systems of secular and religious living. This clash has resulted in deep cultural changes in the Iranian collective conscience and can be observed in various aspects, from naming children to clothing styles and lifestyles. Alongside these cultural transitions, society is also undergoing a process of de-ideologization. In spite of these cultural transformations, censorship, lack of freedom of speech, and lack of access to free exchange of information are among the biggest issues civil society is struggling with.

### Opportunities

→ The daily lives of Iranians have been subject to many changes over the last decades and these changes are deeply culture-based. Family structures, familial relationships and kinship, gender and sexuality, religiousness, intergenerational connections, fashion, music, and recreational activities have all changed immensely over the last years, and these cultural changes have created a fertile soil for associational life and the formation of civic groups and organizations.

→ An expansion of the democratization discourse as well as a culture of tolerance provides a good breeding ground for the development of civil society. The last decade has seen the marginalization of leftist as well as religious-fundamentalist groups as well as a gradual de-ideologization of Iranian society. Democratic mentality and discourse are settling among some groups and socio-political activists, which is unprecedented, as democracy had previously been a marginal issue, even among intellectuals. Now, the discourse on democracy is the centerpiece of several civil rights movements because the main players of these movements have realized that, based on the two revolutions of modern Iran (1906 Constitutional Revolution and 1979 Islamic Revolution), the main problem lies within the structure and democratization of power, not in whose hands it happens to be at a given moment. What matters most, therefore, is the distribution and taming of power, which cannot be achieved through a culture of violence. Quite the opposite, the language and culture of violence give rise to a violent power structure, so to control power, a culture of tolerance must be fostered in society.

→ The secular trends in the cultural environment present another opportunity for civil society. Now that the illusion of revolutionary ideals is broken and the social justice that the 1979 Revolution promised has not materialized, Iranians are becoming increasingly skeptical of the feasibility of a religious government. Younger generations of educated Iranians are turning away from religion and Islam and casting doubt on the legitimacy of religious leadership and institutions. These are eminent signs of secularization and de-ideologization in Iranian society. Another symptom of the rise of secularism is the tendency to emphasize wisdom and expertise in areas such as management and the citizens' demands to have experts and scientists manage the economy, politics, and socio-cultural aspects of life. Civil activists should develop a strategy to ride this wave of opportunity and expand civil society alongside these trends.

### Threats

→ Despite the above-mentioned transformations, ideological traditional discourse is still the dominant discourse in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which consists of elements such as the Shi'a theory of political Islam, traditional patrimonialism, and populism, among others. In this discourse, the modern world and the democratic way of life are considered enemies, and liberalism is labeled as a malignant ideology. Pluralism, civil society, Western Enlightenment are oppressed, whereas supreme leadership, social and moral discipline, political elitism, and cultural control are emphasized. Needless to say, the continuation of such a discourse will prevent the development of a dynamic civil society.

→ Orthodox leftist ideas and intellectuals pose another cultural threat to the civil society project in Iran. These groups stir a phobia of civil society and oppose its expansion in Iran. These intellectuals and their disciples consider

civil society a byproduct of neoliberalism and claim that civil society is the infantry of capitalism. According to these intellectuals, the new world order and gradual takeover of neoliberalism have given rise to CSOs and NGOs to promote and carry out the socio-political acts of governments overseas.

→ Another threat to civil society in the cultural environment is the stagnation of cultural production, censorship, and filtering of information by the hands of government institutions. Even after Rouhani's victory in 2013, Iran is still home to one of the five top prisons for journalists, ranks 7<sup>th</sup> in censorship and filtering of news and restrictions on journalists, and is at the top of the list of the enemies of internet<sup>22</sup>. Censorship in media, book audits prior to publication, exclusivity of TV and radio broadcasts, and filtering the internet are characteristic of the cultural environment in Iran. These restrictions also translate into limitations for civic action and restrictions on activists and CSOs.

## Economic Environment

According to government reports, the economy has developed over the last years and inflation is down to single digits. The economy, however, is struggling with six mega-crises: water shortage, environmental issues, the pension system, the banking system, the government budget, and unemployment. The multi-layered structure of the economy and the downturn it has been experiencing for years is now entering a period of hardship. The reason for this prospect is that the government does not have the right tools to counter economic stagnancy. Economists believe that the present downturn is the worst Iran has dealt with over the last four decades because the country is now struggling with five different areas of stagnancy and recession: macro-economic recession, structural decline, institutional recession, global recession, and dwindling oil revenues. It seems very difficult to escape this multifaceted recession. With regard to our research topic, the economic environment of Iran provides some opportunities and poses certain threats for the advancement of civil society.

### Opportunities

→ Since its inauguration in 2013, Rouhani's government has been able to control the inflation rate and steer economic growth in a positive direction. Compared to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> governments, the current government has restored a relatively stable and calm environment to the economy and society, and economic indicators show better results than under Ahmadinejad. The poverty index, which is the correlation of inflation rates and unemployment, has dropped from 42.6% in 2013 to 21.4% in 2017<sup>23</sup>. This positive economic development has also created a fertile ground for civil activism.

→ Privatization, economic liberalization, and correction of problematic policies of Article 44 of the Constitution by the 11<sup>th</sup> government have also provided an opportunity for civil society and created a space for social initiatives, engaging the private sector on the one hand, and government control on the other. According to statistics, a total of 100,000 billion Tomans (ca. 16,667,000,000.00 Euros) had been allocated to the private sector in the 12 years preceding the 11<sup>th</sup> government, whereas during the 11<sup>th</sup> government alone, this number has been 42,000 billion Tomans (ca. 7,000,000,000.00 Euros). This means that the 11<sup>th</sup> government is responsible for 30% of privatization of the last two decades<sup>24</sup>. Another factor to consider here is whether what is labeled as 'private' sector is genuinely private; before the 11<sup>th</sup> government, only 18% of all allocations had gone to the real private sector, whereas under the 11<sup>th</sup> government this number stands at 66%. Should this trend continue<sup>25</sup>, the private sector has better future prospects, which also creates a better chance for civil society in Iran.

### Threats

→ Iran's military branches have gradually entered various spheres of society and expanded their influence. Their presence constitutes a serious threat for civil society and the private sector. Military infiltration of the power

<sup>22</sup> <http://fa.iran-hrm.com/index.php/2017/12/08/annual-human-rights-monitoring-report-of-iran-december-2017/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://goo.gl/L5U2aa>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82630773>

<sup>25</sup> <http://ipo.ir/index.jsp?fkeyid=&siteid=1&pageid=167&newsview=8213>

structure has caused major changes to the political and economic structure of the Islamic Republic and has created a military oligarchy. During the 90s, and under the pretext of stimulating economic capacities, the IRGC created the Khatamol-Anbiya Construction Headquarter as well as a number of satellite companies through which it entered the economic structure of the country. During the 2000s, the military took advantage of a wrongful interpretation of Article 44 of the Constitution and extended its reach into the economy even further. Currently, through its 800 companies<sup>26</sup>, the military controls Iran's economic arteries in oil and energy, telecommunications, mother industries, transportation, credit companies, banking, etc.

→ Poverty and unemployment also pose a threat to civil society in Iran. According to current statistics, 5% of the population live in extreme poverty, and 33% of the urban population and 40% of the rural population suffer from poverty<sup>27</sup>. Over 11 million Iranians depend on food baskets<sup>28</sup>, and in the state of Sistan-o-Baluchistan, poverty affects 60% of the population, in the states of Kurdistan and Golestan, 50%. According to optimistic estimates, 33% of Iranians do not have any purchasing power<sup>29</sup>. The Minister of Labor has projected that 8.5 million individuals will be in need of employment, 5 million of whom are university graduates. currently, 3,5 million people are unemployed<sup>30</sup>. The protest movement of the financially underprivileged was born from these dire circumstances. Should this movement expand, civil society will be hard hit and its accomplishments of the last decades will be lost.

→ Systemic and extended economic corruption is another threat to Iranian civil society. Financial corruption is one of the worst obstacles to economic growth. As a result, public trust and social capital are disappearing, which in turn damages entrepreneurial initiatives that generate social wealth. Tax evasion, a byproduct of this corruption, has lowered government financial resources. In the Transparency International 2018 annual report on economic corruption, Iran ranks 130<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries studied<sup>31</sup>. The decline of social capital in Iran poses an alarming threat to civil society.

## International Environment

The last two decades have witnessed fundamental changes in the international arena, featuring new players in both national and transnational arenas. The September 11 terrorist attacks changed the international rules of the game, and the third wave of democracy, especially after the rise and fall of Arab Spring, is now in decline. All of these events and trends have impacted Iranian civil society and have created both opportunities and threats for civil society in Iran.

### Opportunities

→ The 2015 nuclear deal struck between Iran and the 5+1 world powers created a new opportunity for Iranian civil society. The relative opening in relations between Iran and the West brought Iran out of total isolation and created an opportunity for topics such as civil society and human rights to be once again discussed in negotiations. The continuation of these negotiations and the fact that civil society is on their agenda have released some of the pressure on Iranian civil society, creating a more relaxed space out of which civil action is possible.

→ Another significant opportunity for Iranian civil activists and organizations is the fact that their capacity-building and reinforcement is now on the agenda of international European and American organizations. Various capacity-building accelerator projects for Iranian civil activists are underway and online training centers are geared toward their needs. This is a unique opportunity for these activists to improve their skills and theoretical knowledge, and also to connect with an international network of civil activists and to exchange knowledge and experience.

→ The dominance of civil society discourse, and acceptance of its role as a powerful player for social

<sup>26</sup> <https://goo.gl/wHxMQp>

<sup>27</sup> <https://goo.gl/czGJcJ>

<sup>28</sup> <https://goo.gl/YXCaeE>

<sup>29</sup> <https://goo.gl/Rrq9D>

<sup>30</sup> <https://goo.gl/QT6do4>

<sup>31</sup> <https://goo.gl/ZLRm6F>



development at the international scale has also encouraged Iranian civil society to benefit from the global literature on civil society, democratization projects, and expansion of civil society inside Iran.

### Threats

→ The biggest current international threat to civil society in Iran is the unprecedented growth in violence, an expansion of fundamentalism and terrorism in the region, and the threat of war. The Middle East is the hotspot of a global crisis in the power struggles of regional and world powers. The hostilities have given rise to extreme hatred and violence, the most malignant environment for civil society and democratic ideas to develop and flourish. The regional tensions are a big threat to the future of Iranian civil society.

→ Another threat to civil society in Iran posed by the international environment is the decline of the third wave of democratization, the rise of Trumpism in the US, and of the extreme right wing in Europe. In recent years, authoritarian regimes have once again popped up on the world map and democratization processes have slowed down. In countries like Nigeria, Russia, Ukraine, Thailand and Venezuela, democratic systems are being toppled or going down. The majority of nations that have transitioned to democracy are not performing well on the tenets of democratization. Even countries like Chile, Hungary and Ghana and South Africa, which were considered success stories of democratization, are now struggling with corruption and mismanagement. The decline in democratization as well as the rise of populist extremism in the Western world are posing an enormous challenge to the expansion and development of civil society and to the transition to democracy for many nations, including Iran.

→ The fragile status of the nuclear deal between Iran and the 5+1 world powers, in addition to new sanctions imposed on Iran by the US government, the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-led regional coalition against Iran, and Iran's involvement in the Syrian, Yemeni and Iraqi wars are all posing threats to Iranian civil society. Current circumstances are working in favor of authoritarian forces and allow for greater surveillance of Iranian society, which means more suppression of civil activism in Iran.

# 6

## **Restrictions of Civil Society in Iran: Freedom and Autonomy of CSOs**

Iranian civil activists face various restrictions and challenges for establishing and running CSOs. The biggest challenge is a lack of autonomy as well as restrictions on the freedom to establish and operate CSOs. In this section, we will briefly discuss these restrictions and challenges based on the criteria of freedom and autonomy. By autonomy, we mean governmental non-interference in the processes of foundation, operation, and dissolution of CSOs; by freedom, we mean no limitations for citizens to join and contribute to civil associations, their freedom of speech regarding social demands, free participation in demonstrations and gatherings, access to free exchange of information, etc. To best understand the restrictions civil society actors face, we will first study them from a legal perspective, and then move on to actual and current circumstances of restrictions on establishing and running a civil society organization under Rouhani.

Before we discuss Iranian civil society restrictions from a legal perspective, it is important to note the following:

- Regulations on the foundation and operation of CSOs are not clear-cut and transparent, and even executive bylaws fail to clarify these ambiguities. This lack of regulatory transparency causes uncertainty among activists and citizens on the one hand, and among law enforcement officials and especially the judicial system on the other hand. This leads to personal interpretations and incompliant actions which restricts citizens' freedom and civil activism.
- Laws and regulations in Iran do not enjoy constancy, and Parliament and government can easily pass laws and regulations which contradict earlier ones. This lack of constancy is the result of the country's political atmosphere and the authorities' political approaches in a given government or period. New regulations are passed to immediately cater to political and security needs of the moment, which has resulted in a hodgepodge of contradictory regulations that further limits the scope of action for civil society. Civil society actors also face a plurality of laws and regulations, which allows the government to interfere with civil society.
- Parliament is NOT the only legislative institution in Iran and other institutions such as the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution can also pass statutes into law. Statutes of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution cover sociocultural domains, especially universities, although there is no legal provision for the existence of such a council.
- The legal system in Iran is a precautionary system which functions on a permission-first basis. In other words, citizens cannot enjoy their rights and freedoms without first fulfilling certain formalities. This means they can only carry out their mission after meeting legal requirements. Establishing a CSO and receiving the status of a legal entity is contingent upon two factors: 1. obtaining an activity license from relevant authorities, and 2. registering the organization with the General Directorate of Corporate Registrar and Non-Commercial Companies. It is important to note, however, that registering a CSO is NOT possible without first acquiring an activity license. This legal approach allows for governmental interference in the establishment and operative processes of CSOs in Iran.

Based on the above-mentioned facts, the first part of this study discusses the legal restrictions and challenges facing civil society actors and organizations based on the Constitution, Parliamentary statutes, executive regulations issued by various ministries, and statutes of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. It should also be noted that there are two types of civil society organizations in Iran's legal system: 1. civil society organizations that are governed by specific legislation passed by Parliament, such as the Bar Association, the Medical Council, the Civil Engineering Council, etc. and 2. CSOs that fall under general regulations. We will discuss both categories and their pertinent regulations in the second part of this report.

## Autonomy of Civil Society Organizations

The first criterion to assess restrictions and challenges of CSOs in Iran is their autonomy. The extent of autonomy in Iranian civil society can be analyzed from a legal – establishment procedures, supervision of activities, and dissolution – as well as a financial perspective.

## Legal Criteria

### Procedures for Establishing a Civil Society Organization

According to paragraph 26 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>32</sup>, all parties, groups, political associations, and trade unions are free to operate, given that they do not compromise the Islamic Republic's independence, freedom, its Islamic guidelines, and foundation. Even though the establishment and operation of political parties and associations as well as guilds and unions are granted in this paragraph, their freedom is limited by five conditions, 1. Non-violation of the Islamic Republic's autonomy 2. Non-violation of its liberation 3. Non-violation of national unity 4. Non-violation of Islamic standards and 5. Non-violation of the foundation of Islamic Republic.

Each of these conditions is generalized, ambiguous, and open to interpretation, allowing the government to easily restrain CSOs and interfere with their affairs. In addition to this paragraph from the Constitution, regulations and bylaws are also drafted in a way that prohibits the creation and maintenance of independent CSOs and restricts civil activism in Iranian society.

### Accreditation of Founding Members and Executive Board

One of the biggest challenges in the process of establishing an independent CSO or association is that their founding members and executive board members must be accredited by relevant government authorities. In articles 584 and 585 of the Trade Law and its amendment from the year 1958<sup>33</sup>, article 131 of the Labor Law of 1990<sup>34</sup>, in regulations for the establishment and operation of labor and employer unions<sup>35</sup>, in articles passed by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in 1991, 1996, and 1999, the laws governing the formation of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology as well as the Ministry of Hygiene and Medical Sciences are responsible for the formation of scientific, cultural, artistic and literary associations<sup>36</sup>, and at universities for the formation of student associations and clubs<sup>37</sup>. In paragraph 13 of article 26 of financial regulations of the government passed by Parliament in 2001<sup>38</sup>, the establishment and supervision of certain NGOs is delegated to Iran's Welfare Organization<sup>39</sup>. The 2016 regulations<sup>40</sup> on government-approved civil associations indicate that all founding members of an association or civil society organization must be accredited by relevant authorities before the association or civil society organization can be established.

The government also interferes with the accreditation of executive board candidates of civil society organizations with active membership policies, requiring that all candidates be accredited by relevant authorities. To provide an example from the Bar Association - the oldest civil society organization in Iran, established in 1952: According to paragraph 4, section 2 of the regulations on obtaining a lawyer's license, passed by Parliament in 1997<sup>41</sup>, all candidates for the Bar Association's executive board must first be approved by the Supreme Court of Justice, and only approved candidates are eligible. This is, however, a clear contradiction to the independence of the Bar Association and another example of the judiciary interfering with Bar Association elections as a government institution.

### Approval of CSOs' Statutes by Government Authorities

Another way in which the government interferes with procedures of establishing a CSO is by requiring official approval of CSOs' statutes. This clearly disrupts the organizational independence of CSOs. In 2004, under directives of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, for instance, governmental interference dug even deeper into the mission,

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran\\_1989.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en)

<sup>33</sup> [http://hoghoogh.online.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=107](http://hoghoogh.online.fr/article.php3?id_article=107)

<sup>34</sup> [https://www.mcls.gov.ir/icm\\_content/media/image/2016/04/87906\\_orig.pdf?t=635958861814543536](https://www.mcls.gov.ir/icm_content/media/image/2016/04/87906_orig.pdf?t=635958861814543536)

<sup>35</sup> <http://anjomansenfiepaksh.com/fa/upload/e996a06d/f17a1497.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/file/show/902504>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.modares.ac.ir/uploads/3-A-TashakolhayDaneshjoei.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.dmk.ir/Dorsapax/userfiles/file/05.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.markazi-behzeisti.ir/html/data/files/.../ayinnamedakheli.docx>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.rrk.ir/Laws/ShowLaw.aspx?Code=11593>

<sup>41</sup> <https://goo.gl/esH4oh>

responsibilities, and organization of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology<sup>42</sup>. Article 2, section B, paragraph 8 of these directives state that in addition to this Ministry's responsibility to approve the statute and issue the license for the establishment of any student associations, organizations, or graduate clubs at universities, the Ministry must also evaluate their actions and decide on the renewal of their licenses based on relevant regulations. The Council's 1996 directives also state that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance must evaluate both the scientific and general eligibility of candidates, as well as the financial resources available to the organization<sup>43</sup>.

### Issuance of Temporary and Time-Limited Licenses

Another governmental restriction on CSOs, and especially NGOs, is the issuance of temporary two- to four-year licenses. According to article 19 of Civil Association bylaws (passed in September 2016), associations and organizations that plan to operate at the local or national level will be granted a two-year operating license if the National Council of Development and Support for Foundations approves their area of activity and goals and confirms their local or national nature. If national associations operate in a minimum of five states and local associations in more than one state during this period, their license will be renewed for four years, and if not, their license will change to that of a state-level association<sup>44</sup>. Short-term licenses will always keep members of these associations and organization in limbo and worrying about whether their license will be renewed for another term, not to mention that the government dangles the strategy over the heads of these organizations like a Sword of Damocles.

### Extreme Supervision of Civil Society Organizations

The government also uses extremely tight supervision of CSOs as a way to interfere with their operations on the community, state, and national levels. Based on existing regulations, various authorities are in charge of controlling CSOs in Iran. According to the 2016 government bylaws on civil associations, the National Council of Development and Support<sup>45</sup> for Foundations is responsible for licensing, control, and supervision of CSOs. However, article 131 of Labor Law names the Department of Labor and Employer Associations<sup>46</sup> as the responsible parties; according to the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in 1991, 1996, and 1999 and the regulations governing the formation of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology as well as the Ministry of Hygiene and Medical Sciences, the Scientific Societies Commission<sup>47</sup>, the Secretariat for Cultural Association Affairs<sup>48</sup>, the Medical Sciences Association Commission<sup>49</sup>, and the Supervisory Board on University Associations<sup>50</sup> are the responsible authorities in the matter; and article 26 of the government's financial regulations passed by Parliament in 2001, names Iran's Welfare Organization as the responsible authority for the licensing and supervision of CSOs<sup>51</sup>. In addition to the above-mentioned responsibilities, these governmental authorities are also in charge of promotional policies to encourage civic participation, coordination between various executive branches, investigation of CSO violations and complaints at the local and national levels. Based on article 33 of civil association bylaws<sup>52</sup>, the auditors of the National Council of Development and Support for Foundations have the authority to access and review all data of any given CSO, and CSOs are obligated to provide these auditors with unlimited access to all data. It should be noted that the majority of non-governmental CSOs working in areas such as women's rights, youth, environmental issues, and children's rights fall under this category.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.sku.ac.ir/Managements/ShowPage.aspx?ID=4027&ManagementID=1005>

<sup>43</sup> <https://tmsh.farhang.gov.ir/fa/conditions/zavabet>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.rrk.ir/Laws/ShowLaw.aspx?Code=11593>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 44

<sup>46</sup> [https://dmlr.mcls.gov.ir/icm\\_content/media/image/2017/11/152298\\_orig.pdf](https://dmlr.mcls.gov.ir/icm_content/media/image/2017/11/152298_orig.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> <https://isac.msrt.ir/fa/page/80/%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%AD-%D9%88%D8%B8%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%81>

<sup>48</sup> <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/100438>

<sup>49</sup> <http://ima-net.ir/Doc/AeenNameh.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> <https://goo.gl/6QyCYH>

<sup>51</sup> <https://behzisti.info/fa/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%81-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C/26>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 44

## Dissolution of Civil Society Organizations

Dissolution of some CSOs is another way in which the government interferes with CSOs and violates their autonomy. Based on laws and regulations overseeing CSOs, they can be dissolved in two different ways: voluntary dissolution based on documented conditions in a CSO's statute, or forced dissolution based on the verdict of a competent court of law. Nevertheless, once again certain government institutions are also authorized to coercively dissolve associations and CSOs, which means these government institutions can dissolve CSOs due to a violation without a court verdict. Article 15 of the regulations for the establishment and supervision of cultural associations, organizations, and centers (passed by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in 1996) stipulates that in case of a proven violation committed by a cultural association, the Investigative Board of Cultural Centers can take one of the following measures: oral or written warning, suspension of license, temporary shutdown of the center for three to twelve months, or permanent shutdown and cancellation of the center's license<sup>53</sup>. Based on article 4.2 of the regulations for activity of Islamic associations at universities (passed by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in 1999), the Investigative Board of University Associations can stop or cancel the license of Islamic associations<sup>54</sup>. In addition to the above-mentioned authorities and based on article 34 of the bylaws on civic association regulations<sup>55</sup>, the National Council of Development and Support for Foundations can also pass a temporary verdict on CSOs. This council can, after investigating documents and data related to a CSO's violation, pass one of the following verdicts:

- Written warning and documentation of the violation with a deadline for corrective action
- Temporary suspension of the operating license for a maximum of 3 months
- Seeking dissolution of the association by way of verdict by a competent court of law

These examples clearly demonstrate how the Iranian government can disrupt the nature of the work CSOs do without even seeking a proper legal verdict and can at times even dissolve a CSO on its own.

## Financial Criteria

Another perspective from which to analyze the level of autonomy in Iranian civil society's is how CSOs raise money to maintain their finances. Iranian CSOs use a variety of ways to provide for and maintain their financial needs, the most common of which can be listed as follows:

- **Membership fees** is one of the most important financial sources for membership-oriented CSOs.
- **Donations and monetary gifts** are the main channel for charities to raise money in Iran. Charities date back centuries in Iran and hold a strong social platform, which enables them to successfully collect public donations and monetary gifts.
- **Service and product sales** is how some charities as well as entrepreneurial associations raise money for their activities.
- **Private sector help and project collaboration** is another significant financial resource for CSOs in Iran. The private sector offers support and/or project collaboration with CSOs free of charge as part of its social mission. Their preference, however, is to collaborate with charities as they are deemed to pose the lowest security risk.
- **Governmental projects and support** is generally the main source of income for Iranian CSOs. Government organizations and institutions dedicate enormous budgets to support or provide project delegations to CSOs free of charge, especially women's and youth NGOs, environmental NGOs, and NGOs tackling social pathology. In the early days of Rouhani's administration, the Omid Entrepreneurial Fund was established to grant charities and entrepreneurial NGOs special facilities to promote their activities. In addition to these government organizations, Tehran's City Council launched the Empowerment and Support Headquarter for CSOs, whose responsibility is to support NGOs in the field

<sup>53</sup> <https://goo.gl/YFfDXq>

<sup>54</sup> <http://modares.ac.ir/uploads/ADM.Oth.rar.3.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 44

of urban management with support or project delegations at no cost.

→ **UN agencies' projects in Iran** are yet another way for Iranian CSOs to raise money for their activities. The downside of this source, however, is that UN agencies are only allowed to collaborate with government-approved Iranian CSOs, which means independent CSOs are excluded from receiving this help.

In order for Iranian CSOs to receive support from international organizations, they must first apply for a relevant license, without which they will have to pay heavy penalties. According to article 23 of the Non-Governmental Organization Bylaw<sup>56</sup>, only NGOs with a required license from relevant authorities are allowed to receive international support – in this case, the license is granted by a work group made up of representatives of the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Intelligence. It is thus safe to say that in practice, article 23<sup>57</sup> means that only government-associated NGOs and CSOs are eligible for international resources and aids.

Charities are currently the only organizations that have relative financial autonomy, which is due to their strong social platform as well as their connection with the religious centers of the country. Other CSOs and NGOs are facing serious problems and threats to the continuation of their activities because of financial challenges. Many CSOs are dependent on government organizations and institutions, which means they are not in a position to decline or resist government policies and plans. These CSOs have no choice but to become a technical tool to advance government policies.

## Freedom to Establish and Operate a Civil Society Organization

Liberty and freedom are another criterion on which to evaluate the status of CSOs in Iran. CSOs face several legal restrictions for their establishment and operational procedures, and we will discuss the most important ones here:

### Restriction on Establishing a Civil Society Organization for Iranian Citizens

Article 26 of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution grants freedom to all parties, groups, political associations and guilds, Islamic associations, or religious minorities, unless they violate the tenets of autonomy, freedom, national unity, Islamic standards, and the foundation of the Islamic Republic. It is also stated that no one can be prohibited from or forced into participation in any of the above-mentioned. It is, however, obvious that these five main tenets, i.e. independence, liberty, national unity, Islamic standards, and the foundation of the Islamic Republic are very general and open to interpretation. On the other hand, for instance, the Labor Law states in its article 131 on civic associations (passed by the government in 2016) that one of the prerequisites for founding members of CSO boards is "to pledge allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution." This stipulation deprives many Iranian citizens of the right to establish a civil society organization. These restrictions are even more encompassing in the directives of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution and article 131 of Labor Law. Two Council directives, passed in 1999 and 2001, which each deal with operational regulations of Islamic associations at universities, allow exclusively for Islamic associations as the only form of association at universities. Article 1, paragraph 3 of the 1999 directive defines an Islamic association as an association which strives for the realization of Islamic ideals, the tenets of the Revolution, and the Islamic government within the framework of the Constitution and this directive<sup>58</sup>. This means that if an Islamic association does not align with certain tenets of the Revolution or the government of Iran, it cannot acquire a license. Article 3 of the same directive contains specific conditions for the establishment of associations. According to this article, in addition to those individuals who cannot establish an Islamic association according to article 7 of the Parties, Groups, Political Associations and Guilds' Operational Law, all members of the founding board of an association must believe in and pledge allegiance to Islam, the authority of the Supreme Leader, and the Constitution of Iran (Paragraph 1, Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution's directive, dated 1999)<sup>59</sup>. Article 131 of Labor Law lists different restrictions for labor associations. Based on this article, there are only three possible types of labor groups: the Islamic council of labor, the labor association, and workers' representatives. All other types of labor unions in factories

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.rnk.ir/Laws/ShowLaw.aspx?Code=11593>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid 44

<sup>58</sup> <https://goo.gl/e22ldg>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid 58



that operate under Labor Law are outlawed. Note 4 of article 131 of chapter 6 of Labor Law states that workers can establish a labor association only in one of three forms: 1. as an Islamic council of labor, 2. a guild association, and 3. as workers' representatives<sup>60</sup>. In other words, a given workplace cannot have two different associations at the same time. Article 15 confines the limits even more by stating that having two similar associations in a certain industry in one geographic region is also NOT allowed. Restrictions do not, unfortunately, end here, and Labor Law also provides for extreme control mechanisms to regulate worker associations through the so-called Supreme Association of Islamic Work Councils, the Supreme Association of Islamic Councils of Labor, the Supreme Association of Guild Associations, and the Assembly of Workers' Representatives. The government establishes these supervisory institutions to oversee the work of such associations at the local, regional, and national levels and to thus control policy-making in these institutions. These institutions also represent all Iranian workers and laborers at the international level, such as ILO. Article 138 of Labor Law also provides for the presence of a representative of the Supreme Leader in any of these institutions, which is another indication of the interference of the Iranian regime in labor associations<sup>61</sup>.

### Restrictions on Freedom of Speech

Civil society organizations in Iran suffer from severe restrictions on freedom of speech. Due to these restrictions, CSOs cannot spread their stakeholders' voices and cannot represent various social groups on the map of power. The Constitution does not specifically restrict freedom of speech, but other laws list a number of restrictions. The most important laws restricting freedom of speech are the Islamic Penal Code and Islamic Republic of Iran's Press Law. Articles 498, 499 and 500 of Islamic Penal Code<sup>62</sup>, among others, correlate freedom of speech and freedom of association with security matters. Article 500 of the Penal Code considers any activity that is detrimental to the Islamic Republic or benefits any other group or organization a national security offence. Articles 498 and 499 consider any gathering of more than two people inside the country or overseas, under any name, as well as attending such a gathering with the aim of disrupting Iran's national security as a national security offence.

Another law that specifies many restrictions on freedom of speech is the Islamic Republic of Iran's Press Law. According to the 2000 Parliamentary Act<sup>63</sup>, not every individual or organization can publish newspapers, magazines, etc. First of all, every person or organization who intends to publish print or digital media must acquire a license. This license is issued by a supervisory board, whose director is the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Article 9 of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Press Law<sup>64</sup> states that anyone who wishes to apply for such a license must pledge allegiance to the Constitution of Iran. Chapter 4, article 6 of the Press Law<sup>65</sup> deals with restrictions on the freedom of speech in the press, specifying areas that are disruptive to the foundation of Islam as well as general and private rights. According to this article, the press cannot spread news of depravity, corruption, or contents contrary to public virtues. The restrictions far exceed these, however, including insult and defamation, falsehoods and rumors. Nevertheless, the law does not define any of these categories. The most problematic of them is rumors, which is basically the leads journalists follow to get to the core of the truth. Article 6, paragraph 6 also bans the publication of news on secret issues, which go beyond issues such as military documents and include covering closed-door sessions of Parliament, closed-door court sessions, and judicial investigations without a proper license. Paragraph 1 of this article clearly states that the distribution and publication of pagan news, news that is against Islamic criteria, or news that harms the foundation of the Islamic Republic is NOT allowed. All these bans restrict civil activists in their quest for transparency and accountability in society and politics because they cannot voice the concerns of their stakeholders.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.mcls.gov.ir/fa/kar/rahnamayemorajein/karegaran/ghanoonekar/fasle6-%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%B4%D8%B4%D9%85>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid 60

<sup>62</sup> <https://srhr.org/abortion-policies/documents/countries/01-Iran-Penal-Code-Fifth-Book-2013.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> <http://farhangi.aut.ac.ir/web/wp-content/uploads/rules/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86%20%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid 63

<sup>65</sup> Ibid 63



## Restrictions on Freedom of Assembly

Civil society organizations also face restrictions on holding rallies, which means they cannot operate freely in society. Article 27 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>66</sup> names two prerequisites for the citizens' right to holding rallies, i.e. not carrying arms and not crossing Islamic boundaries. Nevertheless, chapter 2 of the law requires that all parties, organizations, and civil or trade associations seek a rally permit from the Article 10 Party Commission<sup>67</sup>. Iran's legal system therefore follows a permit-prior-to-action strategy to restrict the freedom of assembly. This strategy does not mean that organizers and participants cannot be prosecuted post-assembly, and organizers, in particular, are liable to prosecution after the rally. Still, the permit-prior-to-action strategy is the bigger problem as it dissuades many from seeking their right to assembly, deterred by the systemic requirements, such as the situation of the applicant(s), rightfulness to freedom and execution methods. For instance, in Party Operation Law, article 6 section 2 requires obtaining a permit from the Ministry of Interior, and chapter 3 of its executive regulations, especially article 32<sup>68</sup>, specifies the requirements applicants must meet, which groups can apply for a permit, how they can apply, how to execute the rally, how to present the topics and areas the rally wants to address and approval thereof, etc.

## Restrictions on Free Exchange of Information

Severe restrictions on the free access to and exchange of information is yet another challenge limiting the scope of action for CSOs in Iran. In May 2009, Parliament passed the Criminal Cyber Law<sup>69</sup>, one of the most restrictive laws on Iranian citizens and activists. This law details what a cyber-crime is, the penalty, supervisory authorities, responsibilities of internet provider companies, and the procedural code for cyber-crime. Cyber restrictions are even more significant given that the internet is the most public, accessible, and inexpensive way to access and exchange information. Iran's Criminal Cyber Law begins by requiring internet provider companies to filter and update their system based on a list provided to them by the Cyber Criminal Code Committee (Article 21). In Article 23, these companies are obligated to notify the Criminal Code Committee of any criminal data they detect in their system. Even more critical is the fact that internet provider companies must keep a six-month record of user data such as type of service, technical specification, its duration, the user's identity, postal and geographical address, phone number, etc. as well as their data traffic such as date, time, duration, and data volume. This record must be handed over to authorities upon request (Article 32). Article 24 criminalizes distributing and teaching the usage of anti-filtering software. On the website of Cyber Police of Iran, the list of cyber-crime instances includes the distribution and teaching of the mechanisms of anti-filtering software, citing article 25 of Criminal Cyber Law, even though this article does not designate this act as criminal. In addition, it is unlawful to use international broadband without an authorized permit (article 24).

The Cyber Criminal Code Committee consists of the following Ministers: Education, Communication and Digital Information, Judiciary, Intelligence, Culture and Islamic Guidance, Science and Research, as well as Islamic Propaganda Organization, the head of IRIB (Iran's Broadcasting Company), the Police Force Chief, a representative of Parliament (delegated by the legal and judiciary committees of Parliament) and an expert on digital and internet sciences (also delegated by Parliament). This committee meets every two weeks to review and update the filtering list and add new items as needed. The decisions made by this committee as to which websites be filtered or shut down are final and immediate. A look at the above-mentioned list on the website of Iran's Cyber Police<sup>70</sup> demonstrates how restrictive the regime's policy on exchange of information and internet use is. Here are some additional items: Anything related to matters of public virtue, matters against Islamic sanctities, pagan matters, matters disrupting public security such as rallies, gatherings, forming online cyber groups with the intention of disrupting national security, production and distribution of material that is against the foundations of the Constitution, propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran, publication of information that is banned by the National Security Council, publication of material against Iranian

<sup>66</sup> Ibid 32

<sup>67</sup> <http://rrk.ir/Laws/ShowLaw.aspx?Code=12758>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid 67

<sup>69</sup> <https://goo.gl/3yLn38>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.cyberpolice.ir>

authorities and institutions, etc.

## PART TWO: Field Examples of Restrictions on Establishing and Operating CSOs

To better demonstrate and understand the restrictions and complications for CSOs in Iran from establishment to operation, in this second part, we will elaborate on the actual circumstances of CSOs under the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> governments (Rouhani's two terms). For this section, we conducted detailed interviews with a number of activists from various fields of civil society in order to provide a clearer picture of the restrictions and challenges these activists face.

### Labor Unions and Worker Associations

Labor unions and workers associations have been heavily targeted and restricted over the years and have not enjoyed the right to freely establish. In recent years, a number of informal independent labor associations with large membership numbers and several smaller unions have been formed, such as Iran's Free Union of Workers, the Kermanshah Electricity and Metal Workers' Union, the Haft-Tapeh Sugarcane Workers' Syndicate, the Alborz State Painters' Syndicate, the Bus Company Workers' Syndicate, the Workers' Rights Protection Agency, and the Coordination Committee to Promote Formation of Workers' Unions. These associations and organizations have tried to persist, operate under difficult conditions, and represent their members, but authorities refuse to recognize them and security forces continue to suppress them.

Farzad Djavid, a member of the executive board of the Tehran Bus Company Workers' Syndicate, describes the circumstances as follows:

"Those guilds that are approved by government authorities, such as the Islamic Council of Labor and the other two similar ones, are completely disconnected from the workers' body they are meant to represent. The Islamic Council of Labor has been formed by coercing workers to vote, and this has not changed under the current government, either. The statutes of such councils are worded and drafted by the Ministry of Labor, and their activities are controlled by this Ministry. They cannot possibly bring about any benefits for workers this way. Independent labor unions and syndicates, on the other hand, are constantly pressured and their activities are curtailed and undermined."

He continues to describe the kinds of pressure worker activists face for their syndicate work.

"The pressure on the Bus Company Syndicate and its activist members such as Mr. Shahabi, Mr. Razavi, and some others shows that the stakes are still very high for activists. Many of these people are out of prison on bail. One should also consider that these pressures to prevent the formation of syndicates are multi-faceted and target the heads of syndicates from one side and the workers who are members in these syndicates from another side."

Another aspect that Farzad Djavid discusses is the restrictions on international relations of labor unions. He believes that the government's approach is no different from that of its predecessors, and at times even harsher.

"For instance, the Bus Company Workers' Syndicate is invited to the International Transport Federation (ITF) annual gatherings, but we have always had problems leaving the country. They do not let us leave and in some cases even confiscate our passports, and then say they do not know who confiscated the passports! Even the Prosecutor's Office says they do not know who confiscated the passports and banned the exits."

## Journalists' Association

Another area which has seen the most severe restrictions, arrests, and detentions in recent years is the field of journalism. The guild of journalists (established in 1997) was one of the most powerful and influential guilds in Iran with over 3,000 members during its active years. Two months after the 2009 presidential election, however, the guild was shut down by order of Said Mortazavi, then district attorney of Tehran. After Rouhani's victory in 2013, journalists joined forces to demand the reopening of their guild, but they have not succeeded to date. Ali Ramezani, an ex-member of the guild's executive board, explains:

"We faced two different problems these last years; the lockdown of our office building and the ban on the guild's activities and operation. The lockdown brought us face to face with the security apparatus of the judiciary, and the ban on operation confronted us with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The judiciary stated that the lockdown was the result of the guild's political/security stance in those years and that the guild was shut down because of its impact in the decade of its existence. Then Rouhani took office and the three Ministers of Islamic Guidance, Labor, and Intelligence negotiated. We met with Vice-President Jahangiri several times, wrote several letters, issued statements on behalf of journalists. The three Ministers also made vague promises regarding the reopening of the guild. But the judiciary and IRGC's intelligence branch has not allowed that to happen to this day."

In another part of the interview, Ramezani discusses the establishment of a new association called Journalists' Association of Tehran.

"Once we realized that our guild will not open any time soon, we took an offer from the Ministry of Labor to establish a new association limited to Tehran, through which we could follow up on the demands of other journalists and support them, too. Mr. Rabi'ee, the Minister of Labor, invited the executive board of the banned Guild of Journalists and made the offer. Some journalists accepted the offer and the Journalists' Association of Tehran was established and its executive board was also selected. But the process of forming the executive board for the new association was very tricky and sensitive. The Minister specifically asked for Mr. Shamsol Va'ezin (a member of the Guild's executive board) not to be on the board of the new association because of the sensitivity some had toward him. Then we had an order from the Prosecutor's Office that Ms. Mofidi and Mr. Moquiseh could not sit on the board, either, due to their criminal charges and detention records they both had during the 2009 post-election unrest. We decided that since our priority was to deal with issues such a health insurance and training that journalists have been struggling with, we would go ahead with the new Tehran association, and like the Participation Front Party, would reinvent ourselves under a different name. Consequently, we agreed to establish the association even without certain individuals."

But soon they realized that intelligence and security branches were interfering with the workings of their new association through the Ministry of Labor.

We formed the founding board, drafted the statute, attracted 780 members, and had our first general assembly in the presence of 165 members at the Ministry headquarters. The statutes were approved, the executive board and auditors were elected, and we applied for the license from the Labor Office, but it did not come. We then received a message from the Ministry that out of the 7 members of the executive board and its 3 substitutes, 5 individuals were not considered eligible. We were told that the Ministry of Intelligence was against them. So eventually all members of the executive board of our young association collectively resigned.

Ramezani added that what happened to the Guild of Journalists and Tehran Journalists' Association can be projected onto other guilds, as well. "The last 4 years have shown us that the situation of guild organization and their empowerment is not a priority of Mr. Rouhani's government."

### Teachers' Association

Iran's Teachers' Association is another guild association that was established during Khatami's presidency in 1999. This association was established with the goal to protect the material as well as immaterial rights of all teachers. Its directors and members, however, were arrested countless times and imprisoned or exiled. Once Rouhani took office in 2013, Teachers' Association activists tried to step up, reorganize, and represent the demands of the country's teacher body. But right at the start, they faced a major problem, like all other guild associations. The Ministry of Interior cancelled the national license of the Teachers' Association and, based on the decision by the Article 10 Commission, announced that all associations and trade unions must first be established at the state level. In the past, guild associations were allowed to operate at the national level, but the 11<sup>th</sup> government changed that and required that these associations be first established at the state level, and then move to the national level and be titled Supreme Council. By 2016, the Ministry of Interior consented to a general assembly for 16 state level teachers' associations held by the Parties' Commission. Other states have not yet received permission to organize a general assembly. The Teachers' Association of the City of Qazvin was also shut down in October 2017. Besides, the general assemblies of those 16 states has not yet been recognized by the Ministry of Interior. Jamshid Fasihi, the secretary of the Teachers' Association, speaks about this decision:

"Since the decision made by the Article 10 Commission of the Ministry of Interior, the national character of the association is lost, and we now operate on state levels only. So we are isolated islands, and teachers of the state of Sistan-o-Baluchistan, for example, are no longer allowed to be part of the central association and were told to contact the state government for their requests. This will take at least two years, and the purpose behind it is to deprive teachers from access to a central association. This is the policy of the security forces that has been imposed on the Ministry of Interior. That way, they want to kill the teachers' associations of remote towns."

Farzin, another activist of the teachers' union, also voices his critique of government policies toward teachers' trade unions and associations, arrests and detentions of teachers, but also talks about policies of the 11<sup>th</sup> government,

"The 11<sup>th</sup> and probably the 12<sup>th</sup> governments also follow a bludgeon policy to control associations' activities. [...] The government interferes with the working of associations in two different ways. One, when new members want to join the executive board, and two, once the association starts working. In theory, there are only two prerequisites for anyone who wants to join an executive board, firstly, recognition and acceptance of the Constitution, and secondly, operating within the framework of the political system of Iran. But in practice, executive and regulatory bodies exert pressure to send less critical individuals to such boards, so that there are fewer problems in the future. Once you are on the board, though, informal pressure continues and they try to manipulate influential members in order to avoid a radicalization of their demands and actions. These mechanisms harm the autonomy of such associations."

As for international networking and collaborations, Farzin says that there are no big differences between Ahmadinejad's and Rouhani's governments, as they both sought to prevent Iran's civil society from connecting with international organizations. "They achieve this by scaring civil and union activists away from such networking and abandoning them once a problem pops up in such networking situations."

## Student Associations

Universities have always been an important center for student activism and through the years, they have been one of the most impactful centers of socio-political transformation and change, which is why the Iranian government has always been very cautious of the developments and has always tried to manipulate and restrict the establishment and operation of such associations. Under the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> governments, universities and student associations were systematically and constantly under attack, but in 2013, once Rouhani took office, student activists were hoping the circumstances would improve and there would be more room for action. Omid Atefi, a student activist from Amir Kabir technical university, however, believes:

“The 11<sup>th</sup> government followed the strategy of pleasing everyone! So they created some room for action by issuing operating licenses for many associations, but they drew the red lines clearly and demanded that we keep off the government’s red lines. Universities have never been a priority for this regime, and the government’s only purpose for universities is to use their participation and interaction as a propaganda tool.” This activist adds that “Islamic associations in universities have had a significant increase in numbers during the 11<sup>th</sup> government, and more than 100 student associations were established during those four years. The number of centers, guilds and student programs also multiplied in comparison to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> governments. Nevertheless, universities are still not as dynamic as they were during the Reform Period of Khatami’s presidency. Under the current government, one undesirable speech can still cause cancellation of all concerts and student camping trips across universities.”

In other parts of the interview, Atefi says that:

“The main policy of the previous government toward student movements was to create an air of suspense at universities; the space is neither open enough for students to express their demands and act on them (because this would mean authoritarian branches of the regime would alert the government), nor are the universities so tightly under siege that students would radically stand up against the conditions. You can call the situation moderate, I would say. There are way fewer arrests of student activists, but way more summons to security agencies. They issue countless operation licenses for student associations, but all sorts of obstacles and blockades are put along the way.”

Mohamad Haqiqi is a student activist at the University of Tehran. We interviewed him about the situation of student publications and journals and organizing speeches at universities. He says:

“At many universities, journals and newspapers must be evaluated before they can be printed, which is against the law. Student associations have enormous problems inviting speakers and organizing events. Many political speakers are not allowed to hold a speech because they have a criminal record or have been temporarily arrested by the university supervisory board, and there are no clear strategies to go about and resolve such cases. So a political activist may be allowed to hold a speech in one university, but not the other. Guild protests and student gatherings also have no clear set of rules. Activists might be summoned to the university disciplinary committee or security office for a protest gathering in one university, but nothing would happen at another university. Because the government’s general policy is to keep universities in suspense and neuter student institutions and activists, we have seen few protest gatherings at universities in the last 4 years. The Ministry of Science has no clear strategy toward student issues and nor do university presidents and authorities. This means that the legal and political procedures involving the establishment of

a student association is different from one university to the next, or even at the same university, different associations are treated differently based on various political, ethnic, or family relations.”

In Haqiqi’s opinion, the main problem for establishing a student organization is the interference of external (outside the university) institutions and security organizations in the decision-making procedures of the university supervisory board (University president, representatives of the Supreme Leader, and the Minister of Science), which is the only board in charge of issuing licenses. Obtaining an operation license for a political group involves three steps:

1. Accepting the founding board, 2. Confirming the statutes, and 3. Attracting a three-percent membership of the student population at the university. In the last 4 years, the main obstacles have been the first two steps, to the extent that in some cases, the security office of a university has rejected up to 60 students as candidates for the founding board of a student group. In other cases, confirming the statutes of such an association has turned into a bureaucratic marathon which has lasted for two years.

### Environmental NGOs

There are many active environmental NGOs in Iran. Given the severe environmental crises the country is dealing with, these NGOs have attracted a lot of attention and are included in decision-making procedures and project operations. Sabour, an environmental activist, believes:

“Under the 11<sup>th</sup> government, NGO numbers have risen considerably, especially in Tehran, where the Governor’s Office issues association licenses rather easily. From a quality perspective, the support of the Environment Protection Agency and its attention to the importance of networks now enables us to coordinate and work together.”

Complaining about the government’s interference in the workings of environmental NGOs, he continues:

“In developing countries, governments tend to want to influence civic associations. Under the 11<sup>th</sup> government, for instance, Tehran’s Governor’s Office issued a lot of licenses for associations so that we now have 2,700 associations in the city. At the beginning, the Governor’s Office initiated eight workgroups with the help of NGOs with topics ranging from family protection to hygiene and health, environment, social issues, charities, special diseases, and the protection of NGO rights. All of these workgroups were dissolved after a while and, according to the Governor’s Office, only two groups were born out of these eight workgroups; one is their own puppet called NGO Think Tank, which is in fact branded by the Governor’s Office, and the other one came out of the workgroup for the protection of NGO-rights, which is independent from the Governor’s Office.”

Sheyda Moslem, a journalist for environmental issues, has a more critical perspective on government interference with environmental NGOs’ affairs:

“In my opinion, Ms. Ebtekar [the director of Iran’s Environment Protection Agency] and her Citizens’ Engagement Bureau are only after dominating NGOs. There is little funding available and they have used the funds to lure some NGOs into collaboration. Under the 11<sup>th</sup> government, NGOs did not follow any specific policies and were led on as propaganda channels for the Agency and did not help the government at all. I believe that some NGOs have established links with the Agency so that they can reap the benefits. Their concern is centered around those areas where there is money and where they can make a profit for themselves. The very small budget allocated to supporting NGOs is used by some retirees to create jobs for themselves and their younger generations.”

## Women's NGOs

Another group that has shown a strong presence on the stage of Iranian civil society over the last decades is women's NGOs, some of which are dedicated to charity, rescue, and development efforts such as children, hygiene, environment and public affairs, whereas others pursue specific goals such as raising sexual and gender awareness, women's empowerment and women's rights issues. Bitā Bayangar, founder and director of the women's NGO Khorshid and a women's rights activist, assesses the situation of women's NGOs under the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> government as follows:

"Our only goal in these years was to survive, and we could not care about evaluating our work or how we could improve our NGOs. We tried to be the voice of all those women who had no voice, and we did our best to make their voices heard in places of need."

Bayangar also complains about a lack of training and skill-building opportunities, the absence of a coherent network among women's rights activists, and the government's disregard of NGOs, adding:

"Under the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> governments, independent women's organizations were viewed as threat, and a lot of quasi-governmental NGOs popped up in those years. This has changed a lot now, and we are invited and welcomed everywhere. However, we still have no say in policy and decision-making; we are just accessories to all these events. This is just a theatrical show of democracy."

Nasim Misaqi, executive director of the NGO Women Entrepreneurs, believes that:

"Women's presence in various socio-political spheres has picked up in the decades after the Revolution. What is significantly missing is organization and mobilization of women's NGO forces. It is normal not to reach our goals when we are so dispersed."

She also believes that in spite of the growth rate of NGOs, the numbers are too small for a country of 80 million people. This civil activist goes on to comment on restrictions and challenges facing women NGOs: "Before the term of the 11<sup>th</sup> government, the largest portion of an NGO's energy was dedicated to its survival on the civil society stage. We were constantly under attack and accused to meddling with politics." In her opinion, these difficult times are over for women's NGOs and the interactive nature of the government's relationship with civic organizations has helped revive the NGOs' vigor.

"The government is now very supportive of our work, and thanks to the presence of the women deputy team of the President's Office, we can now communicate better. Such collaborative exchange, and the fact that they know our problems and challenges will help us to enjoy more freedom in the future."

Nasim Misaqi believes that one of the biggest weaknesses of civil activism in NGOs in general, and in women's NGOs in particular, is their dependence on government resources, which means if they cannot secure governmental projects, they are unable to fund themselves because they have not learned how to raise funds, which will cause big problems for NGOs down the road. Another problematic area, in her opinion, is the controlling and accusatory attitude of many regulatory bodies toward women-related NGOs.

"If you want to establish a CSO or NGO, for example, the police will document and register your fingerprints. This is how they will monitor your work. This is, in my opinion, contradictory to the law and only shows the accusatory attitude toward civic associations and NGOs. What these regulatory bodies need to control is the expertise of the person who wants to establish a CSO."



So if I want to establish a CSO in the field of women's issues, I must have relevant knowledge and expertise of the individual and social issues women deal with. This is what institutions like the President's Deputy on Women's Affairs, the National Welfare Organization, and other bodies with expertise in the field must evaluate and control, rather than conduct a moral-security checkup before they even start operating. NGOs have nothing to do with the police force to begin with."

Another restriction women's NGOs suffer from, in Saber's opinion, is a lack of international relations. She says:

"Because of all the restrictions imposed on NGOs, we could not initiate any international relations and could not expand. We were completely isolated. Some NGOs even feared contact with other NGOs and would cut all ties because liaising with an international organization entailed security charges. I am not saying there should be no control mechanism of NGOs, though. Without control, some NGOs might commit financial or political abuses or money laundering, but control must not mean labeling a certain group with unfounded security accusations, which will prevent them from continuing their work in fields of social interest."





# **7 Driving Forces and Restraining Forces Reshaping Civil Society**

Various groups inside Iranian society are pushing for or against civil society, which we can label as driving forces and restraining forces of civil society. By driving force, we mean those forces acting as a power engine, catalyst, or accelerator of positive change and transformation for civil society, those that strive for a dynamic and energized civil society because they believe that a strong civil society is a prerequisite to a sustainable democracy in Iran. Restraining forces, on the other hand, are forces that consider civil society a malignant tumor, a source of evil in society whose mission is to undermine the culture of religiousness and mosques as the core of Iranian society. As a consequence, they join forces to stop civil society from expanding and developing, stirring a phobia of civil society among societal groups and forces.

## Driving Forces behind Iranian Civil Society

The most prominent driving forces that advocate and encourage expansion of civil society in Iran are:

### Cultural Middle Class

This group has been supporting the development and expansion of Iranian civil society throughout the last few decades. Due to the political and economic circumstances of these years, they have paid a high toll, which has weakened them to a certain extent, but the cultural middle class continues to push for advancement of civil society and can still be counted as a powerful and extensive group throughout the country.

### Journalists, Bloggers, and Social Network Activists

This group has been playing a vital role in raising public awareness for, promoting, and cultivating civil society, exchange of knowledge and information among citizens. Because of this role, journalists, bloggers, and social network activists have constantly and systematically been targeted by Iran's intelligence and security forces and paid the highest price in terms of arrests, detention, and imprisonment.

### Civil Activists and Social Movements

Civil activists, especially women and youth as well as social movement activists are among leading forces of expansion for Iranian civil society who have always tried to boost civil society through their innovative social projects such as Change the Masculine Face of Parliament Campaign and more recently, the Women of Enqelab (Revolution) Street and the Movement of the Poor. This last movement, the Movement of the Poor, took everyone by surprise when it occurred in the last days of 2017 and quickly spread across the country in spite of all limitations imposed by the tight security reigning over Iranian society. What distinguished this movement from all previous social movements in Iran was a change in its slogans and demands, in the participants' social categories, and in their protest strategies.

All in all, these groups and movements continue to challenge the government's policies and plans on environmental issues, women's issues, social pathology, etc. Under the 11<sup>th</sup> government, certain branches of civil society gradually returned to the social scene and relaunched their online as well as offline efforts in organizational, associational, and civic formats. Social movements such as women's rights, student, and labor movements, however, are still on the margins and have not returned to the social arena since the 2009 post-election crackdown. They remain a potential capacity for Iranian civil society.

### Reformist Groups and Religious Intellectuals

These groups have a strong impact on promoting civil society because they are part of the country's power structure and enjoy the corresponding social status among the population. Next to reformist politicians, religious intellectuals such as Dr. Soroush, Mojtabeh Shabestari, Kadivar, and others have played a significant role in the adaptation and

consistency between modern concepts of civil society and religion. They have provided an interpretation of religion that corresponds with a modern society.

### Secular and Democratic Intellectuals and Groups

This group has contributed to the advancement of civil society and adaptation of modern life in Iranian society through translation of texts and books, publication of magazines and journals as well as films and movies. The circle around Goftogou (Dialogue) Magazine<sup>71</sup>, for instance, is one of the most vital advocacy centers for civil society which has been publishing books and magazines since the 90s with the aim of impacting the socio-cultural lives of Iranians. Other circles such as Farzan Publications<sup>72</sup>, Cheshmeh Publications<sup>73</sup>, Agah Publications<sup>74</sup> and Bokhara Magazine<sup>75</sup> have similar circles and follow the same mission.

### The Private Sector

The private sector is relatively very small and, according to the best estimates, covers 20% of Iran's economy. This sector, however, has put the expansion of civil society on its agenda in recent years. It advocates civil society through chambers of commerce in different states and drives capacity-building accelerators, especially in the enterprise and business sectors. The private sector knows that they need civil society as a powerful counterweight in the new geography of power.

### Overseas Iranian Civil Activists

Iranian civil activists who live outside the country, as well as the diaspora, are another driving force behind civil society in Iran. Not only do they try to share literature of successful civil society examples from around the world with civil activists inside Iran, but they also build a bridge for collaboration and exchange of knowledge and experience between activists inside Iran and international bodies of civil activists. Overseas activists also reflect and represent the unheard voices of those inside Iran.

### International Organizations

International European and North American organizations have been playing an important role in the arena of Iranian civil society in recent years. These organizations advance and support independent civil society in contrast to quasi-governmental civil society, which is used as a government domination tool. These organizations and agencies can be divided into two major categories as they follow two distinct policies when it comes to supporting Iranian civil society. The first category are those agencies and organizations that have been financing civil society, human rights, and democracy projects in the country and have been showing support in international meetings and conferences. The second group, on the other hand, actively pursues an existing policy by designing and implementing capacity-building and empowerment projects for Iranian activists and CSOs. Thus, they advance a particular top-down policy and can be considered active actors and builders of civil society in Iran.

<sup>71</sup> <http://goftogu.com>

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.farzanpublishers.com>

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.cheshmeh.ir/Home/>

<sup>74</sup> [https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1\\_%D8%A2%DA%AF%D9%87](https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1_%D8%A2%DA%AF%D9%87)

<sup>75</sup> <http://bukharamag.com>

## Restraining Forces Opposing Civil Society in Iran

As we mentioned earlier, several groups and entities consider civil society an enemy and work hard to undermine and block civil society in Iran. Some of the most powerful of these restraining forces can be listed as follows:

### Civil Society Organizations dependent on the Government

Quasi-governmental CSOs that operate with the help of government institutions and advance government policies and goals are one of the most harmful forces for Iranian civil society. CSOs such as ODVV (Organization for Defending Victims of Violence), Workers' House, the Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children, and the Institute of Women's Studies and Research are a few of such CSOs that have been instrumentalized by the government. These CSOs have occupied many civic spaces and operate as a government domination tool. A large portion of civil society in Iran is currently occupied by such CSOs.

### Bureaucracy

The administrative system of Iran's government is another important restraining force facing civil society. Government branches and institutions generally consider society an adversary in administrative matters, which means they work hard to disrupt the formative process of a strong civil society in Iran and occupy civic spaces.

### Traditional Conservative Groups

Although fundamentalist groups have suffered serious blows in recent Presidential, Parliamentary and City Council elections, they still play a decisive role in the country's power structure and social structure. These conservatives basically oppose civil society and consider it a tool in the hands of their adversaries, i.e. Reformist groups and forces, which is used to subvert fundamentalists and conservative groups. To them, civil society is a Trojan Horse which has come after the Islamic way of life. They believe that civic associations are the antithesis to mosques.

### Islamic Seminaries and Disciples of Mesbah Yazdi

Seminaries and educational religious centers throughout the country, especially in the cities of Qom and Mashhad, disciples of Mesbah Yazdi and students at his training and educational centers, as well as Imam Khomeini's Research and Educational Center<sup>76</sup> are among the most striking opponents of civil society. They believe that civil society is a Western concept to advocate a social lifestyle which is contradictory to Islamic values and virtues. These centers enjoy extensive influence in Iran's power structure and directly feed into the ideological apparatus of the Islamic Republic.

### Clergy and Friday Prayer Imams

Another group forcefully undermining and opposing civil society is a large number of conservative clergy and Friday-prayer Imams. The clergy hold a very powerful unified position in Iran, part of which comes from their longstanding presence in Iranian society. They act as an expansive front and can mobilize masses in distant parts of the country. They use mosques as their exclusive base in society where they are in daily contact with the masses. Statistics report more than 72,000 mosques and 91,000 religious delegations<sup>77</sup>. These are used as centers to promote religious ideas and Islamic ways of life, among other things. The clergy may have lost some of its influence in recent years, but they are still among the leading actors in the power game in Iran.

### Anti-Western Intellectuals and the Fardid Circle of Intellectuals

Anti-Westernism has been a dominant intellectual discourse in Iran for over 60 years now. Animosity towards Western

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.iki.ac.ir>

<sup>77</sup> <https://goo.gl/wLNvNa>

culture, which represents decadence, and a quest for the forgotten “Pure Orient” have been the centerpiece for intellectuals such as Dr. Shariati, Jalal Al-Ahmad, Dariush Shaygan, and others. The anti-Westernism these intellectuals advocated is still present in today’s Iran, and its main proponent after the 1979 Revolution has been Ahmad Fardid, whose students continue his path following his death. Among his influential disciples are Reza Davari, Abbas Mo’aref, and Rajabi Davani who view civil society as a symbol of Western decadence and therefore strive to marginalize and undermine it.

### Orthodox Leftist Groups

The Marxist-Leninist orthodox left is another group trying to undermine Iranian civil society. They consider expansion of civil society and NGOs to be a byproduct of neoliberalism whose aim is to conquer global markets. They view NGOs as the infantry of imperialism and puppets of capitalism which act as a Trojan Horse, especially in Southern countries.

### Traditional Bazar

The bazar and its traders are another ancient social institution in Iran which have been influential in various social transitions and transformations of the past. Following the 1979 Revolution, the bazars lost some of their dominance, but they continue to be a decisive force in the society. Bazaris (traders of Bazar), however, have always had close ties with the Shia Clergy, which means they follow the Clergy in undermining civil society.

### Basidj Militia

Shortly after the Revolution and formation of the IRGC in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini issued an order for the formation of Basidj Mostaz’afin (Mobilization of the Oppressed), a militia organization to recruit volunteers amongst the masses to incorporate and advance the societal goals of the Islamic Revolution. This militia gradually expanded into all branches of social, cultural, and economic spheres and gained a foothold in factories, bureaus, hospitals and clinics, schools, and universities and soon started operating at the local, regional, and national levels. In this way, they have occupied a major portion of civic spheres in society, acting as a suppressive apparatus for civic associations and social movements. At the regional level alone, Basidj now has 40,000 bases<sup>78</sup>, which means they have an enormous capacity to mobilize the masses.

### Supreme Leader and Dependent Institutions

Institutions operating under Supreme Leader’s Supervision are another damaging factor to Iranian civil society. The Supreme Leader Institution plays a major role in policy-making in all political, social, cultural, and economic spheres. Other institutions that operate under its supervision, such as Astan Qods Razavi, Bonyad Mostaz’afan, or Bonyad 15-Khordad, enjoy enormous financial and power resources and view civil society as contradictory to Islamic thought, ideology, and political system. They believe that proponents of civil society are in fact aiming to overthrow the Islamic Republic and replace mosques with CSOs.

<sup>78</sup> <http://7sobh.com/content/75408/>



# **8 Influential Trends within and around Civil Society**



This section mainly deals with the question of current trends in and around civil society in Iran as well as the strategic significance of these trends. This key question is based on the premise that understanding the strategic vision of Iranian society cannot be achieved by observing civil society actors alone, and one needs to look at the context of Iranian civil society and carefully analyze the context, too. The context and foundation of civil society can demonstrate trends that are significant and consequential to its future prospects in Iran. The most important current trends of Iranian civil society can be listed as follows:

**Emergence of a New Generation of Civil Activists** has been a dominant trend in Iranian civil society over the last few years. This new generation is the byproduct of tremendous social changes, a de-ideologization of Iranian society, and the emergence of an intellectual middle class as well as the political and social marginalization of several traditional social forces and groups. This generation signifies the rise of the Third Generation in a post-Islamic Iranian society. These new activists distance themselves from ideological tenets, meta-narratives, and traditional methods of civic-political activism. They rather focus on the daily lives of citizens, advocating the approach of “Think global, act local; Think local, act global!” They have thus introduced a new literature of democracy, human rights, and non-violent resistance and combat to Iranian society. This new generation of civil activists considers civil society the resistance headquarters for Iranian society for its transition to democracy and its liberation from government domination. The Green Movement was among the turning points of this new movement, which strives for the citizens’ civic-political rights and, although it is still not large, it is definitely a force to reckon with for the future of socio-political life in Iran, as it keeps growing.

**Reification of Social Relations** is yet another trend Iranian society has been experiencing in recent years. This is a harmful and serious threat to society and is most recognizable in the cultural sphere and in personal hygiene education. Unfortunately, this trend can also be observed inside Iranian civil society, and especially in NGOs in the fields of environment, youth, and social pathology, which concentrate around available funding. Due to this issue, we have seen a rise in the number of family-based NGOs, or organizations with only two or three members. Some activists have been reduced to bureaucrats as the ideals of change and civic and/or union demands have given way to collaborations to maximize private-sector or government profits. Profit and capital, therefore, are now the deciding factors in many socio-political spheres of life, and the culture of volunteer work, civil ethics, and ethical civil society are being increasingly marginalized.

**Growth of Social, Labor, and Union Protests** has been a reoccurring trend in Iranian society over the last few years, accelerating and expanding among different social groups since Rouhani’s inauguration in 2013. The most prominent illustration of civic protests of recent years is perhaps the mass protests that quickly spread across the country in the last days of 2017, also known as the Movement of the Poor. Although these protests have been disorganized, the fact that they are now a recurring trend shows the government’s inability to meet its citizens’ societal demands and mounting dissatisfaction with authorities among citizens. The fact that these demonstrations originate from various social groups also illustrates the societal pain and hardship that are born out of poverty, unemployment, embezzlement, corruption of authorities, and a failure to pay wages.

**Expansion of Civil Society as a Technical Instrumental Instead of Civil Society as a Social Force** has been the government strategy over the last few years and is another concerning trend in Iranian civil society. In recent years, the government has adapted a strategy of privatization and economic liberation, delegating its responsibilities in fields such as social pathology, environment, etc. to CSOs. This strategy also means that the government sees civil society as a technical toolkit to advance its own agenda and has therefore accelerated the industry of civil-society building, especially in fields such as women, youth, environmental issues, social pathology, and drug abuse. For instance, the Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs<sup>79</sup> has stated that when the 11<sup>th</sup> government took office, there were only 60 youth NGOs across the nation, but by 2017, this number had risen to 2,000. He also expressed the hope that by the year 2020, the number of youth NGOs will have reached 5,000. In another example, Shahindokht Molaverdi, special aide to

<sup>79</sup> <https://goo.gl/ugKuSC>

President Rouhani in women's and family affairs<sup>80</sup>, has announced a rise in women's NGOs from 1,677 in 2013 to 2,333 in 2016. Environmental NGOs have also doubled in number from 413 to 891 during the 11<sup>th</sup> government, according to Mohammad Darvish, executive manager of the Training and Citizen Participation Bureau at Iran's Department of Environment<sup>81</sup>.

The Deputy of NGOs affairs at the Center for Social and Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Interior<sup>82</sup> has also announced that NGOs have enjoyed a 120% growth rate under the 11<sup>th</sup> government. However, this growth of civil society as a technical toolkit for furthering the government agenda comes at the cost of stalling the formation and expansion of civil society as a social force in Iran. Independent NGOs, CSOs, and unions of workers, journalists, human rights, women's rights, and students have been deprived of the right to licensure, establishment, and operation. Social movements of women, workers, and students have been suppressed and marginalized.

**Constant Violation of Freedom of Associations** is yet another prevalent trend in Iranian civil society. Government institutions and authorities use legal and illegal mechanisms to obstruct the establishment and operation of associations and CSOs, especially in the fields of labor, students, women, and human rights. In spite of Rouhani's campaign promises, this trend has not changed under his presidency, either, and the trend of outlawing protest rallies and cancelling civic-political activist speeches has continued. Many sensitive associations and CSOs, such as the Guild of Journalists of Iran or independent labor and student unions, women's rights and human rights associations cannot secure a license or registration. The government does not allow any such network or union to take shape and has even restricted the operation of some associations like the teachers' syndicate, which was established in 1999 with the permission of the Ministry of Interior of the time to form at the national level and at limited state levels.

**Continuous Citation, Arrest, and Imprisonment of Civil Activists and "Starred" Students** is also a trend that has continued into the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> governments of Iran and has, unfortunately, even increased under Rouhani in fields such as labor and minorities. The security apparatus of the government constantly summons activists and threatens them with detention and imprisonment. Many activists are then released on bail, and many are charged with accusations such as threat to national security, propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran, disturbance of public opinion, insult to the person of the Supreme Leader, and other vague charges. The government has also continued to "star" students and in the academic year 2017-2018, more than 100 graduate students<sup>83</sup> have been "starred." "Starring" a student means that they do not meet the political requirements to continue their studies. Some of these students are compelled to sign affidavits not to commit any political act or join a student association while others are banned from their studies.

<sup>80</sup> <https://goo.gl/FAWsff>

<sup>81</sup> <https://goo.gl/hWc2fc>

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82417493>

<sup>83</sup> <https://goo.gl/QzNber>



# 9

## **Strategic Concerns of Civil Society Leaders and Activists**

In addition to continuous and daily monitoring of the developments of civil society in Iran over the last few years, Volunteer Activists (VA) also conducted four strategic gatherings with activists from inside Iran and from student groups, women's rights groups, environmental groups, etc. to devise a roadmap for civil society in Iran. These gatherings took place over a period of two years and in various locations outside the country. As part of its mission, VA also interviewed a number of civil society actors regarding the issues and challenges facing Iranian civil society. These gatherings and interviews have helped VA to map out these strategic concerns based on a situational analysis of civil society in Iran as follows:

### **Transitioning from a Weakened and Disjointed Civil Society to a Strong and Coherent One**

The current situation of Iranian civil society is difficult and precarious because of a serious lack of resources, efficient leadership, developed human resources, strong organization, a roadmap, etc. on the one hand, and various peripheral threats and challenges in the sociocultural, economic, and political environment of Iranian society on the other hand. How is it possible to achieve sustainability in the absence of strong and efficient leadership, with a lack of human and financial resources as well as independent NGOs? Which strategies must be implemented in order for civil activists to produce a strong and sustainable civil society?

### **Counteracting the Government Policy of Building a Quasi-Governmental Civil Society**

The Iranian government strongly pursues a strategy to supplant independent Iranian civil society with quasi-governmental organizations and trade unions. In doing so, it has partially succeeded in occupying certain civic spaces. The government has also conducted various capacity-building programs for civil activists and organizations, trying to train them to be effective tools to efficiently administer the plans and policies on the government's agenda. Civil society leaders and activists are therefore deliberating how they can counteract the government's policy of supplantment and how they can create civic resistance centers to effectively oppose the above-mentioned government policies. Civil society actors are looking for ways in which they can define civil society as an important social force, and not as a technical tool for domination and manipulation.

### **Creating an Appropriate Legal Foundation for Civil Activism and Associational Life**

A lack of autonomy and freedom to establish and run associations and civil organizations are prominent characteristics of Iranian civil society. Restricted freedom of action as well as a lack of independence have created a weakened and anemic civil society in the country. Under such circumstances, how can Iranian civil society actors create a strong legal foundation for the establishment and operation of civil society organizations? How can they alter the restrictive regulations imposed on civil society and how can they improve its independence? How is it possible to protect civil society organizations from government organizations?

### **Encouraging Peace-Building and Democratization**

With the worldwide decline of the third wave of democratization as well as an extreme rise of violence, radicalism, and fundamentalism in the region, the specter of war hovers over Iran. Under such complicated circumstances and given the domestic condition of Iranian civil society, how can civil society actors contribute to peace-building? How can they form civic schools that teach tolerance, civility, and peace in the face of hatred and animosity? How can civil society counteract the downgrading of social projects and encourage accumulation of social assets? How can it reanimate political communities to retrieve their agendas and force, and how can it mend societal affliction?

## Representing Stakeholder Groups and Holding the Government Accountable

One of the biggest shortcomings of civil society in Iran is the fact that it has not been able to effectively represent social groups and make their voices heard by authorities. It is, therefore, a very important question how civil society can respond to its stakeholders, successfully reflect their demands, and as a result, strengthen its social base. How can civil society hold authorities accountable for their policy and program transparency at the local and national scales? How can civil society leaders participate in the government's decision- and policy-making processes, and how can they mobilize stakeholders and public opinion to effect change?

## Promoting Associational Life, Coalitions, and Online/Offline Social Networks

Limitations on associational life as well as an absence of efficient networks and of a spirit of collaboration and teamwork are among the characteristics of civil society in Iran. How is it possible, under such circumstances, to promote associational life and voluntary work, and how can civil society actors create an effective collaboration network among civil society organizations? How can Iranian civil society connect with the international network of civil society organizations and exchange knowledge and experience? And last, but not least, how can social networks be used to promote civil-society-building projects in Iran?

## Fostering an Efficient Capacity-Building Strategy for Activists and CSOs

At the moment, both the Iranian government and several international organizations are administering capacity-building programs for activists and CSOs in Iran. Nevertheless, all these projects fall short of meeting the needs of their immediate stakeholder, i.e. Iranian civil society. The biggest concern of civil society leaders in Iran is therefore how to foster capacity-building despite a lack of domestic resources and prohibited access to foreign resources. How is it possible to create a capacity-building program for Iranian civil society leaders? How could they use programs for the exchange of knowledge and experience with other countries to build capacity within Iranian civil society? And how can international organizations help Iranian civil activists and leaders?



# **10 Future Scenarios for Civil Society in Iran**



In this section, we will discuss five probable scenarios for civil society in Iran until 2022, based on 1. the span of activity and capability of civil society organizations, 2. a situational analysis of these organizations, 3. mapping of encouraging as well as restraining forces and 4. dominant trends of civil society in Iran. In addition to these factors, we also need to consider spatial variables such as socio-economic crises, the rising trend of social and syndicate protests, especially by financially-underprivileged groups, the death of Khamenei as Supreme Leader and the ensuing succession crisis, the makeup of political forces, and, last but not least, foreign threats.

### **First Scenario: Disintegration and Collapse of Iran**

The main hypothesis here is that the government's inability to meet the socio-political demands of the population and its shortcomings in social, political, and economic crises will give rise to social unrest, especially from financially underprivileged social groups, and that this, together with the intervention of foreign powers, will lead to the fall of the Islamic Republic. Since there are no strong and unified power centers among the opposition on the one hand, and strong eccentric, ethno-religious deviations in the country on the other hand, the country will disintegrate. In this scenario, civil society has very little say in the transformation of the country since a radicalized society, affected by foreign intervention, will potentially best respond to violence and armed conflict.

### **Second Scenario: Dominance of a Security Environment and Military Takeover**

This scenario entails the death of Khamenei as Supreme Leader, and the continuation of social, political, and economical crises and social protests, which would in turn give rise to a tightened security environment throughout the country. Under such circumstances, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) could undertake a coup in the name of protecting the achievements of the Revolution against foreign intervention and thus, take over the country's power centers. In this scenario, civil society will become next to non-existent and every attempt at protest will be suppressed. Civil activists could only work from closed-circle, underground groups.

### **Third Scenario: Persistence of Current Circumstances**

This scenario hypothesizes that the regime can manage the social unrest of the poor, socio-economic crises, and the death of Khamenei and his succession crisis in the face of a weak and scattered opposition. The regime will thus maintain the current circumstances and we will not see any changes in the power fabric in the near future. In such a scenario, civil society will be utilized as a tool to advance government policies and will be developed accordingly. The formation of a civil society as a social force, however, will be severely restricted, and social movements or independent civil society organizations will be marginalized.

### **Fourth Scenario: Socio-political and Economic Reform**

In this scenario, under pressure from reformist and moderate groups, the government will execute socio-political and economic reforms in order to respond to social protests and to prevent the deepening of socio-economic crises. The socio-political environment will open up and we will see socio-political reforms as well as a relative improvement of the citizens' livelihood.

Under such a hypothesis, civil society will expand as a social force, and civil society organizations will have better opportunities for participation and action. Civil society can have a more impactful role as a social auditor that holds the government and authorities accountable, reflecting the voices of diverse social groups and various geographical locations.

## Fifth Scenario: Fall of the Islamic Republic and Transition to a Democratic System

The main hypothesis of this scenario is that the Islamic regime and its inner power houses will not be able to respond to demands of social groups, and following the death of the Supreme Leader, the ensuing succession crisis, and civilian protests and unrest, the regime will fall, but the coalition of democratic forces will establish a democratic government system in Iran. This would mean freedom of civil society as a powerful social force, which plays a significant role in the transition period as well as in reinforcing democracy.

According to the civil activists VA hosted at strategic meetings during the last two years and activists from various fields who were interviewed for this research as well as available circumstantial evidence, scenarios 2, 3 and 4 are more likely to materialize than 1 and 5.



# 11 Recommendations

In this part, we will list some guidelines and recommendations for the expansion and development of civil society and associational life in Iran. Our recommendations are directed at the government of Iran, civil activists in Iran, as well as international organizations.

## Guidelines for the Government of Iran

- **Freedom of Association:** Hereby we demand that the government of Iran recognize and respect its citizens' right to establish associations and CSOs and associational life, as well as the citizens' right to engage in all socio-political spheres according to article 26 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the International Labor Organization's conventions and protocols 87 and 98.
- **Autonomy:** We demand that the government of Iran recognize the autonomy of associations and CSOs according to article 26 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the International Labor Organization's conventions and protocols 87 and 98. The government must stop interfering with CSO affairs and its top-down policy of civil-society-building.
- **Right to Peaceful Gathering:** We demand that the government of Iran recognize its citizens' right to peaceful gatherings according to article 26 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the International Labor Organization's conventions and protocols 87 and 98. The government must eliminate restrictions on the citizens' right to peaceful gathering to demand their needs and rights immediately.
- **Modification of Laws and Regulations for CSOs:** We demand that the government of Iran review and modify all laws and regulations that contradict the principles of freedom and autonomy of CSOs and associations. The government must repeal all regulations that prohibit civil society from becoming an enormous social capital.
- **Social Communication:** Iranian civil society cannot grow and expand in isolation from the outside world, so we demand that the government eliminate all legal and illegal obstacles for exchange and dialogue between Iranian civil society and the global network of civil society, and thus provide a fertile ground for the development of civil society in Iran.
- **Right to Access and Free Exchange of Information:** It is the government's responsibility to secure access to free circulation of information among citizens and associations. We demand that the government guarantee this right for all citizens and refrain from any act of censorship and filtering that interferes with this right.
- **Social Networks:** The existence of dynamic social networks and channels of communication and exchange among citizens is a sign of a powerful social capital in a country. Social capital, development, and sustainable democracy are interrelated. We therefore demand that the government repeal policies that undermine and destroy virtual and actual social networks. The government must, to the contrary, create a proper foundation for the development of such networks to accumulate social capital.
- **Supervision and Monitoring by CSOs:** In every society, CSOs act as social groups' monitors. They reflect the views and demands of their stakeholders of various social groups, especially marginalized ones. We therefore demand that the government recognize and allow for the CSOs' mission to monitor the country's administrative affairs and eliminate obstacles to their freedom of speech, demands, and right to peaceful gathering.

## Recommendations for Civil Activists

- **Campaign for Freedom of Associations:** We advise civil activists to campaign for the freedom to establish and operate associations and CSOs through various socio-political networks and demand that the government respond to this public lawful demand.

- **Defense of Associational Autonomy:** We advise civil activists to strengthen their internal collaborative networks and prohibit the government from interfering with their operations and projects through international legal mechanisms such as the UN Human Rights Council, the International Labor Organization, etc.
- **Societal Dialogue:** Societal discourse is an extremely vital mechanism to escape impasses. We therefore advise civil activists to work on the societal discourse project and engage with the government and other stakeholders to transition from a weak civil society to a powerful one. That way, activists will also have an opportunity to counteract the project of civil-society-phobia that is being generated by power centers in Iran.
- **Representation of Social Groups:** By representing larger social groups, associations and CSOs can play a more crucial role in the arena of power and can reflect their voices and demands at various decision-making levels. We therefore advise civil activists to invest their energy and resources even more than before in expanding their social base and be accountable to the needs and demands of their members and stakeholders.
- **Creation of a Collaborative Network:** In the last four decades, the government of Iran has occupied a large portion of civic spaces so as to pressure activists and CSOs, which is why Iranian activists and CSOs must work together to build a strong collaboration network and coalition to regain their civic spaces.

## Recommendations and Guidelines for International Organizations

- **Defense of Iranian Civil Society's Freedom and Autonomy:** International organizations such as UN agencies, European Union, Western governments must continue to press Iranian authorities in international conferences to recognize the right to freedom and autonomy of CSOs in Iran and refrain from interfering with the internal affairs of these CSOs. The government of Iran must also allow civil society activists to organize without any restrictions.
- **Creation of a Knowledge and Experience Exchange Network:** International donor organizations must speed up their plans to create exchange networks of knowledge and experience with Iranian civil society to accelerate capacity-building and development of CSOs. These organizations should also create an opportunity for Iranian activists to communicate with the global networks of civil society about shared problems and interests.
- **Monitoring Civil Society:** International organizations such as Civicus and Western governments must constantly monitor the events and trends in Iranian civil society, reflect the voices of Iranian activists on international occasions, and hold Iranian authorities accountable for their policies against activists and CSOs in Iran. Iranian authorities must be held accountable for the severe restrictive and suppressive measures against civil society.
- **Access to Free Exchange of Information:** International organizations must defend the Iranian citizens' right to free circulation of information and hold Iranian authorities accountable to respect this basic human right. Iranian authorities must remove all restrictions and all suppressive mechanisms that hinder freedom of speech, freedom of the press, access to free exchange of knowledge and information in both online and offline formats.
- **Prioritizing Freedom of Association:** International organizations such as ILO and UN agencies must demand that Western governments prioritize the independence and freedom of Iranian associations and CSOs in their talks and negotiations with Iranian authorities and hold them accountable for recognizing associations' right to freedom and independence. Iranian authorities must be obligated to refrain from interfering with CSOs and associations.





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