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# Withdrawal of the Middle Class from Socio-Political Scene in a Democratizing Iran

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## Abstract

Delving upon the significance of the traditional middle class and the rise of the modern middle class in the modern history of Iran, one can obviously realize their prominent roles in democratizing movements like Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The former had a tight connection with the ulama whose undeniable power had earned them high socio-political status, which enabled them to put massive pressure on the ruling regimes. The latter, known as intelligentsia, that had a remarkable rise particularly during and after Reza Shah's period, made a great effort in modernizing Iran. Needless to say, both groups played significant roles in pro-democratic party of National Front. However, their prominence is deemed to have faded in post-revolution era. Since democratization is a socio-political will and structure, and hence, it requires the participation of socio-political groups, this research aims to examine the elements that have weakened the middle class and lessened its participation in democratizing Iran and to find the obstacles, if any, they have been facing with.

**Keywords:** Middle Class, Revolution, Democratization, Socio-Political Structure

## Introduction

Structural changes in a society highly depend on the development of socio-political awareness of the social classes. Undoubtedly transitioning from authoritarianism and the realization of democracy are among the key features of Iranian political life for over a hundred years. Significant movements such as Constitutional Movement, Oil Nationalization Movement, and Islamic Revolution of 1979 made democratization their primary goal. In the Constitutional Movement, democratization was pursued in the form of liberalization, legitimacy, the establishment of a royal constitutional system and making the king's power subject to the law, and the establishment of parliamentary democracy (Enayat 2013). In Oil Nationalization Movement, democratization pursuit was continued by strengthening parliamentary democracy, a re-attempt to condition the king's power with the constitution. And in the Islamic Revolution, its goal was pursued in the context of freedom, independence and rejection of the monarchy. However, Iran's society, politics, economics, history and culture are of some features that have challenged democratic movements and even have caused their partial failure. In other words each of them has somehow replaced a new form of authoritarianism with the previous one (Fadaee 2012).

It is evident that in the post-revolution era, the transition to democracy in Iran has confronted obstacles such as power centralization, based on the so-called velayat-e faqih<sup>1</sup> (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), lack of growth of political parties, and inaction of social groups, particularly middle class. Since one of the most essential elements in democratization is the rise of a strong middle class, this study aims to examine their role and function in the realization of the transitional process of democracy in the above-mentioned movements as well as the reason of their underperformance as political actors in post-revolution era based on scientific theories.

## 1. What is the Middle Class?

The middle class is one of those concepts that do not have a precise and uniform definition, and therefore there is no complete agreement between political scientists and social science researchers on its definition. The inclusion of different social groups with different characteristics and characteristics in this social class has made some social science practitioners avoid active use of the concept as far as possible. In the twentieth century, with the emergence of modern sociology, some specific criteria were introduced to define middle class, among which the factors such as occupation, the volume of consumption, education, class and family background are highlighted. Along with the type of job and level of education, another very important condition is income<sup>2</sup>, which is needed to provide the financial means to make a living. Another significant factor is family history and upbringing environment due to the important role it plays in the formation of class identity.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is in the family education that consciousness, social behavior and class culture are formed, and passed from generation to generation. In social relations, it is the behaviors of each individual that identifies them, and it is through these actions that their class status and affiliation become clear, in the minds of the audience and those who encounter them (Haji Qasemi 2012, 2-3). Although there are other methods to identify social groups that fall into the middle class, they have some drawbacks. One of these is to measure individual or household income. According to this method, the middle class in any society comprises groups with an income of 75 to 125 percent of the median income in the community. The disadvantage of this approach is that it is indifferent to the other above-mentioned conditions such as occupation, education and family history and only the income criterion is considered. Similarly, if we put the criterion solely on the level of education or type of employment, we will not achieve the right definition (Haji Qasemi 2012, 4-5). From consumption and income level approach, as it is argued, middle class is comprised of people who are neither at the top nor at the bottom of their societies in terms of income, who have received at least a secondary education, and who own either real property, durable goods, or their own businesses (Fukuyama 2012, 54).

## 2. The Emergence of Middle Class in Iran

Although it has a long history of Agriculture, Iran is considered to be a dry country. Only some western parts and the coastal areas by the Caspian Sea receive adequate rainfall (Mirmoghtadaee 2013, 115). The Iranian society has not long been a center of agriculture, and cities have always been important. Therefore, communities were formed mainly around small villages or in fact where water or agriculture facilities were found and emerged as cities expanded. Other reasons for the tendency to urbanize in Iran can be attributed to the Silk Road, spice business, and Iran being the main trading channel for East and West. And hence, it can be said that unlike the more prosperous countries, which had a predominantly agricultural and feudal character in which cities were less important, cities have always been the focus of attention. The city is where the middle class is more prosperous. And economic life in the city is more rational than life in the village (Ashraf 1993, 167). Dissimilar to many democratic countries in which the rise of middle class occurred after industrialization, Iranian society was of a

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of velayat-e faqih, though it was mentioned about a decade prior to the 1979 revolution, had not appeared in the first draft of the constitution, drawn by Bazargan's, during his premiership. Actually, until the summer of 1979, no one spoke about it. Gradually, pro-Khomeini forces imposed the idea of rule by the clergy. The first person who implicitly referred to velayat-e faqih was Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri who, on the eve of the drafting of the constitution, remarked, "If people voted for an Islamic state, then the faqih must be at the pinnacle to ensure that the regime is indeed Islamic." (for further information, see also Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, 2002, pp. 25-28)

<sup>2</sup> Based on consumption and income level approach, the middle class are those who have regular jobs and income and can dedicate at least one-third of their disposable income to discretionary spending other than food, shelter, and absolute necessities. (See also Zahirnejad 2014, 64)

<sup>3</sup> Drawing on recent research on the psychology of social class, the material conditions in which people grow up and live have a lasting impact on their personal and social identities and that this influences both the way they think and feel about their social environment and key aspects of their social behavior. (for further information, see [Antony S. R. Manstead](#) 2018)

middle class before industrialization. Therefore, as Zahirnejad (2014) mentions, the middle class which exists in Iran has been formed with different characteristics. Based on this view, maybe it can be argued that there has been a middle class present in Iran during different periods but it has not had the same quality and characters in comparison with the middle class in Europe. It is also of significance to consider the fact that Iran has two middle classes. The historical middle class of Iran, known as the traditional middle class was comprised of the urban bazars and religious notables and existed long before the emergence of the second middle class. Alongside the traditional middle class outside the state, a class emerged that had a distinct status apart from traditional power relations (Adibi 1979, 122). The latter, known as modern middle class, underwent a great expansion in post-constitutional revolution era, particularly during the modernization period which Iran underwent during the reign of Reza Shah. His efforts to develop a modern army and a centralized administrative system and educational reforms led to the expansion of the modern middle class. So it was largely a product of the Pahlavi-era modernization process, and both, Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah, contributed to that process. The new middle class comprises groups that are largely the product of the modern era and have played a role in advancing it. In addition, it influences on the dynamics of socio-economic and political developments both quantitatively and qualitatively. The key components of this class are the intellectuals, bureaucrats, freelancers such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, writers and artists (Sai and Akbar Zade 2019, 106).

### **3. The Middle Class and the Transition to Democracy**

Democracy is a form of government and a form of structure for the political system. Accordingly, democracy is a form of government based on the intentions of the state and based on the sources of government power and the way in which the government is formed. In this form of government, people are directly or indirectly involved with, or can participate in, decisions that affect them all, and the rulers are elected by the people in the context of free and fair competitive elections and are held accountable to the people. In this system, dismissal and replacement of rulers without bloodshed is possible through elections and voting, and civil and political freedoms, freedom of speech, freedom of press and the activities of the opposition are recognized (Sai and Akbar Zade 2019, 107). The goal of democratization is the realization of the political system, and is subject to structural changes in various economic, social and cultural areas. And, in the context of structural changes in the social environment, new social forces, including the new middle class that pursues new political concepts and currents such as democracy, emerges and strives for its realization and establishment. Therefore, transition to democracy requires a large middle class of people whose economic position is independent of those who hold power. Democratization emerges from interacting changes in public politics, categorical inequality, and networks of trust, which in turn depend on specifiable mechanisms of change in social relations. Without significant transformations in the arenas of inequality and networks of trust strictly governmental changes toward democracy remain either unstable or nonexistent (Nomani and Behdad 2012, 216). However, there are unanswered questions about the power of middle class in Iran. It is true that the middle class has existed in Iran for a long time. In fact, the middle class in Iran has been plagued by various expansions at different times, but unlike some people perceive, in the social history of Iran, the middle class has never become extinct (Armaki 2019, 4). But, has it ever been strong enough to challenge the state or the authoritarian regime and if not, what has been the problem?

### **4. The Problems of the Middle Class in the Transition to Democracy**

As it was mentioned above, there are two middle classes in Iran, but before focusing on the possible inconsistencies between the two groups, it is of importance to realize whether the traditional middle class, prior to the emergence of the modern middle class, faced any problems. As a matter of fact, the traditional middle class was not only weak, but also faced lots of changes due to several significant reasons. The most important premise was the tyranny of society and the authoritarian government. As Katouzian (2010, 6) argues, "Tyranny of the society does not only refer to the dictatorship. It actually means a society in which, on the one hand, the government has not grown on the basis of law and the community, on the other hand, is not based on discipline." Another reason for the changes is the constant conflict between the authoritarian government and the nation in Iran as well as short-lived and individualistic characters of society. Furthermore, the fear of losing life and property caused them to feel insecure. In ancient times, because Iranians were afraid that their property would be looted by despots, there was no accumulation of capital (Katouzian 2010, 15-17).

The traditional middle class consisted of the urban bazaars and the religious notables, and they had very strong ties. Since many of these businessmen, traders, and craftsmen financed the bazaar mosques, schools, seminaries, theaters, and other charitable foundations, the commercial middle class was intricately connected to the ulama.<sup>4</sup> Often marriage reinforced this connection (Abrahamian 1982, 34). On the other hand, the modern middle class comprised of white-collar employees and college-educated professionals, evaded traditions. With the advent of the New Age, the intellectuals followed the modern Western lifestyle and became the core of the new middle class and political leaders (Ashraf 1993, 170). There has been a contradiction between traditional and modern middle classes from the old to the present, and this is because the modern middle class, with its prominent role in the cultural, managerial, and economic spheres of society, is creating new values and norms that traditional structures cannot preserve (Sharif Far 2015, 26-27). With the founding of the University of Tehran and the modern administrative apparatus, the group increased in number and added to the foundation of the new middle class and political elite at that time and the second half of the present century. Regarding to the contradiction between these classes, Ashraf admits, the factor that profoundly influenced the lifestyle of this class and the separation and alienation between them and the earlier class of ulama and bazaar, and was prone to cultural alienation and antagonism, was the forced ban on women wearing hijab and unifying men's clothing (Ashraf 1993, 171).

In spite of the fact that a strong middle class plays a crucial role in democratization, it does not necessarily mean that middle class definitely pursue democracy. In the process of the constitutional movement, if it were not for the modern middle class enticing ulama and traditional middle class, they would have asked for law and justice, not democracy (Abrahamian 1982, 51). Francis Fukuyama's following expression confirms this fact. Middle-class people do not necessarily support democracy in principle: like everyone else, they are self-interested actors who want to protect their property and position (Fukuyama 2012, 56). It is also added that many middle-class people feel threatened by the redistributive demands of the poor and hence have lined up in support of authoritarian governments that protect their class interests. Nor is it the case that democracies necessarily meet the expectations of their own middle classes, and when they do not, the middle classes can become restive (Fukuyama 2012, 56).

It goes without saying that the number of middle class has increased. It now contains a large salaried middle class and an educated working class as well as a traditional entrepreneurial middle class. In many ways, the country is no longer part of the Third World (Abrahamian 2008, 194). However, today, we are faced with a large low-energy class, which is the result of a lack of a combination of weak economic and cultural strength (Armaki 2019, 5-6).

The significant reason for the middle class inability to transition to democracy is their lack of awareness of this concept, and because they ignore Iranian individualism and the specific characteristics of Iranian such as authoritarianism, lawlessness, and short-living history of the society. They want to practice Western democracy in a country that has many differences with Western democratic countries. In this regard the author of this article is in agreement with Ashraf. In the present century, our committed intellectuals and modern scholars along with the leaders of the society and the new middle class, generation after generation, have become increasingly alienated of Iranian culture, of Iranian history, of Iranian Islam, and of the masses. And the fundamental question is not why these are separated from the traditions. The point is that they lose their true understanding of society and culture over time. Before studying and reflecting on their own society and measuring its changes with other societies, and before knowing their own workers, peasants, intellectuals, statesmen, bazaar and ulama, they speak of general theories that are rooted in other societies (Ashraf 1993, 174).

In Post-revolution era, particularly in the past decade, the middle class in Iran, especially the modern middle class has faced serious problems and become weaker. 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 (Zahirnejad 2014, 63). 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

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<sup>4</sup> Although the word 'ulama' usually refers to high-ranking religious scholars, in this particular case it is much safer to refer to Abrahamian's classification of ulama in his book, *Iran Between Two Revolution*, that is the various preachers (*va'ez*), Koranic teachers (*akhunds*), seminary students (*tullabs*), Low-ranking clerics (*mullas*), and even high-ranking theologians (*mujtaheds*).

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.

### **5. Social Classes and the Potential Force of Solidarity**

The rise of the 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 (Haji Qasemi 2012, 6). As a matter of fact, in democratic movements in Iran, although middle class was strongly supported by ulama and intellectuals in organizing civic institutions, they would not probably be able to consolidate their political rights or challenge the authoritarian regimes without the support of the lower middle class.

The prominent role of the middle class in democratic movements of Iran is undeniable. However, it must not be forgotten that they were strongly supported by the intellectuals; the lower middle class has also played a very significant role in all above mentioned democratic movements. In this regard Abrahamian (1982, 526) stipulates, "Thus the torrent of middle class and working-class protests had come together to burst asunder the Pahlavi dam, tearing apart its pillars, and washing away most of its foundation." 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 controls the means of production. It should not be overlooked that majority of urban villagers constitute a potential force that may be used by other social classes when necessary (Ashraf 1993, 170-171). The lower middle class only gets involved in socio-political transitions when they are invited to act. And it is very important who calls them to the field. 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.

### **6. Conclusion**

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 is safe to say that losing influence as prominent socio-political actors is not the only problem the middle class 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. 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.

And last but not least, although the above-mentioned elements have caused the underperformance of the middle class, what has kept Iran's middle class weak is the existence of two middle classes and the conflicts between them, the short-lived society of Iran, the tyranny and the lawlessness of the society, the lack of the support from ulama, the extreme dependence on the state and its policies, along with the individualistic characters of Iranians. And in relation to their inability to transition to democracy, the reason is their lack of awareness and political growth, and hence they misinterpret the democracy itself, particularly the Western democracy. It does not

necessarily mean that the Western democracy is perfect and has no weaknesses. It actually means they overlook the specific characteristics of Iranian society such as authoritarianism, lawlessness, and short-living history of the society. Thus, they want to practice Western democracy in a country that has many differences with Western democratic countries.

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