

MULTIPLE PERCEPTIONS OF OPPORTUNITY AND THREAT AND COALITIONAL  
DYNAMICS IN THE IRANIAN REFORM MOVEMENT (1997-2005)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Multiple perceptions of Opportunity and Threat and Coalitional Dynamics in the Iranian Reform Movement (1997-2005)

(Under the direction of Charles Kurzman)

After social movements emerge, different actors within the movements usually take different trajectories. To understand these different trajectories, one needs to understand how these actors assess the political context. Different assessments of the political context imply different strategic choices. Also, converging and diverging assessments are part of the formation and disintegration of coalitions within social movements. I use the Iranian reform movement (1997-2005) to test my argument, since it contained multiple actors, changing coalitions, and diachronic as well as synchronic variations in the assessments of the political context.

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## Introduction

Shifts in the configurations of political opportunities and threats would not matter for social movements, unless perceived, interpreted, or attributed by contenders<sup>1</sup>. While this statement is now widely shared in social movement theory, the case of multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat within the same time and the same movement has been downplayed. As scholars of social movements debate over different dimensions of this concept in general and its configurations and ramifications in particular cases, social movement actors as well assess the political context in different ways. As scholars develop different theories of opportunity and threat, actors' perceptions of opportunity and threat also involve different theories of history and sociopolitical change. In a sense then social movement actors engage in an intellectual enterprise somewhat equivalent to social movement scholars. Finally, multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat matter for different kinds of activism and social movement coalitions. Different assessments of context imply different strategic choices, and converging and diverging perceptions of opportunity and threat are part of the formation and disintegration of coalitions within social movements. The case of the Iranian reform movement (1997-2005) appear a suitable case to study multiple perceptions and their implications, inasmuch as it is a case with shifting configurations of opportunity and threat, different actors within the movement, synchronic and diachronic variation in perceptions of opportunity and threat, and changing coalitions within the movement. I shall argue that one cannot understand the changing coalitions within the movement unless taking into account the changing landscape of the perceptions of opportunity and threat within the movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Political events are usually vague and open to interpretation. These events also reflect different dimensions of the political context. If actors interpret any dimension of the political context differently, the overall perception would be different. The receptiveness of incumbent elite, the openness of the institutionalized politics, and the opportunity for mass mobilizations are three dimensions of the political context among others. Having a contrasting take on any of these three dimensions then makes an overall different assessment of the political context. Finally, actors are not passive receiver of the changes or continuities within the political context. Instead, they are active interpreters of their environment. These factors all help us understand it better why multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat can be the case in social movements.

Perceptions of opportunity and threat engage theories of sociopolitical change. Movement actors in many occasions care about theories of sociopolitical change. They try to come up with a better judgment about their context, and for this goal familiarize themselves with theories crafted by social scientists or develop their own theories. A rigid wall that we sometime draw between ourselves and social movement activists in fact does not exist in many cases.

Multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat matter for different ways of activism and coalitions within the movement. If part of the movement think there are opportunities within the institutionalized politics they might advocate for lobbying or electoral participation, whereas if another part of the movement does not see any opportunity in the institutionalized politics but perceives opportunities for mass mobilization it would champion tactics of civil disobedience. Multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat are also part of the coalitional dynamics within the movement. When in a coalition perceptions of opportunity and threat diverge, actors with divergent perceptions push for dissimilar strategic moves in different directions which in turn create tensions within the coalition and can lead to fractures and disintegration of the whole coalition. Likewise, when perceptions of opportunity and threat converges actors with dissimilar background or identities

favor similar strategic moves. Taking similar strategic trajectories then, these actors may forge new coalitions.

The Iranian Reform movement was an attempt to democratize the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) between 1997 and 2005. The movement contained four types of actors, a clerical reformist party, lay reformist parties, the student movement, and opposition groups. The main coalition in the movement was between the first three groups. These groups all shared the same perception of opportunity and threat. This perception involved optimism toward the incumbent elite of IRI, optimism toward the institutional arrangements of IRI, and pessimism about the costs and repercussions of mass mobilization. Opposition groups though were less optimistic toward elite and institutionalized politics and had a bigger emphasis on grass-roots protest activities. During later developments within the movement though the main student organization lost its optimism in the IRI and incumbent elite and institutional arrangements and left the coalition. Lay reformist parties dropped optimism toward incumbent elite whereas kept its optimism toward institutions. Clerical reformist party though kept their position toward elites, institutions, and mass mobilization. In 2005, the coalitional configuration then totally changed; the former coalition was totally disintegrated and a new coalition between lay reformist parties and opposition groups formed. I shall argue that diverging perceptions were part of that disintegration and converging perceptions were part of the newly formed coalition within the reform movement.

In what follows, I will engage with theories of political opportunities, theory-ladenness of perceptions, and coalitions in three sections develop my theoretical argument. Then I will introduce my case, main actors and main perceptions of opportunities and threat within my case, and my data. In the next section, I will trace the four actors, their perceptions, strategic moves, and coalitions during the major junctures during the eight years of the reform movement. The paper will end with a conclusion.



## Literature Review and Theoretical Discussion

### Multiple Perceptions of Opportunity and Threat

The concept of political opportunities has been a focal concept in social movement studies during last three decades. These attributes of the political context are defined as specified as the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, the stability or instability of elite alignments, the presence or absence of elite allies, and the state capacity or propensity for repression<sup>2</sup>. Studies employing this concept all build on the premise that changes in particular features in the political environment of a movement can explain the mobilization, claims, strategic choices, alliances, developments, and outcomes of a movement<sup>3</sup>.

It is now widely accepted in the social movement literature that there is a subjective side to political opportunities<sup>4</sup>. To be effective then, an objective political opportunity should be perceived by social movement actors. Framing is a concept that has been deployed to capture the subjective dimension of political opportunities<sup>5</sup>. As a concept that for a while was supposed to deal with the cultural aspects of

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<sup>2</sup> Doug McAdam, "Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements : Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, eds. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge England ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> P. K. Eisinger, "The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities," *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 1 (1973), 11.; Herbert P. Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (Jan., 1986), 57-85.; Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).; David S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30, no. 1 (08/01, 2004), 125-145.

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Kurzman, "Structural Opportunity and Perceived Opportunity in Social-Movement Theory: The Iranian Revolution of 1979," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 1 (1996), 153.; Charles Kurzman, "The Poststructuralist Consensus in Social Movement Theory," in *Rethinking Social Movements; Structure, Meaning, and Emotions*, eds. Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (New York: Row Man & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2004).; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*; D. Suh, "How do Political Opportunities Matter for Social Movements?: Political Opportunity, Misframing, Pseudosuccess, and Pseudofailure," *Sociological Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2001), 437.

<sup>5</sup> William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer, "Framing Political Opportunities," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements : Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, eds. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge England ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).; Lisa L. Kowalchuk, "THE DISCOURSE OF DEMOBILIZATION: Shifts in Activist Priorities and the

protest in Political Process Model, framing was defined as “the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action”<sup>6</sup>.

Whereas studies that focused on framing political opportunities have somewhat expanded our knowledge about the subjective aspects of the political opportunity concept, the notion of framing and its application in the case of the political opportunities might be considered problematic in two aspects. First, framing has been conceptualized as a strategic process in which movements try to legitimize their action and recruit more supporters. Thus, framing political opportunities would be about the ways movement activists strategically describe the political context to attract more people and resources to the movement and to legitimize their cause. However, other than strategically depicting political opportunities, social movement actors are also genuinely engaged in understanding and defining the political context and the moment for themselves. This cognitive process of identifying political opportunities is not being adequately addressed under the concept of framing. As James Jasper suggests it might be more beneficial to limit framing concept to the process of recruitment and use other concepts to examine other cultural and subjective dimensions of protest, instead of stretching the concept of framing and lumping all cultural and subjective processes under this category<sup>7</sup>.

Aside from framing, terms such as the *perception*<sup>8</sup> of political opportunity and *cognitive liberation* have been also utilized to highlight the subjective aspects of the phenomena. It has been argued that,

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Framing of Political Opportunities in a Peasant Land Struggle," *Sociological Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2005), 237-261.

<sup>6</sup> Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements : Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge England ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).p.6

<sup>7</sup> James M. Jasper 1957-, *The Art of Moral Protest : Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Kurzman, *The Poststructuralist Consensus in Social Movement Theory*

in order to be effective, opportunities and threats should be first *perceived* by actors<sup>9</sup>. McAdam labels this subjective process of identifying political opportunities “cognitive liberation”: “before collective protest can get under way, people must collectively define their situations as unjust and subject to change through group action”<sup>10</sup>.

In this account, first objective changes occur in the structure of the political opportunities; second, actors may perceive changes; finally, if actors accurately perceived the changes they get mobilized. Thus, after a change occurs in the political opportunity structure, there are only two possibilities about how actors may perceive them. Either actors perceive the opportunities or act upon them, or they simply do not see the opportunities. For example, McAdam argues that shifts in the political structure gives a structural potential for collective action, and then the question is whether the shifts will be defined as such or not by potential protestors<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, it has also been suggested that there are two kinds of actors: rational actors who see opportunities and threats as they are and actors with more emphasis on religious belief or identity issues who disregard these objective factors<sup>12</sup>. Sydney Tarrow says that “movements that privilege identity ignore opportunities.” And Charles Brockett states that “as analysts, we want to know how accurately activists perceive their context.” The question here then is whether actors ignore opportunities or not; and if they see them how accurate they perceive them. In these accounts, there is no room for protestors to shape their perceptions and so there is no possibility of a third, where a subset of movement actors sees the opportunities and threats in one way while other actors see them quite differently.

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<sup>9</sup> McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*

<sup>10</sup> McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* p.51

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 48

<sup>12</sup> Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement : Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, U.K. ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).;{{David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier and Belinda Robnett, *Social Movements : Identity, Culture, and the State* (Oxford ;New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).}}. Eitan Y. Alimi, "Mobilizing Under the Gun: Theorizing Political Opportunity Structure in a Highly Repressive Setting," *Mobilization (San Diego, Calif.)* 14, no. 2 (2009), 219.

The other important point about McAdam's concept of cognitive liberation is that he takes into account the variation of perceptions of political opportunity within time. In this sense, he offers a dynamic view toward perceptions. Nonetheless, he contends that this variation can be explained by the changes in the political context and mobilizing structure. Accordingly, the perceptions again get reduced to a structural factor such as political opportunity structure, and no room gets left for perceptions as an independent

To go beyond the question of ignorance or accuracy, and in order not to reduce the subjective aspect to structural factors, I suggest looking at movement actors as painters who depict a scene on their canvas while reshaping and reprocessing the scene in their mind and through their artistic tastes. Looking at perceptions in this way enables us to understand the possible plurality and diversity of the perceptions more than the dichotomous approach.

While the political context of the movement and its organizational structure are significant in shaping this disagreement, one can argue it is also important that in fact there are different ways of assessing opportunities and threats, ways that are *relatively* independent from mobilizing structures and objective political opportunities. What attracts more attention to these different subjective ways is the point that the impacts of the objective factors such as institutions or repression do not shape the behavior of all the actors consistently and in the same way. While political process theory puts the main emphasis on political institutions in shaping the trajectories of the movement actors, the fact that different actors may react differently to the same institutional rewards and sanctions within the same time and context within the same social movement presents a challenge to a structuralist position. To borrow from Bruno Latour's terms, the critical point here is whether to count actors as intermediaries or mediators:

"An intermediary, in my vocabulary, is what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs..." while the output of mediators "is never a good

predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time... Mediators transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry”<sup>13</sup>.

Applying this distinction to the perceptions of opportunity and threat, one can argue that contextual factors such as institutional position or repression affect these perceptions, but given these objective factors *per se* as the input, one cannot predict perceptions as the output. Actors’ perceptions are not the automatic outcome of what institutions do to them. The agency and subjectivity of the movement actors mediate the contextual factors and actors’ perceptions, and we still need to deepen our concept of perceived opportunity and threat.

So far I argued that we need to conceive actors active in their perceptions and not to totally reduce these perceptions to contextual factors. It was also mentioned that recognizing the relative independence importance of perceptions, we would be able to better apprehend cases of multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat within a movement. There are also two other factors that help us understand why multiple perceptions of political opportunity might be sometime the case in some social movements. First, social movement actors do not observe features of political opportunity such as the availability of elite allies or the propensity of the state for repression, but based on different events they try to come up with some general conclusions about the political context. However, as Gamson and Meyer suggest “most events are more ambiguous and leave ample room for disagreement about where the best opportunity lie”<sup>14</sup>.

Besides, as scholars of social movements distinguish between different dimensions of political opportunities and threats<sup>15</sup>, movement actors as well deal with different elements in the political context. It might be the case that movement actors agree on some elements for example the relative openness of the institutionalized politics, but not the propensity of state for repression. Thus

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<sup>13</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social : An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford ;New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). P. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Gamson and Meyer, *Framing Political Opportunities* p. 284

<sup>15</sup> Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

complexity of political context and multidimensionality of perceptions of opportunity and threat are another factor that contributes to multiplicity of perceptions of opportunity and threat in some cases.

Inasmuch as actors are active in perceiving opportunity and threat within their political context, ramifications of political events are usually vague, and perceptions of opportunity and threat are multi-dimensional, multiplicity of these perceptions might be the case in social movements.

Perceptions of opportunity and threat might vary within a movement at the same time or during the time. Nonetheless, whereas defining opportunity and threat has been called the most contentious process within social movements<sup>16</sup>, diachronic and synchronic variation of perceptions have been downplayed and are still an unexplored area in social movement studies.

### **Movement Actors as Theorists of Political Change and Narrators of Opportunity and Threat**

Perceptions of opportunity and threat involve theories of sociopolitical change. It was mentioned that movement actors and movement scholars are engaged in a similar enterprise in terms of identifying different dimensions of the political context. Employing or developing theories of sociopolitical change, movement actors in fact do something somewhat equivalent to movement scholars.

Activists are not practitioners they are also theorists of activism and change, who also try to explain the world<sup>17</sup>. Movement actors, similar to movement scholars, have theories about social and political change and utilize these theories in prioritizing their goals, perceiving threats and opportunities, and making strategic choices. Movement actors try to change the status quo into a more desirable situation. There are usually different potential strategies to achieve these changes, and actors make

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<sup>16</sup> Gamson and Meyer, *Framing Political Opportunities*

<sup>17</sup> Lynn Owens, *Cracking Under Pressure : Narrating the Decline of the Amsterdam Squatters' Movement* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).; Sarah Maddison and Sean Scalmer, *Activist Wisdom : Practical Knowledge and Creative Tension in Social Movements*, ed. Sean Scalmer (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006).

decisions to choose from these different options. Actors then contemplate about different mechanisms that can bring the change. They also deliberate about how they can manipulate the context to trigger those mechanisms or facilitate the mechanisms that finally lead to the desirable changes. Theories of sociopolitical change, therefore, are ideas that explain to them what the causes of these changes are, how these changes happen, how much it is possible for actors to manipulate these mechanisms, and how they can manipulate them. One can observe on many occasions that movement activists read scholarly theoretical discussions to find the most efficient way to change the status quo to the desirable situation<sup>18</sup>. Actors with different theories, then, see political opportunities and threats differently. It is mainly because these different theories frame the political context differently and have different criteria to define a political opportunity.

The subject of perceptions and theories has been profoundly discussed in the philosophy of science. Thomas Kuhn, among others, argued that perceptions are theory-laden. Thomas Kuhn argued that actors' observations cannot be separated from their paradigms. He maintained that actors with different paradigms look at different things. For example if we show a pendulum to an Aristotelian and a Newtonian physicist, the former would look at "the weight of the stone, the vertical height to which it had been raised, and the time required for it to achieve rest" while the latter would examine "radius, angular displacement, and time per swing"<sup>19</sup>. Besides, building on some psychological tests, Kuhn suggests that observers with different conceptual recourses see the objects even differently.

The historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Identifying different styles of leadership within Brazilian youth movement, Ann Mische points out to the fact these different styles were in fact associated with actors familiarity with and reading of theorists such as Gramsci, Habermas, Dewey, and Machiavelli Ann Mische, *Partisan Publics : Communication and Contention Across Brazilian Youth Activist Networks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). p.190-1.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Kuhn also adds that observers from different paradigms, albeit using the same language, understand different meaning from the same terms<sup>21</sup>. Accordingly, it could be said that perceptions of threats and opportunities are theory-laden. Attributing threats and opportunities to the political context involves actors' theories or schemas. They use their historical knowledge of the political context to make sense of the current situation to find the openings and constraints on the horizon. They also use their understanding of mechanisms of change and the constraints of change to promote their desirable change and to overcome obstacles. These theories could be general theories of sociopolitical change, historical theories, or particular theories about the characteristics of that particular political context.

The example of internal debates within the reformist represented by Eduard Bernstein and revolutionary wings of the German socialist movement represented by Rosa Luxemburg in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can better illustrate my point. Bernstein was of the opinion that Marx' prediction about the collapse of capitalism was wrong, a revolution that suddenly improves the situation of all society was a doctrinal illusion, and the only hope for socialists was socialization of property through democratic institutions. According to Bernstein the good model for Germany was British socialism which lacked a revolutionary doctrine but had gained the best achievements. Since he believed that socialization through democratic institutions was possible and in fact was happening, he advocated parliamentarism and reformist policies such as workers' economic struggles for better conditions, and campaigning for democratizing bourgeoisie society.

On the other hand, Rosa Luxemburg was of the opinion that capitalism would inevitably collapse and working class was revolutionary in essence. For her, the Russian Revolution of 1905 was the future

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<sup>21</sup> "By the same token, the Copernicans who denied its traditional title 'planet' to the sun were not only learning what 'planet' to the sun were not only learning what 'planet' meant or what the sun was. Instead, they were changing the meaning of 'planet' so that it could continue to make useful distinctions in a world where all celestial bodies, not just the sun, were seen differently from the way they had been seen before. The same point could be made about any of our earlier examples. To see oxygen instead of dephlogisticated air, the condenser instead of the Leyden jar, or the pendulum instead of constrained fall, was only one part of an integrated shift in the scientist's vision of a great many related chemical, electrical, or dynamical phenomena. Paradigms determine large areas of experience at the same time" Ibid. pp.128-129.



pattern for Germany and as a result mass strike was the most effective strategy of the working class. To her, reform was not a goal for socialists, it was just a means to provide the necessary device for the final battle of the proletariat with bourgeoisie<sup>22</sup>. Whereas Bernstein said “What is generally called the ultimate goal of socialism is nothing to me; the movement is everything”<sup>23</sup>, Luxemburg stated that “The movement as an end in itself, unrelated to the ultimate goal is nothing to me; the ultimate goal is everything”<sup>24</sup>. In this example Bernstein and reformists saw the opportunity in the democratic institutions of the state, whereas for Luxemburg and revolutionary left the main opportunity was in the ultimate collapse of capitalism and the essentially revolutionary features of the working class. Disagreement between these two figures and their followers did not remain in the theoretical realm. The German socialist movement later split between the reformist and revolutionary wings<sup>25</sup>.

So far my discussion was about movement actors identifying threats and opportunities in the present and future. Nonetheless, movement actors also examine threats and opportunity in the recent past of the movement to evaluate strategic measures which they took. They would like to know if they took opportunities, avoided the threats, or missed the opportunities, or were damaged by actualized threats. Employing these categories of taken opportunity, missed opportunity, avoided threat, or actualized threat, they evaluate the success and failure of the movement in general. In a sense, movement actors

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<sup>22</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism : The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*, ed. P. S. (Paul Stephen) Falla, Vol. II (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005). pp. 64-82, 99-108.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 46. A similar case can be made in reference to internal debate and fissures between integrationist and separatists in the US black movements. There were also important theoretical differences within the Black Power Movement. In these debates different actors grapple with questions of whether there is any opportunity in pursuing demands within American political institutions, whether there is any possibility for change in resorting to American public opinion, and other similar questions. See John T. McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies : An Essay in African-American Political Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

tell narratives of opportunity and threat to present their appraisal of the success and failure of the movement.

Activists' narratives and stories, their emergence, and their impacts have recently attracted attention in social movement studies<sup>26</sup>. While the importance of these narratives in social movement has been admitted, it has been also maintained that the mode of narratives is different from the mode of scientific paradigms and movement stories are dissimilar to scientific explanations<sup>27</sup>.

However, I argue that in some occasion actors' narratives of opportunity and threat are somewhat equivalent to scholars' narratives of success or failure of social movements based on their opportunities and threats. As scholars explore success or failure of movements according to their conceptualization and operationalization of opportunities and threats, movement actors as well, movement actors as well narrate the stories of success and failure within their general schemas through which they assess the context. I call these general schemas strategic paradigms. Strategic paradigms are certain ways of assessing the political context, crafting strategies, and reflecting on the recent past of the movement.

## **Multiple Perceptions and Coalitional Dynamics**

Multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat matter for different strategic choices and coalitional dynamics within social movements. Whether movements to insider tactics such as lobbying or electoral participation, or outsider peaceful tactics such as civil disobedience, or even violent tactics

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<sup>26</sup> Francesca Polletta, *It was Like a Fever : Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).; Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).; Owens, *Cracking Under Pressure : Narrating the Decline of the Amsterdam Squatters' Movement; Culture, Social Movements, and Protest*, ed. Hank Johnston (Farnham, England ;Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).; *Stories of Change : Narrative and Social Movements*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*; Polletta, *It was Like a Fever : Storytelling in Protest and Politics*

such as arm struggle, or passive revolutionary tactics such as Gramscian discursive positioning somewhat depend on perceptions of threat and opportunity<sup>28</sup>.

For instance, if one considers three different dimensions of the political context, receptiveness of incumbent elite, relative openness of institutionalized politics, and opportunity for mass mobilization, one can come up at least five strategies among others, based on different perceptions of these three dimensions<sup>29</sup>:

*Insider Discursive strategy.* If one perceives the incumbent elite receptive toward movement demands, perceives the institutionalized politics relatively open, but perceives the situation unfavorable for mass mobilization, one may conclude that movement should follow its demands through dialogue, bargaining and negotiation with incumbent elite through political institutions.

*Institutional strategy.* If the incumbent elite is perceived as resistant toward movement's demands, and no opportunity seems available for mass mobilization, but institutionalized politics appear receptive toward the movement, one can conclude that it would be beneficial to challenge the incumbent elite through political institutions.

*Activist Strategy.* If one's assessment is that the incumbent elite and institutional politics would not be receptive toward demands unless there is pressure from below, and there is opportunity to mobilize social support, the one can strategize to use both insider and outsider tactics.

*Active Radical Strategy.* If one comes with the conclusion that the incumbent elite is resistant toward the movement demands and institutionalized politics is closed, but there is opportunity for mass mobilization, one can follow that outsider tactics such as civic disobedience should be on the agenda.

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<sup>28</sup> Gamson and Meyer, *Framing Political Opportunities*

<sup>29</sup> Here I do not mean that other factors such as emotions or moral convictions do not matter in strategizing. By the example of these different strategies, I am just trying to illustrate how perceptions of political context matter in strategic choices.

*Passive Radical Strategy*. Finally, if one sees incumbent elite hostile, institutionalized politics closed, and conditions for mass mobilization calamitous, one may adhere go for tactics of seizing hard and minds and expanding the movement networks until the right moment arrives.

Other than strategizing, multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat also matter for coalitions within a social movement. It is now widely accepted that social movements are not monolithic but fields of different actors. Coalitions between these different actors have been the subject of inquiry in social movement studies.

Ideological similarity compatibility and convergence<sup>30</sup>, the role of symbols and political discourses<sup>31</sup>, political culture<sup>32</sup>, bonds of obligation and responsibility<sup>33</sup>, social ties and brokers<sup>34</sup>, decentralized organizational structure<sup>35</sup>, and organizational formalization and professionalization<sup>36</sup> are among major

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<sup>30</sup> Ion Bogdan Vasi and David Strang, "Civil Liberty in America: The Diffusion of Municipal Bill of Rights Resolutions After the Passage of the USA PATRIOT Act." *The American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 6 (2009).; Gretchen Arnold, "**Dilemmas of Feminist Coalitions: Collective Identity and Strategic Effectiveness in the Battered Women's Movement**," in *Feminist Organizations : Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, eds. Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).; Hyung Sam Park, "Forming Coalitions: A Network-Theoretic Approach to the Contemporary South Korean Environmental Movement," *Mobilization (San Diego, Calif.)* 13, no. 1 (2008), 99-114.; Daniel B. Cornfield and Holly J. McCammon, "Approaching Merger: The Converging Public Policy Agendas of the AFL and CIO, 1938-1955," in *Strategic Alliances : Coalition Building and Social Movements*, eds. Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Christopher K. Ansell, "Symbolic Networks: The Realignment of the French Working Class, 1887-1894," *The American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997).

<sup>32</sup> Mario Diani, Isobel Lindsay and Derrick Purdue, "Sustained Interactions? Social Movements and Coalitions in Local Settings," in *Strategic Alliances : Coalition Building and Social Movements*, eds. Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Paul Lichterman, "Piecing Together Multicultural Community: Cultural Differences in Community Building among Grass-Roots Environmentalists," *Social Problems (Berkeley, Calif.)* 42, no. 4 (1995), 513.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Corrigan-Brown and David S. Meyer, "The Prehistory of a Coalition: The Role of Social Ties in Win without War," in *Strategic Alliances : Coalition Building and Social Movements*, eds. Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Vasi and Strang, *Civil Liberty in America: The Diffusion of Municipal Bill of Rights Resolutions After the Passage of the USA PATRIOT Act*.

<sup>36</sup> Suzanne Staggenborg, "The Consequences of Professionalization and Formalization in the Pro-Choice Movement," *American Sociological Review* 53, no. 4 (1988), 585.

factors that have been found to have constitutive or facilitative impact on coalition building in social movements.

In addition to these factors, a considerable portion of the literature about coalitions within social movement is devoted to the explanatory role of political opportunity and threats. However, there is no agreement on whether opportunities or threats are more conducive to the formation of coalitions. On the one hand some scholars argue that with emergence of political opportunities or in favorable contexts coalitions are more likely to form<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, it has been argued that political opportunities either do not matter or even undermine coalitions, whereas the emergence of threats encourages actors to cooperate and form coalitions<sup>38</sup>. There is also a third position demonstrating that a combination of opportunities and threats promoted the coalition formation in the case of the Latin American Social movements and oppositional parties<sup>39</sup>.

One important point about these works and this debate is that the subjective aspect of political opportunities and threats is again downplayed here. In fact, while the subjective aspect is recognized theoretically it is still being ignored in the application of the concept. The fact that favorable and unfavorable contexts do not consistently affect coalition-building is to a certain degree due to different assessment of actors of the political context. This is the actors' assessments that mediate

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<sup>37</sup> Mario Diani, "The Italian Ecology Movement: From Radicalism to Moderation," in *Green Politics One*, ed. Wolfgang Rüdig (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 153-176.; Suzanne Staggenborg, "Coalition Work in the Pro-Choice Movement: Organizational and Environmental Opportunities and Obstacles," *Social Problems* 33, no. 5 (1986), 374.

<sup>38</sup> Holly J. McCammon, "Stirring Up Suffrage Sentiment: The Formation of the State Woman Suffrage Organizations, 1866-1914," *Social Forces* 80, no. 2 (2001), 449-480.; Nella N. Van Dyke, "Crossing Movement Boundaries: Factors that Facilitate Coalition Protest by American College Students, 1930-1990," *Social Problems* 50, no. 2 (2003), 226-250.; David S. Meyer and Catherine Corrigan-Brown, "Coalitions and Political Context: US Movements Against Wars in Iraq," *Mobilization (San Diego, Calif.)* 10, no. 3 (2005), 327.; Dina G. Okamoto, "Organizing Across Ethnic Boundaries," in *Strategic Alliances : Coalition Building and Social Movements*, eds. Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Paul Almeida, "Social Movement Partyism: Collective Action and Oppositional Political Parties," in *Strategic Alliances : Coalition Building and Social Movements*, eds. Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

between changes in the political context and their decision about forming, maintaining, or exiting from a coalition, and without taking into account these perceptions we cannot understand the processes of coalition formation well.

Another point about the literature about social movement coalitions is that it has been limited to the emergence of coalitions and the processes of coalition disintegration and fragmentation have not been addressed. Sydney Tarrow's and Ruud Koopmans' works on cycles of contention, though, address the splits and fragmentation within social movements. Tarrow contends that selective repression and facilitation by government split off moderates from radicals<sup>40</sup>. Koopmans also argues that lack of success might reinforce tensions within moderates and radicals. Success brings different factions in a peaceful coexistence, and strategic debates erupt when things go wrong<sup>41</sup>. Accordingly, Koopman points how changes in the political context trigger strategic debates within social movements, he does not explore how these processes play out on the ground<sup>42</sup>.

One aspect of this strategic debate is about political opportunities and threats. Actors discuss over whether the lack of failure is because of the contextual constraints or wrong strategies taken by the movement. Actors then present their narratives of opportunity and threat to respond to these issues. They also try to update their strategic paradigms, justify them, or even totally reject them or come up with a new one.

If one looks at these strategic debates through time and put them in motion, one can see that multiple perceptions may converge or diverge. Converging and diverging perceptions of opportunities and threats are part of the formation or disintegration of coalitions within social movements.

Disagreements over these perceptions may contribute to rifts and fractures within a movement, and

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<sup>40</sup> Tarrow, *Power in Movement : Social Movements and Contentious Politics*

<sup>41</sup> Ruud Koopmans, "The Dynamics of Protest Waves - West-Germany, 1965 to 1989," *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 5 (1993), 637-658.

<sup>42</sup> Owens, *Cracking Under Pressure : Narrating the Decline of the Amsterdam Squatters' Movement*

convergence over these perceptions can bring together movement actors who have been at odds with each other. Actors who do not share the same identity or world views may ally, as their similar perceptions about opportunities and threats could be a part of this alliance formation. On the other hand, actors with common values and identities may come to different assessments of the political context and this could fuel the collapse or disintegration of their alliance.

## **Case and Data**

In two respects, the Iranian Reform Movement seems a good opportunity to examine the complexity and importance of the different perceptions of opportunities and threats. Similar to many other social movements this movement also included different sets of actors. Movement witnessed two phases. In the first phase, most of the actors agreed upon one set of perceptions of the political context. In the second phase, the crackdown on the movement was severed. Some actors kept their previous perceptions of the political context, some modified their previous assessments, and some came up with a totally new paradigm. Indeed, different ways of assessing political context existed or emerged within the life of the movement. Moreover, the coalitions within the movement within the first phase changed dramatically within the second phase. In this section, I introduce these actors within the movement and different perceptions of threat and opportunity in the life of the movement. Finally, I will introduce my data.

## **Reformist Actors**

Iranian reform movement consisted of actors who sought to democratize the Islamic Republic of Iran. IRI was a political regime that came to power in Iran after the popular revolution of 1979. This regime has been a combination of republican institutions such as presidency, parliament, and municipalities, and revolutionary or religious institutions such as the Leader and the Guardian Council. While republican institutions control some portion of power in Iran, religious and revolutionary institutions have had the upper hand both on the paper and in the reality. For example,

Leader as a non-elected office-holder controls armed forces, National Radio and TV, and directly and indirectly appoints the members of the Guardian Council. Guardian Council has discretionary supervision over all elections in Iran, and enjoys veto power over all parliamentary enactments. The reform movement was an attempt to empower republican institutions within IRI.

Political actors within the reform movement can be roughly classified to four sets: a reformist clerical party, reformist lay parties, student movement, and opposition groups<sup>43</sup>.

*Reformist Clerical Party.* The Assembly of Militant Clerics, the main reformist Clerical party, was founded in 1988. In the factional politics of IRI, the Assembly belonged to the Left wing. They advocated state intervention in economy and taking a radical anti-imperialist position in foreign policy. While they managed to achieve the majority seats in the third parliament (1988-1992) most of their candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council in 1992 parliamentary election. In the 1990s they gradually modified their political views and put more emphasis on the popular sovereignty and the right of people in their discourse. In 1997, Mohammad Khatami, a leading member of the group won the presidential election and this brought the Assembly again back in the center of the stage. Later with the landslide victory of reformists in 1999 parliamentary election, Mahdi Karrubi, another prominent member of the group by the time, became the speaker of the parliament.

*Reformist Lay Parties.* Participation Party and the Organization of Mujahidin were two major reformist political parties. Similar to the Assembly, Organization of Mujahidin was also a part of the IRI left wing in 1980s and was excluded from the parliament and the executive in early 1990s. They also transformed then their leftist and radical views toward more democratic themes. In 1997 presidential election they backed Khatami, and after the landslide victory of the reformist in 1999 parliamentary election, two prominent members of the group became the second and the third speakers of the parliament (2000-2004).

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<sup>43</sup> For more information on these groups see *Iran Data Portal* <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/parties/>.



Participation Party was formed in 1998 out of high staff members in Khatami's presidential campaign in 1997. Participation front very soon managed to become the biggest reformist party. it had the biggest fraction in the 6<sup>th</sup> parliament (2000-2004), and many of its members served as minister deputies in Khatami's cabinet.

Table 1  
Reformist Actors

	Clerical Reformist Party	Lay Reformist Parties	Student Movement	Opposition Groups		
Persian Name	Majma'e Rohaniyun-e Mobarez	Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Eslami-ye Iran	Jebheye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami	Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat	Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran	Fa'alan-e Melli Mazhabi
English Name	Assembly of Militant Clerics	The Organization of the Mujahidin of the Islamic Revolution of Iran	Islamic Iran Participation Front	The Office for Strengthening Unity	Iran Liberation Movement	Nationalist-Religious Activists
The year of Foundation	1989	Founded in 1979 Dissolved once in 1986 Refounded in 1991	1998	1979	1961	
Prominent Members	Mohammad Khatami, Mehdi Karrubi, Mohammad Musavi Kho'eyniha	Behzad Nabavi, Mohsen Armin, Mohammad Salamati	Mohammad Reza Khatami, Mostafa Tajzade, Mohsen Mirdamadi	Ali Afshari, Reza Hojjati, Nima Fateh	Ebrahim Yazdi, Mohammad Tavassoli, Hashem Sabbaghiyan	Ezzatollah Sahabi, Habibollah Peyman, Morteza Kazemian

*Student Movement.* Student movement and its main organization, the Unity Office, were active in Khatami's campaign in 1997 and in the later political events. This organization was affiliated with the left wing of the IRI in 1980s and functioned as a the regime's arm to clean university campuses from Marxist students in that decade. Nonetheless, with the rise of new intellectual trends in Iran, this organization made its discourse more democratic and liberal. Advocating pro-democracy demands, it held different gatherings and meetings in university campuses. Students in each university elect the members of its Association and then these Associations elect the members of the central committee of the Office for Strengthening.

*Opposition Groups.* Iran Liberation Movement and Nationalist-Religious Activists are two main oppositional groups that also acted as members of the reform movement. Founded in 1961, and advocating a liberal ideology the group was opposing the Monarchy before the revolution. At the time of the revolution, members of the group formed the interim government, but their moderate government resigned in a few month due to the pressures from radical revolutionary groups. This group was critical of non-democratic themes and the integration of religious and political institutions within IRI constitution from the inception of IRI, and while they had some members in the first parliament (1980-1984), they were not allowed to run in any election in 1980s and 1990s.

The other group Nationalist-Religious Activists shared the pro-democracy stance with the Liberation Movement. The main difference between these two groups was that the latter advocated a welfare state model in the economy, while the former was more favoring a free-market model. Besides, Nationalist-Religious activists had a more critical view toward West in their views about foreign policy.

## **Reformist Strategic Paradigms**

*Discursive Paradigm.* This paradigm had an optimistic view toward the incumbent elite, and was of the opinion that reformist demands could be met through dialogue and negotiation with the

conservative elite. This paradigm also had an optimistic view toward working through governmental institutions, and believed that movement would benefit in following its demands through them. Third, according to this paradigm mass mobilization would lead to unrest and would give excuses to hardliner for cracking down on the movement. There was no opportunity for mass mobilization in this paradigm.

*Institutionalist Paradigm.* This paradigm shared the second and the third point with the previous paradigm. Nonetheless, according to this paradigm incumbent elite would not give way to reform just through negotiation and dialogue. The method that would work is to enter governmental institutions and to use insider resources to challenge incumbent elite.

*Activist Paradigm.* According to this paradigm, mere working through institutions and negotiating with elite would not work unless accompanied with pressure from below. Combining insider and outsider strategies, the motto of this paradigm was “pressure from below, bargaining at the top”.

*Radical Paradigm.* According to the Radical Paradigm working through institutions and negotiating with incumbent elite would not work at all, so would just waste the social capital of the movement. The only way out is to mass mobilization and civil disobedience.

Table 2

Differences in Assessing Political Context within the Reform Movement

	Discursive Paradigm	Institutionalist Paradigm	Activist Paradigm	Radical Paradigm
Optimism toward the incumbent Elites	Yes	No	No	No
Working through Institutions	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Pressure from Below	No	No	Yes	Yes

## Data

My data consist of comments, speeches, interviews and articles from different active members of the Reform Movement between 1997 and 2005. I have used Namayah software for accessing newspapers and magazines of these years. Namayah is a selection of articles, reports, interviews etc. from all periodical publications for each month. This selection contains 1368 journals, periodicals, newspapers and magazines on different political cultural economic and social topics over the eight years of my study. Regarding published *political* materials, Namayah covers important news, speeches, interviews and debates in each month. I have reviewed all the political materials in the Namayah and chose any material including discussions about opportunity, threat, movement's strategy, definitions of reformism, actors' political theories, and their normative statements about political activity. It seems that there is a good coverage of almost all of each month's important political events and their reflections in the print media in Namayah. In some cases, it even covers important speeches or interviews from different sources, when different newspapers or magazines covered political events. There are also materials for all three mentioned groups which are of interest for this article, although the coverage of students' opinions is less than the two other groups.

Fortunately, Iranian Student National News Agency (ISNA) has its archive available online since 1998, which is the oldest online source for this period. ISNA has covered all the statements of the Tahkim and all other reformist political groups in this period, in addition to interviews with many reformists and student activists throughout the whole period.

I have also used other online sources that their archives go back to years 1997-2005. Besides, Persian books that got published during reform period were another source of data. These books were either collections of articles by some active members of the movement, or a collection of news pieces and political statements about some of the most important incidents of the reform period. I have also used secondary sources which went through eight years of reform movement.

## The Literature on the Reform Movement

Different works have examined the rise and fall of the reform movement. In this section, I will try review these works from the perspective of this paper, perceptions of opportunity and threats within the Reform movement and its changing coalitions.

A remarkable number works about the Reform movement have treated threats and opportunities for the reform movement in an objective way, as if the scholar knows what the opportunity for the movement is, independent from actors' perceptions. Treating the political context in this way they have explained why the movement rose and fell. Some of these works argued that particular institutional arrangement of the IRI was an influential factor in the rise of the reform movement and president Khatami. IRI Constitution in particular and Iranian political structure in general are a combination of democratic and non-democratic institutions. According to these works the rise of the reform movement was the revival of the democratic element of the Constitution and institutional arrangements. The heterogeneity of the IRI elite and their unstable and changing coalitions has been also another factor of the political context that explains the emergence of reformism in Iran<sup>44</sup>.

The institutional arrangement of the IRI has been also referred to as a factor contributing in the failure or fall of the movement. Different authors argued that non-democratic institutions, according to Constitution, are more powerful than democratic institutions. The main power according to the Constitution and in reality is the Leader. He controls the military and Police Force, National Radio and TV, Judiciary, and the Guardian Council. Guardian Council supervises all the elections in Iran and decides who can or cannot run for office in each election. It also has veto power over all

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<sup>44</sup> Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy : The Politics of Managing Change* (London: Chatham House, 2006).; Said Amir Arjomand, "Civil Society and the Rule of Law in the Constitutional Politics of Iran Under Khatami," *Social Research* 67, no. 2 (2000), 283.; Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini : The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).; Mehrdad M. Mashayekhi, "The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001), 283-313.; Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).; Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

parliament enactments. As a result elected institutions such as president and parliament are left with a very limited power comparing with non-democratic institutions which were controlled by conservatives<sup>45</sup>. The formation of the modern middle class, besides, has been a factor to explain the emergence of the reform movement<sup>46</sup>. While some of these works have somehow touched the subjective aspects of opportunity and threats, by using speeches, statements, interviews, and comments of actors, perceptions of actors have not been the focus of these studies.

In addition to these works about institutions, elites, and society, there are also some works that have examined more subjective and ideational aspects of the reform movement. Some of these works have concentrated on the reformist discourse, how ideas such as democracy, freedom, and civil society were articulated in this discourse, and how this articulation was crucial in the rise of the movement<sup>47</sup>. In some other works, also, it was argued that this was reformist discourse that disabled them to confront hardliners<sup>48</sup>. These works explain the strategic choice of the movement based on how Khatami and other reformists articulated and framed their goals and ideals. The point that is missing here is again reformists' understanding of their political context, the ramifications of this understanding in their strategic choice, and the variation within movement regarding their perceptions of opportunity and threats.

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<sup>45</sup> Kazem Alamdari, *Chera Eslahat Shekast Khord?* [Why did reformism fail?] (Woodland Hills, California: Sayeh Publishing Corporation, 2008).; Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini : Iran Under His Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).; Ali Gheissari and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Democracy in Iran : History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford ;New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).; Hossein Bashiriyeh, *Gozar be Democracy* (Tehran: Negah-e Mo'aser, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Hossein Bashiriyeh, *Dibache'i Bar Jame'e Shenasi-Ye Siasi-Ye Iran; Asr-e Jomhuri-Ye Eslami* (Tehran: Negah-e Mo'aser, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Muhammad Javad Ghulam Riza Kashi, *Jadu-Yi Guftar : Zahniyat-i Farhangi Va Nizam-i Maani Dar Intikhabat-i Duvvum-i Khurdad* (Tehran: Ayande Puyan Cultural Institute, 2000).; Mehran Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution* (Cambridge, UK ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).; Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy : The Politics of Managing Change*; Tawfiq Alsaif, *Islamic Democracy and its Limits : The Iranian Experience since 1979* (London ;San Francisco: Saqi, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Keyvan K. Tabari, "The Rule of Law and the Politics of Reform in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2003), 96-113.; Cyrus Masroori, "The Conceptual Obstacles to Political Reform in Iran." *The Review of Politics* 69, no. 2 (-03-01, 2007), 171.; Arjomand, *After Khomeini : Iran Under His Successors*; Alamdari, *Chera Eslahat Shekast Khord?*

Finally there are couples of works that refer to reformists' strategy as a factor contributing to the failure of the movement. These works single out the movements' lack of an overall strategy, negligence about forging connections with civil society, and failing to have a dialogue with conservative elements in the government and society as major causes in the decline of the movement<sup>49</sup>. While these works do a good job in explaining the role of reformists' strategic mistakes in the failure of the movement, they do not tell us in a systematic why they made these strategic choices, and how their assessments of the political context played in these strategic choices or flaws. Besides, while some of the mentioned works have reported the clash between students and Khatami, there is still no systematic classification of the perceptions of opportunity and threat within the movement in these works. Moreover, no work has paid attention to the fact that variation over these perceptions even produced tensions and fractures within the student movement. Finally, none of these works on the reform movement has examined the importance of diverging and converging perceptions of opportunity and threat in changing coalitions within the movement.

## **Analysis**

The Life of the Reform Movement can be divided to two phases 1997-1999 and 1999-2005. In the first phase period, almost all of the main actors shared a strategic paradigm in assessing political opportunity and threat. In the second phase, one can observe that some of the main political groups and figures within the movement modified or dramatically changed the paradigm they affiliated with during the first phase, while some other just kept with their previous paradigms. In the second period we also observe that the main coalition between these political groups disintegrate, and a new

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<sup>49</sup> Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic : Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).; Saeed Hajjarian, "Zende Bad Eslahat," *Ayeen*, no. 4 (2005), 11-17.; Mehrdad Mashayekhi, *Be Su-Ye Democracy Va Jomhuri Dar Iran* [Toward Democracy and Republic in Iran] (Amsterdam: Radio Zamaneh, 2007).; Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran : The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (London ;New York; New York: Tauris Academic Studies; Distributed in the U.S. by Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

coalition emerges. In the following, I will trace actors perceptions, strategic moves, and coalitional configurations around major junctures in the life of the reform movement.

Table 3

Changing Perceptions of the Political Context within the Reform Movement

	Student Movement	Clerical Reformist Party	Lay Reformist Parties	Opposition Groups
1997-2000	Discursive Paradigm	Discursive Paradigm	Discursive Paradigm	Activist Paradigm
2000-2005	Radical Paradigm	Discursive Paradigm	Institutionalist Paradigm	Activist Paradigm

## The First Phase (1997-2000)

### 1997 Presidential Election and the Subsequent Political Opening

The catalyst for the appearance of the reform movement was undoubtedly Mohammad Khatami's presidential campaign in 1997 and his landslide and unexpected victory in the elections. Khatami won the elections, while the establishment was supporting Khatami's rival. In spite of this support, Khatami gained 20 million votes and became president. In that campaign, Khatami was backed by a coalition consisting of 18 groups. After the victory, these groups formed a front called The May 23<sup>rd</sup> Front (*Jebhe-ye-Dovvom-e-Khordad*) - May 23<sup>rd</sup> being the day that Khatami won the elections. The Assembly, the Organization of Mojahedin, and the Unity Office were important members of this Front.

Opposition groups such as Iran Liberation Movement and Nationalist-Religious Activists also participated in the election. Liberation Movement casted blank ballot in the election, and Religious-Nationalist Activists implicitly endorsed Khatami. They mentioned the threat of political monopolism and totalitarianism as a reason to vote in the election, despite their candidates were not allowed to



run<sup>50</sup>. After Khatami's victory, these groups supported Khatami's pro-democracy programs and slogans.

Khatami's government put into practice liberalizing policies in the political and cultural spheres. As a result of these policies, a new generation of press came into being which was at the forefront of the reform movement and at that time acted as its most important component. Press hotly discussed issues such as democracy, civil society, human rights, and criticized authoritarian tendencies and policies within IRI. Also, student activities in university campuses increased their activities and held many open discussion meetings for students, protest gatherings, and other types of activities.

In the second year of Khatami's presidency, his government held elections for Urban and Rural Councils for the first time in the IRI. In these elections, half a million candidates competed for 35,000 Rural Councils and 900 Urban Councils. The reformists won 80 percent of the seats. The elections opened a new sphere for direct decision-making and citizen-participation, and were thus a considerable step toward expanding participation and representation in the political regime.

*Discursive Paradigm.* During the first three years of the reform movement a certain way of appraising political context was more or less dominant within the Reform Movement. This paradigm originates in a certain theory about the trajectories of political development in Iran and a particular reading of Iranian history<sup>51</sup>.

According to this reading, Iran has been under despotic rule for centuries. These years of despotism have cultivated a despotified culture which is the opposite of the democratic culture. Iranian people, then, do not know how to act and react in liberalized atmospheres. Thus, whenever despotism got

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<sup>50</sup> Ghulam Riza Kashi, *Jadu-Yi Guftar : Zahniyat-i Farhangi Va Nizam-i Maani Dar Intikhabat-i Duvvum-i Khurdad*, p. 234-255-256.

<sup>51</sup> Minimalists mainly borrowed this theory from Homa Katuzain's theory of Autocratic rule in Iran. See Homa H. Katouzian, "Arbitrary Rule: A Comparative Theory of State, Politics and Society in Iran," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24, no. 1 (1997), 49-73.. Nonetheless, what I am narrating here is minimalists' reading of this theory not Katuzian's articulation of the theory.

undermined and political sphere opened a bit, Iranian people would resort to extremism, engage in conflictual behavior and fighting with each other, and transform the newly democratic conditions into chaos and anarchy which in its turn set the ground for the return of the despotism. President Khatami explained this viewpoint in his second year in office as follows:

“a country’s problems should be viewed in the context of its reality. To assume that country just learning democracy should have a similar political culture to that in the West which has had 200-300 years of experience with democracy, along with the expectations and attitudes that come with it, is not right. (Iran) has just begun to practice democracy. Unfortunately these democratic efforts have repeatedly failed in the course of history due to two factors. Namely, a mentality influenced by despotism. As a result, we face intolerance, impatience, and transformation of differences to violent opposition and hostility. These have been the factors that often blocked the people’s movement towards the establishment of a popular government and a democratic regime.<sup>52</sup>”

President Khatami followed that Iranians suffer from the chronic sickness of despotism and so they do not respect the law. According to Khatami, despotism is second nature to Iranians<sup>53</sup>.

This particular history of Iranian politics and the lack of democratic values in the Iranian culture implied that reform should be followed gradually and through cultivating cultural values of tolerance and dialogue. Dialogue and negotiation then should be a major means for democratization. This emphasis on centrality of dialogue and negotiation was also based on optimism toward the elite of the IRI. It was hoping that reformists would persuade conservative opponents of reform to give up their resistance and give way to democratization. In an instant, president Khatami mentioned that “We have no other path except moderation and dialogue”<sup>54</sup>. A newspaper affiliated with Lay Reformist Parties writing about president Khatami and his opponents described him as “somebody who is trying

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<sup>52</sup> Zhand Shakibi, *Khatami and Gorbachev : Politics of Change in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the USSR* (London ;New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010). p. 175.

<sup>53</sup> <http://former.president.ir/farsi/khatami/speeches/1377/shah/770629.htm> accessed in 09-02-2010

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.. P. 233.

to convince a person not to commit a suicide, and Khatami does not have any choice other than repeating his argument”<sup>55</sup>.

In addition to this optimistic presumption toward the incumbent elite of the Islamic Republic of Iran – that these opponents of the reform would be convinced through dialogue- it was also believed that the institutions of the regime particularly elections were receptive toward reformism or had the capacity for reforming the regime from within, and following reformist demands outside legal institutions equated violence, chaos, and riot<sup>56</sup>. As a reformist journalist in that time affiliated with Lay Reformist parties explained this idea, “The Islamic Republic of Iran is a regime without impasse... in order to change the world there is no way other than acting within legal institutions”<sup>57</sup>.

Furthermore, in line with this major emphasis on the electoral mobilization and working through legal institutions, this paradigm was reluctant about mass mobilization. The main fear was that mass mobilization would involve emotional agitation, emotional explosion would give way to extremism, and this in turn would give an excuse for repression to hardliners. The reasoning was that the grievances in the society are high, so it could have been exploded easily. In addition, Iranian civil society is weak and reform movement also lacked the organizational capacity to control marches, demonstrations and gathering. Explaining this argument which in a sense resonated “mass society” theory of the collective behavior, a reformist newspaper affiliated with Lay Reformist Parties wrote, for instance, “in mass gathering extremist people always take the position of leaders and lead the

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<sup>55</sup> *Asr-e Azadegan*, 1378/09/08.

<sup>56</sup> See for example *Asr-e Ma* 1378\_05; *Asr-e Ma* 1378, no. 143; *Asr-e Ma*, 1378, no. 146; *Asr-e Ma* 1379, no.182; *Salam*, 1378/03/04; see also the interview with Mohsen Armin, the other deputy speaker of the parliament in *Jame'e\_ye\_Madani*, 1379, no. 11; also *Asr-e Ma*, 1378, no. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Majid Mohammad, *Neshat* 1378\_04\_22. In another example another reformist journalist writes that “We believe there is a rational faculty at the upper level of the regime (Nazam) that has always rescued the country at the edge of the precipice” (*Iran*, 1379\_02\_08).

crowded, people who tell the most radical slogans and agitate the feelings and emotions. That's what the psychology of masses tells us"<sup>58</sup>.

Hence, the call for being patience, moderate, rational, unemotional was a recurrent theme in this paradigm, and reformist supporters were urged to "beware of leftism and Anarchism, and not to give excuse for repression to the opponents of reform"<sup>59</sup>. Analogies from recent history of Iran were also extracted to show how radicalism and extremism have damaged democratic movements in the past<sup>60</sup>.

What is important in this section is how Discursive Paradigm as a certain theoretical framework functioned in reformists' appraisal of the political context. Interestingly, this paradigm had similarities to theories of democratization that emphasize on civic political culture as a prerequisite for democracy, theories of mass society, and the theory of Autocratic Rule in the history of Iran.

While lay and clerical reformist parties advocated the Discursive Paradigm and student movement also abided by this paradigm, Liberation Movement and Religious-Nationalist activists had a different understanding of the situation. They frequently featured the example of Mohammad Mosaddeq, Iran's prime minister and the leader of the National Movement, who nationalized the oil in 1950 while just a minority in the Iranian Parliament supported him. Mosaddeq took the opportunity to mobilize masses, and by mobilizing popular support forced his opponents who were better positioned in governmental institutions to give way to his programs<sup>61</sup>. This reading of the Iranian history was in contradiction with the historical reading of the Discursive Paradigm that associated mass mobilization with

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<sup>58</sup> *Sobh-e Emruz*, 1378/05/05.

<sup>59</sup> *Asr-e Ma*, 1377\_05; See also interview with Abbas Abdi, in *Rah-e Now* 1377/04. And the interview with Behzad Nabavi, in *Salam* 1378/03/04

<sup>60</sup> Neshat, 1378/04/23; Khordad 1378/05/14; Bayan, 1378/10/14.

<sup>61</sup> see ILM statement in 1377/02/29, no. 1369; Interviews with Habibollah Peyman, a member of Nationalist-Religious Activists in *Yas-e Now*,

extremism, chaos, and the return of dictatorship. In fact, oppositional groups were urging Khatami to take a more confrontational stance toward the incumbent elite and also to benefit from mass mobilization tactics.

### **Conservative Resistance and Repression**

Resistance to reformist policies and repression of reformists started somehow from the first year. Hardliners tried to block the movement's democratizing attempts in different ways including limited disqualification of reformist candidates in elections, arresting and harassing reformist prominent figures, attacking protest gatherings, and closing reformist press.

In one of the first episodes of conservative resistance, when in the election for the Council of Experts in 1998, the Guardian Council disqualified many reformist clerics to run for the election, Khatami tried to solve the problem through negotiation with the Leader, and he apparently failed<sup>62</sup>.

In line with these efforts to deal with resistances through negotiation, in different occasions, reformists demobilized their supporters and tried to discourage them from a popular encounter with hardliners. Two important incidents were arrest of Mohsen Kadivar, a dissident cleric, and Abdollah Nori, a prominent reformist and the former minister of Interior in Khatami's government. After Kadivar's arrest in 1999, the student movement had organized gatherings in university campuses all over the country, in protest to the arrest of Kadivar. Reformist press affiliated with lay reformist parties, though, wrote about hardliners' plot for a massive bloodshed in those gatherings and finally convinced student leaders to cancel the event. Similarly, after the arrest of Nuri in 1999, lay reformist parties and activists argued that "Nuri's arrest might be a plan to agitate emotions and we should not

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<sup>62</sup> In an interview in the same year Mahdi Karrubi told the story about these negotiations (*Jomhuri Eslami* 1377\_11\_06).

give the opportunity to repression. Thus, at this time any gathering will serve the interests of authoritarians”<sup>63</sup>.

At the same time opposition groups had a different appraisal of the conditions and called for different reactions. As an illustration, when the reformist mayor of Tehran was arrested in 1998, a monthly associated with the opposition groups wrote:

“The biggest source of the power for the president is 20 million votes, so he should think of ways to make this potential force real... President should talk to people through interviews, lectures, and gatherings in National holidays.

When president invites the people the police will not allow the militia to attack the crowd. This way he even prevents the eruption of emotions”<sup>64</sup>.

Beside arrestment of major reformist, the major incident of crackdown occurred when on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1999, militia and police raided student dormitories in the University of Tehran. This raid was followed by sit-ins in the Tehran University campus, a series of scattered and uncoordinated demonstrations, and riots in universities and main squares in cities like Tehran and Tabriz which continued until July 12th. Protests were suppressed brutally and many students were arrested during this episode. While different reformist actors condemned the violence against students, they also sought to placate angry students<sup>65</sup>. The main student movement organization, also, while condemned the violence tried to control the students and prevent them from radicalization<sup>66</sup>.

Resistance to the movement continued after reformists’ landslide victory in 1999 parliamentary election and even was severed. Saeed Hajjarian, the deputy speaker of the Tehran municipality was shot in the face. He survived the attempt albeit incapacitated.

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<sup>63</sup> *Asr-e Azadegan*, 1378/09/08.

<sup>64</sup> *Iran-e Farda*, 1377, 04.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Kurzman, "Student Protests and the Stability of Gridlock in Khatami's Iran," *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* 15, no. 2 (, 76-82.

<sup>66</sup> See Unity Office statements in Mohammad Ali Zakariyayi, *Hejdahom-e Tir Mah be Ravayat-e Jenah-Ha-Ye Siyasi* (Tehran: Kavir, 1999).

Couple of months later, in March 2000, the Judiciary closed dozens of reformist press. This was a big damage to the movement, because reformist press was one of the major pillars of the movement. This aggressive move by hardliners again did not result in a big and immediate paradigm shift by reformist parties and student movement organization.

In reaction to this aggressive move, Unity Office planned to organize protest gatherings and marches in Tehran and other cities<sup>67</sup>. However, the reformist Ministry of Interior declined their request for having a march<sup>68</sup>, and students sufficed to silent protest gatherings on university campuses.

Right after that one of the lay reformist parties issued an important statement and urged all reformists to pursue the strategy of “active tranquility.” They again compared “July 8th” – an actualized threat – with the events around the attempted assassination of Hajjarian – an avoided threat. They argued that after the attempt on Hajjarian people did not go to streets, and by avoiding polarization and unrest reformists did not give an excuse for crackdown to hardliners. They emphasized that reformists should defend the demands of the movement while keeping tranquility and avoiding turmoil. They also suggested that reformists should provide a clear image of the reformism to the legitimizing centers of the Regime<sup>69</sup>. Unity Office was one of the first groups that followed the strategy of Active Tranquility by that time<sup>70</sup>.

### **1999 parliamentary election**

These repressive measures by the hardliners did not lead to a sudden and dramatic paradigm shift on behalf of the reformist parties and student movement organization. The optimism toward reforming the regime through legal institutions followed even after the event of July 8<sup>th</sup>. The major

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<sup>67</sup> ISNA News Agency, 1379/02/31, <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-7404>

<sup>68</sup> ISNA News Agency, 1379/03/01, <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-5829>

<sup>69</sup> *Asr\_e\_Ma*, 1379, no. 162.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Nima Fateh, *Iran*, 1379/04/20.

crystallization of this continuance was the participation of all different reformist actors including the student movement in the parliamentary election in 2000. Similar to previous election student movement acted in cooperation with other reformist parties and had even some candidates of its own. Reformists won the majority of the parliament in this election and the Unity Office also got some seats in the parliament.

As mentioned in the theoretical discussion, movement actors not only assess the context in the present and future, they also appraise past events in the political context. July 8<sup>th</sup> and all elections from 1997 to 2000 were events that became the subject of retrospective assessments. As an actualized threat July 8<sup>th</sup> was recalled by lay reformist parties as an incident that masses went to the streets and served the interests of hardliners by giving them an excuse for cracking down on the movement<sup>71</sup>. Elections were also recalled as incidents that movement pursued its demands through ballot boxes and succeeded<sup>72</sup>. The conclusion was that the advantage of the movement was in electoral institutions rather than in mass mobilization<sup>73</sup>.

6<sup>th</sup> Parliament started on May 7<sup>th</sup>. Reformists still had this hope that through negotiations and dialogue can deal with conservative institutions such as the Guardian Council<sup>74</sup> that according to the Constitution had the right to veto parliamentary bills.

In instances that echoed a still lasting optimism toward conservative elites, dialogue was still mentioned as the best means to smooth the path toward democratization<sup>75</sup>. The transitology literature

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<sup>71</sup> *Asr-e Azadegan*, 1378/09/08; *Sobh-e Emruz*, 1378/05/03; *Sobh-e Emruz*, 1378/05/5; 1378/05/9; 1378/05/19; 1378/05/21; *Sobh\_e Emruz*, 1378/5/10; Neshat, 1378/05/14;

<sup>72</sup> *Bayan*, 1378/12/28.

<sup>73</sup> *Sobh-e Emruz* 1379/02/06.

<sup>74</sup> Different reformist PMs brought up this theme in their interviews. See *Bayan*, 1379/02/15; *Hayat-e Now*, 1379/10/04; *Nowruz*, 1381/03/05.

<sup>75</sup> *Hayat-e Now*, 1379/04/01; *Nowruz*, 1380\_05\_24; *Nowruz*, 1380\_10\_05.



on democratization was even cited to show the centrality of negotiation and elite settlement in democratic transitions. Sohrab Razzaqi, a deputy of the reformist Ministry of Interior affiliated with lay reformist parties suggested that,

“We need elite settlement. All countries that have been successful in transition to democracy have had elite settlement. Elite settlement has been the heart of the reformist strategy. Elite settlement is a process through which rival leaders and political forces work through the leverage of negotiation and bargaining to push the reform project and based on this they define their future relationships and accommodate on certain rules of the game”<sup>76</sup>.

Having parliament and executive under reformist control, reformist parties stressed that these institutions were still the best opportunities to follow reform<sup>77</sup>. The movement could not use the capacity of their supporters except in elections, because this was just a shapeless mass and it was very likely that any popular gathering lead to violence<sup>78</sup>.

Again similar to works in transitiology literature and the revolution literature, reformists parties argued that acts of violence, mass mobilization and revolutionary methods could not bring about democracy<sup>79</sup>. On different occasions, they also referred to instances of the Iranian history, in the Constitutional Revolution, and the Nationalization of Oil (1950-53) when radicalism aborted democratization process<sup>80</sup>.

To sum up, one can see reformist parties and the student movement organization more or less shared the same paradigm in assessing the political context. Resonating with some academic social science theories, this paradigm, Discursive Paradigm was based on optimism toward the incumbent elite and political institutions such as elections and pessimism about the percussions of the mass mobilization.

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<sup>76</sup> *Nowruz*, 1380/05/24; see also *Hayat-e Now*, 1381/06/23.

<sup>77</sup> *Hambastegi*, 1380/09/10.

<sup>78</sup> *Aftab*, 1380, no. 11. See also.

<sup>79</sup> *Aftab*, 1381, no. 18.

<sup>80</sup> *Hayat-e Now*, 1379/06/03; *Asr-e Ma*, 1380; *Yas-e-Now* 1382/05/14.

Opposition groups, as we saw, did not share this paradigm with other reformist actors. Finally, instances of repression did not immediately make reformist actors to revise or reject the paradigm they were using.

## **The Second Phase (2000-2005)**

### **New Paradigms in the Movement (2000-2001)**

Whereas reformists had put lots of hope in capturing legislature, some of these hopes turned to disillusionment when Guardian Council vetoed different pro-democratic parliamentary bills and other repressive measures toward reformist journalists, intellectuals, and activists continued. In tandem with these closures in the political context a new paradigm became more visible in public debates within the movement. This paradigm was advocated by opposition groups and some other individual reformist intellectuals and strategists<sup>81</sup>.

*Activist Paradigm.* The first and most important point about this paradigm was that, it did not share the optimistic view toward reforming the system just through governmental institutions and electoral politics. Optimistic hopes in transforming the opponents through sympathy would not work, if not accompanied by popular pressure.

In this paradigm, the Reform Movement was seen as a grass-roots social movement<sup>82</sup>. The successes of the movement have been because of its grass-roots base, and the only way to success is to work on the pressure from below and the popular force of the movement<sup>83</sup>. Thus, to promote the reformist causes, it would be necessary to take the opportunity to organize and mobilize the supporters. The main proposed strategy in this paradigm was “pressure from below and bargaining at the top,” formulated by Sa’eed Hajjarian. In contrast to tendency in Discursive and Institutional Paradigms

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<sup>81</sup> People like Alireza Alavitabar and Sa’eed Hajjarian.

<sup>82</sup> See for instance Abdol’ali Rezayi’s interview in *Aftab*, 1379, no. 02.

<sup>83</sup> See for instance *Aftab*, 1379, no. 2.

to elitism, Hajjarian had a different understanding of power: “We should not see the power at the top. The power is distributed in the bottom. When people in the bottom find each other, a micro-mobilization occurs”<sup>84</sup>. For him, the government was the fruit of the movement not its creator<sup>85</sup>.

This paradigm had also reflections on the past. It was argued that the failure of the movement began when it just concentrated on bargaining at the top and lost its privilege in the “pressure from below”<sup>86</sup>. Moreover, the fact that Khatami refrained in different occasions to confront hardliner and lead his supporters to encounter them was also criticized and was mentioned as another instance of missing opportunity: “expressing hope is not enough, Khatami should resist hardliners, use his 20 million backbone and talk explicitly to them”<sup>87</sup>. This was in fact a critique of the optimistic assumption about conservative elites of IRI.

*Institutionalist Paradigm.* In addition to the rise of the activist paradigm, another subtle but important paradigm shift also occurred when fifteen months after proposing the strategy of Active Tranquility, the Organization of Mujahidin called for following the new strategy of Active Deterrence. In this new strategy, Mujahidin accepted that the hope in rationalizing the opponents have not worked and it urged reformist elite in the Executive and Legislature to voice their opposition toward hard-liners’ crackdown on reformist activists<sup>88</sup>. Lay reformist parties were the main groups that pursued this strategy and took a challenger stance toward hardliners. This paradigm kept the premise of plausibility of working through institutions, and implausibility of mass mobilization, but rejected the

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<sup>84</sup> *Fekr-e Now* 1379, no. 6

<sup>85</sup> *Hayat-e Now*, 1380/03/06.

<sup>86</sup> *Mardom-Salari*, 1381/06/14; see also *Jame'e\_ye\_Madan,i* 1379 no. 08. *Hayat-e Now* 1380/0306; *Doran-e Emruz*, 1379/12/17; *Yek Haftom*, 1380, no. 14.

<sup>87</sup> *Asr-e Azadegan*, 1378/08/19; see also the same theme from other politicians and journalists in *Asr-e Azadegan*, 1378/09/10; *Payam-e Hamun*, 1378, no. 303; *Nawruz*, 1380/03/16.

<sup>88</sup> *Asr-e Ma*, 1380, no. 24.

optimism toward IRI elite. Lay reformist parties, who advocated this paradigm, later used their official ranks to attack judiciary and other non-electoral governmental institutions.

This subtle shift is important because it was a relative convergence toward the Activist Paradigm that was urging for a more confrontational approach. We will see later how this convergence played in later coalitional changes within the movement.

## **2002 Municipality Elections**

Slightly before the second municipalities' elections, the Unity Office signaled its departure from the Discursive and Institutional Paradigms. Unity Office had worked in coordination with clerical and lay reformists advocating aforementioned paradigms until 2001, but in September 2001, it indicated in its final resolution of the annual meeting that,

“accepting the general paradigm of reformism, we have brought up our criticisms of the status quo. According to our analysis the capacities of the current discourse of reformism – that started in May 23<sup>rd</sup> - is getting exhausted and many of its assumption have been tarnished”<sup>89</sup>.

Unity Office, then did not issue a list of candidate in the municipality elections in February 2003, while Clerical and Lay reformist parties and opposition groups both participated in this election<sup>90</sup>. These groups affiliated with Discursive, Institutional and Activist paradigms and all shared the perception of these elections as an opportunity for pushing forward reforms. Besides, based on reformist landslide victories four elections from 1997 to 2001, there was not so much talk in this election about the threat of hardliners capturing the municipalities.

Nonetheless, the turnout and the results of the polls took the participant reformist actors by surprise.

The turn-out in the election was very low over throughout the country, especially in Tehran, and

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<sup>89</sup> Asr-e Now, 1381/07/02 <http://asre-nou.net/1381/mehr/2/m-tahkim.html>

<sup>90</sup> Nehzat-e Azadi statement 1381/11/28 <http://www.nehzateazadi.org/statements/81/1822.pdf> (accessed 2010-10-22).

hardliners ended winning the municipalities. Mahmud Ahmadi-nejad was elected as the mayor of Tehran after this election.

The important point here is that, the threat was in fact present in this period, but since actors had won all the elections since 1997, they did not perceive the imminent danger of hardliners capturing the municipalities. This point speaks to the literature about threat and coalition. Indeed, what is important is not the objective threat but the perception of threat that contributes in coalition-making between movement actors.

Shortly after the election Unity Office announced its departure from the May 23<sup>rd</sup> Front since it did not see this front efficient anymore and their decision to launch the new “All-inclusive Democracy Front” [Jebhe-ye faragir-e demokrasi]. This departure was based on diverging assessment of Unity Office of the political context from other reformist actors in the May 23<sup>rd</sup> Front. Office Unity argued that reform from within would not be efficient anymore. The movement would need then a new strategy and so a new coalition to work that strategy out:

“Talking about the inefficiency of the May 23<sup>rd</sup> Front is based on this reality that the strategy of “self-reforming” of the regime has faced a blockade. Of course this does not just go back to the weaknesses of the reformists, but the fact that the hard cores of power do not surrender to the process of reform has been one of the serious causes of this blockade”<sup>91</sup>.

*Radical Paradigm.* A few months before this statement of Unity Office, Akbar Ganji, a reformist journalist formerly advocating the discursive paradigm, wrote his *Republican Manifesto* in the Evin Prison that was suggesting of the emergence of the radical paradigm. In this new paradigm, IRI was not reformable. The institutional arrangement of the regime was so inherently authoritarian that would render reform from within the regime impossible. Working within legal institutions, then, could not result in anything other than wasting the social capital of the movement, as was observed in the low turn-out in the municipality election. The only way out was to boycott governmental

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<sup>91</sup> The final resolution of the meeting of the public council of OCU in March 10 2003 Asr-e Nou, 1381/12/19 <http://asre-nou.net/1381/esfand/19/m-tahkim.html> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

institution and struggle for establishment of a full-fledged secular republic through methods of civil disobedience. Ganji argued in detail in his *Manifesto* that reforming the regime within the framework of the Constitution was not possible. Ali Afshari, a prominent member of Tahkim, also brought up this point among others:

“Struggling to reform an unreformable system is futile. In an inflexible power structure and sociopolitical configuration that has not left any hope for submission to the will of people, could one talk about the political action within the framework of reformism?<sup>92</sup>”.

Instead, radical paradigm highlighted the importance of the pressure from below. They shared this critique with activist paradigm that failure of reformism to an extent has been because of their failure in organizing and mobilizing their constituencies<sup>93</sup>. However, the pressure from below was the only way of democratization and they rejected any positive role for having representatives in governmental institutions<sup>94</sup>. Their argument against the presence in the government was that structural constraints would not let the reformists to be effective in the government. As a result they would not be able to keep their promise and would lose people’s trust in them<sup>95</sup>.

One can notice how similar this argument is to Piven’s and Cloward’s classic argument in social movement literature. They argued that the only means conducive to positive outcome for movements is disruption, and working through institutions would lead to cooptation of movement leaders<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>92</sup> *Sharq*, 1383/07/08; also *Sharq*, 1383/09/01; Mohsen Sazegar also mentioned in an interview that “people have concluded that this regime is not reformable” *Sepide Zendege*, 1381, no 5.

<sup>93</sup> See Ahmad Zeidabadi’s interview in *Payam-e Hamun* 1378 no. 32; Hatam Qaderi’s interview in *Jame’e-ye Madani* 1379, no. 4; Mohsen Sazegara’s interview in *Tose’e* 1389/10/23; and *Golestan-e Iran*, 1381/06/21.

<sup>94</sup> *Aftab*, 1380 no. 7; Akbar Ganji, *Manifest-e Jomhuri-Khahi; Jomhuri-Khahi Dar Barabar-e Mashrute-Khahi; Modeli Baraye Khoruj Az Bonbast-e Stasi*, 1381)

<sup>95</sup> *Sharq*, 1383/09/09.

<sup>96</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements : Why they Succeed, how they Fail* (New York: Vintage books, 1979).

## **2004 Parliamentary Elections and the Proposal for Constitutional Amendment**

In 2004 parliamentary elections, many reformist candidates who registered for the elections got disqualified by the Guardian Council. Khatami and Mahdi Karrubi, the speaker of the parliament, tried to solve the problem through negotiation with the Leader<sup>97</sup>. Lay reformist parties, though, expected Khatami to take a more confrontational stance and refuse carrying out the elections. Finally when the elections carried out, lay reformist parties did not participate in this election, while Khatami, Karrubi and the clerical reformist party participated and invited people to participate in the election. This election was an important point in terms of drawing a line between lay reformist parties and Institutional paradigm on the one hand, and clerical reformist party and the Discursive paradigm, on the other hand.

In the aftermath of this election, seven activists including four top member of Unity Office issued a statement asking for a referendum to change the Constitution. They launched a website on internet under the title of “Sixty Million Signatures” and asked people to sign their petition<sup>98</sup>.

This proposition did not fly within other reformist actors. Not only groups affiliated with Institutionalism rejected the idea of a referendum for Constitutional change, but also figures associated with Activism criticized it. Hajjarian criticized them because of what he called the unfit between their means and ends. He questioned if they had the capacity to change the Constitution, called them delusional, and compared them with messianic movements in terms of unfit between means and ends<sup>99</sup>. Similarly Ebrahim Yazdi, the secretary general of Liberation Movement, one of the

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<sup>97</sup> See *Iran* 1382/07/16.

<sup>98</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20041126100719/http://60000000.com/> (accessed in 07/17/2010).

<sup>99</sup> *Sharq*, 1383 no. 83 the Special Edition for the New Year.

opposition groups, also argued that if the movement had the capacity to mobilize people then it would not need to change the legal structure,

“because with this popular power, one can reform the structure. In England, the queen has the legal right to close the parliament and fire the prime minister but political forces do not let her do that. People who seek to change the Constitution and the legal structure should explain with which power leverage they are going to do so”<sup>100</sup>.

What was in fact at the heart of the debates about the Constitutional referendum was whether realizing the Constitutional referendum was possible or not, or there was an opportunity for that. In fact, perceptions of opportunity mattered in themselves in this juncture. A group such as Liberation Movement was a political party that has been critical toward the content of the Constitution and some of its core doctrines since its ratification. Its members had been also subject of state repression in different occasions, and were banned from running for office in 1980s and 1990s. However, all these factors did not make Liberation Movement to line up with radical proposers of the Constitutional Change who as well were critical toward the Constitution and were target of repression.

Then a few months before 2005 presidential elections the configuration reformist actors' alliances within the reform movement had completely changed. Lay reformist parties had broken up with the reformist clerical party over a debate about the possibility of confronting hardliners in 2004 parliamentary elections, and opposition groups had lined up with the lay reformist parties about the implausibility of having a constitutional referendum.

### **2005 Presidential election**

In 2005 presidential election, different perceptions of opportunity and threats crystallized in different positions toward election. Mahdi Karrubi's candidacy, backed by clerical reformist party, represented discursive paradigm, as he emphasized in his campaign that he was a good bargainer and could pursue the reform through negotiations. Lay reformist parties nominated Mostafa Mo'een, and stated

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with ILNA.1383\_06\_25 <http://newsmanager.gooya.com/politics/archives/020460.php> (accessed 2010-10-21).



that if he got qualified to run, they would participate<sup>101</sup>. They described the election as an opportunity for resuscitating and empowering the movement<sup>102</sup>. Mo'een from the beginning revealed his confrontational approach and said he would not carry out elections such as 2004 parliamentary elections.

Opposition groups affiliated with the activist paradigm such also said they would participate if their candidate got qualified, and described the elections as an opportunity for democratization<sup>103</sup>. When their candidate got disqualified by Guardian Council, after a few rounds of negotiations with the lay reformist parties, opposition groups supported Mo'een's candidacy. To clarify this decision, they pointed to the threat that they perceived in unification of sovereignty under hardliner's rule. They stated that boycotting the election in practice will serve the benefit of the incumbent authoritarian faction and would let them to capture the executive without any problem<sup>104</sup>:

“If we do not participate in the election, the right faction will win the election and then they will make a disaster for the country, that we can observe in the behavior of the mayor of Tehran [Mahmud Ahmadi-nejad]”<sup>105</sup>.

While lay reformist parties shared this notion of threat with opposition groups, they also noticed that they needed new allies in elections, when they observed the low turnout in 2003 municipality elections, and after they broke up with the clerical reformist party in 2004 parliamentary elections.

Groups and figures affiliated with the radical paradigm such as Unity office, nonetheless, boycotted the election. They argued that the legal regime in Iran was the main obstacle to reform<sup>106</sup>. Even in

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<sup>101</sup> Mostafa Tajzade in debate with Ali Afshari in Shahid Abbaspur University, *ISNA* 1384/03/01 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-530839> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

<sup>102</sup> Mohammad Reza Khatami's lecture in Orumiye University in *ISNA* 1384/02/24 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-526866> (accessed in 2010-10-22)

<sup>103</sup> *ISNA* 1384/02/24 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-526998> (accessed in 2010-10-22). *Sharq*, 1384/02/12.

<sup>104</sup> *ISNA* 1384/03/16 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-537369>

<sup>105</sup> *ISNA* 1384/03/16 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-537369>

case of a free election this power structure would not allow the elected president to fulfill his promises and this would erode the social capital of the movement<sup>107</sup>. Finally, hardliners needed this vote to legitimize their rule, so movement should abstain its vote and delegitimize the regime<sup>108</sup>. They were of the opinion that this is a more efficient way to pursue democratization<sup>109</sup>.

*Organizational tension within Unity Office.* Although Unity Office was the most important group endorsing boycott, this view toward the election was not shared within all of the subunits of the Unity Office. A significant minority in subunits of the Unity Office either endorsed Mo'een's candidacy or just supported participating in the election<sup>110</sup>. In an argument very similar to the classic political opportunity thesis in social movement literature, these student activists argued that a fracture in the sovereignty would open the political space in the bottom, and there was still opportunities within the system to reform it from the within. He said that activists needed a force within the government to interact with hardliners<sup>111</sup>.

What is important here is that divergence over assessments of political context not only can contribute in fractures within movement coalitions, but also they can lead to tensions within social movement organizations, tensions which undermine their efficacy to act as a unified collective actor. The

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<sup>106</sup> ISNA 1384/03/03 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-532001> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

<sup>107</sup> ISNA 1384/03/15 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-536818> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

<sup>108</sup> Ali Afshari in his debate with Mostafa Tajzade said that the power structure is the main cause of the weakness of the civil society. "These votes strengthen both electoral institutions in the regime and other institutions; we do not want to contribute in strengthening other institutions" ISNA 1384/03/01 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-530958> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

<sup>109</sup> ISNA 1384/02/25 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-527651> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

<sup>110</sup> ISNA 1384/03/18 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-538281> (accessed in 2010-10-22); ISNA 1384/03/23 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-540656> (accessed in 2010-10-22); ISNA 1384/03/24 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-540192> (accessed in 2010-10-22); ISNA 1384/03/21 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-539352> (accessed in 2010-10-22); ISNA 1384/03/20 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-538310> (accessed in 2010-10-22); ISNA 1384/03/20 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-538178> (accessed in 2010-10-22); ISNA 1384/03/16 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-534963> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

<sup>111</sup> ISNA 1384/02/25 <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-527400> (accessed in 2010-10-22).

evidence about tensions within the Unity Office indicates that one cannot reduce disagreements over perceived opportunity and threat to mobilizational structure or organizational membership.

Table 4  
Key Moments in the life of the Reform Movement  
Perceptions, Actions, and Changing Coalitions

	Reformist Clerical Party	Reformist Lay Parties	Student Movement	Opposition Groups
1997				
Presidential Election	Supporting Khatami	Supporting Khatami	Supporting Khatami	Participating in the Election
Arrest of the Refirnuust Mayor of Tehran [Karbaschi]	Khatami trying to solve the problem through negotiation			Suggesting to Khatami to rely on people in dealing with this crisis
1998				
Municipalities Election	Participation as a member of May 23 <sup>rd</sup> Front	Participation as a member of May 23 <sup>rd</sup> Front	Participation as a member of May 23 <sup>rd</sup> Front	
Arrest of Kadivar			Organizing protests all over the country but then canceling them after people affiliated with Reformist Lay Parties encouraged them to do so	
July 7 <sup>th</sup> (18 Tir)	Condemning Violence against students and inviting students to calmness	Condemning Violence against students and inviting students to calmness	Protesting against violence and trying to control the crowd at the same time	
2000				
Parliamentary election	Participation as a member of May 23 <sup>rd</sup> Front	Participation as members of May 23 <sup>rd</sup> Front	Participation as a member of May 23 <sup>rd</sup> Front	Participation with their own list of Candidate
Shut-down of reformist Press		Suggesting Active Tranquility	Limiting their protests within University campuses and abiding by Active Tranquility	
2001				
Presidential	Supporting	Supporting	Supporting Khatami	Supporting

Election	Khatami	Khatami		Khatami
	Emphasizing on Moderation and avoiding extremism	Suggesting Active Deterrence (taking a confrontational stance within institutions)	Stating that reformist discourse is tarnished	
2002				
Municipalities Elections	Participation with a separate list	Participation with a separate list	Not Participating in the Elections, and Leaving May 23 <sup>rd</sup> Front After the Elections	Participation with a separate list
2004				
Parliamentary Elections	Participation	Not Participation	Not Participation	Not Participation
The Proposal for Constitutional Referendum	Rejection	Rejection	Endorsing	Rejection
2005				
Presidential Election	Majma' supporting Karrubi	Supporting Mo'een	The Majority of Subunits and the Central Committee Boycotting, and a Minority Endorsing Mo'een	Supporting Mo'een

## Conclusion

The Iranian Reform movement started its campaign for democratizing political power in Iran with a coalition between the clerical reformist party, lay reformist parties, and the student movement. These three actors all shared the discursive paradigm in assessing the political context and making strategic choices. During the later political development, Unity Office the main organization of the student movement rejected the discursive paradigm and took a radical stance. They stated that there is no opportunity in working within institutions and negotiating with political elites. They left the coalition in 2002. Lay reformist parties also dropped their optimism toward political elite and broke up with the clerical reformist party. This paradigm shift brought them closer to the opposition groups. Opposition groups did not totally reject working within institutions. They maintained that working within

institutions should be accompanied with pressure from below. Lay reformist parties and opposition groups formed a coalition in 2005 presidential elections, while the clerical reformist party endorsed another candidate, and the Unity office boycotted the election. As I argued, goals, repression, and organization cannot explain this new coalitional configuration. If similar goals and repression were determinant factors opposition groups should have lined up with the student movement. Also, if perceptions could be reduced to organizational factors Unity office would not have witnessed the internal tension between units that followed the organization official policy and units that followed the coalition of the opposition groups and the lay reformist parties. One cannot understand the new coalitional configuration unless taking into account the new landscape of the perceived opportunities and threats.

The case of multiple perceptions of opportunity and threat is a scenario that is downplayed by the scholars of social movements. This paper takes this scenario seriously and argues that perceptions of opportunity and threat are complex and the subject of debate between movement actors. In this sense movement actors are very similar to movement scholars who try to figure out different dimensions of the concept and identify it in different contexts. The similarity appears even bigger, when we observe that actors' perceptions engage theories of mass society, democratization, social movements and so on.

Finally, this paper contends that treating political opportunities and threats objectively in explanations of coalition building or fragmentation within social movements leaves us with unsolved puzzles. To understand these processes better I proposed to take the perceptions into account. Converging and diverging perceptions of opportunity and threat are part of the formation and disintegration of coalitions within social movements.

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