State Capacity and Democratization in Iran

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Scholars and social thinkers have long analyzed and debated the nature of the democratic state. Most sociologists agree that the likelihood of democratization is directly affected by state capacity, i.e., the power of the political system or the government to control and regulate the activities of the population within its jurisdiction. Democratization can be defined as the process of empowering the civilian population vis-à-vis the state. Empowering the civilian population requires all of the democratic freedoms and civil liberties, including freedom of speech, association, assembly, and above all, political equality and accountability of the rulers. This minimalist definition is consistent with the institutions of liberal democracy, which do not address matters such as equity and social justice. Very high capacity states often undermine the likelihood of democratization and generate irreconcilable conflicts, as in the case of the Soviet Union. Similarly, states with low capacity may fall vulnerable to instability and collapse. Hence, only states possessing a moderate capacity to control the social activities of their public are likely to be able to function along the principles of a liberal democracy. Based on these criteria, Iran’s theocracy would fall into the category of a high capacity state whose institutions are incompatible with liberal democracy.

Iranian society failed to democratize and empower the civilian popu-
ulation vis-à-vis the state for more than a century. Despite repeated popular attempts, from the Constitutional Revolution, through the nationalist movement of the 1950s, to the 1979 revolution and the Green Movement in 2009, Iran’s political system has resisted democratization. During all these contentious periods, internal forces, sometimes in alliance with external powers, denied Iranians democratic rights, and succeeded in imposing highly authoritarian rule.

During the revolutionary struggles, Ayatollah Khomeini and other Islamic leaders promised democratic rights and institutions. Here are a few samples of Khomeini’s statements on freedom and democracy:

• “In Islamic government, there is no dictatorship.”

• “We think that force and repression are not the means to progress.”

• “There is no repression in Islam. There is freedom in Islam for all classes—for women, for men, for whites, for blacks, for everyone.”

• “We will not abandon our struggle until we have a real democratic government that replaces the dictatorship and bloodshed.”

• “Never allow a small group to rule over you like in the bitter days of despotism of the past. Do not forget the principle of Islamic democracy.”

• “Repression has been buried and will not return.”

But, once in power, following the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters pursued policies that undermined democracy and democratic institutions. Khomeini rejected democracy on the grounds that it was based on the rule of humans who could fall into error. Democracy was deemed unacceptable because it had a Western dimension. Khomeini even rejected the suggestion of calling the country an Islamic democratic republic. In a large public gathering in Qom, he noted, “We accept Western civilization but do not accept their corruption.” He de-

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nounced those “aristocrats” who lived in the West and had no role in the movement but wanted to derail the revolution. Khomeini declared that those who weakened the government were traitors. He noted that it was the youth who created the revolution, not the lawyers. He stated, “Newspapers should correct themselves and not commit treason against Islam. . . . The thing we want is an Islamic republic, not just a republic, or a democratic republic, or even an Islamic democratic republic, just an Islamic republic.”

Khomeini and his allies pressed relentlessly for the formation of a high capacity state that would remain unaccountable. Once Iranians approved the formation of an Islamic Republic in March 1979, Khomeini called it “the government of God.” Within a short period of time, he and his allies created the most powerful state in Iran’s modern history. Khomeini declared that the preservation of the Islamic system was one of the most important obligations. He asserted that, in the service of Islam, one could spy, lie, and even drink alcohol. Khomeini’s declaration undermined accountability and the rule of law, which constitute critical dimensions of a democratic state.

As the undisputed leader of the revolution, Khomeini determined the Islamic Republic’s constitution, which empowered the clergy. According to the constitution’s Article 5, the Muslim nation’s highest leadership position during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam was the Supreme Leader, reserved for the clergy. In response to criticism that this position might pave the way for dictatorship, Khomeini asserted that the velayat- e faghieh and clerical rule would not establish dictatorship but prevent it. But, in actuality, Khomeini instituted one of the most authoritarian systems in Iran and in the modern world.

Today, the Supreme Leader controls all three branches of government through his position at the apex of an elaborate network of councils and assemblies that reinforce theocratic, authoritarian decision-making and leave no room for democratic checks and balances. The Supreme Leader determines the regime’s top leadership by directly appointing six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council and the head of the
The Guardian Council vets and approves all candidates for the Assembly of Experts, who must also pass a religious examination. Only approved candidates for the Assembly are presented to the public for a nationwide popular vote. By determining the Guardian Council’s membership, the Supreme Leader exercises additional influence over its role in certifying that all legislation is compatible with Islam. The Supreme Leader also appoints all members of the Expediency Council, which is constitutionally charged with resolving disputes between the Guardian Council and the Majles. The Supreme Leader is appointed for an indefinite term by the Assembly of Experts, which theoretically can dismiss him in case of moral transgression or incompetence. However, such an outcome is highly unlikely because of the Leader’s influence over the Assembly. In reality, the Supreme Leader is accountable to no one.

The Supreme Leader’s powers are not limited to political arena. He enjoys other economic and ideological privileges. In addition to receiving unspecified amount of resources from the state, the Supreme Leader and economic entities under his rule control an estimated fifty percent of Iran’s GDP. More importantly, the Supreme Leader claims unusual qualifications and ideological prerogatives. He and his clerical subordinates claim that he is infallible and does not make mistakes because he receives guidance and inspiration from the prophet and the Twelfth Imam. Some clergy claim that the Supreme Leader is appointed by the Imam of Age (Hidden Imam). Some even note that everyone must submit to the rule of the Supreme Leader and disobedience is tantamount to polytheism. And anyone who opposes the regime would be deemed as *mohareb*, or enemy of God, and could be executed.

According to the ruling clergy, the Islamic Republic and the Supreme Leader do not gain their legitimacy from the Iranian people because God and the prophet confer the legitimacy for the system and its ruler. It is important to note that such claims negate Article 56 of the country’s constitution, which declares that God “has made man the master of his own social destiny. No one can deprive man of this divine right, nor subordinate it to the vested interests of a particular individual or group.”
Obviously, a regime that represents divine rule and whose legitimacy is not rooted in the consent of the people must have attained a high level of autonomy from the population and may not represent the will of the people.

In sum, the Islamic Republic is an example of a high capacity state headed by absolutist rule resembling divine rights, with no accountability. The Supreme Leader wields enormous powers over the social, economic, and political structures of Iranian society, violating the basic requirement of political equality. It has become an exclusive state fundamentally incompatible with liberal democracy. The state imposes numerous obligations on the population but grants it no political rights. According to the rulers of the Islamic Republic, it is the duty of Iranians to obey and submit to a system that is a divine trust.

The formation of such a high capacity state in Iran entails significant implications for the country’s democratization. Extensive state control in virtually every aspect of society violates people’s democratic rights to determine their own destiny. Moreover, such state intervention generates multiple, irreconcilable contradictions and conflicts. Maintaining the Islamic Republic requires widespread, endless repression to silence dissent. Given that Iran’s theocracy is based on absolutist principles that rejects popular sovereignty, the regime cannot be democratized through limited reforms. In combination, the denial of democratic rights, the prolonged exclusion of the populace from determining its own destiny in the social, cultural, economic, and political spheres, endless state repression, along with the inability to reform tend to radicalize the people and set the stage for revolutionary struggles.

To avoid authoritarian rule and establish democracy, democratic movements must refrain from forming high capacity states. Such states often become highly intrusive, have the ability to severely control the social, economic, and political activities of the population under their jurisdiction. Furthermore, high capacity states may also impose all kinds of obligations and restrict people’s rights, violating the basic premises of democracy.
Thus, Iranians interested in empowering the people vis-à-vis the state must attempt to establish a liberal democracy and avoid instituting high capacity states. To democratize, Iranians must realize that above all democracies are based on political equality. Hence, they would have to revoke all political privileges and powerful institutions that have given rise to the theocracy and created economic and cultural advantages for a small portion of the population. All such powers and institutions are incompatible with modern definitions of democracy and democratic rights.

Iranians interested in empowering the people vis-à-vis the state and establish a liberal democracy would find little enlightenment from the Russian and Chinese experiences. A more fruitful path would be to learn what bourgeois revolutions accomplished in England, France, and the United States earlier in those countries’ histories. After all, those revolutions challenged divine rights and demanded people’s political rights, which enabled their citizens to obtain a say in the decision-making processes.

But liberal democracies, which usually rely on market forces to determine the distribution of wealth and income, often do not have an interest in issues of social justice and equity. Iranians interested in equity and social justice may want to study social democracies, which partially empower working and middle classes vis-à-vis the economically dominant class. Social democracies generally possess greater capacity than liberal states, exercise greater control over the economy and society, possess some state enterprises for certain services, and play an active role in the distribution of wealth and income, while still remaining vibrant democracies. When socialists in Great Britain nationalized a number of industries and services after World War II, the country did not become undemocratic. The British government continued for decades to be the major shareholder of British Petroleum, formerly the Anglo-Iranian oil company, the largest corporation in the empire. In spite of such state intervention in the economy, the British government remained democratic. States in Scandinavian countries also have had a greater role in their economies while remaining fully democratic. In
Norway, an oil-rich country, the state owns and controls much of its oil, which constitutes about 25 percent of GDP. The country remains both democratic and one of the most egalitarian societies in the world. Norway would provide an appealing model for Iranians seeking social democracy.

In conclusion, this brief analysis demonstrates that state capacity directly affects the likelihood of democratization. High capacity states tend to regulate heavily, control their population’s social activities, and become unaccountable. Such states leave little room for the public to decide their own behavior freely. Although Ayatollah Khomeini promised political freedom and democracy to the Iranian people during the revolutionary struggles, after the 1979 revolution the Islamic regime built a very high capacity state. The Islamic state was empowered to control and regulate the cultural, social, economic, political, and religious activities of the people. Iran’s experience clearly reveals that a high capacity state is incompatible with liberal democracy. Iranians interested in greater political freedom would do better to avoid a high capacity state; those who are also interested in social justice may learn from the experiences of social democracies in Europe and other parts of the world.