
Obstacles of Political Party Development in Iran

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Abstract: The political party is a means of connecting the political process with society and it helps to improve the political system. Oldness of political party development in Iran reaches almost a century but political parties could not have an important role in Iranian political system. This paper looks at obstacles of political party development in Iran and describes obstacles such as; fund, electoral system, political culture, Rentier state, power centralization, civil society and separation between elite groups and masses. In this article we examine how these hindrances impede of party development process in Iran.

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Introduction

The idea of party development was born and developed in the early stages of political sociology. Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Lapalombara and Wiener, (1966) and Duverger (1964) were among those who pioneered sociological models of party formation, and they theorized the idea that parties are formed as part of a social and political maturation process which culminated in the mature, democratic party systems we know today. Furthermore, a core feature of any democracy is the political party which serves as a vehicle through which citizens can assemble freely to define their political and policy aspirations, and campaign for public office (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2001). The existence of at least one party occurs even in dictatorial and, indeed, totalitarian systems (Lapalombara and Wiener, 1966). Besides, if we accept the suggestion by Duverger (1964) and

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Michels (2001) that political parties are often little more than a small group of oligarchs, we cannot disregard their role as a connector between political systems and the community (Almond & Powell, 1966) and as “instruments of civil society” (Biezen, 2004, p. 18).

Given the importance and influence of parties as catalyst in developing the political process and democratic growth in many countries, this article aims to look at the obstacles of parties in the Islamic Republic of Iran. All studies are focused on following barriers of party development process in Iran; lack of fund, the type of party and Iranian electoral system¹,

¹ Electoral system in Iran is based on persons. It is two stages: after the registration of candidates, first; Guardian Council should approve their qualifications (the Guardian Council is appointed by supreme leader) and then they can participate in public vote.

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lack of developed political culture, lacking publication authority and press, Rentier economic and dependence of people to government, power centralization, lack of civil society and separation between elite groups and masses. In this article we examine how these hindrances impede of party development process in Iran.

Main Obstacles of Party Development

To begin with, fund stands out as one of the crucial factors to improve any political party. In countries like the United States, political parties are financially supported through “donations and subsidies provided by a few backers merchants, industrial undertakings, banks and so on” (Duverger, 1964, p. 1); in addition, political parties in Western Europe primarily depend on private contributions to finance their activities. While the classic mass party secures a structural flow of income from the fees paid by its members and the donations from affiliated trade unions, the cadre party generally relies on contributions from wealthy individuals or donations from private business. Government financing of the political process, if at all, occurs mainly indirectly. Public funding for political parties is a relatively recent phenomenon in European democracies (Alexander, 1989; Biezen, 2004).

Political parties in Iran, however, lack such substantial support. Since the huge private companies active in the developed countries are missing in this country. In fact, most companies and banks are under government control and are unwilling to support parties. In the other hand, in Iran, people are not interested to become parties’ members that oblige them to pay subscription fee and there is no public funding for political parties.

Another problem of parties in Iran is electoral system. Political parties actually are “electoral machines, which ensure the nomination of candidate” (Duverger, 1964, pp. 21-22) and “the party system and the electoral system are two realities that are indissolubly linked and even difficult sometimes to separate by analysis” (Duverger, 1964, p. 205). This suggests that political parties cannot be separated from the electoral system. In Iran, the electoral system is not dependent on the party system, and the candidates with the highest standings are not considered members of political parties. The elected representatives, who have not necessarily been a party member realize a need for support only after the elections. This is the general way in which political

parties are founded and increase in member. In this way 217 registered political parties, associations and organizations that have been given legitimacy to operate (Interior ministry, 2008). Another problem of electoral system is qualification of candidates by Guardian Council. This institution disqualifies lots of candidates and does not reply on any institution. For example, this institution disqualified about 50% of candidates in the seventh and eighth parliamentary elections in Iran in 2004 and 2008 (Zaeim, 2007).

Research shows that another problem of political parties in Iran is lacking publication authority and press, while it is emphasized that “The press constitutions a potent instrument for the conquest, the preservation, and the consolidation of [party] power” (Michels, 2001, p. 83). In Iran, however, most presses belong to government and according to constitution; governance cannot allow establishing private T.V. Channels (Constitution, 1989, Article 175). Political parties lack this remarkable medium to be in touch with the mass of people. In 1998-2003, Judicial Power closed up about 120 magazines and news papers (Sahar khiz, 2007) most of which belonged to political parties that found it difficult to connect with the masses.

Tajik (2008) also reveals that autocracy and chaos are two temporary and obstructive elements that cause experiences to be disregarded in political competitions. He adds that the lack of developed political culture is a basic element that prohibits the political activities and gaining experiences.

In addition, Alijani’s (2006) study points to some reasons for the lack of development among the parties as follows:

- 1) Eastern autocracy and sovereign of absolute rule
- 2) Lack of confidence and intention for being away from a group
- 3) Having a poetical, confusion, lack of persistence, and being unadjusted
- 4) Excessive attention to cultural elements especially religious factors
- 5) Overdependence of economy on oil and the dependence of people on the government but not *vice versa*

He also believes that dominate political and economical systems in the third world do not intend to share power with institutions such as parties and civic structure. Indeed they regard nongovernmental parties and groups as their rival groups.

Hence, on the one hand, the governments try to weaken parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). On the other hand, to keep their political power they start forming parties. Unlike the developed countries, where the parties form the government, the government forms the parties. Then Alijani refers to economical issues. He asserts that the economical system is effective when the parties and civic organizations are formed and being empowered. He investigates the internal issues happening in parties. To Agha Alikhani (2006) some important issues like, upside down formation of parties, insufficient education among the parties members, ignorance towards the elites rotation and new individuals in parties are the main reasons that cause the parties cannot have effective roles. He also mentions other problems faced by parties like the lack of party thought among the parties, and paying more attention to individual thought than to group thought.

The other academic work by Bagheri Khouzani (2005) points to the relationship between power centralization and inefficiency of political parties in Iran. He suggests that when the central government is weak, the development of the political parties can be considerable, and when it gets stronger, it suppresses the parties. Therefore, they cannot play effective roles in a society. He maintains that the imbalance between political and economical development is the main cause of political inefficiency of parties in Iran.

Delavari (1998) also notes some problems of political parties before the Islamic Republic of Iran, some of which include:

- 1) There has been a reverse relationship between authority and consolidation of government and the freedom and activities of political parties.
- 2) The emergence of a great number of political parties that support a politician, and their activities which ensure their continuation are dependent on that individual.

- 3) All these parties are supported by a few numbers of intellectual individuals from the capital and some big cities in Iran.
- 4) Most of these parties lack any internal integration and include many different branches among themselves.
- 5) There is not a friendly relationship between the political parties and groups.

A quick look at the problems mentioned by Delavari shows that the obstacles above have hindered the development of political parties after the Islamic Revolution particularly in the period of Khatami's presidency.

Besides, Zibakalam (1997) divides the historical roots of failing parties in Iran into three parts; authority, function of religion institution and negligible infrastructural changes in Iranian society like the one that occurred in Europe. Katoozian (2000) also refers to main historical reasons for inconsistency of political parties in Iran. He believes that there are internal problems such as the limitation of private possession and unsafe economy that are amongst the main obstacles for the development of parties in Iran. He asserts that capitalism like feudalism is a privilege that government bestows to wealthy people like the owners of big companies. The central government has this power to take these privileges back from them. Therefore, the lack of confidence of people in the political system and lack of interest for having a long term schedule for investment in various economical and political dimensions cause the inconsistency of political parties.

Furthermore, Bashirieh (1997) states that the first priority in Iranian society is the drastic changes in governmental structure. In such cases, the people and society are revised automatically. He adds that the development of political participation and emergence of parties require some basic changes in the traditional society, including the appearance of new social groups, the development of public opinion, and other processes related to social and economical renovation. These changes can initiate the condition for the development of parties and political participation.

According to Amirahmadi (1996) the relationship between Iranian government and civic society is not transparent and well-developed.

Moreover, the government is not responsible for the issues going on in the society. One of the reasons for this is the presence of tyranny in Iran that has a historical background and the lack of intermediate organizations like parties. From the viewpoint of Naser Irani (1998) political power and the structure of government in Islamic Republic of Iran can be regarded as another obstacle in the way of democracy institutions in Iran. In a related study, Badei (1997) argues that one of the problems of political parties in third world is separation between elite groups and mass. This gap makes a huge obstacle in creating the political participation, which in turn leads to the establishment of an arbitrary government. It also is an obstacle for the formation of some civic institutions such as political parties, NGOs and etc.

Likewise, Razzaghi (1996) summarizes some preventive factors for political life and the condition of parties in Iran. These factors include: a) patriarchy b) conspiracy theory c) lack of tolerance d) violence e) political apathy f) political distrust. Additionally, Anvar khamaei (2000) expresses that one of the most important obstacles of parties in Iran is government interference in parties' affairs. Moreover, Salamati (2005) on a paper states that the reason for inconsistency among the political parties is the lack of organization that is suitable for Iranian society.

Finally, Dehghani (2003) addresses some electoral problems in Iran. In this article, he explains that the electoral system in Iran does not affect on the development of parties as the most integral bases of democracy. The author mentions that in the democratic systems of the world the individuals are not able to candidate haphazardly, and they should be introduced by a party or a special commission. This is not the case in Iran where the people take part in electoral campaigns unlike other countries where people enter electoral campaign haphazardly. This increases the number of candidates. According to him, there are many parties in Iran that are known as parties, but they lack the important features of a powerful and through party. Even one percent of people have not heard their names so far.

Conclusion

This article is an overview of the main problems of parties that should be supported by the civil society. The growth of civil society and political culture will increase the demands of people from the political system. Moreover, these demands force the

government to develop political parties. Party organizations will be activated for categorizing these demands and transferring them to the political system. This article also regards the budget as one of the main obstacles in the way of the political parties. The only way to solve this problem is that the government should financially support party activities because there are no big factories and companies to help parties and people are usually reluctant to help them. The electoral system is another factor that needs to be reformed to a democratic process. In other words, the electoral system should be based on parties not rather than an individual.

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