VolunteerActivists

LONGITUDINAL SITUATION ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN NGOS

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Executive Summary

This paper provides a longitudinal situation analysis regarding the position of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Iran and also presents a set of strategies for policymakers and international donors concerning effective and riskless support for NGOs. The paper firstly discusses the legal, political, and policy positions of Iranian NGOs principally during two contemporary political periods, namely the reformist administration (1997–2005) and the conservative administration (2005–2013). Subsequently, the paper also discusses the further process of securitization and militarization in Iran, which happened during 2013–2021, and explains how this has tightened the scope of activism for NGOs. The paper concludes that the current situation of civil society in Iran is extremely complicated as NGOs play their role in quite a sectional setting, one which is also becoming homogenized owing to the authoritarian trends of the Islamic Republic. Because of the differences evident between different areas and levels of activism, policymakers and donors that seek to support NGOs should definitely compile distinct categories of policies that account for the variations in the civil society and political regime of Iran. Otherwise, such support will lead to unintended risks for NGOs, including security harassments, arrest, and judicial complaints.

Based on a research project conducted between 2012 and 2021, this paper presents the results of interviews with dozens of NGOs and civil activists, as well as policymakers in local and central government and from environmental and women's rights domains. This paper explains how the scope and freedoms of NGOs, and also the formal discourse and laws about them, depend significantly on changes in the state. This means that any expectation from NGOs in terms of promoting democratic capacities in authoritarian regimes such as that of Iran should be re-assessed and re-adjusted.

Firstly, one should bear in mind that the structure and composition of civil society in Iran is not homogenous and coherent. Secondly, each policy domain differs from each other in terms of its political importance to the regime; this difference determines where NGOs can have more freedom in pursuing influence on public policies and where they cannot have it. Highly political domains such as human rights are to a great extent under severe security control from the government, and NGOs face a securitized atmosphere and many limiting redlines. In non- or less political domains, such as environmental protection, NGOs benefit from a greater degree of freedom and relations between the state and NGOs can be expected to be friendlier. In addition, the local level of government is very different from central government. At the local government level, the interaction between NGOs and state organizations is less confrontational and politicized, and therefore NGOs face less security suppression, whereas, at the central level, the extent of political and security tensions is higher. Therefore, what NGOs are allowed to say or do in the public sphere is determined to a great extent by the policy domain and level of government.

Policymakers are recommended to design specific schemes and strategies to provide NGOs with funding, support, or even training programmes. Any support, especially international support, may have negative consequences and expose NGOs to serious risks if it is given without taking account of the above-mentioned factors. However, this sectional environment has become more homogenized recently. Concerning the securitized and militarized political atmosphere inside Iran, international donors and organizations can resort to more effective and less risky strategies. This paper concludes with five categories of strategy for supporting NGOs, including promoting campaigns on social media, providing special training, targeting the restrictive official rules, and setting particular ways of funding. In the current securitized environment, identifying the current issues of NGOs and campaigning at an international level by naming and shaming the repressors and authorities is the best strategy to reduce the security pressures on NGOs.

Additionally, it should be noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran has long ago abandoned the concepts of

democracy, human rights, and civil society. Thus, there is always a strong chance that women's rights will be curtailed or, under the heading of environmentalism, that natural reserves will be exploited by the regime. When it comes to NGOs and public participation, government policies restrict independent NGOs by passing laws and regulations that appear to have the effect of supporting NGOs. International organizations and policymakers should identify, study, and scrutinize the current policies of the Iranian regime and reveal their undemocratic aspects internationally in order to shame them. Such a strategy has been shown to be effective, especially in the area of human rights.

In 2020, the situation in Iran changed as the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the country. This nationwide crisis shifted the political situation by paving the way for the regime's military and Islamic forces and institutions to expand their authority across all areas and levels, and by moving towards a totalitarian police state. In 2021, the rise to power of Ebrahim Raeesi has been of concern to civil activists as it is expected that more anti-democratic policies will be implemented. Thus, while differences and variations in public spheres still exist, policymakers and international organizations should exercise greater caution when they seek to contact or support NGOs.

There are nine sections in this paper, the last of which is a conclusion that provides the reader with several strategies based on the trajectory and experiences of NGOs over the last three decades. The sections are as follows:

1. Introduction
2. The Legal Position of NGOs
3. Variation in the Public Spheres
4. Research Design
5. Women's Rights NGOs
6. Environmental NGOs
7. Securitization and Militarization
8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Section 1

INTRODUCTION

The Shifting Position of NGOs in Iran

The legal position and formal agency of NGOs in Iran have been constantly changing because of two factors. The first is the shifting balance between the reformist and conservative factions in society and the rotation of power between them during the last three decades. The second factor is the interaction between the two sections of the political regime, namely elected institutions such as the president and unelected institutions such as the supreme leader. These factions and sections all encounter and interact with one another and the balance of power between them determines the position of NGOs in the governance. It is particularly desirable for donors and international organizations to know which political camp, using which discourse and approach, has the power in its hands and also to know which one is capable of providing a more democratic environment by taking a critical stance against the authoritative trends of the authoritarian institutions. Despite the ultimate power of the unelected institutions, it is also crucial to account for the elected section of the regime—i.e. the president and parliament—and its political and legal capacity to promote the influence of the civil activism of NGOs. However, one should always bear in mind that the military, security, and Islamic institutions, with their extensive authority, can always impede or block the critical pressures of civil society which may be directed towards the regime through the elected institutions. The trajectory of the Islamic Republic during the last three decades has been towards militarization and securitization. This has favoured the unelected institutions and occurred at the expense of NGOs.

1.1 Social Identity of NGOs

In terms of social identity and ideology, civil society groups in Iran can be divided into (but are not limited to) two main streams. These streams originate from and correspond to the main sociocultural factions of the society, which make up two political camps competing with one another. These include a conservative camp with a strong religious orientation and a reformist camp with a democratic orientation[1]. The former camp includes several strata, activists, and groups that seek to promote the rule of Sharia principles, i.e. an Islamic interpretation of justice, social collaboration, and traditional culture under the guidance of the Muslim clergy. This faction enjoys the privilege of political backing and financial support from the conservative clergy, which rules hundreds of national and local Islamic organizations and state institutions. Superior to all the state institutions, the supreme leader is the political reference point of this faction. The groups in this section of society are not independent of the formal Islamic discourse of the regime, nor can they be regarded as agents of spontaneous societal forces as they do not have the legitimacy to make decisions against the state. The second faction, by contrast, has an interest in Western democracy and its cultural values, as well as modern lifestyles, while at the same time it seeks to integrate the concepts of human rights into Islam, so the reformist camp also accounts for social trust, collaboration, and justice. The groups in this section of society seek to promote democratization by implementing the principles of rule of law, transparency, and public participation. A distinct line drawn between the two factions would not be an exact one as there are overlaps in their beliefs, behaviours, and discourses and sometimes they have collaborated and formed a coalition made up of moderate elements. Nevertheless, NGOs and their members usually associate their identity and origins with either of these two factions.

When it comes to representing a cause in policymaking, the origin and identity of NGOs determine their approach, discourse, and behaviour in the public sphere and explain their actions as well. Besides that, the extent to which NGOs benefit from political freedoms, social security, and state support on the one hand, and their deprivation of public resources and the type of interaction they have with the government organizations on the other, are influenced by their ideological status and political approach towards the conservative clergy that has ruled the Islamic Republic for four decades. Conservative NGOs have been mostly supported and directed

1 Bashirieh, H. (2016). An Introduction to the Political Sociology of Iran: The Age of the Islamic Republic. Tehran: Negah-e-Moaser.

by the regime and usually have a pro-state stance, while they are funded by the Islamic and military forces. By contrast, NGOs with a reformist agenda and discourse may have a stronger vocal, critical stance, although this does not mean that they are independent; rather, their main source of survival is state funds.

NGO activism in Iran is also characterized by the general features of Iranian culture, which has elements of traditionalism and Islamism at its centre. Historically, Iranian civil society has not developed with the same trajectory as its Western counterparts. American and European civil societies grew hand in hand with democracy, private property, the rule of law, and political rights, whilst Iranian civil society has its roots in the traditional charitable organizations and communities that were inspired by Islamic teaching and had social collaboration, public training, or religious tasks as their functions, but rarely as a policy mission[2]. The current cohort of advocacy NGOs in Iran, although diverse, inherited its characteristics from its traditional predecessors, such as Islamic groups in neighbourhoods and small seminaries which lacked a modern structure, discipline, and hierarchical system. They also did not have official procedures and records, nor did they have political aims and purposes related to government[3]. This means that even registered NGOs in the Islamic Republic are still semi-traditional in character.

1.2 Paradoxical Structure of the Islamic Republic

As previously mentioned, the paradoxical structure of the Iranian regime also determines the position of NGOs. On one side, the republican institutions, including parliament and the president, which are elected by a public vote, are the mechanisms of public sovereignty but, on the other side, many Islamic and military organizations oversee and counter the power of the elected institutions in both policymaking and electoral processes. During the last four decades, institutions from these two sections have interacted differently over time. Despite shifts in the administration, the official approach and discourse of the Islamic Republic determine the scope of the actions and political boundaries of civil society and the level of its public participation. This means that the freedom NGOs have in terms of what they can or cannot do, and what they can or cannot say, are defined and may not go beyond a certain limit. This discourse has been spelt out by the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, at the top of the regime, and has been interpreted and implemented differently by the reformist and conservative administrations. Khamenei heads and overrules both the elected and non-elected institutions. While the administration and the president are given legal authority to set the main agendas in different policy domains, and parliament has the power to pass laws and monitor the performance of all state institutions, the supreme leader has the ultimate power to veto all policies and decisions, determine the general policies of the state, and appoint people to judicial and Islamic posts. This is an extensive range of powers, which significantly limits the elected institutions.

When it comes to supporting NGOs in the context of Iranian politics, one should bear in mind that the core elements of the discourse and policies of the current supreme leader have not shifted over time. Khamenei's rhetoric about democracy has no room for democratic values and constitutional freedoms, yet he also stresses the active participation of people in politics. In his speeches, the supreme leader has often adjusted the Islamic definition and function of democracy. He associates the Islamic Republic as a political system with the universal concept of democracy but also paradoxically distinguishes it from democracy, as follows: '[…] this is something else. […] it is not that we get democracy from the West and we pin it to religion until we can have a complete group, no, *mardomsalari*[4] itself is connected to religion.'[5] In his rhetoric, the active participation of people in governance and public affairs is limited to electoral and pro-regime demonstrations and does not include organized ones such as civil society organizations. At the same time, the universal notions of civil society and citizenship have never been acknowledged in the formal discourse of the regime, because Khamenei delegitimizes them as 'western and deviant.'

2 Katouzian, H. (2004). The Short-term society: A Study in the Problems of Long-term Political and Economic Development in Iran. Middle Eastern Studies, 40 (1), 1–22.
3 Kamali, M. (2003). Civil society and Islam: a sociological perspective. European Journal of Sociology, 42 (3), 457–482.
4 Mardomsalary is known to be the equivalent word for democracy in Persian language, it means the rule of people
5 Gheissari, A., & Nasr, V. (2006). Democracy in Iran: History and the quest for liberty. New York: Oxford University Press.

Section 2

LEGAL POSITION OF NGOS

Legal and Policy Capacities of NGOs

Despite the authoritarian character of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there are several democratic articles in its constitution, especially those about the rights of people and public participation in governance. This aspect of the political system allows NGOs to find some opportunities for political shifts inside the regime. The pro-democracy streams and groups have sought to utilize the limited legal and political capacities within the regime's structure and constitution to support NGOs. Also, international organizations and donors see these democratic spaces as an opportunity to enhance the position of civil society and to promote democratization through Iranian NGOs. However, the history of the Islamic Republic shows that, because of the authoritarian and ideological features of the regime, the extent of change is limited. Thus, the scope of action of NGOs, even with international and local support, cannot go beyond a certain limit. Consideration of the legal position of NGOs and of two major political shifts during the Islamic Republic period makes this clear.

While the third chapter of the constitution guarantees the basic political rights and civil freedoms of the people, and necessitates regular elections, the institutional design of the regime is a hybrid one which simultaneously limits the given freedoms. Also, several articles of the constitution, especially those about guaranteeing the implementation of Islamic rules, restrict the rights of the people. For example, it states that: 'people are free to associate unless they endanger Islamic principles and national security'. Moreover, the laws provide dozens of Islamic, security, military, and other unelected institutions with a wide range of authorities that preserve the power of the establishment, especially the supreme leader and the hundreds of forces, institutions, and foundations under his rule.

2.1 Localization of Civil Society

In the regime's formal ideology and discourse, which is shaped by Islamic principles, a religious version of civil society has been defined, institutionalized, and developed by a conservative faction. In this definition, the concept of civil society has an altered meaning, one that is contrary to that which applies in Western democracies. This is a confiscating act by a conservative clergy; it is also an attempt to delegitimize Western democracy whilst replacing it with a combined system that integrates Sharia within the façade of democracy. The current leader of Iran has repeatedly mandated certain Islamic alternative concepts such as Umma (the society of Muslims) and Madinatonabi (the city of the Prophet) that refer to traditional Muslim societies in the early history of Islam.[6] He reduces civic activism to charitable acts and religious activities such as taking part in Friday prayers and attending pro-regime demonstrations, mosques, and seminaries, which are quite different from policymaking activity. Civic engagement has the long-term goal of public improvement and addressing the causes of public issues, while charity aims to alleviate suffering such as hunger, the need for financial assistance, etc. By ignoring NGOs, and not acknowledging their policy role, the Islamic regime and the leader reduce the risk of political opposition and persistence from civil society. Like many authoritarian or Islamic countries, the Islamic Republic limits the legal and practical scope of action of civil society by resorting to its Islamic, anti-Western, undemocratic ideology[7]. These notions reduce social activism to a form of collaborative activism under religious leadership which is meant to be guided and spelt out by the clergy. The clergy has long been an integral and influential element within Iranian civil society, especially when Islamist clerics played a key role during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Since the rise of the regime, the clergy has developed many unelected religious and cultural foundations, organizations, military, and semi-military institutions to enable them to hold onto power and also to maintain authority in the civic spheres by employing social groups. In the Islamic Republic's discourse, the function of civil society is defined as facilitating the exercise of Islamic values, including social collaboration, charity, and devotion, instead of taking part in public decisions and committing political activism.

6 Feirahi, D. (1999). Civil Society: the Dual Origin. In H. Laali, What Does Khatami Speak About? (pp. 72–99). Tehran: Ekhlas.
7 Zarifinia, H. (1998). Assessing the Political Streams in Iran: from 1980 to 2000. Tehran: Azadi-e-Andishe.

Nevertheless, in the upstream legal and policy documents, the agency and role of the civil society and non-state groups are still recognized, albeit traditionally and vaguely. The constitution contains a handful of articles in its third chapter that guarantee the nation's rights and freedoms of assembly, organization, speech, and equality, as well as freedom from discrimination and state intervention in citizens' privacy. Although the general policies, strategic documents, and executive enactments are meant to be part of this chapter of the constitution, in practice they may not be since the Islamic and military institutions oversee and restrict them. Thus, any communication with Iranian NGOs with the aim of helping them should take into account the role of the unelected section of the regime, otherwise NGOs run the risk of repression and closure by judicial and security measures.

2.2 Position of NGOs in Governance

The legal rights and participatory role of NGOs are a more recent subject, one that is not directly mentioned in the constitution but is to be found instead in the ordinary rules and regulations. Their rights range from proposing alternative solutions to appealing the state's decisions. However, over the last three decades, long-term development plans and upstream policy documents have been subject to political interventions due to shifts in the composition of the administration and, therefore, changes in the rights and position of NGOs.

The political shifts of power during the last three decades which led to growth of the capacity and scope of NGOs showed that large-scale shifts, if they happen, are not necessarily stable and constant. Moreover, at any time, with the intervention of the authoritarian institutions and groups, the political processes and elections can be engineered in a way that reverses any progressive democratic shift. Khatami and Ahmadinejad's administrations are two cases worth looking at in this respect. Comparing these administrations and the position of NGOs during the two political periods 1997–2005 and 2005–2013 helps to understand how NGOs can be supported in one administration and restricted in another.

The recognition of NGOs as formal actors in the policy processes and legal documents started in 1997, when President Khatami's administration took the first steps towards introducing a new position and role for NGOs, although via a top-down approach as part of the government's reform-centred agenda. This agenda was inspired by similar shifts in other Middle East countries and also by international encouragement from organizations such as the United Nations (UN). The reformist administration gradually formalized the policy role of NGOs in the administrative regulations, ordinary laws, and executive enactments and also improved their organizational capacities in the public sphere by providing financial and organizational support. The first official outcome of the reform project came in 2004, when the cabinet of ministers approved the first executive regulation that required all state offices to let NGOs access their information, policy details, and decisions, and also granted NGOs the right of appealing state policies. However, the majority of NGO leaders and members confirmed that, while their organizational capacities, resources, and communication with the state became regularized, NGOs were still semi-informal actors for many state organizations, either because of the non-positive perception of policymakers or owing to a lack of legal support. Registered NGOs, whilst growing in number, were still not fully fledged in terms of independence, experience, and resources, as they were set up with the political support and funding of the authorities.

2.3 Distribution of NGOs

The official reports and documents of the Islamic Republic institutions concerning the total number of NGOs and also their numbers in different areas of activity have never been consistent, accurate, or comprehensive, owing to a lack of transparency. However, if one compares the available reports and statements, several significant changes can be seen in the total number of NGOs across recent decades and presidencies. Figure 1 provides a comparison between the last three administrations in terms of the growth and decline of the total number of registered NGOs.

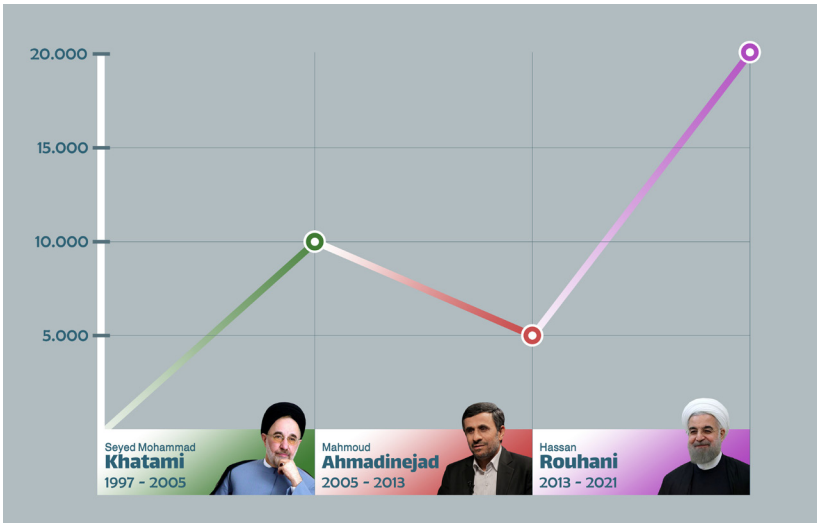

Figure 1: Comparison of the number of NGOs across three administrations

Figure 1 shows how dependent the civil society of Iran is on the state, since every change in the administration brought about a significant shift in the size of civil society.

The first change can be traced back to the Khatami administration. The reformist administration facilitated a spike in the number of formally registered groups to more than 10,000, according to the Ministry of Interior (MoI)'s databases in 2005. But this change was a state project because inspection of the many new NGOs formed at that time revealed that they were made up of politicians, state officials, and their family members and friends, who were encouraged to register a group to support the project of reformism. Apart from the registered NGOs, there were (and always are) thousands of simultaneous unregistered cultural, educational, and religious groups that have no policy or political role in the governance. Moreover, one should bear in mind that most of the registered NGOs were made up of people who lacked skills and knowledge about civil activism; rather, they were passionate people who sought social activism. Nevertheless, the political shifts during the reformist administration changed the balance of power and type of relationships between the state and NGOs. Therefore, the policies of the state were no longer only the result of a sole decision by the authorities; instead, NGOs had some influence over them and were sometimes quite influential in creating, implementing, or impeding policies.

After the reformist period, however, the rise of the conservative administration of President Ahmadinejad changed both the legal position and size of civil society and the number of NGOs fell by about a half, i.e. to 5,000 in 2013[8]. That administration sought to engineer the composition and function of NGOs in order to harmonize them with the Islamic discourse of the regime and control their critical pressure. In this period, the state limited the legal capacities concerning the policy role of NGOs and restricted their access to authorities so that they returned to the traditions of religious training and charity instead of political representation. In the top policy documents, the definition and function of NGOs were reduced to non-political activities and their legal access to and influence over state decisions, for example that enacted by the reformist cabinet, was removed.

Later again, owing to the shift in the administration after the 2013 presidential elections, during the so-called 'moderate' administration of President Rouhani, i.e. during the period 2013–2021, the total number of NGOs was reported to have increased to about 20,000[9]. During this period, the rules for registration and setting up of NGOs underwent major shifts and appropriation by the state. Also, the project of governmentalizing and instrumentalizing NGOs progressed and shifted the composition of civil society. These shifts, and their implications for NGOs, mean that, in every political period, the legal position of NGOs changes; therefore, donor organizations and supporters that aim to develop NGOs in Iran should bear in mind the current status

8 Interview with the then Director-General for the NGO Office in the Ministry of Interior, Arman newspaper, 2014, available at: http://armandaily.ir/1393/08/20

9 Deputy for Social Participation, The Social Affairs Department, Ministry of Interior, February 2, 2020, IRNA news agency, available at https://www.irna.ir/news/83657324/

quo and policies and adjust their support accordingly.

However, it should be noted that all the above-mentioned numbers are approximate and also controversial as different authorities have always given different numbers when they have talked about the number of NGOs in the country.

2.4 NGOs According to Area of Activity

Apart from the total number of NGOs, their distribution across different areas of activity and different policy fields has never been accurately reported. A report by the Volunteer Activists Institute in 2018, which brought together several formal reports from different official sources, demonstrated the distribution of NGOs in Iran. It shows a sparse number of NGOs active in the areas of human rights and professional and policy advocacy[10]. For example, the report shows 2,722 NGOs in the area of women's issues and 673 in the area of environmental issues, whereas in charity areas the number is 14,619. This means that around one-third of NGOs in Iran are charity groups, while environmental NGOs comprise 1.5% and women's issues NGOs only comprise 6.1%. An implication that can be understood from this report is that a small section of civil society engages with policy roles and governance and the representative role of NGOs in policymaking is weak. Figure 2 shows the distribution of NGOs across different fields.

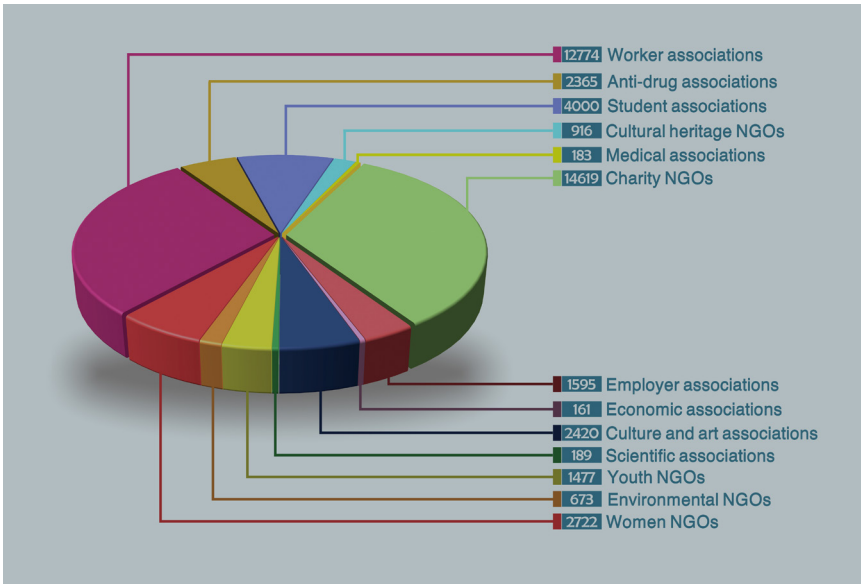

Figure 2: Distribution of NGOs in Iran. Data taken from Volunteer Activists (2018)

10 Civil Society in Iran and its Future Prospects—A Case Study, September 2018, Volunteer Activists.

Section 3

VARIATION IN THE POLITICAL SETTING

The Hybrid Regime of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran should be regarded as a hybrid regime that confronts NGOs differently across different policy domains and government levels during different political periods. This difference leads to complexity within the political settings of the Islamic Republic and has implications for supporting NGOs in policymaking. Apart from the structural complexity and differences, the rotation of power between reformist and conservative streams, in the framework of the Islamic ideology, changes the scope of NGOs. It is important that this is taken into account as donors and policymakers may see their strategies concerning NGOs give different results.

The political structure of the regime has become open and closed during different periods. It was open during the Khatami administration, since it allowed greater public participation, more competitive interest groups to rise and act, and also more freedoms in the civic space. Moreover, power was decentralized to local government. The climate of policymaking during this period was friendlier and more tolerant. However, it was still an undemocratic state compared to many Western democratic countries. But later on, during the Ahmadinejad administration, the regime closed the structure since the climate was more conflictual and tighter, freedoms were restricted, and critical groups and interests had fewer freedoms. The environment of civil society in the 'open' Islamic Republic was more diverse in terms of the number of NGOs, their interests, and statuses, more competitive in terms of competing interests and ideologies, and more flexible in terms of the possibility of inclusion in decision making. But the 'closed' Islamic Republic was exclusive and did not easily allow outsiders access or the ability to influence policies.

3.1 The Effect of the State's Political Approach

The discourse and approach of each administration towards civil society were different and so the agency of NGOs was determined differently. The more 'liberal' a state was, like the reformist one from 1997 to 2005, the more freedoms the NGOs had. The reformist elite, which had a more democratic approach and manifesto, was more tolerant, had greater inclusiveness in its decision-making style, and used fewer security measures when it faced criticism and pressure from society. However, the conservative elite, which was in power between 2005 and 2013, closed the structure, which led to less transparency, a lack of tolerance, and a less inclusive approach towards civil society. Figure 3 compares the two periods.

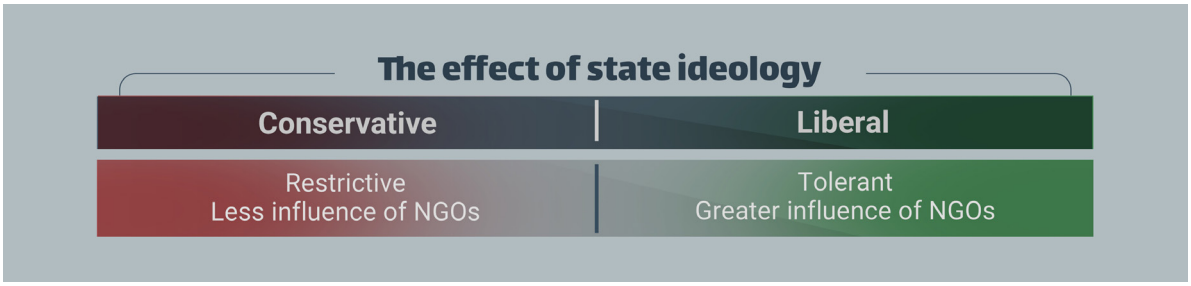

Figure 3: The effect of the state's ideology

3.2 Variation Across Policy Domains

Apart from periodic changes, the political or ideological policy domains have, for NGOs, always been different from technical or executive domains[11]. A political domain strictly engages the ideology of the regime and also

11 Kriesi, H. (1991). The political opportunity structure of new social movements: Its impact on their mobilization. In J. C. Jenkins & B. Klandermans (Eds.), The politics of social protest (pp. 167–198). London: University of Minnesota Press/UCL Press.

the beliefs of NGOs and increases the insistence of the state and NGOs on their interests[12]. This causes greater conflict between the two parties. The Islamic Republic has always been less tolerant and less inclusive in political areas, while in technical areas they accept higher participation from non-state actors, essentially because they need the resources and capacities of NGOs to fulfil public welfare and maintenance functions. Areas such as healthcare, sport, and science have usually seen less conflict between the two sides. Nevertheless, the extent of conflicts and confrontations still depends upon which political camp rules the state. For instance, in some cases, the policies of the Khatami administration in the women's rights domain were more tolerant than those of the Ahmadinejad administration. Figure 4 demonstrates this effect.

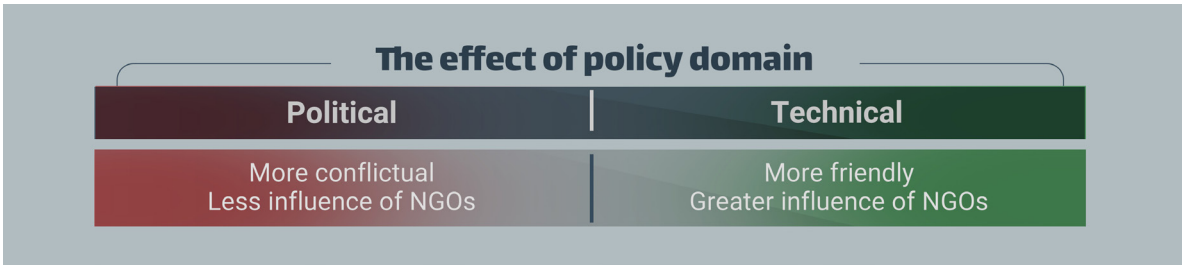

Figure 4: The effect of policy domains

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the extent of politicization of each domain may be higher than that in a democratic country. Also, over time, because of the militarization and securitization of politics, many unpolitical domains have been politicized as well. In general, the policy domains and areas of activity of NGOs can be categorized as shown in Figure 5. The green column shows the less political areas that normally do not engage with policymaking, whereas the pink column is more political as NGOs in those areas usually seek to affect public policies. The middle column shows areas that have overlap with the other two.

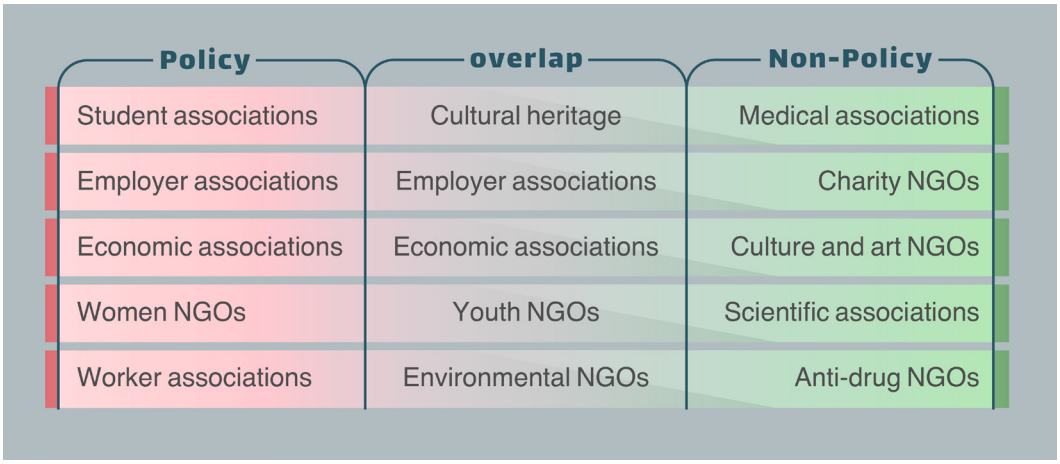

Figure 5: The policy and non-policy domains

3.3 Variation Across Government Levels

The freedoms and opportunities of civil society organizations often vary between central and local government[13]. This variation is mainly due to two factors: access of people to policymakers; and the type of relationships between NGOs and the state[14,15].

As shown in Figure 6, during both the reformist and conservative administrations, the interactions and

12 Kriesi, H. (2007). Political context and opportunity. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), The Blackwell companion to social movements. Oxford: Blackwell.
13 Meyer, D. S. (2004). Protest and political opportunities. Annual Review of Sociology, 30, 125–145.
14 Pateman, C. (1970). Participation and democracy in theory. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
15 Smith, B. (1985). Decentralization: The territorial dimension of the state. London: George Allen & Unwin.

confrontations between civil society and the state were more conflictual at the national level and power was more concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite. But, in local government, policymakers were less political and more accessible to civil society organizations. Nevertheless, the decentralization of power and the functions and discretion of local authorities in Iran still differ from those in democratic countries. Although the decentralization of power to hundreds of sectoral and local state institutions has led to the development of a system of local government, the discretion of local policymakers is still limited, and they are subordinate to the policies of central government. In terms of political participation, local government organizations have often been used to deepen the influence and control of the state across the country.

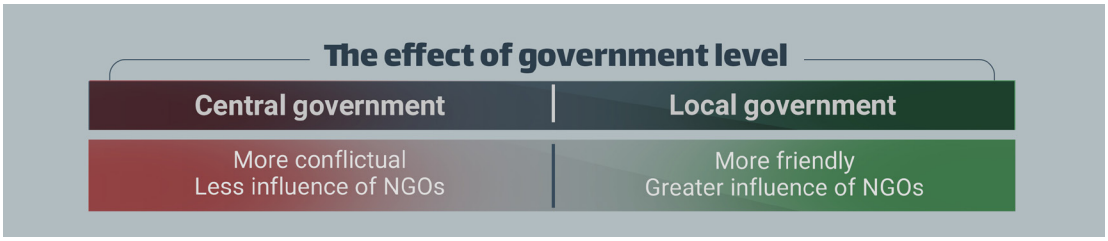

Figure 6: The effects of government levels

In Iran, the state has intentionally opened or closed the political structure by appropriating formal rules and manipulating laws, particularly those relating to public participation. Figure 7 demonstrates the effect of the three above-mentioned factors on networks and the agency of NGOs.

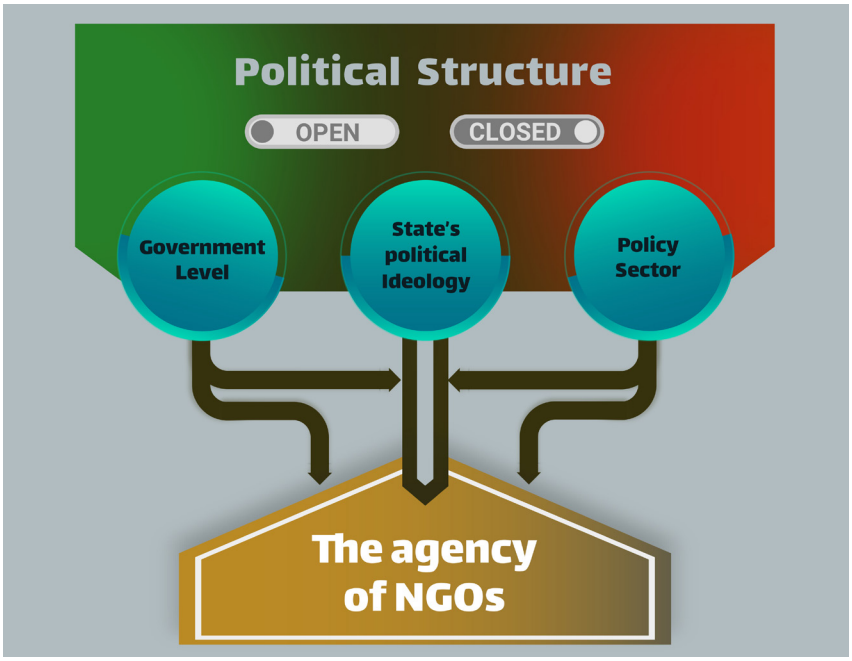

Figure 7: The effect of political structure on the agency of NGOs

Section 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

This report is based on a research project carried out in Iran between 2012 and 2021. It compares the position of NGOs in the women's rights and environmental policy domains at central and local government levels across the reformist and conservative administrations. It is a combination of qualitative and quantitative designs. By using quantitative methods, the research compares and measures the number of NGOs, as well as comparing the frequency of interaction between NGOs and state and non-state actors during different administrations. A qualitative strategy is used to explain changes in the policies of the state and the status of NGOs. It also enables discussion of the character of the relationship between NGOs and state, i.e. friendly or conflictual, as well as their behaviour and discourses in the two chosen domains.

4.1 Research Methods

The research findings are derived from interviews with 44 people from state organizations and NGOs. The interviewees were chosen from both conservative and reformist streams to reflect contrasts between their discourse and policies in the women's rights and environmental policy domains. The women's rights domain is a political one and the environmental domain is a technical one; these domains show the different statuses of NGOs and their constraints across policy domains. Respondents to the research are state authorities and NGO activists from both local and central government. Tehran, the capital city, is the seat of central government and Golestan province represents local government. In addition, experts, journalists, partisans, and civil activists were interviewed to provide complementary information.

The research employed several different data sources to strengthen the validity and reliability of the information. In this regard, state reports, academic studies, and data from international organizations and media outlets were used. The interview questions were designed with common sets of themes but there were also some special sections regarding the status of the respondent. The common themes included questions that were about, but not limited to, the position and definition of NGOs in Iran, their policy role in the making of laws, the policies of different administrations towards them, and their constraints and methods of participation. As will be discussed in the following sections, across the reformist and conservative administrations, the political setting of Iran and the freedoms of NGOs changed significantly because of changes in the political climate, but the extent of change was different at the local government level and also across the two policy domains.

Section 5

WOMEN'S RIGHTS NGOS

Political Nature of the Domain

Both policymakers and civil activists admit that the women's rights domain has always been one of the most political and contentious domains in Iran during the Islamic Republic period. It is a battlefield between competing ideologies, including feminist, Islamist, and secular ideologies, which have opposing discourses and agendas regarding the position and rights of women. Nevertheless, the degree of conflict is lower at the local government level and the interaction between state and NGOs is friendlier. Investing in the capacities of local NGOs has a greater chance of success than engaging with political conflicts at the national level.

The reason for the political aspect of this domain is the shadow cast over it by the politics of Islam, as this ideology has specific mandates and teachings about gender-related issues and also about the social status and rights of women. The Islamic discourse has been reluctant to accept critical discourses and groups.

Although women have been treated as the 'second sex' in the history and culture of Iran, equalitarian women activists have always been present in the most important turns of history, including the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 and the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Since the rise of the Islamic Republic, the state has set up dozens of institutions for devising regulations, policies, and rules about women and their private and social affairs, ranging from dress codes to inheritance laws. All state institutions, whether elected or unelected, must comply with the guidelines and strategies set out by the supreme leader about women's rights. Ayatollah Khamenei has always spelt out a traditional discourse about women which defines their main roles as being 'a good mother,' 'a good homemaker', or 'a good wife', while, in a limited way, he also admits the presence and social contribution of women. In his discourse, certain concepts such as chastity—meaning not mixing with the opposite sex—are highlighted. In the formal rhetoric of the Islamic Republic, women are considered inferior to men[16]. This makes the environment of civil society challenging and constrained for secular or feminist NGOs.

5.1 Reformist Period: Competition and Confrontation

During the reformist and conservative administrations, interactions between women NGOs and state institutions shifted corresponding to changes in the national mood, political coalitions, and formal policies. This brought about different situations for women NGOs over the period 1997–2013.

During 1997–2005, the administration used a liberal discourse and strategy, which included establishing offices for women's affairs in the presidential office and also in other state organizations. The central government was inspired by the policies of the UN and had the agenda of promoting women's rights, albeit via a top-down approach. The Khatami administration used its financial and political resources to increase the number of NGOs. By distributing public resources, including finance and material support, and by establishing new administrative units and posts, such as advisors for women, and creating formal procedures to ease the registration of women NGOs, the government helped thousands of women to set up their own organizations and groups. As a result, the number of women NGOs increased almost ninefold from 55 to 470. However, many of these groups were financially or politically dependent upon the state or their members were relatives of members of the authorities. This is a disadvantage of providing civil society with external or state support, as NGOs grow dependently and develop clientelist networks in society. Nevertheless, a vibrant cohort of women NGOs appeared and gained formal status in the networks of civil society over time, as they succeeded in taking seats in government commissions and on committees. Female lawyers, lecturers, students, state employees, and civil activists were the leading actors in this area.

In terms of rules and procedures, owing to encouragement from international organizations and growing

16 Sadeghi, F. (2009). Foot Soldiers of the Islamic Republic's "Culture of Modesty". Middle East Research and Information Project, 39. Retrieved from http://www.merip.org/mer/mer250/foot-soldiers-islamic-republic%E2%80%99s- %E2%80%9Culture-modesty%E2%80%9D

pressures from Iranian women NGOs, the state organizations faced the prospect of an egalitarian discourse occurring in public spheres. As a result, the reformist administration established several agendas for supporting women groups. First of all, the formal discourse of the government turned into a more women-friendly one by stressing the political empowerment of women and eliminating violence against them. The presidential office, and the leading religious women figures in it, adopted their blueprints from international organizations like the UN and communicated them to local government offices. Filling the gender gap and decreasing discrimination became the priorities for advocacy NGOs alongside reformist authorities. 'Equal rights' became the prevalent discourse in the policy domain; however, the women-unfriendly rhetoric of the leader and dozens of Islamic unelected institutions remained in place and impeded the scope of the competitor discourse and actors. For instance, a major project of the equalitarian NGOs was for the nationwide movement for campaigning to join the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, but it failed as the Islamic institutions under the supreme leader took a stance against its approval. This means that even full cooperation between international donors and local NGOs can be stopped by the power of the regime's leaders.

It was not all failure for young NGOs though. With regard to smaller and less controversial issues, NGOs succeeded in extending their influence and making some progress. For instance, in cooperation with the reformist women in the presidential office, all ministries and organizations of state were obliged to appoint an advisor for women to take account of women's interests in their policies. Additionally, several articles relating to women's issues were added to the five-year development plans of the regime. However, simultaneously, the rules and procedures concerning the control of NGOs were being made stricter. For example, the state required women to go through qualification and vetting processes in order to set up their groups; this process included security and background checks.

As for relationships, the reformist period saw a spike in the frequency of interactions between women NGOs and state organizations. For the first time, members of many new NGOs were allowed to enter state buildings and to become involved in meetings with officials, such as governors general, and to regularly interact with decision makers. However, the Islamic and security organizations remained suspicious and cynical about the rise of feminist NGOs. When leading feminist NGO activists took part in critical actions and protests, the security forces were actively and aggressively confrontational and did not restrain from arresting activists and taking them to court. In general, the climate of the policy network was cooperative and conflictual at the same time, because of the friction between different streams. This implies that supporting and developing local NGOs in the women's rights domain cannot ease the achievement of more rights; instead, it can lead to paradoxes and risks. Also, the relationships in the policy domain were managed and engineered in favour of trusted NGOs, and the chance to be involved and interact with policymakers was not equal for every NGO. This is because of the rentier political system, which does not permit fair and transparent treatment of non-state actors.

At the central level, feminist groups, although bound within the Islamic framework, found opportunities to challenge the traditional narratives of the conservative establishment and counteract them to some extent. The policymaking climate became pluralized but, at the same time, the safety and security of the activists and NGOs were not fully guaranteed as streets, parks, and university campuses were to some extent open to the public actions of women NGOs but, simultaneously, the security measures of the police, the MoI, and the intelligence ministry tied the hands of NGOs.

5.2 Conservative Period: Conflict and Rivalry

In contrary to the reformists, the conservative administration of Ahmadinejad used public resources to restructure the policy domain and change its climate. It manipulated the laws in such a way that most equalitarian and feminist NGOs lost their state sponsorship and gradually vanished. Notably, the security institutions used an iron fist and revoked the licences of vocal NGOs and arrested many of their members. In parallel, traditional groups, which had educational and charitable agendas, became the beneficiaries of state sponsorship and many of them were registered and recognized as the only legitimate groups. These were those that had a higher

level of compliance with the rhetoric of the supreme leader. Consequently, at the end of 2013, the composition of the NGOs in this domain was completely harmonized, as most registered NGOs were pro-regime, but the size of the domain did not shrink as many new state-funded NGOs replaced the previous ones. The government managed to increase the number of NGOs threefold, while the vocal media and political parties with human rights interests were closed or underwent security pressures.

In terms of relationships, first, the presidential office and the ministries restricted their interactions with critical NGOs and media and made the domain exclusively for the religious NGOs and women who complied with the agenda of advancing 'motherhood'. In some cases, the vocal NGOs and their members were even denied entry to state buildings. Security institutions increased their contacts with vocal feminist activists and groups, placing more pressure on them. Cooperation between state offices and ministries on the one hand and military and security forces on the other securitized the environment. Also, the arrangement of relationships became hierarchical, with the state directing the loyal NGOs towards religiously oriented projects and policies. The women's force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)[17], a semi-military force, was introduced as an example of an ideal Islamic women's group. By contrast, the feminist discourse was labelled illegitimate.

In addition, the upstream policy documents and sectoral rules were manipulated; for example, polygamy was put on the agenda of the conservative state, while conformist state-sponsored NGOs supported it. At the same time, the presidential office and parliament focused on the economic aspects of female activism instead of political rights and participation. In the new policies, the employment and work policies were amended to give women priority to remain at home and work remotely. As a result of these changes, the climate became closed: the regime did not tolerate pressure from outsiders and also reduced opportunities for protests and public action on the part of NGOs. During this period, any relationship or interaction with international organizations and agendas became the target of security harassment.

In the local government of Golestan province, the trajectory of shifts was similar, but with some differences. During both the reformist and conservative administrations, local networks of NGOs in the women's rights domain were inspired and influenced by the national mood and the agendas of the central state.

In the reformist period, the number of groups and NGOs in this domain in Golestan province increased to about 50. However, only a small number of NGOs were genuinely independent of the state. The atmosphere of this domain in Golestan was friendlier than that in Tehran and was less political because the competing discourses and interests were not quite in conflict with each other. Moreover, local security offices were not concerned about NGOs and civil society, at least for a few years after the rise of the reformist state, owing to strong and close personal linkages in the local communities.

In terms of institutions, the approach and discourse of the reformist local government authorities were also designed to promote new women's rights but, because of the traditional and religious culture of the local community, the discourse of 'motherhood' and 'chastity' also had to be kept in place. Progressive issues such as eliminating violence against women, empowering women, and increasing women's awareness were put on the local government's agenda but with some delay compared to central government, as more time was needed for these issues to be digested by the local communities.

Local authorities had a lack of knowledge and experience about the position and function of NGOs. Therefore, the process of compiling rules for local NGOs was done by trial and error and was time consuming. This was an opportunity for women activists to use their skills and scope with fewer governmental restrictions.

17 The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is the military force of the Islamic Republic and has a cultural mission and ideological manifesto of saving the revolution, according to constitutional law. It has many branches and sub-forces, ranging from students to engineers, as well as bases in all cities, villages, and state offices. Over the last three decades, it has increased its economic capacity by beginning commercial and trade activities. Also, its intelligence force is a parallel security institution that oversees and intervenes in the political environment, mainly involving the political parties and NGOs, in order to control and suppress them if necessary.

5.3 Changes at Local Government Level

In general, during the reformist period, the women's rights domain at the local government level was more open to new NGOs owing to personal ties, family relationships and friendships, and a warmer reception in the local community. In some cases, when women activists wanted to avoid political barriers and bureaucratic hurdles, they could resort to their contacts with local figures to extend their influence over policymakers. Because of their close relationships with local government authorities, NGOs had regular contact with them and could exert influence over their decisions or gain a permanent advisory seat on some local committees. Proximity to state authorities and organizations and access to them became possible for many NGOs, although the frequency of relationships and their character were not the same for all NGOs; feminist and equalitarian NGOs were more privileged because of ideological similarity with the reformist government. In this climate, use of confrontational actions such as street protests was not needed to the same extent as with central government, unless necessary. But, if such actions were used, the chance of encountering violent reactions from police or security institutions of the government was smaller than at central government level. The security and military forces increased their presence in this domain during the later years of the reformist period because the vibrancy of women NGOs increased. This environment implies that supporting NGOs in political issues at the local government level is less risky and faces smaller security risks. However, the lack of knowledge of policymakers at this level can be a hurdle to the development of local civil society.

During the conservative administration, the local women's rights domain experienced considerable shifts following changes to the central government's agenda, but with a lower intensity. In terms of the composition of the domain, local governors were replaced by politicians with a background in military or security forces, and women from seminaries and local orthodox religious groups filled the office for women's affairs. Over a period of eight years, many NGOs that were dependent on state funds and support lost their backbone as the state ceased to fund them owing to ideological or rhetorical confrontations. Many of them vanished from the civic sphere and new NGOs started to appear. Local authorities followed a blueprint given to them by the central government, which required existing NGOs to go through a vetting process in order to renew their licences. As a result of this process, some NGOs did not have permission to extend their activity. This engineered the composition of the domain and also reduced its size as the number of registered women's NGOs dropped to 30. Moreover, diversity in the composition of these NGOs was reduced and the domain became harmonized since women with similar religious, security, and conservative backgrounds dominated state and non-state organizations.

In terms of relationships, authorities reduced their interactions with feminist and equalitarian NGOs and activists. Instead, religious and traditional NGOs and activists were included in the policymaking meetings and committees. Nevertheless, because of local bonds and friendships between people—including NGO activists and authorities—confrontations between the critical NGOs and conservative authorities did not become conflictual. However, the security and military institutions overshadowed the domain and directed the approach of rules and policies. Owing to reluctance on the part of the conservative administration, the scope of public activism for critical NGOs shrank. As a result, most public events in civil society, such as training courses, workshops, and schemes for women, focused on the subject of family rights and issues, and the conservative NGOs supported and contributed to them. At the same time, the dominant discourse about critical NGOs became more radical, as security and military forces perceived feminist NGOs as being 'agents of colour revolution'.

Consequently, during this period, the climate of the domain became exclusive and inclusion in policy relationships became less feasible for critical women. Thus, while equalitarian NGOs were left outside the circle of local government, if they wanted to resort to protests and critical actions in order to object to policies they faced threats and summonses. Owing to this shift, outsider NGOs had to adjust their demands and discourse with local government policies; otherwise, they were ignored, warned, or revoked by the state. During this period, the IRGC and the intelligence office were more active in monitoring NGOs, which led to much greater harassment. In a few cases, NGOs were pressured into closing their offices, and had no chance to set up new groups with state-approved agendas and functions.

Section 6

ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS

The Nature of the Domain

Although in terms of environmental reserves Iran is one of the world's high-profile countries, this domain has never been a priority for the Islamic Republic. This low profile has been an opportunity for NGOs and environmental movements, since they face lesser security risks in this domain, but it is also difficult for NGOs to be heard and included in the decision-making processes unless the government needs them. This domain has immense potential in the way in which donors and international organizations can support NGOs, but more technical resources and skills are also needed.

The formal discourse of the Islamic regime defines environmental protection as a religious duty in a simple and limited way, one which does not leave much room for professional environmentalism. This negligence of the environment comes despite emphasis on the issue of environmental protection in the constitution and upstream policy documents.

6.1 Reformist Period: Competition

The rise of the Khatami administration and its civil society discourse nurtured the growth of the first formal and professional NGOs in this domain. Khatami assigned Masoumeh Ebtekar as head of the Department for Environmental Protection, and since she had been known as a revolutionary political figure, the domain gained more political weight during 1997–2005. She aimed to transform the traditional volunteer environmental groups into formal NGOs. As in other domains of civil activism, the government distributed public funds to the emerging environmental NGOs and, as a result, the number of groups increased from a dozen to more than 600.

In terms of institutions, the Department of Environment took the leading role in the introduction of new rules and regulations that increased social checks and control over state policies concerning environmental issues. One aspect of the new rules was concerned with the inclusion of NGOs in the decision-making and monitoring processes. To do so, some seats were allocated to NGO representatives in the special councils and subordinated offices of the Department of Environment; however, the line ministries and executive organizations did not follow this approach and remained reluctant to deal with environmental issues. As a result, for most politicians and authorities, environmental NGOs were regarded as 'intruders' when considering the implementation of construction projects.

Also, because the source of activism of NGOs was mostly based on passion instead of knowledge, skill, or technical resources, their power in influencing the state's decisions was never very high. Nevertheless, because of the general tendency of the administration towards civil society activism, environmental NGOs had the chance to carry out several types of activity, including both extreme ones such as protesting, or more benign ones such as holding workshops and raising criticism via media outlets. They were mostly ignored instead of heard, but at least they were not repressed.

As for relationships, the Department of Environment showed eagerness to broaden its relationships with NGOs but, at the bureaucratic level of the organization, NGOs were not greatly welcomed by authorities and technocrats. NGOs also needed the support of the department to extend their relationships with other state ministries or to resist environment-unfriendly policies. The Islamic organizations and political institutions of the regime did not have much involvement or interest in this domain and security institutions were not concerned either. Therefore, they did not confront NGOs and the domain did not become conflictual. Within the environmental network, the support of the presidential office and the department improved the agency of NGOs. However, the scope of action of NGOs remained limited to simple environmental issues, such as air and water pollution, whereas fundamental issues still remained far out of reach. Towards the end of the second term of the reformist administration, security institutions became concerned about the critical potential of the

environmental NGOs and increased restrictive measures which impeded the activities of the critical groups. This means that donors should bear in mind that if the rise of environmental NGOs leads to the formation of a social movement that threatens to damage the government politically, it may face a serious reaction from the security and military forces.

6.2 Conservative Period: Downgrading NGOs

During the conservative administration of Ahmadinejad, the climate of the policy domain, despite expectations, changed. The profile and importance of the environmental domain were downgraded by the administration. The figures who were assigned as heads of the Department of Environment were not influential or well known to civil society. They were also not very influential in the cabinet of ministers. During this period, as part of the securitization project at the general level, the security and Islamic institutions increased their control over the activities of environmental NGOs. The government started to engineer the composition of civil society in this domain by means of several methods, including reviewing funding and state support for NGOs, toughening the process of issuing a licence for new NGOs, and also making every current NGO submit to tougher administrative and security checks if they wished to continue their registration. As a result, the number of NGOs had halved by the end of this period. Most of those left were technical NGOs which had no intention of challenging and influencing the strategic policies of the government. Instead, they were interested in undertaking state-funded projects and implementing them. Additionally, the environmental media and political parties with independent status were in decline, and thus the vibrancy of civil society decreased in this domain.

As for the laws and rules, the leader and the then-president prioritized exploitation discourse over environmental protection by emphasizing construction and development projects for the benefit of the lower classes of society. Consequently, the position of environmental policies declined and, in tandem, so did the position of environmental NGOs. Except for cosmetic statements from the government authorities about the importance of the environment, in practice, the Department of Environment became more conformist with the general policies of the cabinet. Exploiting natural resources, such as oil and coal, was the main agenda of the state and the vanguard position of NGOs could not counteract it. In parallel, rules concerning the activities of NGOs were manipulated by the state and became harsher. The security policies of the MoI, in terms of checking the members, activities, and decisions of the NGOs, made it harder for independent NGOs to survive. At the same time, the conservative administration restricted civil activism and environmentalism. As a result of the new climate, going onto the streets to protest or writing critical reports in the media came under the complete control of the government. Simultaneously, the seats of the NGOs in the councils and on the committees were taken one by one.

In terms of relationships, the Department of Environment decreased the frequency of contacts with critical NGOs and activists and even banned a number of them from entering its office. The character of the relationships became unfriendly for them. NGO activists were either ignored, or harassed if they insisted on criticizing state policies. At the same time, only state-funded and conformist NGOs had the right and opportunity to contact officials. Moreover, the relationship between the state and military and security organizations increased and made the climate of the domain more securitized. The frequency of contacts of the intelligence office and IRGC agents with activists increased, placing pressure on vocal groups.

As a result, the climate of the domain became closed and exclusive. NGOs had less chance to organize public events and protests, and their members became disappointed and less vibrant. The policy domain had one discourse, which was about 'exploiting nature', and NGOs that advocated protection had less chance of public action.

6.3 Changes at Local Government Level

At the local government level, the environment and climate of the domain were different. During the reformist period, the local security institutions had less suspicion of and concern about the NGOs and therefore the

number of groups increased from three to more than 40 in the peaceful environment of Golestan province. As in other areas, the composition of NGOs comprised officials and their relatives. By way of government funding, dozens of NGOs were created. The diversity and volume of environmental activists and state organizations in this area increased and, because of the political agenda of the central government, NGOs were given the chance to act in the provinces.

However, the government discourse about environmental issues was very simple and limited at the local level. Thus, there was less room for professional civil activism. But over time, and by gaining more experience, NGOs and state authorities learnt the principles and procedures of interacting with one another. Nevertheless, the second term of the reformists saw local government place emphasis on dealing with illegal constructions, which was a controversial issue in Golestan province for a long time. This emphasis created more opportunities for NGOs to utilize their resources, contribute to environmentalism, and act more effectively and with a higher level of legitimacy. As this area was not a very political one, the chance of consensus and cooperation between state and non-state actors was higher and the two sides interacted in a friendlier manner. The local government made some new rules concerning NGOs which permitted their inclusion in the meetings and decision-making processes of subcommittees. This increased the chance of interaction with policymakers and led to policies such as the banning of construction in some mountainous villages. Also, when NGOs needed to take serious actions such as protesting it was possible to do so, even in front of state offices. In terms of relationships, the personal linkage of the NGO members with local politicians was strong and the relationships were friendly but not equal and even for all NGOs. Therefore, NGOs often had a chance to contact and exchange opinions with decision makers.

Like the central government level, security offices increased their contacts with NGOs between 2001 and 2005, intensifying their control over the critical activities of NGOs. The environment of the domain at the local level was pluralized, with different NGOs looking for different environmental issues and having different political affiliations. Also, the absence of military forces, e.g. the IRGC, made the climate tolerant. This means that donor organizations can consider that the chance of social activism of NGOs with a non-political profile in the environmental domain, under the rule of a moderate administration, is high.

When the conservative government rose to power, a strategy of closing and harmonizing the composition of the environmental domain was employed in Golestan province. By redirecting state funds, and allowing insider and loyal actors to establish new NGOs, a new cohort of environmental NGOs was established. These NGOs mostly had operational missions, such as cleaning the natural parks, and did not want to engage with the policymaking process. A considerable number (at least 15 out of 40) of critical NGOs that were still active in the 2000s closed one by one because of disenchantment and the political costs of activism since the political climate of the country was securitized. The size of the civil society groups in this domain did not shrink but their composition was engineered. Thus, the conservative and security actors in the domain and loyal NGOs in civil society became dominant. At the same time, cooperation and relationships between local government organizations and military forces increased and they initiated several projects that were environmentally risky. However, critical NGOs were either too weak to oppose them or could not bear the security costs of doing so. Only loyal NGOs and activists could reach the officials and the seats of other NGOs in the local environmental councils were removed. Thus, the domain became exclusive and closed. The tendencies of local government in terms of engineering the domain and securitizing its climate were similar to those of the central government, but with less intensity. Thus, to providing support for environmental NGOs, even with a conservative government, more opportunities for action can be found at the local government level.

Section 7

SECURITIZATION AND MILITARIZATION

Securitization During the Rouhani Administration

After the two political periods with opposing policies, the presidential elections in 2013 brought a coalition of moderate elements to power that did not have public participation in civil society as a priority on its agenda. The stance of this administration towards NGOs and civil society was neither supportive nor suppressive. During 2013–2021, the Rouhani administration sought to stabilize the vibrancy of civil society by engineering the legal position and rights of NGOs to a limited scope.

The so-called moderate administration finalized and passed the executive regulations of NGOs and also regulations concerning the establishment of NGO networks. These rules centralized the authority of the state organizations within the MoI, which has a political function and character. In practice, it brought the scope of NGOs under the power of this ministry. This means that the MoI, beginning in 2016, when the regulations were declared, was authorized to reject or accept requests to set up NGOs and could also revoke their licences if decide so. By passing this regulation, the long-running disagreement between NGOs and the state about the reference law of issuing a licence for NGOs ended up in favour of the state. Thus, it has become very easy for any ruling administration to suppress or shut down NGOs, in parallel with security and military institutions. These regulatory bodies have had considerable consequences for NGOs. The first consequence of this was seen when the ministry sued the largest charitable NGO in Iran, the 'Imam Ali Student Charity', and closed it by pursuing a judicial order. Additionally, according to these regulations, any international contact, cooperation, or coordination with NGOs is subject to permission being obtained from the state authorities. This system cuts communications between Iranian NGOs and their counterparts overseas, firstly, because it is very difficult to obtain such permission from the state and, secondly, because this authority can easily be used by politicians as an excuse to charge opposition NGOs with 'betrayal for foreign countries'. All in all, these shifts during the presidency of Rouhani restricted the agency of NGOs to a greater extent than before and institutionalized the power of government towards civil society.

The second shift further strengthened the institutional influence of military forces across central and local government because of both internal and external factors. Internally, the cabinet and statesmen of Rouhani, with their security backgrounds and approaches, regularized the intervention of military and security forces in political issues and policymaking, with the IRGC intelligence unit having more legal mechanisms to use in deciding the appointment of policymakers and their decisions. The state authorities also facilitated the process of revoking and cancelling the programmes of NGOs because of pressure and interventions from the IRGC.

Externally, rising tensions in the neighbouring countries of Iran, especially the rise of ISIS and the policy of the Islamic Republic to expand its extraterritorial presence, was an excuse for the regime's leaders to provide the IRGC and its commanders and units with more financial and political resources inside the country. This shift provided the military forces with the excuse of 'national security' to suppress any critical movement of civil activists and NGOs inside the country. One such case was the arrest of eight environmental activists with the charge of 'betraying and spying for Western countries'. Another was the arrest of the president of the Imam Ali charitable NGO. This means that, during the Rouhani administration, even charitable and environmental issues became politicized and securitized.

Although the rules passed during this period advanced the process of formalizing and legalizing the position of NGOs, it did so at the same time as legalizing the shadow of military and security forces that hung over them.

This period ended unexpectedly for NGOs owing to the outbreak of COVID-19. By virtue of this global health crisis, the Islamic regime was presented with a window of opportunity not only to expand and reorganize its paramilitary capacity, but also to recruit new troops from among the young generation. With the help of the

Rouhani administration, NGOs were replaced by semi-military forces. Considering the situation of Iranian society and the severity of the health crisis, the state's actions were centred on the military and semi-military forces, especially the IRGC's young forces. The regime, under the mandate of the supreme leader, issued permission for the military forces, especially the IRGC, to initiate manoeuvres and projects nationwide under the flag of fighting the pandemic. Independent NGOs, and groups with expertise and resources, were ignored and even their criticisms about the management of the crisis were faced with harsh confrontations with the security offices and judiciary. Among the most damaging of these activities were the installation of checkpoints on intra-urban roads and at the entrances to cities, the running of 'happiness carnivals' on the streets, the setting up of disinfestation stations in urban areas, the establishment of cyber and spirituality camps against COVID-19, and the disinfection of public properties. In parallel, because of the national crisis, critical media were suppressed and restricted to a greater extent than before, and the opportunity was also taken to clamp down on rising criticism from NGOs. Dozens of social media activists were arrested, and the media became completely subject to checks by the security institutions. By means of all these efforts, the pandemic provided the state and state-backed groups in civil society with the opportunity to dominate the social sphere and also private spheres. For instance, the Commander in Chief of the IRGC openly ordered the Basij forces to keep people in their houses and these forces also entered private apartments with the excuse of sanitizing the environment. As a study suggests, 2020 can be regarded as the year when true engagement of the militia in the civic sphere and the complete isolation of NGOs occurred, as it took place while there was a lack of collective action in Iranian society[18]. These shifts took place because many NGOs in Tehran and other cities faced a monetary crisis and had to stop their activities because their state funding was ceased, or because their sources of income were crippled as a result of the fiscal crisis caused by the pandemic. 2020 was the year of completion of the militarization project in Iranian politics and society at the expense of NGOs and social groups.

7.1. Militarization During the Raeesi Administration

In 2021, the presidential elections became a turning point for the trajectory of civil society in Iran. By the overt intervention of the establishment in the election, while society sanctioned the election owing to political disappointment regarding reform and change, the radical cleric Ebrahim Raeesi took power.

While the Rouhani administration lessened the spike in the power of military and security forces towards civil society, the Raeesi administration has paved the way for the direct presence and decision making of military commanders and security figures at the top of the government. This development has had a significant influence on the status of civil society and NGOs in Iran. At the heart of the administration, Raeesi appointed General Ahmad Vahidi, an IRGC commander, who is infamous as a result of represing previous nationwide protests as the Minister of Interior. As this ministry is the central organization for regulating and overseeing NGOs, issuing licences to them or revoking their licences, it can be said that, in the next four years, the remaining critical NGOs will be under the strict supervision of and pressure from the Minister of Interior, with the IRGC having a big slice of the power. This pressure will be harder for human rights NGOs and women's groups. In the provinces, the same situation is happening. The state cabinet has appointed local IRGC commanders as the governor generals of several provinces. This means that, across the cities, counties, and provinces, the local NGOs will be under similar security pressures. Also, the militarization and securitization projects of the Islamic Republic will proceed at higher speed. Moreover, this will politicize all fields of activities, so that even if the environmentalism domain remains unpolitical to some extent, it can be expected that this field will be securitized and politicized to a higher degree.

In addition, the discourse of the current administration has no room for concepts such as civil society and NGOs, as none of the politicians or authorities in the Raeesi administration have ever spoken about them. The central rhetoric of the Raeesi administration concerns justice and economic change which, alongside the security and military composition and background of Raeesi's team, will advance mass movements and replace them with

18 Moheimany, M., Ganji, N., Salehi V., and Shehni, M. (2021). Covid-19, Youth and The Engineered Social Movements in Iran. In I. Natil, Youth, Civic Engagement and Local Peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa, London: Routledge.

organized social movements and NGO activism.

The current administration and the conservative parliament are considering passing a bill that aims to limit access to social media and internet websites. This bill is being reviewed by the MPs and the Raeesi administration has openly supported it. Civil and political activists call the bill 'the nationalization of the internet' since one of its main goals is to bring the servers of messaging services into the country so that they can be checked, their performance can be controlled by the government and, in case of any protests or threats to the security of the state, the authorities can easily shut down the messaging services and internet. The consequence of this bill for civil society is that the only remaining resort NGOs have to network, make coalitions, name and shame authorities, and inform the public about human rights violations and public policies will come under the severe control of the government. If the bill is passed, which is very likely to happen, NGOs may lose both their actual civil spheres and virtual spaces of activism in the near future.

Finally, the background of Ebrahim Raeesi in terms of human rights violations concerns NGO activists and civil society leaders more than anything else. He was a former prosecuter when thousands of opposition activists and figures were executed in the 1980s. After he became president, human rights groups such as Amnesty International have been chasing his human rights violations case and have called for him to be brought to trial. Raeesi's background has implications and lessons for civil activists, and some of them have warned that the years ahead may be dark ones for the civil society of Iran.

Section 8

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consideration of Systematic Variation

Conclusion

In general, NGOs have come a long way in terms of establishing and enhancing their policy role and political agency in Iran. Currently, their role is better recognized compared with 20 years ago, when they were legalized, but not professionalized. However, there is still a long way to go as their criticism and activities are not yet accepted. The government has learnt, developed, and employed new methods to contain the political pressures of NGOs and to limit their policy capacities. For the Iranian government, loyal NGOs that only conform to and confirm the government's policies are more privileged in terms of resources and support, while critical activism that is concerned with state policies is the target of political pressure. Thus, designing specific policies and schemes can help donors to deal with this situation in a less risky and more effective way.

Recommendations and considerations

The scope of freedoms and constraints for NGOs in Iran is to a certain extent systematic and predictable since it is dynamic and periodic. Not only do the freedoms of NGOs vary between central and local government, but they also show significant differences between political and technical domains. The current policies of the ruling administration also change the status of NGOs to a great extent from time to time. This means that international organizations and donors should adjust their tone and methods of supporting NGOs based on the location and area of activity of those NGOs, and also the discourse and strategies of the current administration. Any donor organization that aims to help and support NGOs to represent public interests in the government should consider time-, domain-, and level-specific policies. While a one-size-fits-all policy, such as providing funds, may generally enhance the capacities and influence of an NGO in a policy domain, it may cause serious difficulties and risks for another NGO in another domain. The same rule applies to different levels of government and different administrations. Based on the report of the situation of NGOs over the last three decades, this paper concludes with several supportive policies that international organizations and donors can provide for NGOs in Iran.

8.1 Financial Aid and Support

Concerning financial support and funding of NGOs, donors should bear in mind that the current political system in Iran has been quite resourceful and skilful in controlling all the venues and mechanisms that an NGO may seek and use for financial sourcing and fundraising. The experience of women activists during the last two decades demonstrates that, since levels of suspicion and cynicism on the part of the government about civil activities in political domains are high, any funding or grants given to NGOs from international donors, or even Iranian ones, may be considered risky and used as an excuse by the government to confront and suppress NGOs. In this situation, the Islamic judiciary or the security forces charge NGOs with 'committing an act against national security' or 'betrayal of the regime', which can lead to them being faced with serious judicial verdicts or even jail. The current body of regulations, which has been differently amended by different administrations, does not allow NGOs, especially in ideological domains such as human rights or women's rights, to even make direct contact with international organizations. This severs any mechanism of receiving funds. This is despite the fact that, in the technical and non-political domains, including environmental protection, fundraising and financial support may still be tolerated if it takes place in a low-profile manner. But one should not neglect the fact that because of securitization over the course of the last decade, making contacts and exchanging money overseas, even in this domain, can still be subject to security measures if the government chooses to do so. The case of the detention of eight environmental NGO members and activists in 2018 by the IRGC's intelligence unit showed that the situation has become more intense compared with a decade ago, when the reformist administration willingly held and hosted international environmental seminars hand in hand with NGO activists. However,

the extent of control or pressure exerted on the financial sources and grants of human rights NGOs is greater than that for non-political ones. In non-political domains, finding less risky ways of providing local NGOs with financial resources would lessen this risk. Also, NGOs at the local level of activism can conduct their activities with a low profile to avoid political risks, and therefore receive donations and funds in return for implementing local projects. Avoiding direct money transfers, sourcing NGOs indirectly through third parties, finding local sponsors, and other similar methods can be considered in this relation.

8.2 Training and Education

In terms of training Iranian NGOs to improve their capacities and capabilities, similar considerations should be taken into account. Although about 20 years ago the state authorities showed themselves to be keen to facilitate and serve as intermediaries in exchanges of experience and knowledge with international organizations such as the UN, currently, any contact of women activists and human rights NGOs with non-Iranian NGOs or organizations can easily lead to detention and trial inside Iran. Any training that originates overseas will cause trouble for NGOs. The reformist administration differed from the conservative administration in this respect; for instance, during the Khatami administration, state organizations hosted international events with local and international NGOs in both environmental and women's rights domains, whereas the Ahmadinejad administration banned such events and only permitted events that were in line with the political discourse of the administration. In some cases, during the last decade, NGO members who have travelled abroad to take part in conferences in order to meet their counterparts and discuss professional issues with them, or to receive training, have been detained or interrogated as soon as they returned to Iran. This is also evident for environmental NGOs and non-political ones, although security measures and pressures are less extensive. At present, certain environmental crises, such as the drying up of Lake Urmia and the consequent water shortage, are very significant in Iran and the government does not have sufficient capacity, incentives, or resources to manage them. Consequently, the leaders and authorities are willing to use the capacities of NGOs to fill the gaps, providing that political criticism will not result from such an action. Nevertheless, if the interests of the security and military forces or Islamic institutions come into conflict with the causes of environmental NGOs, those NGOs will face security measures and threats. The IRGC was behind the detention of the eight environmental activists, as those activists were monitoring and reporting the anti-environmental activities and projects of this military force concerning the natural resources of Iran. This means that international organizations should limit their training for NGOs to technical and less political forms of training to avoid harassment or risk. Also, instead of public training, clever use should be made of individual contacts and teachings.

Concerning the government levels, the extent of security measures and pressures exerted by the government against NGOs is higher at the central level of government. At the local level of government, as shown by Golestan province, NGOs are outside the monitoring radius of the central government, which is more ideological and less tolerant and accountable. Proper methods of training and financial support for local NGOs can boost their performance, campaigning, and policymaking activism. This is a consideration that donor organizations and policymakers should take into account when designing their training and financial schemes for Iranian NGOs.

8.3 International Political Pressure

International organizations and groups can provide effective political and legal support for Iranian NGOs. Given that the extent of violation of human rights and the repression of social movements have been increasing inside Iran, the experience of the last decade has shown that international organizations such as the UN can exert pressure on the Islamic Republic in several cases that involve risks to NGOs. The human rights reports of the UN's special rapporteurs or human rights council, although they have no legal power, have been effective in terms of shaming the Islamic Republic authorities internationally. The NGOs are not the only subjects of these reports, but their demands and criticisms are reflected and heard thanks to the international reports.

For example, the reports by Javaid Rehman, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the

Islamic Republic of Iran, which are released and published regularly, contain sections on the violation of women's rights, the execution of juvenile offenders and children, and the repression of ethnic and religious groups. These reports reflect and resonate with the demands of human rights groups and NGOs that support the rights of women, ethnic minorities, and children. As human rights NGOs in Iran are the most suppressed and limited NGOs, this is a way in which their voices can be heard more effectively.

Moreover, human rights groups and organizations such as Amnesty International can provide Iranian human rights NGOs with similar support. In recent years, in several cases, reports and media campaigns by Amnesty International have helped prevent the execution of people in Iran, a cause that is espoused by Iranian human rights NGOs. One case in this area was the execution verdict for Arman Abdolali[19].

As well as the human rights area, international organizations can also provide support in other areas of activity. For example, in the area of environmental issues, international environmentalists worked with Iranian NGOs to stop environmentally unfriendly projects and make the authorities responsible for them. International organizations can also continue to exert pressure on the Iranian regime so that the authorities decrease security pressures on NGOs. One example in this area is the case of the eight environmental activists who were arrested[20].

Therefore, international organizations and NGOs can help Iranian NGOs by actively monitoring their current issues and situations in different domains and enabling their demands to resonate at both national and international level, as the placing of international pressure on the Iranian government can double the force of the local NGOs in counteracting government resistance against NGOs.

8.4 Social Media Campaigning

International pressure is more crucial nowadays in Iran because of the absence of effective print media. For Iranian NGO activists, social media and online messaging services are great opportunities to publish regular reports and stories about the suppression of women's rights, including mandatory codes about the wearing of a hijab or domestic violence. In some cases, such activity has deterred the government from its policies, for example, with respect to amending the body of family laws during the Ahmadinejad administration. Also, regarding some environmental issues such as the drying up of Lake Urmia, the international community engaged with the crisis, implemented campaigns, and helped local NGOs to be heard globally. However, these international media campaigns can also be used by the security and intelligence forces to pressure NGOs regarding their communication with foreign states, which is normally used as an excuse by the judiciary and security forces. Therefore, the language, timing, and method of campaigning support are important.

8.5 Official Rules and Procedures

Currently, a major problem of Iranian NGOs concerns the regulations and administrative procedures. The government of Iran is ramping up the bureaucratic and administrative system by increasing barriers to the public activities of NGOs and civil society organizations. To tackle this issue, firstly, international organizations and NGOs should focus more on the current system and its regulatory rules and identify the barriers to NGOs inherent in them. If such barriers are revealed then pressure can be exerted on MPs and authorities to stop increasing them. Secondly, NGO activists should be trained and instructed to pressurize parliament and the administration so that they shift and reform their policies and rules in a way that will remove the barriers and obstacles to setting up an NGO, or about obtaining a licence for public activities. In this way, in the long term, spontaneous activism can become stronger.

19 Amnesty International, October 11, 2021, available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/iran-to-execute-man-arrested-at-17/

20 United Nations Human Rights, February 23, 2018, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22697&LangID=E

NOTE

The findings of this report and research paper about women's rights and environmental NGOs in Iran, as well as the theoretical parts and the graphs, are taken from a research thesis at Dublin City University that was published as a book in 2021. The title of the book, written by Mohsen Moheimany, is Policy Networks and Political Opportunities in Hybrid Regimes and the publisher is Palgrave Macmillan.

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Volunteer Activists Institute (VA) is a non-profit, non-governmental, non-political and independent institute, whose primary aim is capacity building among activists and civil society organizations; facilitation of information exchange among civil society activists, and advocacy and expansion of democracy, human rights and peace building within Iranian society and communities in the MENA region.

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