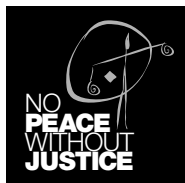# Supporting Iranian civil society

A toolkit for democratic colleagues
in the international community

Supporting Iranian civil society

A toolkit for democratic colleagues in the international community

No Peace Without Justice is an international non-profit
organisation founded by Emma Bonino and born of a
1993 campaign of the Transnational Radical Party that
campaigns for the protection and promotion of human
rights, democracy, the rule of law and international justice.
NPWJ undertakes its work within three main thematic
programs: International Criminal Justice; Female Genital
Mutilation; and Middle East and North Africa Democracy.
NPWJ is a Constituent Association of the TRP and a
Member of its Senate, a founding member of NGO
Coalition for the International Criminal Court and a
member of it's Steering Committee, and the Italian civil
society partner in the Democracy Assistance Dialogue.

Contents

Executive summary

This document makes the argument that Iran's civil society is the most likely source of meaningful democratic reform in Iran, but requires increased international support and solidarity in its effort to achieve these aims. The loose alliance of journalists, academics, students, women's groups, and other voluntary organisations that work under the heading of civil society has in recent times proved itself one of the few forces able to pressure Iran's ruling theocracy towards political reform. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the protests that followed the presidential elections of 2009, when thousands of ordinary Iranians took to the street in an effort to assert their democratic rights. The upshot of this period of political upheaval has been to recast the relationship between civil society and the state, making international support crucial as Iran's reformers move to build on the popular calls for democracy advanced during the second half of 2009 and re-establish themselves as a significant force in the Iranian political landscape.

The conservative supporters of President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamene'i have however also identified civil society as the most likely threat to their continued power, and have consequently dedicated considerable resources to silencing its politically active members through censorship, legislation, arrest, imprisonment, intimidation, and violence. Particular attention has been given to severing all ties between Iranian civil society and "western" states or organisations regarded as intent solely only on bringing about the collapse of the Islamic Republic.

The international community has responded by limiting its support for Iranian organisations, reasoning that any form of collaboration is likely only to attract unwanted recriminations from the government and undermine the legitimacy of what must ultimately be a local democratic movement. International support, it is argued, will at present simply do more harm than good.

This document argues that this line of reasoning has gone too far, and that the time has now come for the international community to act in support of Iranian civil society at this crucial juncture in the history of the country's democratic movement. The protests that followed the presidential elections of 2009 brought with them fundamental changes to the political landscape in Iran. Although the reform movement has been expanded and re-energised, increased mistrust in the civil society movement is likely to bring a further deterioration in the conditions facing democratic reformers in Iran. At the same time they face new challenges in maintaining the courage and focus that characterised the initial wave of protests, and in making the transition from a movement protesting an electoral process to a force campaigning for broader democratic reform.

Local democratic actors cannot be expected to face these challenges without the support of their international colleagues. Isolating Iranian civil society from international support will not only serve to undermine the advances their movement has made, but will strengthen and embolden their conservative opponents, who remain firmly in control of many central state institutions. If the international community wishes to see democratic reform in Iran, it will be essential that it stand by the local actors responsible for bringing about these reforms in the years to come.

International civil society must of course accept that many forms of support might bring unwanted risk and harm to domestic political activists. The fact that it is difficult to provide suitable forms of support is however no reason to abstain entirely from doing so. Instead, it is the task of international civil society to consider carefully how support can be provided in a way that benefits their Iranian colleagues without further exasperating their difficulties. This process must begin with an understanding of the components of Iranian civil society and an appreciation of the challenges they face, as well as an appreciation of how their condition has changed since June 2009.

Civil society is by no means a recent innovation in Iranian politics. The notion of a third sector, working independent of both the government and private sectors on issues of public concern, has deep roots in both Islamic and Iranian culture. Iranian civil society did however experience an important period of rejuvenation and expansion under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005. During this period, government reforms encouraged women's

groups, students, and intellectuals to emerge once again as significant political forces in Iran. The civil society that today advocates for reform of the Iranian government is therefore, at least in part, the product of earlier concerted government efforts to build a politically active civil society in Iran. Preserving the advances of this period of reform has however proved increasingly difficult since the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005. His government has come to view civil society with increasing mistrust, and has therefore sought to exercise extensive control over their activities by limiting funding, introducing complex regulations, and pursuing any organisation or individual deemed to represent a political threat through conservative courts.

A young and educated population, an active women's movement, and perhaps most importantly, the internet and other new forms of social media, have however provided Iranian civil society with some of the resources they need to continue their democratic struggle under conservative rule. These proved particularly powerful in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, and there is some evidence that these have already succeeded in opening up new areas of political debate in Iran.

Capitalising on these opportunities will however require measured and considered international support. This will undoubtedly require compromise on both parts, and perhaps a process that moves slower than either party would prefer. The central message of this document is however that Iran's democratic reformers cannot afford for the international community to wait until the conditions for support are perfect. Although providing them with assistance involves inherent risk, providing none at all represents an even greater gamble. We conclude therefore with a series of recommendations aimed at facilitating international civil society in their own determinations of how these risks can be managed in a way that allows them to provide their Iranian colleagues with the support they need, without subjecting them to further and unnecessary danger. The key recommendations are:

Do not isolate democratic reformers, as this only serves to weaken their own fragile movement and embolden their opponents.

Avoid highly contentious issues when engaging local Iranian organisations. Limiting partnerships to issues that are not explicitly political can mitigate the risk of an immediate and violent response from the government.

Adopt an incremental approach instead. Even without discussion contentious political issues such as democratic reform, international organisations can do much to strengthen and build capacity within Iranian civil society, enabling these local organisations to gradually open up new areas for acceptable cooperation and discussion.

Understand local working conditions so as to avoid imposing further risks on local organisations by unwittingly violating local regulations or unspoken agreements.

Follow the lead of locals, many of which have successfully carved out a space for their work by taking advantage of Iran's respect for philosophical, religious, and other theoretical discussion. Much can be done to reduce the risk of a government response if issues discussed are cast in theoretical non-confrontational terms, rather than the confrontational language of practical politics.

Introduction

The events of June 2009 refocused international attention on the streets of Tehran and Iran's other major cities, where thousands of ordinary citizens protested in defiance of their government on a scale without precedent since the Islamic Revolution. The effects of these tumultuous weeks are still being counted, but it is clear already that the Iranian presidential elections of 2009 mark a watershed for the country's democratic forces. A re-energised reform movement has grown in both number and complexity, and has seen its relationship to the government significantly altered. Simultaneously, politicians, clerics, and journalists have opened debate on topics previously considered entirely off-limit, offering new hope that there may soon be meaningful discussions of political reforms.

Despite these dramatic changes in the Iranian political landscape, the international community must remain attentive to the pervading political realities of Iran. Despite reports that the conservative government of President Ahmadinejad is close to collapse, it remains firmly in control of government institutions and its highly effective security forces. Evidence of their capacity and willingness to use these forces in an effort to secure their continued power was displayed most spectacularly following the protests of June 2009, when government forces and conservative militia groups were dispatched to violently suppress tens of thousands of ordinary citizens gathered in the streets to protest an election process they felt had denied them their basic democratic rights. It is clear therefore that Iran's democratic movement has much yet to accomplish, and that turning June's protests into a sustained and effective movement for democratic reform will require a great deal of work.

Iran's democratic actors cannot be expected to succeed in this work without the support of their democratic colleagues in the international community. Iran's political process is designed largely to frustrate the efforts of reformers, and the alarming erosion of civil and political liberties that have seen Iran spiral towards authoritarianism since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

in 2005 are all well documented.[1] In recent years, the conservative faction of the Iranian government has grown only more repressive in its efforts to silence political opposition and ward off the threat of what it perceives as foreign forces intent on bringing about the collapse of the Islamic Republic.

The impetus for meaningful democratic reform must, however, come from within Iran. Only domestic actors can take the lead in coordinating and maintaining a coalition dedicated to building an Iranian society committed to human rights, freedom and the rule of law. Fortunately, the thousands that took to the streets in 2009 – demanding respect for their right to meaningful participation in the political process – are a clear indication that the materials needed for such a coalition can be found in Iran already.

As is true of other periods of political reform in Iran, the most recent protest movement suggests that the materials for such a democratic movement are not concentrated in a single party or political coalition. Even the notion of a neat divide between the Iranian authorities on the one hand, and the Iranian people on the other, is misleading. The reality is far more complex. Much impetus for democratic reform clearly comes from Iranian civil society, but civil society itself has, over the past decade, been encouraged and developed from within reform-oriented components of the Iranian government. The relationship between civil society and the Iranian state is therefore far more dynamic and complex than this traditional dichotomy at first suggests.

During the most recent protests therefore, pressure and impetus was supplied by a varied group of politicians, students, teachers, and journalists, to name but a few of the actors involved. Religious leaders and religious groups also played a key role in the movement, providing an important and popular Islamic rationale and justification for the protests.

No-one, therefore, can hope to fully understand the events of June 2009 without understanding the composite nature of Iran's civil society. This rich and diverse aspect of Iranian society provides the best prospect for an effective domestic democratic movement in Iran, and so it is the opinion of this document that before the international community can provide Iran's democratic reformers with the support they need, the international community must understand how it can support Iranian civil society.

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1   Human Rights Watch documents the deterioration of human rights under the rule of Ahmadinejad in its *Iran: Rights Crisis Escalates*, September 2008: http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/iran0908web_0.pdf

Four years of conservative rule under the presidency of Ahmadinejad has however brought serious constraints on the work of Iran's civil society. Viewed with profound mistrust by Iran's conservative institutions, civil society organisations and civil society leaders have been subject to increasingly burdensome restrictions, limited resources, and even arrest and extended detention. New restrictions on freedom of speech have stifled political discussion within Iran's once lively newspapers, and blogs and other internet materials are also increasingly finding themselves within the reach of government censors.

With the return of Ahmadinejad for a second term in the presidential office, the working conditions of Iran's civil society are likely only to continue in their deterioration. The protests that followed his disputed re-election are likely to have further convinced Ahmadinejad and his backers of the danger Iran's civil society presents to their continued rule. We should expect nothing less therefore than redoubled efforts to further limit their ability to organise as a force for political reform and positive social change.

International institutions and civil society despaired as they watched Iranian protestors intimidated, arrested, beaten, and only then eventually dispersed, and as Ahmadinejad was sworn in for a second term. The familiar lamentation was that there was little, if anything, the international community could do to support their democratic colleagues in Iran. The very suggestion of a link between brave protestors on the streets of Iran and the international community was thought to undermine their credentials as genuine representatives of a disaffected Iranian public and so jeopardise the legitimacy of their democratic campaign.

Prior to the re-election of President Ahmadinejad many of the civil society leaders interviewed might have agreed and urged their democratic colleagues abroad to wait until after the elections, when conditions more amenable to cooperation were expected to return. A great deal has now changed. Not only does the return of a conservative government suggest working conditions are set only to deteriorate further for Iran's civil society, the protests movement also dramatically changed the relationship between civil society and the government. While the reform movement has grown stronger, the conservative government is more suspicious than ever of civil society organisations and their international counterparts. The final form of this reconfigured relationship is yet to be determined, but it is likely to depend a great deal on the extent

to which the reform movement can sustain interest and commitment in its programme in the face of increasing oppression. For this reason, it is more crucial than ever that Iran's democratic civil society is not left isolated, but is given the international support it needs to organise and assert itself as a movement for the democratic changed desired by ordinary Iranians.

It is undoubtedly true that international support for Iran's civil society movement is fraught with difficulty. Hasty and ill-informed actions are likely to do more harm than good, regardless of the purity of their motives. As conditions grow increasingly difficult for Iran's civil society, and as the time comes to secure the advances of the recent protest movement, now, however, is not the time to shy from action altogether. The fact that supporting Iranian civil society is not easy is no reason to offer no support at all. Isolating Iranian organisations and political activists from their international colleagues will only strengthen and embolden the conservative movement, leaving it free to continue is persecution of political opponents with impunity. More serious still is the message such disengagement sends to Iranian civil society and to the Iranian people. If local actors are to remain strong in their commitment to democratic reform, they must believe there is international support for their actions and for their cause. It is therefore more important than ever that international organisations and international civil society find ways of supporting their colleagues in Iran.

This document is intended as a step towards rebuilding a willingness within the international community to engage and support civil society organisations in Iran. It aims to do so by providing some of the background and information necessary to make informed decisions about how such support might be provided in a way that is productive rather than harmful to the cause of democracy in Iran, and in a way that will be welcomed and valued by local democratic actors.

The first chapter provides some background information on civil society in Iran, providing some important historical and cultural context for their work and organisation. Chapter two provides an overview of the main obstacles these organisations now face, particularly since the election of president Ahmadinejad. These difficulties help explain why many forms of international support are unlikely to be productive. The following chapter outlines however some of the resources presently available to Iranian civil society, including

new opportunities provided by the internet and new social media. Finally, a list of recommendations is provided in an effort to help interested parties begin the process of considering how they might best support their democratic colleagues in Iran.

This document does not provide a foolproof step-by-step guide to working with organisations in Iran. The fluid and complex political environment in Iran precludes the possibility of any such guide. Resisting the thought that there is a simple formula for supporting Iranian civil society would therefore be this document's first and perhaps most important recommendation, and appreciating the complexity of the conditions under which Iranian activists work is an important first step towards fruitful collaboration.

What we present in this document is intended as a guide to thinking about how an international organisation or institution might develop a partnership with Iranian civil society. It will highlight some of the difficulties Iranian organisations face, and warn against some of the risks poor planning might introduce to such a project. In addition to these important words of caution, it will also provide some suggestions as to the kind of practices and policies that might be utilised when engaging or supporting local organisations. In combination, these recommendations will help organisations better anticipate and manage the risks inherent to supporting the cause of democracy in Iran, and so enable them to make more informed decisions about how such support might be initiated, structured, and maintained.

The main objective of this document is therefore to begin the process of rebuilding an international commitment to supporting civil society in Iran by demonstrating that some avenues for such support remain open. Waiting until support can be provided easily and without complication is waiting until it is no longer necessary. We hope this document will therefore serve as a useful resource to those who wish to heed the call of Iranian civil society leaders and provide them with the support they need right now.

The roots of civil society in Iran

What is civil society?

One of the central arguments of this document is that there exists in Iran today a rich and varied civil society that requires increased international support if it is to fulfil its potential a source of democratic reform. Before the optimal form of this support can be determined however, it is important to clearly identify what is meant by civil society. Much of this document is, for example, premised on the view that Iranian civil society extends beyond a handful of highly visible and outspoken political activists and includes also a large number of students, academics, journalists, and voluntary workers that might also play an important role in promoting democratic reform.

The political events that reshaped Eastern Europe towards the end of the 20th century brought renewed interest in the notion of a civil society. The origins of these dramatic political reforms could not be understood without looking beyond the traditional political division between the state and the private sector. Examining the events leading up to democratic revolution, the influence of a third sector, or "civil society," neither state nor private, was undeniable.

The same might be said of Iran today. The forces fighting for and against democratic reform in Iran cannot be adequately understood without including a number of civil society actors that do not belong to either the state or private sector. Working both with state and private actors, and at times also as an alternate and parallel means of political expression, these civil society actors have often been among the most forceful advocates of political reform in Iran.

There is no concise definition available to capture all that is meant by civil society in Iran. The term includes a great variety of actors and organisations, all of which interact in different ways and across different circumstances. While recent protests might give the impression of Iranian civil society as a movement located firmly outside of government institutions, other periods during the past fifteen years have seen civil society developed from within the

Iranian government, with the Presidency and Parliament both responsible, at various times, for the encouragement and establishment of reform-oriented newspapers and NGOs.

A useful, if somewhat unwieldy, definition of civil society is provided by the London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society. It can helpfully point the way towards some of what is included by reference to "civil society:"

> "Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group."[2]

All of these actors, and more, are present as part of civil society in Iran. Equally important is however appreciating the role these organisations occupy in Iranian society. It is sometimes supposed that "civil societies" are found only in western liberal democracies, and that they must be introduced, along with the principles of democracy, to states such as Iran. With this broad and inclusive definition in hand however, it becomes clear that "civil societies" can take root in all forms of political climate. It is precisely this ability to exist and provide the opportunity for political expression under the rule of undemocratic regimes that enables civil society to act as one of the sources of democratic reform. Supporting the process of democratic reform in Iran requires therefore an understanding of the origins and form of its own existing civil society, not the import or replication of a social movement from elsewhere.

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2   London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society, Introduction, March 2004:
     http://lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/introduction.htm

Political civil society

The section of civil society that is of most interest to this document is that which is explicitly political. Indeed, a significant portion of Iran's civil society does identify itself as political, though often by necessity in somewhat vague terms. The protests that followed the 2009 presidential elections were clear evidence of the very large number of people willing to give voice to the call for political reform in Iran. For most however, this will not have been a spontaneous awakening of a democratic instinct, but a protest articulating democratic principles that have been part of Iranian civil society for some time. Three periods of Iran's history have been particularly important in this development of a political civil society.

Constitutional Revolution

The fist is the constitutional revolution of 1906, when an Iranian society crippled by an economic crisis overseen by a Shah whose power was absolute forced him to accept a new democratic constitution and the election of a national assembly. This dramatic political upheaval immediately opened a number of new political spaces, and the country's intellectuals quickly began debating terms once too dangerous to mention. Notions of rights, liberty, equality, and reform all entered the political dialogue with an active national press taking the lead. The constitution that emerged from these debates survived, at least in principle, until the Islamic revolution of 1979. It centred on a new and elected national assembly that was given extensive oversight over laws, decrees, budgets, and concessions to foreign powers, but included also a bill of rights guaranteeing at least segments of the population the right to property, as well as freedom of speech and assembly.

Nationalism and Mossadeq

The second popular movement on which reformers and democrats draw is the nationalist movement of Muhammad Mossadeq, which reached its height in the early 1950s. Mossadeq's movement was again a challenge to the powers the unelected Shah, but this time also a challenge to the encroachment for foreign powers on the sovereignty of Iran, and in particular that of the United Kingdom. As such, Mossadeq's movement is easily seen as part of what is often termed the "first radical wave" in the Middle East, which centred its ideology

around Arab nationalism and its leader Gamal Abdel Nasser who went on to rule Egypt after overthrowing King Farouk in 1952. The "second radical wave" retains an anticolonial spirit, but centres by contrast on an Islamic ideology, and is largely thought to have begun with the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.[3]

As Iran's Prime Minister, Mossadeq nationalised the Iranian oil industry and proposed numerous laws limiting the powers of the Shah and powerful landed magnates. Having forced a weakened Shah to accede, 1953 saw open discussion for the first time of a further constitutional revolution and the establishment of a democratic republic in Iran. These discussions were only cut short by an internationally orchestrated coup toppling the government of Mossadeq.

Muhammad Mossadeq remains an important figure to many of Iran's reformers. His reforms are remembered in particular across Iran's many political blogs, where he is frequently invoked as a figure worthy of respect and inspiration. Significantly, many Iranians also remember the self-interested international conspiracy that led to his downfall. The coup and international smear campaign that toppled his government, along with the United States' support for Saddam Hussein during the latter stages of the Iran-Iraq war are perhaps the two most frequently cited reasons for suspicion of both the U.S. and the U.K.

The Reform Movement

Undoubtedly the most significant period for Iranian civil society is the years of the Khatami's presidency. His 1997 election campaign and subsequent two-terms in the presidential office are at the very heart of what is now known as Iran's reform movement. This is also a period during which elements of the state played an important role in encouraging and expanding Iranian civil society, establishing many significant connections between this third sector and Iranian institutions and politicians.

During the early 1990s, a close alliance developed between then President Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Khamene'i. A number of Iran's moderates and leftists were forced out of politics during this period, as conservatives cemented their control of key institutions, including the national assembly. Many of those who left politics during this period have later described a form of

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3   See for example L. Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, London: Phoenix, 2008, 18

intellectual transformation that they experienced during this period. Working as academics, journalists, or studying abroad, many became interested again in concepts of human rights, democracy, and civil rights. At the same time, a growing and educated middle class began to discuss similar ideas, including the role of women in the Islamic Republic.

As Rafsanjani's second term ended ahead of the 1997 presidential elections, the time proved right for a campaign centred on increased rights for women and minorities, as well as the notion of "civil society." Having previously proved popular among the country's intellectuals for easing censorship laws, Khatami was well positioned to tap into these popular sentiments during his campaign. His landslide victory over the conservative candidate tacitly endorsed by Supreme Leader Khamene'i nevertheless surprised both domestic and international observers. Khatami proved popular with the emerging middle class, youth, women, and minorities, all of whom voted in record numbers. The size of Khatami's victory however also suggested some of Iran's traditionally conservative social classes had developed an appetite for at least limited political reform.

Khatami began his Presidency by opening a dialogue with the Iranian people on many of the reform issues that featured in his campaign. By weakening restrictions on the press, Khatami allowed many reformist newspapers to open, and the national press again took a leading role in debating political reform. Debates around women's rights, minority rights, and even some of the central tenants of the Islamic Republic's political structure began to take shape in reformist newspapers. The political vocabulary was again altered as a result, introducing once more terms such as equality, liberty, human rights, as well as the terms "citizenship" and "civil society," both of which has been given prominence in Khatami's campaign. Success in National Assembly elections also allowed the reformist movement to propose over a hundred reform oriented bills, including an end to torture and physical coercion, improved rights for prisoners, and an easing of some of the restrictions on women.

Conservative elements quickly regrouped however, focusing their attention on securing the powers of Supreme Leader Khamene'i, who remained a more powerful figure than President Khatami. The unelected and conservative Guardian Council rejected many of the reform bills passed by the national assembly, either on the grounds that they were unconstitutional or incompatible

with Shari'a law. At the same time, the conservative and powerful judiciary, accountable only to the Supreme Leader, began closing reformist newspapers and jailing reformist journalists and editors. The same journalists, as well as intellectuals in general, also became subjects of more frequent and violent attack, with many suspecting ultimate responsibility for the attacks resided inside the state's conservative institutions. A number of student protests were also met with increasing violence and brutality by the state security apparatus. By 2000 most reformist newspapers had been closed down, and reform bills continued to be blocked by the Guardian Council. Protests were becoming increasingly violent as a result, but Khatami encouraged a non-confrontational approach with his conservative opponents for fear of further bloodshed.

Although Khatami was re-elected in 2001, his continued inability to weaken the conservative power structure around Supreme Leader Khamene'i and his insistence on a non-confrontational approach to his political opponents quickly began to erode some of his initial support. Youth in particular began loosing faith in their vision of Khatami as someone capable of meaningful reform. The divided left and political apathy that resulted eventually paved the way of the election of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005.

Conservative resurgence and Ahmadinejad

Since the election of Ahmadinejad efforts to stifle the work of politically active CSOs in Iran has continued with renewed focus. Through the conservative judiciary and state security laws, civil society leaders, journalists, academics, and students have been arrested in increasing numbers, with serious questions raised about the conditions of their detention and the fairness of their trials. Human rights defenders and civil society leaders have also increasingly been banned from travelling abroad, curtailing their ability to engage in capacity building international events and isolating Iranian civil society still further from their international colleagues.

Despite many setbacks however, Khatami's two terms as President brought a number of significant changes to Iranian society. The political discourse he introduced, centred on rights and civil society, still survives, as was evident during protests following the contested Presidential elections of 2009. Numerous NGOs and CSOs emerged during his period of reform and many of these still

survive along with much of the art and film exploring the themes on which he based his initial campaign.

Iranian civil society leaders appeared confident ahead of the 2009 presidential elections that Ahmadinejad would not be re-elected, and that a political atmosphere more amenable to the work of Iran's civil society would remerge following the election of a new President. The contested election result has however put an end to these hopes, forcing CSOs in Iran to contemplate at least one more Presidential term of challenging working conditions.

The question that remains is whether President Ahmadinejad will now be permitted to continue his efforts to erode the gains achieved during the Khatami Presidency, or whether, with renewed international support, Iranian civil society will be able to reassert itself as the main advocate for political reform.

The protests that followed the 2009 Presidential elections are a clear indication of the energy and commitment that remains within civil society in Iran. Thousands of protestors braved arrest, intimidation, and militia violence to protest the result and assert their right to a free and fair election. Simultaneously, thousands began to document events as they unfolded using pictures, video, and perhaps most importantly, the internet. Although these efforts did not prevent Iran's religious leaders from swearing in Ahmadinejad for another term as President, the cumulative efforts of civil society activists over these weeks has had a profound impact on Iranian politics by opening up a number of new avenues for political discussion. While it is up to Iranian civil society to maintain this pressure, it is clear that their success requires increased international support and solidarity.

Charity

While explicitly political elements of Iran's civil society are of most interest with respect to the prospect of democratic reform in Iran, it is important to acknowledge also other elements of Iran's civil society. Democratic reform is not usually achieved through the actions of a small group of individuals or organisations, but by the cumulative force of a disaffected and disenfranchised population.

If we understand civil society as what is independent of both the government and commercial sector, it is a phenomenon with very deep cultural and religious

roots in Iran that still exists and extends well-beyond the explicitly political organisations operating in Iran today. A strong Islamic sense of the duty and value of charity has built and maintained an extensive charity sector entirely independent of the government for over hundreds of years. In recent times, it has provided financial and other forms of assistance on both a short and long-term basis, focusing in many cases on groups of the Iranian population that are particularly vulnerable or marginalised.

Two types of organisation are particularly important to acknowledge. The first are autonomous trade and credit organisations. These include interest free loan funds often based in local mosques, and trade and credit organisations based around weekly bazaars. Both are widely supported by wealthy bazaar merchants, many of whom take their religious obligation to charity very seriously. Consequently, these funds are not administered for profit, but are designed to help combat poverty and avoid the practice of usury. This link to Islamic religious belief led to a large increase in the number of such funds following the Islamic revolution.

The second kind of organisation of note is co-operative service delivery organisations. These largely voluntary organisations aim to provide care and protection for vulnerable groups in society. As many of these organisations operate on an informal and voluntary basis, it is difficult to estimate their numbers, but it is important to note that voluntary community based service is extensive in Iran, and is often coordinated by local civil society organisations.

The Bam earthquake of 2003 is a good example of the strength of the voluntary and charity sector in Iran. Following the earthquake, relief funds raised in Iran totalled millions, with thousands of people also travelling to the devastated city to assist the relief effort.

There are however important differences between charity and volunteer work of this kind and work of a more political nature. As organisations of this type rarely advocate political agendas, their role in a democratic reform process will be different to that of organisation which aim to pursue and agenda of political reform, or which advocate a specific set of political rights.

Key Points

- The notion of a "civil society" defies simple definition. It is a complex social entity constituted by a wide range of both political and non-political components.

- Civil societies are not a feature exclusive to democracies, but have frequently played an important role in promoting reform within non-democratic states. This was true of Eastern Europe under Communist rule, and is true also of Iran today.

- Iran has a rich, varied and established civil society tradition. Three historical periods are of particular importance to the current reform movement: the constitutional revolution of 1906; the nationalist movement of Mossadeq during the 1950s; and the Presidency of Khatami from 1997 to 2004.

- The Khatami Presidency is of particular importance to the current reform movement, though its initial advances, such as greater press freedom and a growing civil society, have been under siege since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2004.

- Central to understanding how Iranian civil society can be supported as a movement for meaningful democratic reform in Iran is to understand its varied composition and its fluid and multifaceted relationship with the Iranian state.

Challenges to civil society in Iran

While Iranian civil society gives voice to the appetite for political reform common to a large percentage of the ordinary public, the upper echelons of Iran's theocracy stand firmly opposed to any further progress toward genuine democratic rule. They too recognise civil society as the main threat to their political interests, and so invest a great deal of effort in stifling and restricting the work of civil society.

With the full resources of the state at their disposal, supporters of the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad have attacked civil society leaders and political activists on a number of fronts. Perhaps most prominent among these is the legal campaign mounted by Iran's conservative judiciary, which has led to the closure of most reformist newspapers and the imprisonment of many prominent activists and journalist.

It is because Iranian civil society must contend with these challenges international support for their work has become critical. Although civil society will always survive in some form, it cannot hope to organise as an effective force for political reform in a state whose institutions are almost universally hostile without drawing on the support and resources of likeminded organisations and individuals elsewhere. Providing Iranian civil society with the support it needs must however begin with an understanding of the obstacles they face. Only then can partnerships be formed that do no exacerbate these difficulties, but help local actors overcome or work around these obstacles.

Intimidation, arrest, and detention of journalists, academics, and other civil society leaders have been well documented by human rights organisations both outside and inside Iran. The continued threat to the physical security and human rights of every person part of Iranian civil society remains perhaps the most significant threat to their ongoing work. It is crucial therefore that international organisations and international civil society do not allow the Iranian state to violate the human rights of its citizens unnoticed and unchallenged. By documenting, reporting, and protesting serious human rights violations

at every opportunity, the international community can at least constrain the Iranian government's willingness to openly suppress its own people by the use of force, and assure local political activists that they will not be forgotten and abandoned if their work leads to arrest and imprisonment. Conversely, abandoning the issue of human right when in dialogue with Iranian officials, either for the sake of protocol or other strategic interests, does a great deal of harm to the confidence of Iranian reformers, and so consequently to the prospect of democracy in Iran.

Although widespread human rights abuses are the most serious of challenges to the work of civil society in Iran, it is instructive also to consider in general terms some of the other means by which their work and organisation is constrained. This chapter will consider four challenges of particular relevance to international support for local civil society.

Trust

Trust is perhaps the issue most central to understanding the threat to civil society in contemporary Iran. Most of the obstacles discussed in this chapter have their roots in the issue of trust, and understanding how to avoid further eroding trust between a local organisation and the Iranian government is one of the central challenges to mitigating the risk inherent in partnerships between Iranian and international organisations. The extensive protests that followed the presidential elections of 2009 will clearly have done much to damage the relationship between the government and civil society. Iranian reformers are therefore likely entering a period where there work will come under increased government scrutiny, and where maintaining a degree of mutual trust will become increasingly challenging.

While relations between the government and civil society improved under the presidency of Khatami, the government of President Ahmadinejad has always been profoundly suspicious of the work of CSOs, particularly those with any form of foreign connection. This conservative government regards CSOs as closely connected to its political opponents within Iran's reform movement, and more seriously, to foreign states it regards as intent on bringing about the collapse of the Islamic Republic. The conservative faction of Iran's regime clearly regards Iranian civil society more as a potential enemy than as a partner in the political process. Their primary objective is consequently

that of limiting and controlling civil society, not that of cooperating in pursuit of shared interests.

A number of reasons for this mistrust are reported. Paramount among these appears to be the fact that the government of President Ahmadinejad regards the most likely threat to their rule and the continued survival of the Islamic revolution as a "soft revolution" instigated by western powers, and brought about through sympathetic local CSOs. It is through Iranian CSOs they fear un-Islamic values and principles of democracy and liberalism might enter the country and take root amongst its young population. Some civil society workers reported that even where there is no direct link between their organisation and any objectives contrary to those of the current regime, the government still regards cooperation and support for their work as an unnecessary risk.

Government suspicion is not the sole cause of mistrust however. Reports have also stressed that a number of Iranian CSOs have failed to meet the standards of transparency and accounting expected of such organisations. Allegations of poor leadership, financial mismanagement, and even isolated incidents of fraud, have also all gone some way towards reducing the government and general public's confidence in Iranian civil society.

Building trust with government institutions and officials is therefore one of the main challenges facing the leaders of Iran's CSOs. In order to improve their working conditions and obtain more freedom from government oversight and regulation, it will be important for Iranian CSOs to show that their work is not all intended as a direct challenge to the present regime's authority.

A number of civil society leaders interviewed expressed awareness of this need to build trust with the government and provided some thoughts on how this might be done. Several focused on the importance of attitudes, noting that both the government and Iran's CSOs have extremely negative images of one another. Both parties are at present committed to a series of prior judgements - the government regarding all CSOs as hostile and CSOs regarding the government as authoritarian and unreasonable. By working to better inform one another of their intentions and objectives, both might help bring about the change in attitude necessary to facilitate at least limited cooperation within select areas of mutual interest. In this respect it is felt that progress is most likely to come through one or two forerunners that successfully build relations with one or

more sections of the government and demonstrate the feasibility of limited cooperation with civil society.

Building trust between civil society and the government of Iran must however be a task for these parties themselves. There is little international civil society can contribute to this process, but as the international community itself is among the elements of contention in this fragile relationship, there is much international civil society can do to undermine what trust there is. Iranian civil society leaders have stressed this in particular since the presidential elections of 2009, noting that in the politically charged climate that has followed, few organisations are well-served by explicit links to western governments or organisations. One of the principle recommendations of this document is therefore that international organisations consider carefully how they can provide support for local organisations without entirely undermining the government's trust in their work. This will be discussed further in the final chapter on recommendations.

Regulations[4]

Most forms of civil society organisation are legal in Iran. Given its lack of trust in these organisations however, the government attempts to exercise extensive control over the civil society sector through complex and often cumbersome regulations. The laws governing the work of CSOs are highly restrictive, in particular when there is international involvement, and they are often difficult to navigate. For this reason, a failure to meet set regulations has been a particularly fruitful method for Iran's conservative judiciary to curtail and limit the work of CSOs.

Article 26 of Iran's constitution affords the people of Iran the right to form political parties and organisations:

> "The formation of parties, societies, political or professional associa-
> tions, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to
> one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted provided they
> do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity,
> the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic republic. No one may

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4   This section relies heavily on Kristin Kooiman's overview prepared for the National Democratic Institute and titled: *Background Brief: Governance of Civil Society*, 4 August 2009 - http://www.ndi.org/node/15666

be prevented from participating in the aforementioned groups, or be compelled to participate in them."

The article stresses however that such parties and organisation may not run contrary to the interests and principles of Islam or the Islamic Republic, nor threaten national unity. This caveat leaves civil society organisations vulnerable to the familiar charge that they are seeking to undermine the rule of the current government, or facilitate a "soft revolution" intended to bring about the collapse of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's 1982 "Law Concerning the Activities of Parties, Associations, Political Associations and Guild Associations, Islamic Associations or the Associations of Recognized Religious Minorities" provides further guidance to the types of organisations that are permitted. It describes four kinds of permissible organisation:

- Political parties and associations bound by a belief in a certain policy or ideal

- Guild associations comprised of members of a trade, profession or occupation, though these are prohibited from partaking in political activities

- Islamic associations and volunteer organisations dedicated to advancing understanding of Islam and the goals of the Islamic revolution

- Religious minority associations that allow Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians to address issues that affect their minority

There are a number of additional laws dedicated to regulating the conduct and activities of these organisations. These are often contradictory and include both pre-revolution legislation and more recent laws, with the judiciary and government officials frequently claiming the right to decide which laws to administer. Reports also suggest there is a lack of consistency across the national and local levels, with local authorities sometimes interpreting or administering laws differently than their national counterparts. Judicial review is also reportedly limited in cases involving CSOs, leaving them with few avenues of appeal.[5]

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5   Katirai, Negar *NGO Regulations in Iran*, The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law, Volume 7, Issue 4, September 2005

President Khatami's efforts to consolidate this legislation were eventually rejected by Parliament. Some components of these reforms were however included in the Ministry of Interior's 2005 "Executive Regulations Concerning the Formation and Activities of Non-Governmental Organizations." This legislation aimed to simplify registration procedures that were widely regarded as unclear and inconsistent.[6]

A three-tiered supervisory board now oversees the registration process. It is comprised of government officials and civil society representatives, and sits at the provincial, state and national level. A number of commentators have however pointed out that most civil society representatives on the board have significant ties to the government. The board is charged with ensuring all CSOs adhere to Iranian law, and oversee all registration and the issue of all permits. A CSO wishing to register itself must apply to the supervisory board equivalent to the level at which it wishes to operate. A CSO wishing to operate at a national level must apply to the national board, while a CSO wishing to operate at the provincial level need only apply to the provincial board.

Although this is reported as an improvement on previous practices, other aspects of the registration process remain cumbersome. Where for example an organisation seeks to work in a field in which a government organisation is also active, the CSO must also seek separate permission from the relevant government agency before registering. Furthermore, once registered by the supervisory board, the CSO must still also register with the Ministry of Justice.

Registration involves a policy letter describing the organisation's intent and articles of association. The organisation must have at least five members, two of whom must be specialists in the organisation's primary field. None of the founding members may have a criminal record, including violations of morality, or belong to organisations recognised as hostile to Iran. Once registered, CSOs are also required to submit annual activity reports to the supervisory board. Additional activities, such as festivals and conferences may require additional permits, many of which are notoriously difficult to obtain.

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6   Previous laws required application to either the Ministry of the Interior or the governor's office within their province. It was widely reported however that both the Ministry of Labour and the Chamber of Commerce issued permits, even though it is no clear where they obtained the authority to do so. See Negar, *op.cit.*

Even once registered and compliant with these regulations, Iranian CSOs remain subject to the oversight of the judiciary, which has wide discretion given the number of overlapping laws and regulations, including restrictive security laws. These laws have been the primary tools used by the judiciary to combat the work of CSOs in recent years, and contain restrictions on various forms of speech, expression, and assembly, and with these broad powers in hand, the judiciary has frequently been able to detain and imprison civil society leaders, including students, journalists, and academics. Particularly common is the charge that CSOs are working as "tools for foreign agents," pursuing an agenda contrary to Iran's government, or having committed "Offenses Against the National and International Security of the Country."

Funding

Most of those surveyed about their work within Iranian civil society identified limited funding and financial resources as one of the most direct limitations on their work. During the Khatami Presidency they report that a reasonable amount of government funding was made available to facilitate them in their work. Since the election of Ahmadinejad however, this funding has been reduced almost to zero, as the government now shows little interest in funding civil society organisations. Funding awarded during the Khatami period has been suspended or withdrawn, and little new funding has been introduced in its place. Sporadic incidents of government funding appear limited to select cases where an organisation's interests are clearly aligned with those of the government.

The lack of funding available to Iranian CSOs has a very obvious impact on their capacity to grow and sustain their activities. Not only are their physical resources limited but, as was remarked on a number of occasions, CSOs are increasingly coming to rely on the work of unpaid volunteers. This in turn undermines their ability to build capacity and to attract and retain new personnel.

Less obviously, it has also been noted that restrictions on available funding have had a detrimental impact on how CSO operate and interact with one another, even within the same field of interest. Given the limited funding available to CSOs, many have chosen to become less specific in the focus of their work. This in an effort both to avoid conflict with the government, and

to appeal to as broad a range of funding possibilities as is possible. Further, limited financial resources has also had the effect of introducing an element of competition among Iran's CSOs, as each competes for their share of a relatively small amount of funding. As is discussed in more detail below, both these effects have served to limit the capacity of Iranian CSOs to coordinate and collaborate in pursuit of shared of objectives.

Coordination

The challenges of operating as a CSO in Iran deny them the opportunity to state in clear and unambiguous terms their objectives and perceived role in society. In order to adapt to the mistrust the government of President Ahmadinejad has of CSOs, most have been forced to redefine themselves in more abstract and less confrontational terms.

During Khatami's presidency, a new model of civil society began to emerge in Iran, incorporating elements of both a liberal democratic civil society and traditional Islamic civil society. This provided Iranian CSOs with an opportunity to begin articulating specific roles for themselves within their society, and to begin coordinating their work around the pursuit of shared objectives.

Since the election of Ahmadinejad however, this hybrid model has come under attack, as his government is less willing to tolerate any form of civil society not committed entirely to the preservation of the Islamic republic. Even CSOs operating under clearly defined objectives that are expressly non-political and non-confrontational, such as work clearing mines from Iran's southern islands or work with Iran's street-children, have found government suspicion to be an increasing hindrance to their work.

In response, and to secure at least the minimum degree of trust necessary for them to continue at least some of their work, a number of Iranian CSOs have begun the process of redefining themselves in the context of a purely Islamic and non-political model of civil society. A form of protection has been found in a degree of deliberate ambiguity when phrasing both their objectives and principles.

Although this ambiguity does to an extent avoid direct confrontation with the government on specific political issues, the consequent lack of stated focus has introduced significant coordination challenges. Without a clear statement of

objectives and principles it becomes difficult to identify organisations pursuing similar goals, and so to coordinate activities where this may be beneficial. This lack of cooperation between CSOs is exasperated by the competition that has emerged as organisations increasingly compete for limited funds. Similarly, in the absence of a clear statement of purpose, it becomes difficult for Iranian CSOs to engage and sustain the interest of new members. Students and young Iranians have in particularly complained of the lack of direction and leadership present within civil society in Iran.

Key Points

- While President Khatami did much to encourage and revitalise a political civil society in Iran, the current government is highly suspicious of civil society, viewing it as one of the main threats to their continued power. This is particularly true of CSOs with ties to the international community, which the government views as potential agents of a "soft revolution."

- While most CSOs in Iran are legal, the government and judiciary exercise considerable control over their work and organisation through a highly complex and often contradictory system of laws and regulations.

- Human rights abuses, committed by state actors against Iranian civil society activists and leaders, have been well documented for many years.

- Some political CSOs in Iran have chosen to operate under purposefully vague principles and objectives in an effort to avoid direct confrontation with the government. This policy has, however, had made it increasingly difficult for these CSOs to articulate a consistent and coherent message, hampering both recruitment and the coordination of their work.

- Even CSOs working under well-defined objectives that are expressly non-confrontational, such as mine-clearing and work with street-children, have found government mistrust a hindrance and obstacle to their work.

- These obstacles make international support for Iranian civil society a challenge. This is, however, only a reason to proceed cautiously when providing support, *not* a reason to abandon and isolate Iran's democratic reformers during one of their most trying periods in recent decades.

- Disengagement, and a failure to monitor and raise the issue of political and human rights with Iranian authorities, only emboldens the conservative movement and makes it more difficult for democratic reformers to maintain their commitment in the face of mounting challenges.

Resources

The obstacles discussed in the previous section have undoubtedly represented a setback for Iranian civil society. As the protests that followed the 2009 presidential elections did, however, demonstrate that civil society remains a formidable force in Iranian politics. As the sitting government remains hostile to their continued work, international support will be crucial during the next few years. While the previous chapter highlighted some of the dangers international organisations must be sensitive to when providing support, this chapter will identify some of the resources on which they might draw. The fact that Iranian civil society has continued to flourish, even under the rule of an oppressive and undemocratic government is after all a clear indication of the fact that there are rich resources available to help them in their work. These resources are also likely to provide the best prospects for meaningful international support.

Women's groups

Iran's women face extensive oppression and discrimination in both the public and private sphere, with their second-class status essentially enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic. The women of Iran are however generally educated and politically engaged, and so have naturally made their own political condition their primary cause. With some support from the government under the presidency of Khatami, a number of women's groups were formed to confront the injustices of a women's life in the Islamic Republic. These groups have since proven to be among the most innovative and successful civil society groups in Iran, securing through their work a number of important concessions and gradually increasing the number of Iranian women in work, education, and even political office.

The conservative government of President Ahmadinejad has targeted women's groups through a number of means, arresting leaders, refusing permits,

and attacking demonstrations. More recently efforts have been made to scandalise leaders of these women's groups through coercion and televised "confessions." Women's groups have however proved themselves particular adept at pursuing their agenda publicly without confronting the principles of the Islamic Republic explicitly. By focusing on the simple facts of their inferior status and the discrimination they suffer, and by adopting a strictly non-violent approach, women's groups have been able to make their argument by appeal to principles of justice and equality, and so without challenging any of the central tenants of the Islamic Republic of Shari'a law. As such, they have provided an important model for civil society activism under conservative rule that other actors might do well to emulate.

Youth and students

Iran has an exceptionally young population, with a majority of its people presently under the age of 35. This large population of young people is generally well educated, and has proved on many occasions to be an engaged and effective force for social change and protest. Iran's youth has frequently complained that they are unable to meaningfully partake in the country's political structures, and have therefore at key times turned to demonstrations as a means of communicating their interests. A lack of freedom within the university campus, as well as fears over the consequences of political activity have however undermined the ability of Iran's youth to articulate a stable platform of principles in which it can sustain interest and commitment.

During the protest movement that followed the presidential elections of June 2009, youth played an active role. Reports have, however, stressed the important role religious leaders, appealing to Islamic principles and values, played in mobilising this demographic.

Journalists and intellectuals

Iran's educated population also contains large numbers of professors, journalists, lawyers, and clerics eager to promote positive social change in their country. Many were initially occupied key positions in the Islamic revolution, but were later disillusioned or forced out of politics by conservative factions. Many of these intellectuals have either returned to universities, or become journalists and editors, enjoying the period of relative freedom that was introduced during

the initial years of Khatami's Presidency. More recently, many have faced arrest, intimidation, and imprisonment for their activities, but nevertheless continue to constitute a potent force for social change inside the country.

New social media and the internet

In a country where newspapers have played an important role in almost all major political turning points in recent history, but where the government exercises heavy control over the press, it should be no surprise that the internet has emerged as an important forum for political debate.

Compared to other countries in the region, Iran has greater access to the internet and more personal computers per capita than average. High levels of literacy and education have also developed a technically competent population willing and able to look to the internet and other new media forms for both information and discussion. Many disenfranchised groups, and in particular the urban youth, have embraced the internet as a platform for discussing their grievances, not often heard through conventional media sources. Surveys have repeatedly found Iran to be one of the most active sources of blogs,[7] often written and maintained by skilled journalists and academics forced from their academic or traditional media positions because of prior ties to the reform movement.

This use of the internet by politically active CSOs has not escaped the attention of the conservative government. In 2003, with the arrest of Sina Montallebi, Iran became the first country in the world to arrest someone for views expressed in a blog. The year after saw the introduction of a new set of laws designed to target the rise of so-called "cybercrimes."[8] Since then, a number of online bloggers and journalists have been arrested for opinions expressed on the internet, and several popular blogs have been shut down by the government.

Iran also employs an extensive filtering system designed to limit public access to what it deems undesirable content on the internet. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are part of this process, helping the government track down online content it deems undesirable and identify users who attempt to access this material. The Supreme Council for Communication Affairs maintains

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7   The NITLE blog census lists Farsi as on of the ten most common languages for internet blogs.
     See: http://www.hirank.com/semantic-indexing-project/census/lang.html
8   Alavi, Nasrin *We are Iran*, 2005, 2

a list of banned websites for which it received inputs from other ministries and organisations.

The important role the internet has assumed within civil society in Iran was made particularly apparent during the protests that followed the contested Presidential elections of 2009. As protests began to spread and authorities responded with ever stricter control over traditional forms of communication, the internet quickly became the dominant means of organising and following political events, spreading information about arrests and acts of militia violence, and facilitating communications between the large number of people engaged with the protest movement. The internet also became one of the most significant sources of information for journalists and supporters following events from outside of Iran, with internet based news-media reporting on events long before television news networks were on the ground. Amateur pictures, videos, and testimonials uploaded to the internet quickly becoming a mainstay of media reporting on the protest movement.

The micro-blogging service Twitter has widely been reported as one of the most significant forms of communication utilised by both protestors and supporters. Through short messages sent from both computers and mobile devices, information was quickly spread about planed protests, political developments, as well as incidents of violence and arrest by government and militia forces. Most of this discussion centred on the #iranelection and #gr88 (Green Revolution 1388) hashtags. The Twitter messaging service has also been credited in some reports as allowing protestors inside Iran to trade information about working proxy servers, allowing those making use of them to circumvent the growing internet censorship of the government. The use of Twitter was so extensive that several reports suggest the US State Department encouraged the company to postpone scheduled maintenance work that would have made the service unavailable for some time.

Some commentators have however questioned the eventual value of resources such as Twitter, with the service eventually becoming inundated with generic messages of support and information ever more difficult to verify. Bloggers, both in Iran and abroad, did however at this point step in to provide much needed filtering, collecting and sorting information in a way that was more accessible to protestors and supporters alike. Several international news outlets also established blogs providing minute-by-minute accounts of events

as they unfolded. Although these were heavily censored, they proved valuable resources for many following events from outside Iran, and were also available to those inside Iran who braved internet censors by use of proxy servers and other technical innovations.

Video and picture posting services were also utilised extensively by protestors and activists inside Iran, both as a means of spreading information within the protest movement, and as a means of ensuring continued support and coverage from international civil society. This emphasises the value Iranian civil society places on international recognition of human rights abuses within Iran, with many braving considerable punishments to ensure the world media was informed of the violence and arrests that formed the backbone of the government's response to the protests.

In addition to its efforts to censor traditional news media, the Iranian government engaged in extensive internet censorship during the post election protest period. Reports suggest the government completely shut down internet access in the country at several times, first following coordinated attacks on the website of President Ahmadinejad, and then again while the results of the elections were officially announced. Bandwidth is also alleged to have been significantly reduced in an effort to stem the flow of pictures and videos on to the internet. Similar measures were taken against mobile text-messaging services that were reportedly affected from the day before the elections. A number of social networking and international media organisations also had access to their sites blocked from inside Iran.

Following the protest movement of June 2009, reports have also increasingly suggested that the Iranian government has made more sophisticated and covert efforts to control and monitor internet traffic within their country. A dedicated section of the Revolutionary Guard is said to be behind many high-profile attacks on international websites, including Twitter, and is also said to be engaged in indentifying bloggers and other online activists.[9]

In response to these censorship measures, activists within Iran immediately began developing and trading means of circumventing controls and protecting the identity of those operating online. Lists of proxy servers were particularly popular and extensively traded, enabling users to bypass filters set-up by

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9   BBC News, 11 February 2010: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8505645.stm

the government to prevent access to certain sites. There are however also extensive reports of government agents infiltrating social networking sites and Twitter discussions, posting misinformation and attempting to identify those responsible organising and partaking in

Although the government's measures clearly met with a degree of success, it is equally clear from the amount of information that made its way on to the internet that even the most intent of governments cannot hope to entirely control the communications options new social media and the internet provides.

Iranian civil society leaders have also stressed that the internet and other forms of social media are likely to retain their significance as the protest movement of June 2009 attempts to recast itself as a more permanent advocate of political reform. An integral part of making this transition will involve articulating and communicating criticism of the government of President Ahmadinejad to the Iranian public, as well as providing a concrete political alternative in the way of a positive agenda for reform. Given strict government control of traditional media, this will be almost impossible without widespread access to uncensored media space such as that offered by the internet.

Key Points

- The protest movement that followed the presidential elections of 2009 demonstrated that, despite considerable obstacles, civil society remains a formidable political force in Iran, with considerable resources at its disposal. Understanding these resources can aid international actors in their efforts to support their democratic colleagues in Iran.

- Iran has a young, educated, and politically engaged population.

- Iranian women's groups have been among the most successful movements for positive social change. Their innovative campaigns, which focus on popular principles of equality and justice without challenging any of the central tenants of the Islamic Republic, provide a valuable model for peaceful and effective campaigning in Iran.

- Youth and students have always been a politically engaged section of Iranian society, increasingly frustrated by their exclusion from mainstream politics. Articulating a platform capable of sustaining the

interest and commitment of this closely monitored demographic has however proved a challenge to civil society organisations.

- While the Iranian government has made considerable efforts to exercise control and censorship over the internet, activists have adapted to these obstacles. Blogs, social networking sites, and video and picture hosting sites have increasingly emerged as a valuable resource for Iranian civil society.

- Internet and mobile phone technology has also become a popular means of coordinating civil society work and protests, with blogging reinventing Iran's rich tradition of political and philosophical debate in newspapers.

- The internet and related technologies are expected to become increasingly significant as civil society attempts to transform the protest movement that followed the presidential elections of 2009 in to a sustained political movement capable of leading lasting campaigns for political reform.

Further resources

Follow current links to online resources at www.npwj.org/iran

Recommendations

Iranian civil society is well positioned to act as the primary instigators of democratic reform in Iran. Civil society leaders can draw on a rich and varied tradition of community service and political activism, and have on a number of occasions proved capable of engaging and giving voice to otherwise disenfranchised elements of Iranian society, most notably women and youth.

The work of Iranian civil society is however being challenged by those opposed to political reform in Iran. State institutions loyal to President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamene'i are actively working to stifle those they view as a threat to their continued power, making use of the full resources of the state. Obstacles to civil society consequently include restricted access to funding, a complex and burdensome regulatory system, and a willingness to dispense with the rule of law and arrest, intimidate, and detain civil society leaders and organisations. The government of President Ahmadinejad has been particularly hostile to civil society organisations with ties to international civil society or international institutions.

These restrictions have frequently frustrated the international community who have often complained that any attempt to support their democratic colleagues in Iran inevitably does more harm than good – both to the individuals and organisations involved, but also to the cause of democracy in Iran.

This document has argued that although there are considerable risks associated with supporting Iranian civil society, the risk of doing nothing is greater still. Policies that isolate Iranian civil society run contrary both to the facts and the recommendations of civil society leaders themselves.

In an effort to encourage greater support for Iranian civil society, this section will therefore conclude with five recommendations, each of which aims to provide some guidance on how Iranian organisations might be supported while mitigating the associated risks. These are not intended as a step-by-

step guide or as a checklist to supporting democracy in Iran, but rather as a guide to thinking about how risks can be managed and minimised when engaging Iranian organisations. They do not aim to take the place of sober reflection and extensive consultation, but seek to provide a starting point for such a process.

(1) Do not isolate democratic reformers

When the difficulties faced by Iranian organisations with ties to international civil society are appreciated, a natural and cautious response is to step back and withhold support for fear that it would do more harm than good. The first recommendation of this document is to recognise that isolating Iranian civil society in this way also does great harm.

In the year leading up to the 2009 presidential elections, some civil society leaders in Iran were of the opinion that international collaboration might wait until after the elections – certain that Ahmadinejad faced little chance of returning as President. Following his disputed re-election however, waiting for more amenable conditions for international support is no longer an option.

Isolating democratic reformers in Iran will now only strengthen the conservative movement and leave it free to continue its persecution of political opponents unhampered. This will in turn weaken the democratic movement in Iran, whose obstacles will only magnify and whose resources will only diminish as the surviving gains of the Khatami period are gradually eroded. Under present political conditions, any capacity that is lost might take years, or even decades, to recover.

It is essential therefore that international organisations remain engaged with Iranian civil society so that it can remain informed of efforts to silence or repress civil society in Iran. Only then can the international community continue to protest the violation of political and human rights that have become common-place, and ensure that the Iranian government knows that the arrest, detention, and execution of civil society leaders, activists, and journalists will not go unnoticed and unchallenged.

Isolating Iranian civil society also does much indirect harm through the signals it sends to Iranian organisations and to the Iranian people. Most civil society leaders are clear that some form of international support is necessary if

they are to achieve genuine democratic reform. By isolating these civil society leaders however, international civil society sends democratic forces inside Iran a signal that implies wavering support for their campaign. If the international community suggests its priorities do not lie in democratic reform, but only in extracting economic, strategic, or nuclear concessions from the Iranian government, we cannot expect Iranian civil society leaders to remain committed to their democratic cause in the face of increasing danger. The EU's "critical dialogue" of 2003 arguably had precisely this effect, as issues of human rights and political freedom were replaced on the agenda by discussions of trade and nuclear proliferation. As a consequence, Iranian reformers came to doubt the international commitment to political reform in Iran. A similar result is reported to have followed U.S. President George W. Bush's now infamous reference to an "axis of evil," of which Iran was part, at a critical period in the battle between President Khatami and his conservative opponents.

(2) Stand clear of the red lines

Trust has been identified as one of the major obstacles to the work of CSOs in Iran. The re-election of President Ahmadinejad makes this is issue still more important, as Iranian civil society must now contemplate another four years or conservative rule opposed to their work and development. Where some civil society leaders were reportedly waiting until the election of a new President in 2009, as was widely expected, they must now consider alternative strategies for continuing their work in a hostile political climate. This may involve adopting and refining strategies successfully pursued by women's movements, which have steered a cautious line and attempted to avoid direct confrontation with the government, and so gradually building at least a limited trust.

International civil society must avoid jeopardising this process. As one of the government's principal objections to the proliferation of CSOs is it fear that such organisations will agitate for regime change through a soft revolution, there are a number of issues to which the present government has proved particularly sensitive. Open discussion of these has provoked serious retaliation, including violence and imprisonment. A clear connection between these discussions and international actors will only further confirm the regime's suspicion, leading to further crackdowns. Iranian civil society is therefore

not productively supported by direct engagement on these most sensitive of issues. These issues include:

Freedom and democracy

Concepts of democracy are largely interpreted as elements of a western ideology designed to undermine the stability, values, and morality of the Islamic Republic. The government, therefore, considers the notion of democracy almost inherently opposed to their interests and continued power. The notion of freedom is almost exclusively associated with the student and youth movements of 1998 and beyond. It similarly implies a challenge to the institutions and governance of the Islamic Republic.

Freedom of the press

Newspapers and the national press have played an important role in all the major turning points in Iran's 20th century history. They were the main forum for debate prior to the constitutional revolution of 1906 and played an important role in popularising Mossadeq's nationalist ideals. More recently, press freedom is the issue on which reformers and conservatives within Iran's government have clashed most visibly.

The structure of the Islamic Republic and the role of the Supreme Leader

The rigid power structure that governs Iran, premised on the doctrine of *velayet-e faqih*, is largely beyond discussion in contemporary Iran. This includes open discussion of constitutional reforms aimed at amending this power structure. The role of the Supreme Leader is primary a religious, not political, question, and the Islamic nature of the political system is similarly beyond the realm of political discussion. Questioning these principles, as well as the role of the Supreme Leader, is therefore interpreted as an affront and attack on the Islamic Republic in the most direct terms possible.

Traditional Morality

Challenging the values of the conservative elements of the government has also proved perilous, including the nature of relationships between men and women, clothing, marriage, as well as sexual morality. These issues are again considered religious, not political, and the traditional values that govern them are considered central to the very stability of the state. For this reason,

the very existence of, for example, homosexuality is denied, despite obvious evidence to the contrary.

These are issues international civil society cannot fruitfully engage with Iranian civil society on directly. To do so is likely only to heighten government suspicion of their activities, and so further undermine their already difficult working conditions.

This, however, does not mean Iranian civil society organisations should be isolated from their international colleagues. Support can be provided in ways that avoids crossing these "red lines." It must ultimately be the task of Iranian organisations to move these lines back, opening up new ground for political discussion and eventual reform. This is a task civil society, when supported, has proved itself particularly adept at doing across the world. In the months that have followed the contested 2009 Presidential elections for example, the terms of political discourse in Iran have changed radically, at least in part as a result of the efforts of civil society to bring about such a change. Senior clerics and other political figures have discussed for the first time the structure of some of Iran's political and judicial institutions, in particular the prison services, as well as the role of the Supreme Leader himself in their country's political structure.

(3) Adopt an incremental approach

Although there are many issues that at present lie beyond these red lines, there remain a number of issues on which meaningful engagement with Iranian civil society has proved both possible and fruitful. These are primary areas within which the government recognises its own self-interest lies in soliciting international support and assistance. Nevertheless, these are areas within which international actors can meaningfully engage Iranian CSOs, and so areas where Iranian organisations and individuals can productively be supported and strengthened through international cooperation.

By supporting Iranian CSOs working on select issues unlikely to result in direct confrontation with the government, a number of benefits can be secured. Contact is maintained between Iranian civil society and international civil society, making it harder for the Iranian government to isolate and persecute civil society leaders without notice. International civil society networks are

channels through which news can be shared, including that of arrests, violence, and injustice.

Cooperation on non-controversial issues can also begin a process of capacity building that is likely to have ripple effects across all of civil society in Iran. A number of civil society leaders interviewed noted the limited capacity that exists within Iranian CSOs at present. Through the support of international civil society however, best practices can be exchanged, and local organisations and their staff can gain valuable experience and exposure. Once capacity is introduced into a local civil society network, it is likely to continue its transmission and reach many more than those directly involved in the initial project.

Finally, by engaging with Iranian civil society on less controversial issues, international actors can be ready to support Iranian CSOs at the crucial time when the red lines are pushed back and new avenues arise for political discussion. Support can then be provided for Iranian CSOs at the crucial point where local organisations must attempt to take advantage of a change in the political climate in order to secure meaningful reforms.

Adopting an incremental approach and working with Iranian CSOs on a limited set of reasonably uncontroversial issues is therefore among the most important recommendations of this report. Some of the best candidates for more limited cooperation of this kind are:

The protection of children and youth
The Islamic Republic has proved willing to cooperate with CSOs on what it perceives as the important task of safeguarding families, and in particular children. This has included a variety of fields, including education, sport, and medical programmes, as well as the protection of children from violence, abuse, and drugs.

Labour rights and the safety of workers
Workplace safety has become an increasingly important issue in Iran, with several high profile advertising campaigns recently highlighting the importance of safety. Legislative changes have also been proposed to support this increased awareness. An important aspect of this movement has been the campaigning undertaken by various unions and professional organisations. They have

not only influenced government debates of safety provisions, but also issues of working hours, the regulation of strikes, and the recognition of foreign academic titles.

The environment
Pollution and air quality have quickly become important issues in big Iranian cities such as Tehran, Kerman, Isfahan, Mashad, and Shiraz. The regulation and enforcement of pollution is limited and is increasingly being recognised as a source of illness and a factor reducing the quality of life in cities.

Women's rights
The Iranian government has demonstrated some willingness in recent years to improve their protection of women in Iran. Though there remain a number if limitations on their freedom, issues such as their rights within the workplace and the freedom to work and study have recently been raised and discussed. More limited discussions have also focused on the protection of women within the home, and by extension, the nature of the relationship between women and their husbands and fathers.

Drugs
The rapid rise in drug addiction and drug use is one of the main social problems confronting Iran at present. From historical consumption of opium, Iranian society now suffers extensive abuse of heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and chemical drugs. The fight against drug consumption and drug distribution has in recent years become a prominent example of fruitful collaboration between CSOs and government institutions. Although repeatedly denied as a major problem by government sources, the related issues of HIV/Aids protection and treatment has also become a focus for many Iranian CSOs.

(4) Understand local working conditions

Iranian CSOs work under difficult conditions. As described above, the regulations that govern their work are cumbersome and often inconsistent. The conservative judiciary in Iran has however actively pursued politically active CSOs through this legislation, suspending their activities and even imprisoning staff where violations are deemed to have occurred. The added suspicion that accompanies any external collaboration means it is particularly

important that international civil society not jeopardise the work and safety of local organisations by failing to respect local rules and regulations.

(5) Follow local leads

The main recommendation of this document is that international civil society continues to provide support for Iranian civil society, but without provoking a direct conflict with the government in Tehran. It has already been noted that a first step towards avoiding such a confrontation is to avoid explicit discussion of highly sensitive topics in favour of an incremental approach that begins with a discussion of more acceptable issues. The risk of provoking a damaging confrontation can however also be minimised by thinking carefully about the way in which work with Iranian civil society is organisations and structured.

Those working inside Iran frequently identify communications as a source of concern. Although the internet and mobile phones have proved to be extremely useful tools in the hands of Iran's civil society, the government continues to monitor and censor these forms of communication. Phone tapping and e-mail interception have all been reported, and many of the civil society leaders interviewed admit being hesitant about communicating through mobile phones and internet. This introduces a new set of challenges when engaging with Iranian civil society. These are however challenges that can be overcome trough careful planning, and perhaps the use of an intermediary during the initial phase of cooperation. Intermediaries might take the form of a non-political local, such as a poet or academic, or a regional partner from elsewhere in the near East. Joint efforts can then be made with the local organisation to identify reasonably safe means of discussing matters that fall within the scope of "safe" topics.

International organisations might also minimise the risk of provoking a confrontation with the government by mirroring the methodology of Iranian civil society organisations when working with Iranians. Initially, this is perhaps most likely to take the form of meetings and collaboration at regional events elsewhere in the Middle East or Islamic world.

As discussed above, following the election of Ahmadinejad and an end to the relative openness of the Khatami era, Iranian organisations adapted to

new circumstances by refining their mission statements and objectives so as to make them less directly confrontational to the government. They did so by redefining themselves in theoretical and literary terms, favouring the language of philosophy, religion, and literature, to that of politics. A number of academics and civil society leaders have stressed that Iran remains a highly educated and intellectualised civil society. Serious study and interest in philosophy, literature (particularly poetry), and of course religion, is not confined to universities, but remains prominent in political and civil society as well. Formal discussion of these issues therefore affords important segueways into substantial political debate, perhaps without provoking the same degree of suspicion as more practically oriented discussions.

Similarly, engaging Iranians as "thinkers" rather than as "activists" might also be of benefit, along with a focus on a broader range of organisations. Universities, for example, include many prominent civil society members, but working with a professor of poetry from an Iranian university is considerably safer than engaging an activists from a political organisation.

Finally, funding has been identified as one of the major obstacles to the work of civil society in Iran. The Iranian government has however been particularly suspicious of any organisation receiving funding from the international community, with the occasional exception of funding received directly from the United Nations and some of its subsidiary bodies, such as the UNDP and Unicef. There is complete ban on receiving funding from the United States, and many organisations have reported difficulties after receiving funds from the European Union and its Member States. Directly funding of Iranian civil society seems therefore at best ill advised. There may in some cases exist the possibility of working with regional intermediary organisations as a means of providing some financial support, but even this may be considered unwise. What is most important therefore is that international civil society recognise the financial limitations that constrain Iranian organisations and work to ensure that any partnerships are at the very least budget neutral for the Iranian organisation.

Key Points

- While supporting Iranian civil society is difficult, much can be done to mitigate risks and build partnerships of real value to the prospect of political reform in Iran.

- Isolating Iranian civil society altogether represents a much greater risk than carefully planned support and solidarity. International disengagement both leaves the Iranian government free to persecute political opponents with impunity, and sends the wrong signals to Iranian activists and CSOs.

- Avoid provoking direct confrontation with the government by steering well clear of the following "red lines" in any discussion with Iranian CSOs: freedom and democracy; freedom of the press; the structure of the Islamic Republic; and traditional morality.

- Adopt instead an incremental approach, focused on maintaining contact and building capacity within Iranian civil society through partnerships focused on more issues more acceptable to the present government, including: protecting children and youth; the rights of women; the environment; labour rights and worker safety; and drug abuse.

- Building partnerships around safe topics such as these will also allow the international community to quickly support Iranian society at crucial turning points when it succeeds in pushing back the "red lines."

- Before any partnership is contemplated, international organisations must familiarise themselves with local regulations. Any violation of these regulations is likely to carry serious repercussion for the local organisation.

- Non-political local or regional intermediaries can play an important role in establishing contact and facilitating safe discussions between international organisations and Iranian CSOs.

- Follow the lead of local organisations by building partnerships and events around Iran's historic interest and respect for theoretical disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and religion, avoiding the more confrontational language of politics.

Supporting Iranian civil society

Iran's rich and varied civil society is the most likely source of meaningful democratic reform in Iran, but it requires increased international support and solidarity in its effort to achieve these aims. The loose alliance of journalists, academics, students, women's groups, and other voluntary organisations that work under the heading of civil society has in recent times proved itself one of the few forces able to pressure Iran's ruling theocracy towards political reform.
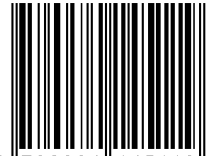
Democratic reformers in Iran face new challenges in making the transition from a movement protesting an electoral process to a force campaigning for broader democratic reform. A young and educated population, an active women's movement, and perhaps most importantly, the internet and other new forms of social media, have provided Iranian civil society with some of the resources they need to continue their democratic struggle under conservative rule.

Waiting until support can be provided easily, and without complication, is waiting until it is no longer necessary. The time has now come for the international community to act in support of Iranian civil society at this crucial juncture in the history of the country's democratic movement. We hope this document will serve as a useful resource to those who wish to heed the call of Iranian civil society leaders and provide them with the support they need right now.