

Individualization and the Emergence of Personalized Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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The 1979 revolution in Iran, which overthrew the monarchical regime, was the result of collective action of a tripartite political-cultural alliance: the intellectuals (belonging to the modern middle class), the *baazari* (merchants), and the clerics.¹ Each of these groups mobilized specific urban strata. This alliance had adopted a heterogeneous political ideology. Secular actors were influenced by the Shi'ite cultural model and symbolic interpretations whose meaning had been transformed by the cultural, economic, and social changes that the shah's modern state policies had brought about.² Iranian Islam had taken on a socio-symbolic

¹Ahmad Ashraf, "Bazaar-Mosque Alliance: The Social Bases of Revolts and Revolutions," *Politics, Culture, and Society* 1 (1988): 538–67.

²Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, "The State, Classes, and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution," *State, Culture, and Society* 1 (1985): 3–39.

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dimension to become an imaginary capable of repairing inequality. On the other hand, religious actors were influenced by the egalitarian discourse and political commitment of secular, left-wing actors and their demands for social justice.³

Despite the high cost of the revolution, individuals motivated by ideas, culture, values, beliefs, and ideologies surpassed themselves, braving the shackles of social convention and fear. However, the actors adhered not to a rational discourse but to fragments of a revolutionary ideology condensed and mobilized in the form of images that often referred to myths and religious beliefs. Ideologies are based on a series of metaphors and images to which individuals respond based on their shared experiences and expectations. It is through ideology that emotional reactions are generalized beyond the specific contexts. Ideology is therefore not only a link between ideas; it is above all a link between actors.⁴

In the aftermath of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic regime, continued to advocate the “unity of the *ummah*” (the community of believers) and unity of discourse (*vahdat-i kalameh*), rejecting both individuality and diversity.⁵ He even opposed a political system based on a multi-party system, believing that the formation of parties contributed to the fragmentation of society and that it would have harmful consequences on unity.

Fragmented Post-Revolutionary Society

However, post-revolutionary Iranian society has been marked by the individualization of its young members, who constitute the majority of the population. They were born after the revolution and many

³Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud, *Secularization of Iran: A Doomed Failure? The New Middle Class and the Making of Modern Iran* (Louvain, Belgium, and Paris: Peeters and Institut d'études iraniennes, 1998).

⁴David John Manning, *The Form of Ideology: Investigations into the Sense of Ideological Reasoning with a View to Giving an Account of Its Place in Political Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980).

⁵Ahmad Ashraf, “Theocracy and Charisma: New Men of Power in Iran,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 4 (1990): 113–52.

after the Iran–Iraq War, and do not aspire to a collective identity or the ascetic values that were dominantly promoted during the war period. As to the religious youth, the individualization of their religious choice ensures continuity with their own Islamic heritage while rejecting traditional readings of the state’s official Islam.⁶ This new religiosity is one of the consequences of the revolution and the politicization of Islam, combined with profound social and cultural changes in society and families which have resulted in the secularization of the sacred. Individuals have thus built their own socio-religious identity from the various symbolic resources available to them. Since the end of the 1970s, society has rapidly urbanized (75 percent of Iranians now live in cities), the gap between rural and urban areas has narrowed, and the literacy rate for people aged six to twenty-four has grown to 96 percent. Women have adopted the family planning campaign “fewer children, better life” (in effect from 1989 to 2015), which has reduced the annual population growth rate from 3.8 to 1.2 and the average number of children per woman from 7.2 to 1.8 today. This in turn has both liberated women from continuous childbearing and child-rearing, and allowed them to think and act for themselves. It has also made children more valuable and placed their well-being at the center of their parents’ concerns; parents now mobilize their resources to respond to their children’s needs and their often consumerist demands. As our national survey demonstrated, the widespread permissive style of education among various social groups has led children to construct an individualized identity and enjoy unprecedented individual freedom within their families.⁷

On the other hand, the economic crisis of recent decades and the failure of the Islamic state to carry out the revolution’s promises,

⁶Farhad Khosrokhavar and Amir Nikpey, *Avoir vingt ans au pays des ayatollahs* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009).

⁷Our quantitative survey was taken in 2002, in collaboration with Iran’s Center for Statistics, in all Iranian provinces, with a sample of thirty-one thousand. It was completed with a qualitative survey I conducted from 2004 to 2008. For a discussion of the findings, see Azadeh Kian, “From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of Patriarchal Order,” *Iranian Studies*, no. 1 (2005): 45–66.

especially those of social justice and freedom, have led parents and grandparents (who belong to the generation of the revolution) to feel guilty toward the younger generation, who are suffering from unemployment and cultural and political repression. Consequently, instead of intergenerational conflicts between parents and children, we are faced with a reinvention of relationships based on respect and understanding between them. This has resulted in the weakening of patriarchy within the family despite the laws that attempt to strengthen patriarchy. It has also led to the rejection of obedience to political and religious authority and the emergence of a cultural and political counterweight.⁸ Authoritarianism and violence as a means of regulating politics, as well as the political institutions that generate them, have thus been rejected.

Since 2014, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the conservatives have challenged the modern demographic behavior of Iranians, who prefer to have fewer children in order to provide them with a better life, by calling on the government to end family planning and to limit women's access to the job market. The free distribution of contraceptive means in health clinics is now prohibited, thus exposing poor women, especially in rural areas and deprived neighborhoods, to the risk of unwanted pregnancies. Voluntary female and male sterilization is criminalized, and doctors who perform it are liable to imprisonment. In September 2016, under President Rouhani's government, the supreme leader, who targets a doubling of the population, published an order according to which the birthrate should increase and stating that women are first and foremost mothers and wives. This order contravenes the very constitution of the Islamic Republic, which recognizes women as social, economic, and political actors beyond their maternal role. However, these injunctions have failed to gain the support of women, as illustrated by the steady decline in fertility rates. Between 2018 and 2019, for example, births diminished by 170,000.⁹ Women's work outside the

⁸Kian, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates."

⁹The Islamic Parliament's research center published a report entitled *The Promulgation of the Motion on Population and the Promotion of the Family in the Eleventh Parliament* (Tehran: Office of Studies on Education and Culture, 2020). It stated that according to the data provided

home continues to be discouraged by the state unless it is essential for the survival of the family, and the home is considered the most suitable place for women. Through these measures, the government has also tried to find a solution to the crisis of traditional masculinity aggravated by the high unemployment rates of young men aged fifteen to twenty-nine years, whose official unemployment rate of 21.4 percent is twice as high as the average for working men. Masculinity refers to men's sense of identity and their individual and collective rights within the material relationships that are grounded in family/domestic relationships. Traditional masculinities construct men as breadwinners who assume control over income and resources, as well as over women. The identity of men as providers has legitimized women's exclusion from work outside the home.

The Discourse of Unity in the Face of a Privatized State

In early 2000, faced with an economic crisis, massive unemployment of youth, and deteriorating social cohesion, the reformist government tried to adapt the model of the social state by implementing a social policy funded by oil revenues rather than taxation and solidarity. Under the Islamic regime, the centrality of the state's role in the rentier economy has allowed the state to maintain the dependence of the most disadvantaged groups through a public social policy of resource allocation, and further to co-opt other social groups, including parts of the modern middle class. These parts of the middle class run the administration as high-ranking state cadres or experts or are active in the economy's private sector. The state's inability to finance social programs through taxation of the main beneficiaries of oil revenues (especially *Bonyads*, or foundations) reflects the political influence of monopolistic structures and the distribution sector.¹⁰ However, the

by the civil registry, there were 1,196,135 births in 2019, the lowest during the past decade. This figure shows a 12 percent decrease compared with 2018 and a 22 percent decrease compared with 2014. "The Birth Rate Has Reached the Lowest in Ten Years," *radiozamaneh*, 1 July 2020, www.radiozamaneh.com/515610.

¹⁰Azadeh Kian, "Iran : l'État islamique entre structures monopolistiques et modèle de l'État social" ("Iran: The Islamic State between Monopolistic Structures and the Model of a Social State"), *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 105–6 (2005): 175–98.

state's "desirability" has been weakened for several reasons: the sharp decline in oil revenues due to US sanctions¹¹ after a decade of international sanctions (December 2006–January 2016); the privatization of the state, which benefits a limited number of institutions, and individuals in or close to power; and more recently the crash in oil prices. The discourse of unity uttered by the leaders at the beginning of the revolution no longer stands in an increasingly fragmented and individualized society that threatens the state's cultural and ideological hegemony.

In order to maintain the social order and assure its hegemony, the state pursues a repressive policy against active social groups. It continues to apply a social policy aimed at the voluntary servitude of individuals who benefit from state aid, and at the same time, it denies the population political citizenship, locking them out of the decision-making processes.

Lack of job opportunity and of individual and collective freedoms has led thousands of educated, middle-class youth to leave the country every year. According to official statistics, almost twelve thousand Iranians migrated in 2014–15. This showed a 16 percent increase in brain drain.¹² The brain drain phenomenon has increased despite important visa limitations set by the US and European administrations. Sorena Sattari, the vice-president in charge of science and technology, declared in 2019 that over two thousand brilliant students leave the country each year for the United States.¹³ Thousands of others leave the country for Europe, Canada, Turkey, Malaysia, New Zealand, or Australia. As to the unemployed or poorly paid underprivileged youth who are devoid of credentials and financial means to immigrate, they were involved in unstructured and spontaneous economic and social riots in more than

¹¹Iran's oil exports decreased from 2.2 million barrels of oil per day in 2018 to less than 250,000 in 2020. Dalga Khatinoglu, "Iran Crude Oil Exports Drop to Less Than 250,000 Bpd in February," *Radio Farda*, 2 March 2020, www.en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-crude-oil-exports-drop-to-less-than-250-000-bpd-in-february/30464729.html.

¹²"Why Do the Scientific Elite Migrate?," *Aftabnews*, 12 January 2020, www.aftabnews.ir/fa/news/631464/%DA%86%D8%B1%D8%A7.

¹³"The Annual Migration of Two Thousand Iranian Students to the United States," *Resalat*, 22 July 2019, www.resalat-news.com/?p=6210.

seventy small and medium-sized cities in December 2017–January 2018, and following the sharp increase in gas prices in November 2019, in over one hundred large and medium-sized towns.

These riots were different from the 2009 Green Movement both in terms of the main social actors and demands. The Green Movement was made up mainly of the urban, educated middle classes, who attempted to transform the social protest of civil society into a political movement in order to democratize the system from within. It called for shared conceptions of what should be good functioning or what E. P. Thompson called the moral economy.¹⁴ The movement's main slogan, "Where is my vote?", showed that its actors still referred to the constitutional law of the Islamic Republic that stipulates the importance of voting in the process of legitimizing the political system. The actors were therefore demanding respect for their vote in the face of massive electoral fraud. By breaking this pact, the Islamic state has unknowingly contributed to the rejection of political paternalism and the same social order on which its power is founded.

In the December 2017–January 2018 and November 2019 riots, the demonstrators were mainly from the lower and lower middle classes. They showed hybrid and individualized forms of political participation. For the first time since the revolution, they acted independently of existing political currents and the educated middle classes (who, in contemporary Iran, have been historically at the forefront of the protest movements), thus constituting an autonomous aggregation of individuals with myriad social and political demands. These sociopolitical and cultural transformations render ineffective the persistence of a specific habitus, which is a system of practices and representations allowing individuals to inhabit and appropriate classical forms of political institutions.¹⁵ This is especially true

¹⁴E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, no. 50 (1971): 76–136.

¹⁵According to Pierre Bourdieu, habitus is at the heart of the reproduction of social structures. Habitus is incorporated and assures the active presence in each individual, in each body, of the history of relations of domination and social order. Habitus designates a system of preferences,

because the security policy conducted by state authorities has prevented the consolidation of other forms of collective action through, for example, independent trade unions or political parties.

How Formal and Informal Civil Society Matter

Debates on the crucial importance of civil society have emerged in Iran, particularly beginning in the second half of the 1990s. The United Nations organized multiple world conferences (including those on population and development, held in Cairo in 1994; on women, in Beijing in 1995; and on cities and housing, in Istanbul in 1996). These conferences called for a new type of relationship between governments and local and national, and not just international, non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The liberal or neo-Tocquevillian perspective, which makes a clear distinction between the state and civil society, and considers associative life the key to a good society, quickly became dominant in Iran. From this viewpoint, civil society is a self-regulated universe of associations committed to the same ideals and resisting state despotism. According to Robert Putnam, whose book was translated and published in Iran in the 2000s and became extremely influential amongst reformists, economic and political success is directly linked to the strength and health of community life.¹⁶ Proponents of this perspective also argue that a strong civil society, as the foundation of democratic politics, protects against domination and hinders the rise of anti-democratic forces. Participation in civil society organizations is thus supposed to promote tolerance, peaceful conflict resolution, and civility.¹⁷ The advocates of a neoliberal vision of civil society target the individual's success, believing that detached from all social constraints, the individual, with their will and action, constitutes the main actor of social change. Under Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997–2005), NGOs and formal voluntary associations proliferated. By

a lifestyle that influences the daily practices of individuals: their way of dressing, speaking, perceiving. These predispositions are internalized unconsciously during the socialization phase, during which the individual adapts and integrates into a social environment. Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1972), 175, 178–79.

¹⁶Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

¹⁷Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

the end of his mandate, more than twenty-eight thousand NGOs were registered. The number of women's NGOs increased from about fifty in 1995 to almost one thousand during Khatami's presidency.

However, civil society is a site of struggle and paradox permeated by power relations. Social relations of class, ethnicity, gender, or religion within NGOs are sometimes so paramount that cooperation among them becomes impossible. The NGOs do not raise the issue of power relations and can reproduce the social hierarchy and the limits of existing political structures. The educated women from the urban middle classes of large cities, especially Tehran, founded NGOs to help subaltern women, especially from urban, lower-class origins. But the differences among the two groups of women—social class, level of education, way of life, cultural values, even language—made listening and understanding very difficult. Moreover, the nature of these relationships is always open to asymmetrical power dynamics since one group is supposed to be able to “help” while the other is constructed from the beginning as “needy” and subaltern.

Many women's NGOs mainly supported women's individual success. Moreover, according to the liberal view, the NGOs should not address issues of economic, social, or political rights nationally or globally. Ernest Gellner, who shares the liberal perspective, argues that if NGOs begin to pursue such goals, they must stop being NGOs. Gellner also claims that civil society and Islam are incompatible because the individual cannot freely leave Islam as an institution.¹⁸

During this period, however, the active citizen, the most important element for the democratic reform of the state, emerged in Iran's political landscape. Despite the risks involved, intellectuals, artists, journalists, women's rights activists, and students continued and even intensified their struggles for the institutionalization of freedom of expression, thought, and the press. Weakened by the repression of their riots in July 1999 and 2003 and the limitations imposed on their political activities,

¹⁸Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994).

the student activists nevertheless managed to organize cultural and political activities on university campuses. Through their presence, which reflected active citizenship, they tried to introduce changes in the perception of political elites and to reshape state institutions. However, zones of civil action in daily life are effective only if institutional violence is absent. Despite the impact of social activities on collective action, the practice of democracy, and the willingness for social participation to bring about change from below, emerging civil society cannot develop as a social movement if freedom of speech, association, or thought is not guaranteed by law and applied. Indeed, because of the restrictions imposed by the authorities, the shaping of a democratic framework for the expression and development of collective visions on the rules of the democratic game could not emerge. The Islamic State has indeed tried to control or repress the activities of organized civil society, particularly following the repression of the Green Movement, which led to the departure in exile of a large number of activists, including women's rights activists, and the emergence of individual initiatives and the individualization of resistance.¹⁹

Moreover, organized civil society's action has proved vulnerable to policy change of governments that have oscillated between liberalization (under Khatami), de-liberalization (under Ahmadinejad), and re-liberalization (during Rouhani's first term of office), with a destructive impact on NGO activities.

But civil society is not limited to formal networks. As Asef Bayat points out, in the Middle East, ordinary citizens in their daily lives have invented strategies to defend and improve their lives against growing inequalities.²⁰

In Iran, mobilizations to air demands for social inclusion and rights are not initiated by only organized civil society. The resistance against state injunction in Iran is expressed through family networks, parental

¹⁹Azadeh Kian, *L'Iran : un mouvement sans révolution ? La vague verte face au pouvoir mercantile-militariste (Iran: A Movement without Revolution? The Green Movement Faced with a Mercantile-Militaristic Power)* (Paris: Michalon, 2011).

²⁰Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

support for youth, neighborhood initiatives, cyber media, websites trying to create a virtual public space, and all kinds of formal and informal associations and groups. This resistance testifies to the preponderance of Antonio Gramsci's vision of civil society as a site of rebellion against the construction of the cultural and ideological hegemony of political power.²¹

Globalization, Individualization

In addition to transformations enhanced by crucial social change, globalization and communication technologies have had important impacts on the younger generation of activists, whose political mobilization is no longer motivated by ideology or identification with formal groups. We hence observe the rise of new social protests, which has also coincided with the dilution of reference and obedience to religion outside the major institutions and organizations established by the state. Along with the secularization of society, the weight of institutional structures (including mosques and theological schools) has diminished in society and among believers alike. Alternative socializing structures have been reactivated, such as the associative net and solidarity networks, contributing to the process of distancing from and counterbalancing the state. The weight of obedience has diminished in favor of demands for individual freedoms and values of individual well-being. The result of this profound change is that the individual is no longer content to simply suffer their fate, but engages in social action to claim individual rights in the modern sense of the word.

The impact of external pressures on the redefinition and reconstruction of individuals' identities is of crucial importance, especially in an era of globalization and the reign of social networks. The new social protests in Iran have taken on a transnational dimension and developed according

²¹Antonio Gramsci, *Guerre de mouvement et guerre de position (War of Movement and War of Position)*, ed. Razmig Keucheyan (Paris: La fabrique, 2012); *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, ed. Simone Chambers and Will Kymlica (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 94; Azadeh Kian, "La Société civile : coopération avec l'Etat ou site de rébellion?" ("Civil Society: Cooperation with the State or a Site of Rebellion?"), *Les cahiers de l'Orient*, no. 123 (2016): 45-61.

to the model of globalized societies that operate through networks, the communication flow that radically transforms the two fundamental dimensions of the human experience: time and space.²² These networks also disseminate ideas for action.

In 2018, Iran, with a population of over 80 million, had an approximate 56.7 million Internet users (both occasional and daily users) and a penetration rate of 69 percent.²³ By way of comparison, the rate of Internet users was almost 80 percent in Israel (which ranks first in the Middle East). During the same period, Instagram reached 24 million active users in Iran in January 2018, ranking seventh in the world.²⁴

The transnational mode of mobilization in collective action exposes actors to new forms of socialization that almost exclusively use (virtual) social networks to the detriment of face-to-face interactions. On the other hand, and as Marie-Joseph Bertini argues, communication technologies do not create but accompany and amplify social demands. However, we still need to measure the extent of their impact. For example, my observations show that some of the collective actions of women in Iran initiated by middle-class activists in the capital, such as the One Million Signature Campaign to Change Discriminatory Laws (launched in 2006), were better known outside the country than inside Iran, with Persian lower-class and/or provincial women and non-Persian urban and rural women especially unlikely to know of this initiative. The subaltern women, who did not have the same access to the social networks of middle-class activists, used the available means to help each other, without being in contact with or “guided” by women’s rights activists. In villages, educated women organized literacy classes and informal discussions at their homes on women’s rights for poorer and illiterate women in order to empower them.²⁵ It is therefore interpersonal ties

²²Manuel Castells, *L'Ère de l'information, la société en réseau* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

²³“Iran,” Internet World Stats, www.internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm (accessed 6 April 2020).

²⁴“Iran Ranked World’s 7th Instagram User,” *Financial Tribune*, 4 February 2018, www.financialtribune.com/articles/economy-sci-tech/81384/iran-ranked-world-s-7th-instagram-user.

²⁵Azadeh Kian, “Gender, Ethnicity and Identity in Iran: Surrender without Consent. Baluchi Women in Changing Contexts,” in *Navigating Contemporary Iran: Challenging Economic,*

that often create political ties. The impact of this recruitment process explains the almost homogeneous nature of women's rights movements in Iran. Inter-class and inter-ethnic recruitment and alliances between the middle classes and the underprivileged women are either absent or ephemeral. The agency of change, however, is located in an alliance of various categories of women, which is likely to bring about the conditions for all women to step out from subalternity.

The Act of Public Unveiling: An Example of Personalization of Politics

In rapidly changing societies, individuals gain power through social networks and individualized communication technologies that allow an increasing number of ordinary people to connect with and be recognized by many others. As Lance Bennett argues, "Social fragmentation and the decline in group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression displaces collective action frames in the embrace of political causes. The rise of personalized forms of political participation is perhaps the defining change in the political culture of our era. . . This large-scale individualized collective action is often coordinated through digital media technologies, sometimes with crowds using layers of social media to coordinate action."²⁶

In Iran, this personalized political participation currently occupies more space in political discourse than other forms of protest. Due to various state limitations set on the activities of organized groups, including women's rights groups, individuals further codify their political action through the values of their personal way of life as a means to empowerment. The empowerment of the younger generation is reflected in, among other things, the rejection of the compulsory veil by a growing number of young women.

Political and Social Perceptions, ed. Leif Stenberg and Eric Hooglund (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 117–38.

²⁶W. Lance Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Identification," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644 (2012): 20–39. Quote on p. 37.

The personal action of women who determine their own goal and decide their forms of struggle corresponds to the action of young women called “the Girls of Enghelab Avenue,” who started to remove their compulsory veil in public in December 2017. These individual actions focused on gender identity and undermined dress codes of which the mandatory veil is the symbol. These young women evolved on a globalized scene and were located between the local and the global. They questioned religious and national specificities in the unifying wake of globalized gender norms that transformed their relationships and interactions with state power as well as with society.

The act of unveiling in public has been an innovation in women’s repertoire of action and a nucleus of resistance against power injunctions with myriads of personal claims even if all of those who unveiled observed a homogenized, methodical performance: climbing on a stage, removing the white or black headscarf, putting it on a stick, and then waving it like a flag. The images of these young women advocating for individual freedom of choice were widely disseminated on social networks, giving them a broad scope both nationally and internationally. These individualized collective actions often sought a rapid response to claims related to individual values and lifestyles (in this case, the desire not to hide hair or the body).

Vida Movahed was the first Girl of Enghelab Avenue. On 27 December 2017, on the fringes of the social riots that shook the country, she unveiled in public to protest against compulsory veiling. This act of civil disobedience was repeated by at least thirty-seven other women, all of whom were arrested and many of whom were sentenced to prison terms.

On Monday, 29 January 2018, Narges Hosseini was the second woman to climb on an electrical transformer box on the street. Originally from Kashan and aged thirty-two at the time of her arrest, she was detained at Gharchak Prison, about forty kilometers from Tehran. In a telephone interview from prison, she says:

For about ten minutes, I was standing on the transformer, and then the police arrived and asked me to step down. Which I did. They took me first to the police station, then to the Islamic Guidance Prosecutor’s

Office, and later to Gharchak Prison. The judge asked me to confess that my act was illegal and that I regretted it in order to reduce the sentence. I replied that I disagree with the law and that I actually acted against a law that I do not accept. And so I don't regret it [. . .].²⁷

In her interview, Narges says she chose a Monday to unveil in public so that her act would not be confused with Masih Alinejad's online campaign calling on women to remove their veils on Wednesdays.²⁸ Referring to the Green Movement and the large demonstration that took place on a Monday, Narges says, "For me, Mondays are still Green Mondays. The Green Movement was peaceful and so was Vida Movahed's action... I wore a green ribbon that day and wanted to graft these two peaceful acts." Her family, who lives in Kashan, a medium-sized town where she is known for her transgression of norms, supported her. Narges had also been active at Mir-Hossein Mousavi's headquarters in Kashan; Mousavi, the unfortunate candidate for the controversial 2009 presidential election, has been under house arrest ever since the election. But she says she made the decision to unveil alone: "It was my personal decision. I was not in contact with anyone. It was just me and me. But I was reporting my protest on Twitter and Instagram. I mean, I believed in my own action. I claim my rights and the right to choose my clothing is the least of my rights. . . I do not expect my action to succeed, however."²⁹

Azam Jangravi, the third girl from Enghelab Avenue, went to the same place as Vida Movahed and stood on the electrical transformer box to remove her veil on 12 February 2018. She was arrested and tried and says she was sentenced to three years in prison. The deputy prosecutor reportedly threatened to ban her from her job, withdraw her driving license, prevent her from continuing her studies, and separate her from her daughter, Viana. Later, Azam managed to leave Iran illegally. In an

²⁷Narges Hosseini, "The Girl of Enghelab Avenue," interview by Shahrzad Hemmati, *Kanoon-i zanan-i irani*, 12 February 2018, www.ir-women.com/16103. All translations are mine.

²⁸Masih Alinejad is a Washington-based journalist and a controversial women's rights activist who initiated a campaign called My Stealthy Freedom.

²⁹Narges Hosseini, "Narges Hosseini's Narrative of the Gharchak Prison," interview by *Kanoon-i zanan-i irani*, *Kanoon-i zanan-i irani*, 27 February 2018, www.ir-women.com/16184.

interview, she says she decided to protest against Islamic laws for the sake of her daughter: “I knew I would be arrested and I was worried about Viana but I thought she shouldn’t grow up under the same conditions as me. Now I am no longer the second sex.”³⁰ Born in Tehran in 1982, Azam obtained a master’s in artificial intelligence and robotics. Unlike many of her counterparts, she had been politically active before her unveiling:

I started my political activities with the Iranian Construction Party (close to the late former President Rafsanjani) hoping that the reforms would change women’s status. [. . .] Later when I worked at the Center for Studies and Research on Women, I realized that several interesting studies were carried out by the Center and sent to various ministries. But these studies were not followed by actions. The motion against violence against women is one example. For many years it has been waiting to be promulgated. All women’s issues are linked to Islamic precepts. . . I realized that these were empty words and told myself that it was time to act.³¹

She was dismissed following her arrest. The judiciary revoked her recent divorce and ordered that the custody of her daughter, who was entrusted to her as a result of her ex-husband’s drug addiction, be withdrawn. Running away with her daughter was the only way out.³²

Some of these “Girls” were so concerned about the obligation to wear the veil that they seemed not to establish a link between different oppressions suffered by women under the Islamic regime. Yassamin, another young woman, declares:

When I drive, shop, or walk, I take off my headscarf. People’s reaction is very positive. Some people smile at me. Some others gently tell me that my scarf has slipped off. Society favors the

³⁰Azam Jangravi, “I Did It for My Daughter,” interview by Reuters, *Reuters*, 14 February 2019, www.reuters.com/video/watch/idOVA1K72GX.

³¹Jangravi, “I Did It for My Daughter.”

³²Maryam Sinaiee, “Iranian Hijab Protester Speaks Up about Cruelty of Fugitive Judge,” *Radio Farda*, 21 June 2020, www.en.radiofarda.com/a/iranian-hijab-protester-speaks-up-about-cruelty-of-fugitive-judge-/30682805.html.

freedom of choice to wear the veil or not, and I think that in the very near future the wearing or not of the veil will be free. But the most radical are the heavily veiled and religious women. They put the veil back on my head [. . .]. My action was peaceful. I offered a white rose and a white scarf to the veiled women who were protesting against my unveiling in public. Several of them even tried to veil me by force. I explained to them that I am not asking all women to remove their veils, but only that my choice be respected and that I enjoy the same rights as others.³³

Shaparak Shajarizadeh was first arrested and beaten in March 2018 when she, like her counterparts, removed her white veil in northern Tehran. Some days later, she was summoned to the detention center, where she was again beaten. She was arrested for the third time in Kashan with her four-year-old son and was sentenced to three years in prison. Her lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, was herself arrested by the judiciary and remains in prison. Shaparak left Iran a few weeks after her release and settled in Canada. She believes that obtaining freedom of choice of clothing for women is the most important right and the first step toward obtaining other rights and freedoms.³⁴

Another Girl of Enghelab Avenue, Bahar, a university-educated woman in her early thirties, says: “They are not going to offer us our freedom. We have to win it. They can’t arrest all women. Our problem is not only the compulsory veiling, but the fact that they [the authorities] do not see us. They inferiorize us, they despise us. . . I spent a night in police custody in Kish (a seaside resort in southern Iran) for wearing a skirt. . .”³⁵

Setareh, who was arrested, says she had not respected the compulsory veiling for many years well before the launching of the recent campaign,

³³Yassamin, “Ravayat-e eteraz-e az zaban-e dokhtaran-e enghelab” (“The Narrative of Protests by the Girls of Enghelab Avenue”), interview by Niusha Boghrati, *Radio Farda*, 2 February 2018, www.google.com/amp/s/www.radiofarda.com/amp/sixth-hour-unveiling-women-of-iran/29014916.html.

³⁴Shaparak Shajarizadeh, “The Veil is an Obvious Form of Violence against Women,” interview by Ehsan Manouchehri, *Chehreh ha va goftogu ha*, 29 April 2020, www.rfi.fr/fa/29/04/2020.

³⁵Bahar, “Ravayat-e eteraz-e az zaban-e dokhtaran-e enghelab” (“The Narrative of Protests by the Girls of Enghelab Avenue”), interview by Niusha Boghrati, *Radio Farda*, 2 February 2018, www.google.com/amp/s/www.radiofarda.com/amp/sixth-hour-unveiling-women-of-iran/29014916.html.

and said she had suffered degrading reactions from both the public and the police. Setareh refuses to credit the more recent campaign against compulsory veiling initiated from the United States by Masih Alinejad even though she maintains that it shares the same goal.³⁶

Despite the increasing number of officially so-called “improperly or badly veiled women,” particularly in major Iranian cities, the actions of the Girls of Enghelab Avenue—that is, public unveiling—remained individual and in low numbers and have not been transformed into a collective action. Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani is a feminist activist and the editor of *The Second Sex (Jens-i dovzum)*, the first post-revolutionary secular feminist journal, and has initiated many collective activities and mobilizations in the past. She points out: “This new activism is based on the individual and his or her own demands. It is very different from the classical structures of mass movements that relayed collective claims and slogans or great narratives such as Islam, Iranianness or various utopias. The actions of these activists aim to find a rapid response to their claim that affects their daily lives.”³⁷

Indeed, the actions of the Girls of Enghelab Avenue have not spread and have remained marginal compared with other individual actions that do not seek confrontation with coercive forces or to break with society and the state. This is illustrated by hundreds of thousands of women who observe and wear the veil “badly” (or not fully the “right” way), letting hair strands stick out and wearing eye-catching makeup or tight and short unbuttoned coats revealing clothes underneath—in short, violating the norms in the perspective of what Gayatri Spivak calls “enabling violation.”³⁸ These almost-ordinary citizens who, in their daily lives, practise creative strategies against gender discrimination, think and act

³⁶Setareh, “Ravayat-e etezar-e az zaban-e dokhtaran-e enghelab” (“The Narrative of Protests by the Girls of Enghelab Avenue”), interview by Niusha Boghrati, *Radio Farda*, 2 February 2018, www.google.com/amp/s/www.radiofarda.com/amp/sixth-hour-unveiling-women-of-iran/29014916.html.

³⁷Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, “Dokhtaran-i enghilab va zohur-i nasl-i jadid koneshgaran-i ejtema” (“The Girls of Enghelab Avenue and the Emergence of a New Generation of Social Activists”), Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, 6 March 2018, noushinahmadi.wordpress.com/2018/03/06.

³⁸Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 523–81.

in relation to their immediate environment, but in a globalized world in which the great stories have given way to a fragmented world (despite the unifying appearances of the media and social networks). They show their disagreement with law and Islamic precepts and grant themselves the power to resist but leave the door open to negotiation with the institutions. Let us recall in passing that in 2012, the action of women who unveiled in their private cars, arguing with the police that their cars constituted a private space and that wearing the veil was therefore not mandatory, provoked debates within the Islamic Parliament.

The public unveiling is undoubtedly a transgression, but it is also a staging aimed at social networks and foreign media, especially Western ones, which have relayed the information concerning the issue of the mandatory Islamic veil. The Girls of Enghelab Avenue wanted to relocate themselves from the margins to the spotlights. They were very sensitive to media coverage of their actions. Removing the headscarf and waving it on a stick is a form of artistic activism, an “iconic subversion,” whose political end is individual well-being.

As Marie-Joseph Bertini points out: “The image has freed itself from classical argumentative modes to switch to the immediacy of emotions, the prevalence of affects, shifting the dialectic of discourse from the grayness of the endless show [. . .]. The image is an action in itself that obscures all parallel discourses [. . .].”³⁹

Although the personalized actions of the Girls of Enghelab Avenue did not lead to an uprising of women against compulsory veiling, or to women’s freedom of choice, these actions nonetheless provoked debates among women’s rights activists both inside the country and internationally. Following Hakim Bey, we may qualify the Girls’ actions as “temporary autonomy zones.” He argues that “Faithful to traditional mediations, the proponents of modern forms of political advocacy fail to understand the value and scope of postmodern action, which consists in provoking

³⁹Marie-Joseph Bertini, “Fragments d’une épistémologie de la domination. La geste de Femen, un dispositif socio-technique de communication à haute tension,” in *Médias, transgressions et négociations de genre, Cahiers de la transidentité*, Hors-série 1, ed. A. Alessandrin et al. (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 19–38. Quote on p. 30 and 32.

reactions, in attracting constant attention in order to stimulate debates and exchanges that will lead to collective awareness and which will have the vocation of creating a space for critical reflection.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

In the absence of independent organizations, political parties, or trade unions and faced with a political system in deadlock, the civil society, both formal and informal, is more invested in social action through both traditional and modern social networks. This participation is likely to ensure, in the long term, the conditions for the development of the spheres of social autonomy, and to set limits on the actions of the state, thus leading to the weakening of the patriarchal political system whose logic of domination through nepotism and co-optation has already broken down and been rejected by the population. Iranians are in the processes of becoming a free-acting plurality.

Despite the loss of legitimacy, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not likely to collapse. As Adam Przeworski points out, “What constitutes a threat to authoritarian regimes is not only the loss of their legitimacy, but the formation of counter-hegemony: the existence of collective projects for a different future. When collective alternative solutions are available, isolated individuals will gain a political choice.”⁴¹

Public life as a potential source of power, likely to create a common ground, and a strengthened collective solidarity allowing individuals to challenge institutions and thus construct a new articulation between politics and society—these have yet to emerge in Iran.

⁴⁰Hakim Bey, *TAZ. Zone autonome temporaire* quoted in Bertini, “Fragments d’une épistémologie,” 35.

⁴¹Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54–55.