

judicial system and the law through the legislative process of the Waqf Law.



Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.

Most of mosques have been managed through the use of waqf system. ©hakuna_jina

Middle Class: The Weak Socio-Political Actor in Post-Revolution Iran

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As revolutions and liberal or democratic movements are socio-political transitions, the role of social groups and classes must not be underestimated. Obviously, these movements are basically caused by discontent with the status quo in society, and hence, social groups take serious steps to change the situation. However, the result of the movements and revolutions is not always desirable. During the past century, Iran experienced great democratic movements such as the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), Oil Nationalization Movement (1951), and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Needless to say that in all these movements, social groups and prominent political actors such as the intellectuals, ulama, middle class and lower middle class played significant roles. These movements, even though not completely successful in the pursuit of their ideals, definitely brought about structural changes along with them. For instance, one of the greatest achievements of the Constitutional Revolution was bringing law into Iran for the first time.

It goes without saying that in the post-revolution era, the progress of democratization in Iran has faced some hindrances such as power centralization, based on the so-called *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), lack of growth of political parties, and lack of social groups' active participation, particularly middle class and lower middle class. Since one of the most essential elements in democratization is the rise of middle class, their withdrawal as prominent political actors in the development of democracy in Iran has had a tremendous impact on slowing down the democratization. Among social groups, the significance of middle class is remarkable, for it is the only class that

can monitor and apply brakes on the state's policy.

It is very difficult to give a concrete definition to middle class in general. However, with the emergence of modern sociology in the twentieth century, some specific criteria were introduced to define middle class, among which the factors such as occupation, income, the volume of consumption, education, class and family background are highlighted. Thus, it can be safe to say that middle class people are those who are neither at the top nor at the bottom of their societies in terms of the above-mentioned criteria.

Unlike many democratic countries in which the remarkable rise of middle class occurred after industrialization, Iranian society was of a strong middle class long before industrialization. The historical middle class of Iran, known as the traditional middle class, comprised the urban bazaars and religious notables. Nevertheless, in post-constitutional revolution era, particularly the modernization period which Iran underwent during Reza Shah's regime, modern middle class was gradually formed. The new middle class, mainly, consisted of white-collar employees and college-educated professionals.

The rise of middle class in a society can increase political demands for the development of political freedom and participation in political decision-making. And the dynamism of democratic demands in the middle class is so dynamic that it will continue to achieve democracy. As some researchers have already mentioned, middle class and intellectuals, majority of whom come from modern middle class, play influential roles in stabilizing democracy. The fact of the matter is that in all above-mentioned democratic movements in Iran, although middle class was supported by ulama and intellectuals in organizing civic institutions, it would be almost impossible for them to consolidate their political rights or challenge the authoritarian regimes without the support of another social group, the lower middle class.

It is evident that like ulama, intellectuals and middle class, the lower middle class has also played a very significant role in all above-mentioned democratic movements. However, their roles seem to have been overlooked. The lower class of Iranian society has not historically been a consequential social actor, and it might be due to the fact that the lower middle class in Iran does not basically own nor control the means of production. They only get involved in socio-political transitions when they are invited to act. And it is very important here who they are called to the field by. For instance, in the contrary to the rural people and the low class of the society which did not advocate the revolution firmly, the lower middle class perceived Khomeini as a charismatic, even semi-divine, savior when they were invited to act by a group of radicalized clerics in the process of 1979 revolution.

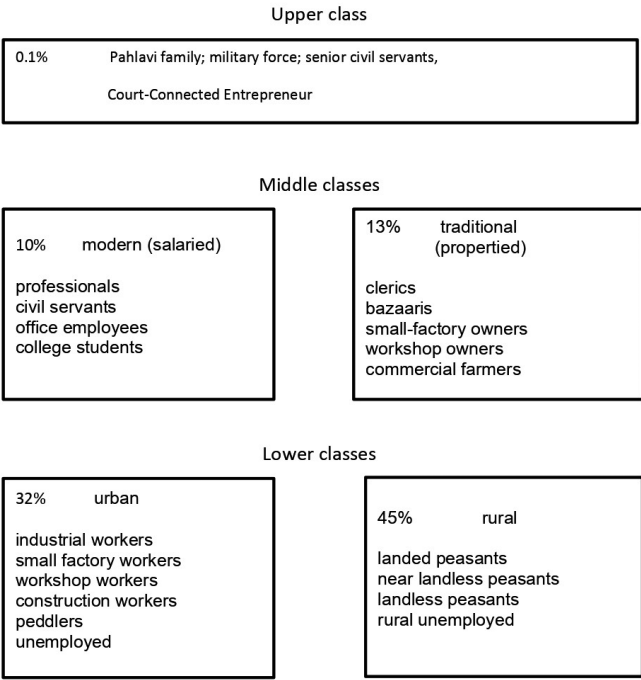
The middle class in Iran, particularly in the past decade, has faced serious problems and lost its power. Since Iran highly depends on petrodollar, it can be considered as a rentier state. The state does not depend much on taxation. In other words, it can be considered independent from the support of social groups. In the contrary, the middle class in Iran, especially after Khatami's administration, highly depends on and is severely influenced by the role of state economy. By and large, modern middle class and consequently the intellectuals have become more vulnerable and dependent. The other big problems they are facing with are the powerful and dominant Shi'ite clerics have dismissed the new urban middle class from power, and the subsidy plan has led the middle class to becoming more dependent on the state. Thus, the middle class whose power is essential in democratizing Iran has lost its influence.

Considering the fact that to achieve a sustainable democracy and to realize a social justice a structural change in power relations is necessary, the importance of middle class as a powerful socio-political actor that can challenge the state becomes clear. And taking it into account that great democratic movements in Iran like Constitutional Revolution and the Iranian Revolution in 1979 would never achieve their goals without great support of the socio-political classes, the importance of intellectuals, ulama, middle class and lower middle class unquestionably stands out. Regarding the

role of ulama in these democratic movements, one must not forget that Constitutional Revolution and the Revolution of 1979 in particular, were both against the state tyrannical power which was deemed serious threats to Islam. After the power struggle that followed the victory of the 1979 revolution, the formation of an Islamic state assured ulama that they had attained their goal.

Thus, it can be safe to say that losing influence as prominent socio-political actors is not the only problem the middle class including the intellectuals have been facing with. They have also lost the support of ulama. And given the statistics revealed by the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran is precise, in spite of the high growth of the middle class, it is increasingly affected by the rentier state and has become exceedingly dependent. The same goes with the intellectuals because they come from this very class.

As a consequence, the lower middle class which has always been moved by the above-mentioned prominent political actors are left desperately desirous for a democracy in which they are not solely given the right to vote, but the equal legal rights such as freedom of speech as well.



Class structure (Labor force in the 1970s)

(Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 140.)

Comments

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First, regarding Takaiwa-san’s presentation, I would say that it was a well-organized argument, appropriately focused, and the concluding message is properly and decently presented. I appreciate his efforts and easy-to-understand presentation even for those who are not familiar with the field of Egyptian judicial modernization with special reference to the Waqf law.