The perspectives of Iranian feminists and women's activists on the process of democratisation

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Abstract

This paper explores women's views about the possibility of democracy in the context of Iran. Although Iran is now an electoral democracy in terms of political process, it may not be considered a fully democratic country. While research has been carried out on democracy in Iran, there is very little research on concepts of democracy for Iranian feminists and women activists, and the possibilities they advocate for democratisation. This paper explores these issues, drawing upon forty-seven semi-structured interviews with Iranian feminists and women activists. This study identifies women's views on different factors that enable democracy in Iran. It concludes that cultural transformation and cultural change among politicians play an important role in the process of democratisation.

Keywords: Iranian feminists, Iranian women activists, feminists, democracy, Islam

Introduction

Throughout Iranian history religion has always been one of the main sources of government regulation. In particular, after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Islamic traditions were given priority as there was a reversal of the modernisation processes that had been adopted in previous periods (Mir-Hosseini, 2015).

The ideology of modernisation supported during the Shah[i]'s time (1960s-1970s) was before the Islamic Revolution. During this time, modernists claimed that women's exclusion from society, and especially from education, brought about a loss of economic and political power. They argued that women should take part in building the national economy (Paidar, 1997; Hoodfar, 1999). Modernists also suggested educating and rehabilitating women to be modern wives and mothers (Hoodfar, 1999). Many girls' schools were constructed and educated

women had the opportunity to be employed as teachers (Paidar, 1997; Hoodfar, 1999). The Shah developed an educational system for women in order to forward the vehicle of modernization. While modernist ideology seemed to have improved women's position, only women, who did not wear the Hijab, had the opportunity to take part in the public realm. Women, who wore the Hijab, were unable to participate in employment opportunities or advanced segments of the economy. As Hoodfar (1999) argued, while many women wore the Chador and scarves in public, the veil was depicted as a symbol of 'backwardness' by the government. For this reason, religious women continued to feel alienated in society. On the other hand, women activists from upper class, secular backgrounds were elevated above religious women (Kia, 2005). These religious women were ignored by both women activists and the government, as religion was assumed to be regressive and a mark of traditionalist resistance to the Western-style modernisation of the time. However, after the Islamic Revolution this pattern of modernism changed and religious women started to work outside the home (Mir- Hosseini, 1996). It is notable that women's participation in the public sphere was the only advantage for Muslim individuals. Women lost many rights due to the changes to the laws after the Islamic Revolution (Karimi, 2014).

Since Islamic Revolution, Iranian political parties have been by and large loose formations of groupings. Parties tend to be considered in public debate as being either reformist, conservative or moderate in their approach to key aspects of how the state should be ruled. Reformist groups believe that they need to reform the structure of the state and these groups call for a reconciliation of democracy, human rights and Islam (Mir-Hosseini 2002). They argue that Islam can and should reflect contemporary society –rather than the different time and place in which the Quran was created. The country was governed by a reformist party during 1997-2005. During this time gender politics was less restrictive in terms of the relative freedom afforded to feminists and women activists. For example, the number of women's NGOs increased during this era due to the relatively open social-political situation. In contrast, conservative groups block reformist groups and reject democracy. They believe that the state should be ruled by Islam in a traditional way (Parsa, 2016). This means that they did not support that the Quran should be interpreted according to the current time, place and issues in society. Conservatives advocate preservation of the Islamic government in its present form in traditional way. The state was governed by a conservative party between 2005 and 2013. The policies of conservative politicians have particularly been restrictive in terms of women's activities. For example, many women's NGOs closed during this time. In another example, joining the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has been rejected by conservative leaders, as they believe that the CEDAW is incompatible with Islamic society. The two different understandings of Islam by conservatives

and reformists have led to the adoption of different positions regarding democracy and gender policies.

While reformist leaders have been more flexible in relation to democracy and feminist activities, conservative politicians are opposed to these activities and limit them. In the conservative view, men and women have different roles and responsibilities due to their God-given differences in terms of both psychology and biology (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). This conservative conviction derives from their inflexible interpretation of Islam.

Between 2013 and 2021 the state was governed by moderates, who are somewhere in the middle of conservative and reformist groups; but have more in common with reformist groups. Their approach to democracy and gender politics is less restrictive; however, conservative politicians retain a presence in government restricting the scope for feminist and women's activities (Tohidi, 2016). During this time, some of the women's NGOs were reopened, but their activities remained constrained. For example, while there has been a reactivation of some women's press and NGOs, they are still under constant pressure and receive threats from conservative politicians (Tohidi, 2016).These different understandings of the role of religion in the state among religious leaders and people in power in Iran have created a system that contains disagreements in terms of adopting united policies on women's rights and democracy.

Since the Islamic Revolution (1979) in Iran women have experienced varying degrees of discrimination and inequality across different fields such as law, family, economy, employment and culture. However, it can be seen that discrimination across these different areas mostly derives from legal inequality. There are a number of governmental state regulations that clearly differentiate women from men. One example is a religious tradition, enshrined in Iranian law, called Quessas[ii], whereby a woman's life is valued less than a man's in murder cases (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). In court, women's legal testimonies are valued less than a man's and, in some cases, worth nothing unless corroborated by a man (Hojati, 2015). Polygamy is also allowed in Iran, and divorce is legally only a right for men (Shirazi, 2012). According to Article 1117 of the Iranian Civil Code, a husband may deny his wife the right to work if he thinks that her job is incompatible with his or his wife's dignity or the interests of the family. It is notable that these limitations have slightly varied depending on their level of power within the political system and the level of influence more moderate and reformist groups are able to achieve (Tohidi, 2016). These examples show that things are far from being fair and equal.

From this quick glimpse into the gender balance in Iran, it is clear that women live in a secondary position to men (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). This information also tells us to what extent the state considers a Muslim woman as an obedient wife, daughter, or mother, whose main roles and duties lay within the private realm (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). Iran is a country in which women are denied any meaningful participation in political and economic

institutions. For some specialists in this field, this is characteristic of countries where the power and lawfulness of the state is directly related to religion (Afary et al., 1997). Forasmuch as the women's movement at the turn of the twenty-first century had great influence on the experience of democracy in Iran (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008; Povey, 2001), the view of Iranian feminists and women activists about democracy is momentous as Iran is at a sensitive crossroad toward democratisation (Moghissi and Moghissi, 1994; Povey, 2001).

In addition, the views of women activists about democracy are crucial because, as Sen (2009: xiii, cited in Richardson and Monro, 2012) states, 'democracy has to be judged not just by the institutions that formally exist but by the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the population can actually be heard'. This illustrates the importance of the ways in which Iranian feminists and women activists view different factors that act as enablers to move toward democratisation. While research has been carried out on democracy in Iran (e.g. Jahanshahrad, 2012; Moghadam and Haghighatjoo, 2016; Moghissi, 2016), no single study exists which explores concepts of democracy for Iranian feminists and women activists, and the possibilities they advocate for democratisation.

This paper addresses this gap in the literature through analysis of a qualitative study of the perspectives of the Iranian women's views on what could enable democracy and equality for women. It draws on forty-seven one to one semi-structured interviews with Iranian feminists and women activists. Participants in the study included a spectrum of women with different beliefs and strategies: secular feminists, religious reformists and religious conservative women.

Women, religion and democracy in Iran

Despite some democratic features in Iran, women are denied basic political and social rights (Parsa, 2016). Most studies related to feminism and democracy in Iran have only been carried out in a small number of overlapping areas. Some researchers have mentioned the ways that Iranian women activists contribute to democratisation by improving women's rights (e.g. Afshar, 1996; Moghadam, 2002; Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). These studies point to women's efforts for gender equality and, consequently, democracy. Additionally, some studies have examined the strong association between women's rights and a democratic system (e.g. Jahanshahrad, 2012; Moghadam and Haghighatjoo, 2016; Moghissi, 2016). Some scholars have engaged with the positive role of reformist leaders, mainly Khatami, who supported democracy and human rights on improvement of women's rights in Iran (e.g. Mir-Hosseini, 2002; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). For example, they examine how, during the reformist time (second era), feminists and women activists enjoyed relative freedom of the press and expression and NGOs grew (e.g. Paidar, 2001; Rostami-Povey, 2013). However, considering

the alleged important role of women activists in the process of democratisation, there is hardly any research on the concept of democracy as seen by feminists and women activists.

Moreover, in the process of democracy, there are two distinct concerns: one is that the individual's values are identified in the political culture, and the other is the democratic institutions and processes. There is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of political cultures that include the beliefs and values of ordinary citizens (e.g.Harik, 1994; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Tessler, 2002; Tohidi, 2016). For example, Rose *et al.* (1998) argue that democratic values such as pluralism and tolerance of diversity result in successful democracy. In another example, Tohidi (2016) emphasised the role of civil society organisations, particularly an effective grassroots women's movement for improving women's rights and building a secular and democratic political state. This study aims to examine the ways in which the women engage with key concepts in the political realm including democracy and rights and women's working relationship to categories of political discourse about democracy, freedom and rights. While this study does not explore the possibility of democracy in Iran, it examines what these possibilities are in feminists' and women activists' views. In other words, this study examines the participants' perspectives about factors that foster democracy.

Methodology

The fieldwork took place in Iran. During my fieldwork I explored how feminists and women activists suggests different ways to gain democracy. The interviewees all saw themselves as activists, while identifying themselves as: feminist, secular feminist, Islamic feminist, religious women rights' activists, and conservative women. Different recruitment strategies were used to access a variety of Iranian women activists. Activism can be defined in a variety of ways, but here it focuses on women who engage with social change at a variety of levels. The aim was to interview activists who focus on women's position in society; however, with different analyses of the social field, and seeking different degrees of social change. Based on this definition of activism, looking at different websites and publications related to women's issues, and also reading news about politicians known to be women's rights activists, enabled access to a number of respondents. In some cases, participants were used as key informants to help with snowball sampling. This approach was significant in the sampling process as it allowed me easier access and identify participants. Finally, the Trade Union Federation website facilitated contact via email with people who linked me to women activists connected with labour issues. Forty seven women in total agreed to take part in the study. I had ethical approval from Newcastle University before data collection in Iran. After data collection of the fieldwork, reading through my transcriptions, frequently alongside listening to the recording of the interviews, helped me to identify the themes in my data. Key themes that emerged through my

analysis were cultural transformation and cultural change among politicians. I turn to these themes in the following section.

Potential enabling factors for democracy

Most feminists and women activists suggested various factors related to cultural change that could enable the Iranian system to move toward democracy. The majority of feminists and women activists talked about cultural transformation in Iranian society and a few emphasised the role of cultural change amongst political leaders. These factors overlapped.

As the history of Iran shows, civil society has not yet fully developed. The state has often considered the expansion of political and civil rights as 'un-Islamic' and, as such, threatening to the foundation of the state's ideological and political bases (Abootalebi, 2000). However, it is notable that the pressure of the state on the public sphere has been fluctuating since the Islamic revolution. As Abootalebi (2000) argues, a fairly large middle class has been created by socio-economic modernisation after the Islamic Revolution and the professional and intellectual community has taken advantage of any opportunity to press for civil rights. Especially during Khatami's time, the pressure and debate over civil society, Islamic leadership, politics and religion has been more tolerated. Also, the post-revolution generation, who were deprived of basic social freedoms and politicised by controversial events, have been able to criticise state policies during Khatami's time. However, in Abbotalebi's view, these conditions do not imply that organised associations in Iran effectively influenced policy outcomes during that time. Indeed, for the majority of women activists, civil society is a key factor that would contribute to democracy in Iran. For example, Nazi, a self-defined Islamic feminist, argued:

> I think that revolution does not work in Iran. Rather, I think the best way to create the reform necessary for the transition to democracy is through civil society.

Similarly, Nadia, who identified herself as a secular feminist, said:

> In order to move towards democracy, the role of civil society is vital. Civil activities, and strong civil protests which force the government to step back, are important so that people can breathe.

In the majority of the respondents' views, the important components of civil society, including civic culture/cultural transformation, are the foundation of democracy and self-determination. These women talked about civic culture amongst Iranian individuals. However, most of the participants, at the same time talked about another aspect of civic culture/cultural change linked to women's rights. They believed that this culture needs to be promoted by

educating Iranian women about their rights. For these participants, women activists should have a role in cultural transformation amongst Iranian women to improve women's rights and lead to democratisation. Through grass-root levels, for example, Atena, who viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, argued for the role of women activists in promoting awareness of women's issues among women, to inspire them to have more of a presence in the social sphere rather than, traditionally, staying at home:

> I think that women activists can help the democratic process if they seriously attempt to promote awareness of women's issues and improvement of their situation, and also by encouraging women to be more active in society.

The above account is an illustration of how most of the women felt that in order to transition to democracy, it is necessary for women to leave behind the traditional confines of kinship and become active in the modern public domain. It seems that the idea that cultural transformation contributes to democracy is seen as more practical and achievable for most of the women. They believed that cultural and influencing religious change has an important role to play in transitioning to democracy.

While the majority of the women focused more on grassroots, some religious reformist women who had political experience argued that cultural change amongst the political leaders is also an important factor in enabling democracy. In these women's view, there is a need for influential senior politicians to advocate for democratic practices/ideals. These women, who during the interviews talked about their experiences in the political system and the problems they faced within this realm, argued that a democratic system needs democratic governors.

To help understand why these participants who have been involved in the political system at key stages think the way they do, it is useful to highlight the Green Movement[iii] which has shaped their approach to democracy. Many people who protested in the Green Movement were arrested and imprisoned and, importantly, the reformist leaders of this movement are, at the time of writing this paper, still in prison. Within this context, some religious reformist women involved in the political realm highlighted the role of having a democratic leader in advocating democratisation. For example, Akram, who saw herself as a religious women's rights activist, talked about the particular characteristics of Khatami, the ex-president, such as 'tolerance of different ideas':

> Also, for the institutionalisation of a democracy we require a series of practices. The most important action is the practice of democracy by political elites. When the slogan of Mr. Khatami is 'long live my opponent', he shows his commitment to democracy. When he says that someone whose ideas are against my own thoughts has his/her own right to live, or that someone who disagrees with me

should not be removed from the face of the Earth, this is a manifestation of democracy. I witnessed his behaviour when I was in the political structure. He asked others to propose ideas and even if their thoughts were against his own notions, he accepted them happily. The tolerance of different ideas and opinions are all manifestations of democracy.

Akram admired Khatami's values and behaviour as a democratic leader who respected and tolerated opponents' ideas. The above account illustrate the importance of the democratic culture, for some religious reformist women, amongst political leaders who they perceive might enable democracy. As discussed earlier, Iranian society experienced good progress toward democracy during Khatami's time. Based on the experiences of these religious reformist women who had political experiences in the time that Iran had a promising democratic process, they argued that the democratic behaviour of political figures could impact positively on democratisation.

The analysis of the data also shows that there is a link with the democratic culture of the religious leaders for conservative women. For the majority of conservative women, 'Islamic democracy' or 'Mardom-salari-ye dini'[iv], which is legitimised by The Supreme Leader[v], can be practised instead of democracy. This particular democracy was accepted by conservative women only to the extent that it does not oppose Islam:

> The Quran has a democratic meaning, but not pure democracy. The Supreme Leader has a debate called 'Mardom-salari-ye dini'. (Anoosh, a self-identifies conservative woman)

The conservative women believed that the state should be ruled by God's will and the role of Supreme Leader is significant for them. His position and ideas are highly respected by these women. The above quotation illustrates how the idea of Islamic democracy is accepted by conservative women because it was legitimised by The Supreme Leader. This suggests that while the secular model of democracy is not supported by The Supreme Leader, his advocacy of an Islamic model influenced the conservative women and implies how the culture of leaders can be important in the democratic process. Some researchers such as Mainwaring (1992) have also highlighted how commitment to democracy, both in terms of behaviour and values, on the part of political elites plays an important role in democratisation. In their argument, a firm commitment to democracy on the part of political elites can make democracy possible. Moreover, as discussed, the role of cultural change is highlighted by women activists in the search for democracy. Similarly, some studies (e.g.Harik, 1994; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Tessler, 2002; Tohidi, 2016) emphasise the role of democratic values on the process of democracy.

Conclusion

Most women believed that cultural change was a key factor in moving toward democracy. This is also illustrated by other scholars (e.g. Harik, 1994; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Tessler, 2002; Tohidi, 2016) who focus on the importance of political cultures, including the beliefs and values of ordinary citizens, in the process of democratisation. This suggests how Iranian feminists' and women activists can play a role in democratisation by their participations in awareness-rising. While this research conducted prior to the current protests of Iranian women, which are one of the most important of the many protests since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the perspectives of participants is very similar to what is happening in Iran these days. These protests are fueled by Mahsa Amini's death and the right of women to choose to wear hijab. It questions the current gender policies of Iran and the positioning of women as a second-class citizen. It calls for a fair society within which democratic values are respected.

Endnotes

[i] Mohammad Reza Shah was the last king of Iran from 1941 to 1979. Due to his advocation of modernism, he lost support from the Iranian clergy.

[ii] An Islamic word that means equal revenge, like the English expression 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'.

[iii] The Green Movement took place in the third era after Ahmadi Nejad became president in 2009 through presidential elections. A mass group of Iranian people and voters demonstrated in the street and called for the removal of Ahmadi Nejad from the presidency. As Ahmadi Nejad belonged to conservative groups, individuals including reformist and secular women, questioned conservatives with the slogan 'where is my vote'? (Milani, 2010). The positions and alliances of reformist and conservative groups shifted after the 2009 elections. As a result of the 2009 election, coalition politics polarised into two different sides, reformists and conservatives, bringing about political paralysis in Iran (Kamrava, 2010). When Ahmadi Nejad won the election, many Iranian people protested by arguing that the votes were fraudulent, and called for Ahmadi Nejad's removal from the presidency. Due to this protest, some dissidents (who advocated for the reformist leaders) faced torture in prisons and arbitrary arrest (Kamrava, 2010). It is notable that the reformist leaders of this movement were, at the time of writing this paper, still being held in prison.

[iv] Mardom-salari-ye dini means Islamic or religious democracy.

[v] The Supreme Leader is a person who is the head of Iranian government and has the highest ranking religious and political authority in the Iranian state.

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