

Debating the Limits of Debate:  
Politics and Rhetorics of Dissent and Disagreement  
in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Department of Communication in the College of Arts and Sciences

Chapel Hill  
2020

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ali Reza Eshraghi: Debating the Limits of Debate:  
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(Under the direction of V. William (Bill) Balthrop)

This dissertation evaluates the place of debate in contemporary Iranian political environment and discursive culture, the assumptions that ruling and opposition elites have about debate and about the opportunities it provides for politicking; and their ongoing negotiation over the definitions, configurations, and conditions of public debate and the discursive resolution of disputes. By studying three major sites of struggle – the print press, academia and the national television – the dissertation examines how the regime has tried to discipline various public spheres, maintain the appropriate form of discourse, and outline the condition of an institutionally mediated and contained dissent without being politically disruptive; and how dissidents have tried to utilize debate for their agenda and deployed rhetorical performances in state-controlled publics in order to navigate the limits, manifest dissent and disagreement, and expand the scope of subversive expression. The dissertation assesses the political circumstances, administrative decisions, governing ideas, habitual practices, and the social conditions that have constituted, and also become constitutive of, the advent and development of diverse forms and modes of public debate in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The dissertation contributes to the interplaying fields of rhetoric, media, religion and politics by exploring, critiquing and expanding the functions ascribed to debate usually manifested in and associated with Western democracies. It argues that debate and deliberation not only could be possible and permissible under nondemocratic settings, but could even be initiated and encouraged by authoritarian agents.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is the result of many debts. My deepest thanks go to my advisor, Bill Balthrop, for his constant comforting support, his wonderful patience, and his invaluable direction and scholarly guidance extended incessantly throughout my voyage of research. I owe an immense debt of gratitude to Charles Kurzman for his unceasingly kind and diligent mentorship, his insightful and meticulous discussions, and his careful attention to my intellectual progress. I am extremely grateful to Carole Blair; without her inspiring wisdom and her unending enthusiasm this project could not have been started. I express my profound gratitude to Carl Ernst; his gentle suggestions, and ever pleasing conversations expanded my horizon and motivated me in pursuing deeper contextual and relational inquiries. I give my humblest thanks to Chris Lundberg for furthering my critical thinking, and for the awe that he brings forth with his stimulating observations. I am deeply honored and privileged for having the support of my committee members. They have set high standards of excellence as rigorous scholars, untiring educators, and compassionate mentors. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Michael Palm for his indispensable knowledge and kindhearted assistance; I truly appreciate all that he has done for me. I additionally owe much to many professors at UNC-Chapel Hill, especially Della Pollock, Patricia Parker, and Lawrence Grossberg. Finally, this journey would not have been possible without the dedicated care and persistent motivation of my dearest wife and my nearest friends.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: SITUATING DEBATE IN IRAN: THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS.....	1
The Concept of Public Debate.....	9
Debate, Deliberation, and Legitimation .....	11
Tracing the Local Roots .....	25
Modern State Promoting Debate.....	38
Structure.....	44
CHAPTER 2: DEBATE IN PRINTED PRESS: RHETORIC OF DISSENT AND JUDICIAL REPRISAL.....	47
Place(s) of Speech.....	48
Pressing the Press .....	53
Order and Freedom .....	58
Error and Trial .....	61
Expanding the Limits of Criticism.....	71
Meaning-without-Saying.....	77

Not for Public Consumption .....	86	
Daring to Debate.....	89	
CHAPTER 3: DEBATE IN ACADEMIA: TRAINING CRITICAL THINKING WITHOUT		
CREATING CRITICAL CONDITIONS .....		96
Commanding “Free Thinking” .....	100	
Too Much Discussion for A Revolution.....	104	
The Calm and the Clamor.....	109	
Debate and Its Paperworks .....	112	
Freedom After Thinking Aloud.....	116	
The Birth of Student Debate Competitions .....	128	
Winning the Debate Vs. Proving Convictions .....	134	
CHAPTER 4: DEBATE ON TELEVISION: DEFINING THE OPTIMAL EXCITEMENT		
WITHOUT DISTURBANCE.....		145
In the Streets, and On the Air.....	149	
Resolution on Screen.....	153	
A Debate to End Debates.....	157	
The Evolution of Revolutionary Television .....	164	
Special Programming: Presidential Debate.....	168	
Formatting and Reformatting .....	174	

Keeping it Live! .....	180
Some Like it Hot!.....	188
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	197
The Dilemma of Endurance .....	200
Debate and Its Discontents .....	208
IMAGE APPENDIX.....	227
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED .....	242

### **Guide to Citations**

Two types of citations are applied in the body of this manuscript, due to the variety of sources in different languages. The MLA style of in-text citation is used for scholarly and intellectual works published in both English and Persian languages with all sources listed in the bibliography. Reference to news sources and official Iranian documents is made in footnotes in order to make the flow easier and to prevent potential conflicts in the text encoding structure. Persian titles and names are transliterated. The publication date for Persian sources is provided based on their local Solar Hijri calendar system.

## CHAPTER 1: SITUATING DEBATE IN IRAN: THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

A series of civil protests occurred in multiple cities across Iran starting on November 15, 2019. The initial trigger for unrest was the increase in fuel prices without any public notification. The shock over the price increase drew the crowds into the streets, but the cries of rage soon expanded to include slogans against the Supreme Leader and broader socio-political demands for justice. According to media reports, within hours, protests spread to more than 100 cities and videos of clashes between citizens and security forces began to circulate online.<sup>1</sup> In some areas of the country the protests turned into riots with more than 900 banks<sup>2</sup> and businesses and government buildings damaged. In order to contain the demonstrations, the state enforced a ten-day nationwide near-total internet shutdown, effectively disconnecting 83 million people from the rest of the world and stopping the flow of information. The police and paramilitary forces confronted the people with live ammunition. Iranian officials have admitted that many protesters were killed, but the state has not released any numbers. International human rights organizations

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see "Iran's Hidden Slaughter: A Video Investigation." *France 24: The Observers*, December 24, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Hamshahri, Azar 3, 1398.



such as Amnesty International reported that at least 304 individuals were killed,<sup>3</sup> while Reuters raised the number up to 1,500 individuals.<sup>4</sup>

On November 26, the final round of Iran's eighth Student Debate Competitions (ISDC) began. A total of 625 university student teams from 31 provinces had been competing against each other during an intense ten-month marathon. A total of 813 debate sessions were conducted all across the country until twelve teams were selected to compete at the national level. On December 23, the grand finale was held at Tehran University's faculty of Literature and Humanities, namely the oldest faculty in the Persian-speaking world. Iran President Hassan Rouhani delivered a message to the closing ceremony, stressing the importance of public debate and complaining that "the lack of constructive dialogue is one of the most pressing challenges of the country."<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile Rouhani was being harshly criticized by the media for his administration's failure to allow a public debate before suddenly announcing its policy to increase fuel prices.<sup>6</sup>

This annual tournament is managed by a government organization dubbed "Academic Jihad" (although its official name in English is Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research), an organization founded after Iran's Cultural Revolution of 1981. One of the reasons for the Cultural Revolution, which resulted in a nationwide closing of

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<sup>3</sup> "Iran: Thousands Arbitrarily Detained and at Risk of Torture in Chilling Post-Protest Crackdown." *Amnesty International*, December 16, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> "Special Report: Iran's Leader Ordered Crackdown on Unrest." *Reuters*, December 23, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> *Iran Student Debate Competition (ISDC.ir) Official Website*, Dey 2, 1398.

<sup>6</sup> "Iran Abruptly Raises Fuel Prices, and Protests Erupt." *The New York Times*, November 15, 2019.

universities and the expulsion of professors and students, was preventing the then heated political and ideological debates and stopping the spread of “subversive ideas” on campuses. The Academic Jihad’s goal was, therefore, to create “a calm environment for teaching higher-value Islamic knowledge” in universities.<sup>7</sup> The same organization established to prevent the initiation of free and public debate on campuses, has now become the founder of a series of competitions in which the redlines of the Islamic regime are easily challenged.

The paradox of debate in Iran has other ironic nuances even on the surface. The preface of one of the booklets circulated by the Academic Jihad to promote the competitions includes a quote by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in praise of debate<sup>8</sup>. Such quotes are a well-established and hackneyed rhetorical technique used in Iran to show that an activity or an idea corresponds with the intentions of the Supreme Leader. A few paragraphs further, when boasting that debate is an originally Iranian tradition and not a western import, the booklet cites a tale from 2500 years ago in the Achaemenid era. The fact that an official document evokes Iran’s pre-Islamic history is itself interesting as the regime has had contentious attitudes toward the ancient past and considers it to be in contrast with its promoted Islamic ideology. The story – according to Herodotus – is that seven Persian nobles debate over the future form of their government. One participant, Otanes, makes a strong argument for the benefits of democracy and

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<sup>7</sup> "Introduction." *Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR.ac.ir) Official Website*.

<sup>8</sup> See the landing page of *Iran Student Debate Competition (ISDC.ir) Official Website*.

disadvantages of individual rule while another defends oligarchy. Until Darius – the soon to be monarch of Persia – challenges all arguments presented and proves monarchy is the best form of government (see Herodotus III.80 - III.97). There was also another quote from Herodotus on the ISDC website which is now removed, presumably because it was against the Islamic morals: “If an important decision is to be made, they [the Persians] discuss the question when they are drunk, and the following day the master of the house where the discussion was held submits their decision for reconsideration when they are sober. If they still approve it, it is adopted; if not, it is abandoned. Conversely, any decision they make when they are sober, is reconsidered afterwards when they are drunk” (see Herodotus I.133).

The paradoxical phenomenon of debate in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the recurring theme in this dissertation that seeks to understand the circumstances, governing ideas, habitual practices, administrative decisions and the social conditions that have affected and also been affected from such a public form of discursive participation and have led to the (re)construction of a certain rhetoric that establishes “the conditions that make a peculiar kind of communication possible” (Berlin 2). Examining the historical background of public debate in the Islamic Republic displays a contested political terrain in which multiple conflicting positions and aspirations about public debate – and about its level of publicity, its potential promises and problems, and the manners by which it should be rhetorically performed – have been at play. Public debate is one of the key sites of struggle that defines the political future of Iran.

The relation of the Islamic Republic with debate is a curious and complicated one. Iran is often categorized as being among the authoritarian regimes; yet, despite the theoretical assumptions and unlike the actual and historical examples of authoritarianism, the regime has never categorically limited freedom of expression and speech. Rather it has always allowed certain levels of public debate even while restricting different modes and forms of disputation to specific spaces and audiences. Houchang Chehabi aptly summarized this peculiar situation two decades ago: “Iran is unique among non-democratic polities in having regular parliamentary and presidential elections in which voters have a genuine (but limited) choice. Inside parliament debates are passionate and criticism of the executive branch frequent. Newspapers have different editorial lines, and engage in polemics from which the nature of the disagreements within the regime can be deduced” (64).

The case of debate in Iran becomes more interesting given the fact that the Islamic regime has bitter memories of its disruptive potential. Debate became popular in the extremely fluid situation of the post-1979-revolution. It played a significant role in political mobilization while both ruling actors and opposition also regarded it as a “peaceful” and “civilized” form of conflict resolution. Yet it ultimately increased contention and led to extreme polarization of the public. Two years after the revolution, instead of allowing the fate of ideological and political confrontations to be determined in debates, street clashes erupted and eventually all opposition groups were either eliminated or repressed by the Islamists who have held on to power until now. Although the regime learned that unrestrained and unfiltered public debate can have troublesome

consequences, it never managed to entirely ban it. Instead it has tried to co-opt, contain, channel, and control it. Even at the height of the political suppression of the 1980s, the public could listen to heated parliamentary debates on the radio as long as they were open sessions (see Brumberg; and Baktiari). Participating in such debates was mostly reserved for the ruling right and left factions of the Islamic regime. Nevertheless, the dissident intellectuals and opposition activists were able to play at the margins of these debates in order to advance their own political agenda.

One can read the four-decade history of the Islamic regime as a constant trial and error experiment to outline the boundaries of public debate, and to allow somehow for the condition of an institutionally mediated dissent without it being politically disruptive. The Iranian regime and the sociopolitical actors have persistently attempted to (re)define participation in public debate, (re)set the conditions for debate, and (re)constitute certain publics with different sizes along with a certain ethos and means of persuasion and deliberation.

But even this restricted, monitored, and often disciplined form of debate has proven to be unruly and destabilizing. Different sociopolitical actors used different tactics in order to enter into various publics, participate in and expand the debate and, at times, even maintain the small window of opportunity for debate. One example is the Reform Movement (1997-2005) during which vibrant and flamboyant forms of debate dominated the public sphere. The Reform Movement is an interesting rhetorical experience, not only because the state failed to control the public debate but also because the opposition failed to take advantage of their perceived available means of persuasion in order to achieve its

political agenda. The movement ended in 2005 without being successful either in mobilizing the public to challenge the regime, or in persuading the state's elites to assent to a path for democratization. On some occasions the heated political debate escalated to physical assaults, and even an assassination attempt in March 2000 on the influential reformist strategist and Editor-in-Chief of *Sobh-e Emrooz* newspaper, Saeed Hajjarian. Nevertheless, the movement resulted in the reconfiguration of public debate and the inception of new forms and modes of discursive disputation. In 2009, four years after the demise of the Reform Movement, the state allowed presidential candidates to directly participate in one-on-one debates for the first time. The heated and aggressive debates of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – the then Iranian president – with other candidates greatly captured the attention of the public and resulted in an overly antagonized election. The debate forced a crisis and added fuel to the fire of the protests following the election. Despite this experience and the subsequent troubles, conducting presidential debates became a norm and continued in the following 2013 and 2017 elections. Perhaps more surprisingly, the most conservative elements of the state expanded and diversified participation in debate through the initiative of national student competitions.

It is against this background that this project intends to study the place of debate in contemporary Iranian political environment. Throughout this dissertation, I examine three major cases of struggle over debate: The first case is the print press, which has seen contentious forces at play trying to either scale up or scale down the expression of dissent and disagreement – trying to codify what should remain unspeakable and what could be speakable in the public. The regime's opposing intellectuals and also the revisionist ruling

elites have considered the print media –especially the daily papers – as the best venue available for generating public debates and arguing for the necessity, legitimacy and urgency of their demands for democratization and liberalization. The second case is academia, which has generated the most active and troublemaking of political forces for the regime, i.e. the student movement. Meanwhile, the regime’s ruling elites have been obsessed with (re)defining the forms and frames of debate in academia, hoping that it would ultimately help them with producing an ideal type of citizenry suitable for the Islamic Republic. The third, and last, case of struggle is television, which the state holds the monopoly of its programming and broadcasting. Staging controversy and disputation on TV screens – in the form of presidential debates and also through various live talk shows, has been an ongoing experimental adventure in the Islamic Republic. For each of these cases, we can detect certain conflicting conceptions and assumptions behind debate as a form of public discursive practice, as a prospect for expressing political dissent and disagreement and advocating for change, as a process of decision-making and establishing the governing policies, as a method of deliberating and constituting the social truth, as a tool for maintaining and boosting the legitimacy and the prestige of political order, as a spectacle to keep the public busy and entertained, and as a means of resolving conflicts.

By examining these three case studies of sites of struggle, I hope to provide a better understanding of the dynamics in which public debate is constructed, and in turn becomes constitutive of politics and publics in the semi-authoritarian context of post-revolutionary Iran.

## The Concept of Public Debate

The meaning of “public debate” is pliable. Both the connotation and denotation of this notion are subject to contraction and expansion in various disciplinary literatures as well as in the vernacular language (Woods 1-3); sometimes it refers to a certain form and format of discursive practice with strict normative rules and performative regulations, and sometimes it refers in general to any dispute as long as it takes place in the public, “whether that dispute takes place in technical journals, in Congressional hearings, in the pages of newspapers or in two minute clips on network television” (Balthrop 20).

In its private context, debate usually refers to a dialogue that is quarrelsome. The term was originally derived from the Latin *battere* and *battuere* meaning to beat, thus associated with contention and competition (Kelly). But when referring to public debate, it is looked at as less of a forensic contest aiming to impress the audience/judge and more of a persuasive practice or a critical discussion based on difference of opinion. The Persian equivalent of debate – *monazereh* which is originally Arabic – had rather a more peaceful meaning; it refers to at least two points of view (*nazar*) contending and interacting with each other.

From the late 1980s and after Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was translated into English, the notion of public debate has overwhelmingly been under the shadow of public sphere and deliberative democracy theories. Habermas indeed used the phrase as an equivalent for the German “*Öffentliches Rasonnement*,” which loosely translates to public use of reason but has a specific, rather unique connotation in the German language which as Habermas explains, “preserves the



polemical nuances of both sides: simultaneously the invocation of reason and its disdainful disparagement as merely malcontent griping" (27).

Aside from a handful of scholars who do not necessarily associate public debate with public sphere (e.g. see Remer; Stannard; Jørgensen; and Kock), the embedded assumption in the literature is that public debate refers to any form of discursive dispute, and even sometimes any form of discursive participation, as long as it happens in or becomes public. A summary of such interpretation is evident in Peters and Cmiel's definition of public sphere as "the site where the citizenry debates matters of common concern and discursively formulates core values" (199, also see Kraus; and Nielsen both attributing constant open and public debate as the characteristic of public sphere). It furtively echoes Arendt when she discusses Kant's notion of public thinking, or public use of one's reason, and concludes "thinking in public can be constitutive of thinking as such" (122).

Interestingly, such an interpretation of public debate has resulted in the general use of "public conversation" (*bahs va goft-ogoo-ye omoomi*) as the equivalent for public debate in Persian translations of works by Habermas and other public sphere theorists instead of the actual Persian equivalent (*monazereh*). Habermas was careful about using the phrase, often adding the adjective "rational-critical" (or occasionally just "critical") before. Yet in many occasions he also uses "public discussion" with the same intention. Only once, he explains public debate as the "public competition of private arguments," that is supposed to "transform *voluntas* into *ratio*" as [that ratio is based on] the "consensus about what was particularly necessary in the interest of all" (83).

Nonetheless, in much of the literature the topic remains focused on the public sphere without clearly examining the concept of public debate, as if the relationship between the two is metonymic in a sense that Kenneth Burke in his discussion in *Four Master Tropes* defines as a form of reduction; a one-way street that only follows one direction (“A Grammar of Motives” 506-507). Such approach has resulted in our understandings and our expectations of public debate and its functions, rhetorically and politically, to be mostly situated in the framework of democracy, and confined to the concept of public sphere that is itself premised on the Liberal idea that there is a rational basis for argument, that people are capable and are also willing to argue with one another rationally, and that some form of *ratio communis* (or *kherad-e jami* in Farsi) can ultimately arise from argument (see Crowley 45-59). As Hicks and Greene aptly put it: “Debate has long been acclaimed as “a technology of democratic decision-making,” and “a unique means for instilling the intellectual habits and capacities of a democratic ethos” (“Managed Conviction” 99 and 106). Ewbank goes further and claims that “Freedom for discussion and debate is essentially the only type of freedom which differentiates a democracy from a dictatorship” (7-8). And Cattani, who considers the practice of debate “the hallmark of a civilized society,” asserts that debate is not possible in a non-democratic regime (130-133).

### **Debate, Deliberation, and Legitimation**

The same democratic expectations exist among scholars in the field of political philosophy and especially theorists of deliberative democracy. For some, debate and deliberation are merely synonyms meaningful only under the context of democracy (see

for example Mutz; Gutman and Thompson; Gastil and also all the deliberative theorists included in Benhabib's "Democracy and Difference") while for others deliberation is the primary function and sometimes the purpose of debate in the public sphere (e.g. Bohman; Chambers). As one scholar relevantly puts it, debate is "a zone for deliberation" (Stannard). The rest of discussion in the literature is heavily focused on critiquing Habermas' model and contemplating on criteria for ideal public deliberation: whether it could be universally rational and inclusive; whether decision (consensual or non-consensual) is the necessarily desired outcome of deliberation; and whether we could and we should have a rhetorical approach to deliberation. Yet, if we bracket off democracy, we find that not only these questions are still valid but are also relevant to an authoritarian context.

Some scholars have criticized the Habermasian consensual stipulation and have drawn attention to the coercive currents of power that streams in public debate and more generally in public discourse (see Fraser; Mouffe; and Young). Others do not consider consensus as the necessarily desired outcome of deliberation, given that achieving it is impossible particularly in today's pluralist ambiance. Phillips strongly rejects consensus on the basis that it suppresses dissent: "Dissent becomes merely a disruption in the inevitable progress toward some transcendent and universal consensus. Even when viewed as productive (i.e., heuristic or corrective), dissent is relegated to a secondary position behind the push toward consensus" (243). One can also look at deliberation from the perspective that Mouffe offers in her model of "agnostic pluralism," in which (as Patricia Roberts-

Miller also suggests) the *telos* is no longer reaching a consensual decision, instead it merely becomes recognizing difference (755-757).

Another source of contention is over processes and procedures of reasoning in public debate and deliberation. This is where the dispute over the role of rhetoric in public debate reaches its peak – a dispute that echoes two different Platonic-Aristotelian views. As mentioned earlier, Habermas often uses the adjective rational-critical before public debate. To Habermas, an ideal deliberation is dialectical and rhetoric-free. Its goal is to resolve dispute over the issue through rationally-motivated agreements and, therefore, participants must avoid affective modes of communication and instead use impartial and impersonal reasoning. The responsibility of participants in the debate is to introduce and address the problem with sincerity; to provide adequate response to challenges and criticism; and to make sure proof offered to support arguments meets the criteria of logic; and “that no force except that of the better argument is exercised” (“Legitimation Crisis” 108).

Based on this very ground, Bessette attacks rhetoric and attempts to insulate deliberative institutions from its debauching influence (237). Ironically, being bound to this interpretation has (perhaps inadvertent) aspects such as what Elster calls the “civilizing force of hypocrisy,” which involves hiding egocentric motives, private interests, and even emotions under the cloak of rationality (“Arguing and Bargaining” 349). There are other scholars falling in the middle of this spectrum who have attempted to present rhetoric as legitimate component of deliberation. (Theorists like Goodnight; Bohman; Young; Richardson; Garsten; Dryzek; Chambers; and Nielsen believe that rhetoric, based on an

Aristotelian understanding, can ultimately stimulate rational judgment.) In this sense, rhetoric is a means to an end and only serves to help inventing an argument capable of placing the intended audience in a specific social and psychological state to generate a responsible judgement. Therefore, Garsten argues that not every rhetoric is deliberative and triggers the deliberation mechanism only when the rhetor persuades the audience to use her/his practical judgement capacity (175). Dewey falls on the same spectrum. He viewed rhetoric and deliberation as inseparable, but at the same time believed that the public problem and its paramount need is that “methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion” (365) constantly become improved and reviewed to ensure that more than anything they help to empower the community. Other scholars like Ivie; Hauser; McDorman and Timmerman; Yack; Manin; Schudson; Jackson and Clark; and Remer go even beyond this and consider the entire deliberation process as rhetorical, encouraging that pathos and ethos as other means of persuasion should be employed alongside logos. For example, Yack advises that public debate should not be constrained, instead it should unleash all its potentials therefore unleashing the potentials of public (422-423). In this version, the “deliberative citizen” (Mendelberg) converges into and becomes one with the “rhetorical citizen” (Kock & Villadsen), thus democratic culture becomes one with rhetorical culture: “Deliberation springs from and creates” this culture (Brian & Clark 5).

In this rhetorical culture, as Hauser argues, we are no longer confined by the restraints of critical rationality and instead use the rhetorical norms of reasonableness (“Rhetorical Democracy” 2). In this view, public debate can be tantamount to a “rule-

based cooperative truth-generation” (Stannard). Brian and Clark on this basis offer a Burkean explanation of deliberation as a process to exchange “symbolic means of inducing cooperation.” In their opinion citizens in a democracy are deliberative rhetors: “even citizens at the receiving end of public deliberation (newspaper readers, TV viewers, audiences at public debates, etc.) must themselves engage in inner deliberation . . . . Careful monitoring of the public deliberation they hear or see is an important part of their deliberative engagement” (5, ellipses added).

Nevertheless, the dispute over having a rhetorical or dialectical approach to deliberation is not resolved. In fact, the continuation of such dispute in and of itself could have value for improving the condition of human communication. This tension is as old as the sophist tradition, whether the criteria for judging a debate should be based on finding the truer argument or the better one – an argument that can withstand any form of criticism. Quintilian reiterates a similar dichotomy in differentiating between what is honorable and what is expedient (see Perelman, 7). Is it expedient to deviate from the honorable when faced with an ignorant audience whose capacity has not been trained (to echo Dewey) for the sake of letting deliberation continue? Interestingly, the Quintilian dilemma becomes an alibi for the Iranian regime to spatialize and classify public debates based on their substance and audience. A serious critique refuting the role of *velayat-e faqih*<sup>9</sup> which forms the bedrock of Iran’s political system is permissible in academic

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of *velayat-e faqih* (usually translated as guardianship or mandate of the jurist) was initially proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini claiming that a certain member of Shia clergy who possesses the necessary qualifications has the God-given right to become Supreme Leader and rule the nation. For more information see Kadivar; and Saffari.

journals and books, but cannot be easily discussed in a daily paper. The justification is that the audience for such debate should be well trained, as uneducated citizens should not be exposed to the noxious hazards of intellectual disputes (see Marefat 166).

There is no exact equivalent for deliberation in the Persian language. In its private sense, terms like *taammoq*, *taammol*, *taanni* are used that all invoke specific tropes: going deep into, stopping and pondering in the middle a walk, or going slowly. (Hadjarian also suggests Arabic terms such as *tafah'hom* i.e. gradual understanding and also *raviyat* i.e. wisdom gained after abundant but gradual reflections, see Paya and Ghaneirad). As for public deliberation, a translation has been used that carries the meaning of counsel (*shora*) and consultation (*mashverat*).

Such a conceptualization could provide a new prospect for public deliberation, one that is less outcome-oriented. There has been always a teleological view, operating at two junctures, attached to the notion of deliberation. At the first juncture, the purpose of deliberation is *arriving* at a solution that forms the basis of a public decision or at least, as Hauser in *Rhetorical Democracy* suggests, a public opinion (6-9). At the second juncture, deliberation implies that there should be an action that is legitimized based on a deliberated solution.

In deliberative democracy literature, the rationale behind legitimacy is that no one is forced to accept a decision that they were not involved in its making; the schematics of political order is the result of deliberation. Therefore, public debate, as a phenomenon that generates legitimacy, is subject to the idea of popular sovereignty. Unlike Rousseau who considered popular sovereignty a result of the "consensus of hearts," the discursive

perception of legitimation considers it a result of the “consensus of arguments” (Calhoun 18). The underlying assumption of these accounts is that deliberation per se is a legitimate process for politicking. There are more radical accounts (Schlesinger & Fossum) that believe only public debate can determine the legitimacy of a decision or action (25). Eriksen and Fossum also believe that “Public debate is the single most important clue for the assessment of democratic quality, because the legitimacy of power holders can be tested in relation to affected interests” (17, also see e.g. Bohmann; Guttman & Thompson; and Cohen & Sabel).

By contrast, there are more moderate interpretations that suggest the fact that citizens have the capacity to start a debate about their concerns should be considered as a sign of the legitimacy of the political system (Peters 120). Hansen even goes further and views deliberation rather than participation as the key module in democracy; asserting that the quality of the deliberation, not the number of speakers should justify the legitimacy (20-24). On this ground, BenHabib also believes that a model of democracy that “emphasizes the determination of norms of action through the practical debate of all affected by them, has the distinct advantage over” other models and conceptions (in Calhoun, p 87).

At this point, once again the issue of legitimation is linked to our expectations of deliberation. Should deliberation lead to decision-making and should such decision be authoritative? Habermas ideally wants deliberation to enforce consensual decision based on rational agreement and not compromise or bargaining (see also Elster 12). But Fraser suggests that we consider two models of deliberation and thus of public: strong public and



weak public. The strong public makes an authoritative decision after the debate and is, therefore, to a degree, involved in popular sovereignty. But the weak public only deliberates without its deliberation leading to ruling (74).

These accounts imply an agency from those who participate in debate and deliberation. As Aristotle explains, “we deliberate about things that are in our control and are attainable by action” (*Rhetoric*, 1112a22-b16). Aristotle points to the implicit assumption that makes the condition of deliberation in its political context compatible with democracy and creates subjects that are “deliberative citizens” (Mendelberg) capable of ruling and governing in a democracy; any average citizen is invited “to deliberate on an increasingly formidable variety of issues, each demanding a different way of knowing” (Antczak, 197).

But Iranian experience does not correspond to Aristotle’s expectations. Citizens are, of course, able to debate on certain issues and rest assured that a decision should be made based on their deliberation. But citizens also deliberate on issues that they have no power over, or little power to change. This notion becomes clear not only in the example of Iran where public debate is popular but also in cases such as China (Hess; Lei; Leib; Keane; Chen & Xu; and also He & Warren) and Russia (Pomerantsev; Vakhtin & Firsov) where the limited studies conducted demonstrate that debate and deliberation can be permissible under authoritarian regimes and are sometimes even initiated or encouraged by such regimes.

One can also offer an interpretation of deliberation which does not emphasize the outcome but the process itself, or, as Parkins and Mitchell state, looks at public

deliberation not as a means to democratize decision-making but merely as an opportunity for “personal reflection,” and gaining “additional information” and education (532). Such an interpretation can be compatible with both the representative democracy model, particularly in today’s complicated democracies where bureaucratic decisions require expertise, and also hybrid and authoritarian regimes such as those of Iran and China. As Polletta suggests, these regimes provide the populace a form of participation without power; where the power to enforce is absent but it could still bring some level of satisfaction (454-463). The public’s inability to enforce a decision, depending on the political order, can to a certain degree influence the legitimation of such political order. Deliberation here turns out to be similar to the fashion of brain-storming sessions advocated in the business management discourse (Kerwin). Although research shows “unequivocally that brainstorming groups produce fewer and poorer quality ideas,” nevertheless corporations encourage it in order to “increase decision acceptance” (Furnham 26). A similar version of this concept is often evoked by the conservative political theorists in Iran. The basis for their arguments is a Quranic Verse that urges the Prophet Muhammad – who was also the ruler – to consult with the public on different issues but make the final decision himself (Surah Al-e-Imran 3.159). Ironically, this tradition allows the political system to use public debate as a “technology of legitimation” – a phrase proposed by Harrison and Mort referring to public consultation and user involvement as an optional practice to increase the acceptability of business and governmental institutions. Zarefsky, explaining the shift in American democracy, claims

that the rhetoric associated with the current form of public debate and deliberation is at the service of “engineering of consent” (124).

The ironic twist is that public debate in democratic regimes like the United States and authoritarian ones like Iran have similar tendencies and capacities to suppress the deliberation function. Even when such a function is invoked, as Mendelberg shows in her comprehensive study of empirical literature in this field, there is a great possibility for deliberation to fail. Deliberation, unlike what Stannard expects, does not necessarily remove the stigma of disagreement and confrontation nor does it lead to an increase in empathy (Guttmann & Thompson). On the contrary, it can deepen the conflict (Mansbridge 149-158).

In many occasions, public debate (whether nationally broadcast or when occurring in small communities) is more entertaining than informative. At this time citizens are no longer what Bitzer considers a rhetorical audience – an audience that has the capacity and desire to be impressed and can create, mediate, or facilitate change (8). Walton’s concerns find topicality here: each side of the public debate has such a fixed position that there is no chance or possibility of one convincing the other (104). The debate oddly gears into an epideictic mode. An audience can function like a football fan, as Jamieson asserts, “observing the ‘sport’ of politics” and will not withdraw support even if their favorite team loses. Under such circumstances, citizens who seek deliberation are negated and overlooked (see also Hicks & Greene’s “Managed Convictions”). In similar circumstances, observing a public debate can be like watching a reality show in which the spectator enjoys the ongoing drama without necessarily choosing a side. This situation is ripe for

public debate becoming a “soap opera for public consumption” (119). This entertaining function, however, is not a modern phenomenon: There are many accounts of debates held in the courts of medieval Islam for the sake of amusing the ruler (see some accounts in Lazarus-Yafeh). Coincidentally, this function of public debate can generate a form of legitimation for a political system that allows for the initiation or continuation of public debate without necessarily guaranteeing the conditions of free speech.

There are other strings attached to the notion of public debate and legitimation. For instance, the issue of procedures (Cohen & Sabel) and also the rules of debate and the general condition under which debate takes place. For Habermas not all the outcomes of debate are necessarily legitimate. Habermas considers the legitimacy of the outcome connected to the fairness of the deliberation process; that everyone have equal opportunity to offer their viewpoints; to have their opinions evenly heard and considered; and to have sufficient access to information and ample temporal/spatial scope to defend them against criticism. Ultimately Habermas conditions the decision’s legitimacy to being consensual based on its appeal to reasoned and rational judgment and warranted assent (“Between Facts and Norms” 340-341 and 362-364). Such deliberative ideals are unlikely to be realized in actually occurring public debates. Kapoor, therefore, suggests that, particularly in the context of politics in the third world, we should not necessarily look for consensus as long as public debate leads to “better mutual understanding” (107). Mansbridge also argues that no public can seek to establish complete legitimacy and that “good enough” legitimacy is sufficient (“Using Power/Fighting Power: The Polity” 54).

Another question linked to legitimation is who participates in public debate. Proponents of the deliberative democracy theory believe legitimacy comes from an inclusive public debate, but reality suggests that access is stratified with different degrees of privilege, or the lack of, for different speakers in the forum. Assessing legitimacy requires knowledge of who has a right to enter the public debate, who determines and defines the rules and enforces the boundaries. Different theories (Ratcliffe; Fraser; Ben Habib; Calhoun) have pointed to the exclusion mechanism. In the Habermasian account, legitimation arises from deliberation of those affected by the issue in question. But there is much ambiguity surrounding how affectedness is established. This is why Dryzek suggests that entering the debate forum should not be limited to the affectedness of participants (326).

Rhetoric and debate are conventionally pitched as necessary communicative tools of engaged-citizenry, which in turn results in democracy. But one could make the argument that a political structure determines the boundaries of rhetoric as much as rhetoric determines the boundaries of political structure. Rhetoric can also make citizens more compliant to the government. Take the idea of prudence, *tadbir* in Farsi, which an unknown Quattrocento humanist once described as a “faculty of judgment exemplary for civic life” (Kahn 153). But this idea could also make rhetoric easily adoptable to a form of government that is not democratic. Fitch introduces the concept of “cultural persuadables,” and suggests when examining the culture of persuasion, we should consider “of what,” “with what” and “how” can people be persuaded (100-101). To participate in public debate in Iran there is a range of political persuadable. For example,

the use of *hadith* and historical religious accounts and evoking sacred memories are considered the most important and voluminous part of the repertoire of persuasion, the part that constitutes “with whats” of persuasion within the political structure of Iran. Even the regime’s secular opposition and non-believers on many occasions use the same repertoire to protest, start or participate in a debate in hopes of reducing the hazardous costs of their discursive practice and also to increase the possibility of persuasion. They seek Islamic forms of sanction in order to justify their proposed democratizing projects. Naturally these rhetorical strategies to ensure the participation in and continuation of debate have been contingent upon the judgment calls and the perceptions that dissident actors – journalists, media owners, university students and professors, and public intellectuals— have about the political opportunity structure; i.e. the discursive, “institutional and cultural access points that actors can seize upon to attempt to bring their claims into the political forum,” as Ferree et al have explained (62). The norms and structures of public debate and their codes of conduct can lead to the assimilation or co-option of certain identities particularly those who were previously excluded. This point draws attention to public debate as an institution which has its own fabric and norms, generates a certain style of discursive productions, considers certain modes of argumentation permissible, and offers its own filters and devices for observation or participation. In that sense, the institution of debate per se can potentially have a heresthetic nature. However, as the comprehensive review Carpini et al conducted of all empirical studies in this field shows, the function of debate is eventually “highly context dependent. It varies with the purpose of deliberation, the subject under discussion, who

participates, the connection to authoritative decision makers, the rules governing interactions, the information provided, prior beliefs, substantive outcomes, and real-world conditions" (336). Citizens, as McCarthy suggests, may enter public debate for a variety of reasons and with different expectations (17-69). While the boundaries, and temporal and spatial structures of public debate can determine the discursive interaction and rhetorical practices of citizens, they could also simultaneously be negotiated, tampered and fiddled with (Hohendahl 107).

Here we can detect a curious situation. By compelling participants in the public debate to apply political persuadables in their discursive practices, the Iranian regime secures a level of popular obedience. It softly implies that people can deliberate about a variety of issues, but they cannot alter the order of things. It invites people to persuade, even to persuade the regime and the Supreme Leader, but it defines how and with what should persuasion happen and compels people to pretend and avow the norms. In Burkean terms, the Islamic Republic delineates an *a priori* identification and delimits how it should occur. And yet, those who do not share the convictions pronounced by the regime pretend to accept, considering it an opportunity to initiate the persuasion process. The contrast with the American tradition of switch-side debating is remarkable: For switch-side debating, participants leave their speech convictions out while for the Iranian version they depart from their speech acts and cloak their convictions in the politically available persuadables. One construes separating act from conviction as a method of enhancing liberal, pluralistic, and sympathetic deliberation in a democracy while the other considers it a strategic choice in the hopes of provoking a potential process of

democratization. Chomsky is highly skeptical of any potential democratic outcome from such arrangement and instead believes, “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum – even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate” (43). But the Iranian experience does not exactly correspond to Chomsky’s formulation: Dissidents inventively find ways within the limited spectrum of permissible debate, and regularly question the very presuppositions of the Islamic regime (see Semati 163). Meanwhile Gallup World Poll indicates that the majority of the Iranian public does not feel there is enough freedom of speech. Iran’s ranking in these polls have remained below other more authoritarian regimes in the region. In surveys conducted once per year, from 2010-2015, on average 56.2 percent of Iranians believed media does not have a lot of freedom in their country (see "Country Report: Iran, 2019" 49). Since 2016 Gallup had to take out the “media freedom question” during its polling in Iran, as it was considered “too sensitive” for the regime (Crabtree).

### **Tracing the Local Roots**

The oldest available record of debate traces it back to the beginning of the second millennium BC, not to ancient Greece, but to the people of Sumer in the historical region of southern Mesopotamia. “The content of the debates is a verbal challenge between two contenders, who boast their qualities and prerogatives, denigrate and vilify the prerogatives of the adversary, and try to gain victory by means of excellence in



eloquence" (Ponchia 64). Debate, or *monazereh*, is also one of the oldest Persian literary genres, both in poetry and prose, which has a history that goes back to pre-Islamic times. In one of the oldest examples named *Dirakht-I Asurig*, which is in Northern Parthian Pahlavi language, a date palm and a goat argue over who is more useful and more virtuous. During the debate both use all techniques to escalate the conflict; they curse at each other, belittle one another, and even resort to threats (see Abdullaeva). Many of the prominent Persian poets, including Asadi Tusi, Nizami Ganjavi, Saadi and Rumi, have explored this genre. The winner of this form of dialogical dispute is always determined by the writer beforehand; just as in Platonic dialogues where we know in advance that Socrates wins every argument.

Interestingly, this old literary genre was politically appropriated by intellectuals in the final years of the 19th century leading to the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. At a time when public debate was not permissible as debating in public, Persian-speaking intellectuals like Mirza Malkam Khan, Mo'ayed ol-Eslam and Abdoraof Fetrat Bokharaei used this genre to challenge monarchy and religious institutions and managed to have a deep impact on the spread of critical dialogue in the society of those days. In one example known as *Dialogue Between the Sheikh and the Vizier*, Mirza Malkam Khan presents an imagined debate between a reactionary cleric and a reformist bureaucrat. While on the surface the debate focuses on Persian/Arabic alphabetical reform, the real issue was accepting the accomplishments of the European modernity. *Monazereh* "presented itself as the narrative of Iranian modernity" (Rezaei Yazdi 235), but unlike its classical examples, it did not follow a model of polemic between right and wrong and it did not

offer a winner, or a final conclusion. Instead, the fictional participants in these debates were engaged in a “continual process of opposing, complementing, contradicting, confirming, challenging and supporting each other such that at the end no single ideology emerges as authoritative, superior, or triumphant” (23). These imaginary debates were often written in the simple vernacular language of the time in order to become understandable even for the average citizen who was illiterate (Delgosha & Nazemianfard 63).

Debate as a form of discursive practice goes beyond the pages of literary creations and is conducted face-to-face in royal courts, religious circles, and seminaries. Oral disputation between various religious faiths and denominations was common within the fluid borders of Persian Empire, especially during the late antiquity. Buddhists in the eastern parts of the empire (in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan) developed the scholastic method of disputation which was adopted by Zoroastrian and later Muslim scholars and then transmitted to the West (Beckwith 24). These forms of debate had found their place in the Sassanid court which was the last dynasty of the Persian Empire before the advance of Islam (see Daryaee 284; and Gilani 61). Surviving record of a court debate narrates arguments exchanged between Zoroastrian sages and “scholars from Rome and India concerning the nature of good and evil.” The Sassanid Persians regarded these debates “as another means of communicating their own unimpeachable intellectual superiority” (Payne 223). In other occasions, debate was conducted as a justification for suppressing dissident religious and political thought. For example, two prominent spiritual and political figures, Mani (c. AD 216–274) and Mazdak (c. AD 478–524) were

summoned to debates held at royal Sassanide court and then ruthlessly executed (see Gardner et al; and Zaehner 48).

The Muslim public sphere adopted and continued these traditions of debate long before they became familiar with Greek philosophy through translations. Religious accounts, both Sunni and Shia, justify debate using a Quranic verse that encourages the believers to enter *al-jidal al-ahsan* (the best or fairest debate). After the start of the Abbasid Caliphate (c. AD 750–861), we have various historical accounts of debates being held in front of the caliph – a tradition that continued in the courts of sultans, kings and other medieval emirs and even later in the Safavid era (c. AD 1501–1736) (see Lazarus-Yafeh; and Zakeri). Such debates usually took place on two levels: either the representatives of different Islamic sects and schools, both juridical and philosophical, debated one another or Muslims sparred with representatives of other religions and non-Islamic philosophical currents. Many of these debates did not necessarily yield a result or a ruling by the caliph; on the contrary, an important function of these debates was entertaining the ruler and his courtiers as a theatrical performance. The amusing characteristic of debate found its way to fictional stories. In *A Thousand and One Nights* we read the story of a beautiful slave girl Tawaddud (or Lovely) who cleverly defeats all the mighty scholars in a debate at the court of Harun al-Rashid. “This story shows again that even debates about religious issues could easily turn into some form of entertainment or vice versa” (Talmon 126).

Many Shia accounts recount details of exchanges between the holy Imams or their trusted disciples and close companions, and their adversaries. At the time when many of these debates took place, Shia was viewed as a minority and deviant sect that was subject

to various forms of harassment. Thus, Shia accounts of these debates often give them an epic quality and, aside from demonstrating lines of argument in debate, also aim to boost and strengthen Shia identity. These accounts are also explicitly suspicious of the intentions of the sponsors of the debate, particularly the Abbasid Caliphs. They usually consider the formation of debate sessions as an excuse in order to suppress Shias after presumably being defeated. But the Shia narratives always claim victory while proudly boasting about their polemical tricks, eristic ploys, and logical fallacies employed during the debate.

Not surprisingly, these Shia accounts attribute the birth of *ilm al-kalam* (literally means science of discourse but generally refers to the Islamic scholastic theology) to vanguards like Hisham ibn Hakam who was famed for being skilled in eristic debates and polemic argumentations. As Van Ess aptly explains, “theology in the realm of Islam is not named after its contents as in Latin or Greek, as ‘knowledge about God,’ but after its style of argumentation: one ‘talks’ (*kallama*) with the opponent by asking questions and reducing his position to meaningless alternatives” (89). Van Ess believes that *kalam* did not start as polemics against unbelievers, rather as an inner-Islamic discussion. It was a political project, a procedure of conflict management, initiated and promoted by caliphs “to cool down existing tensions within the Muslim society” (101). This form of disputation followed a very similar method conducted among Indian Brahmins and Buddhists (Bronkhorst); Persian Zoroastrians (Thrope); and the Christians in the Western Asia and the Byzantine Empire (Gutas). Disputation in all these geographically widespread forms starts by “posing a question which is invariably a disjunction.” The opponent eventually must choose from a restricted either-or frame; “whichever choice he makes, he either loses

immediately or faces a further disjunction. Sooner or later all the possibilities are exhausted, and the adversary is trapped in a position which is either manifestly untenable, or identical with that of the questioner" (Cook 36).

We can trace the integration of the literary genre of debate with religious practice here. In many reports of scholastic and theological debates (e.g. Makarem-Shirazi; Hosseini Mirsafai; Reyshahri; Shoubaklayee; Ranjbar-Hosseini) we find names of holy or famous figures, such as the eighth Imam al-Rida as participants. Such accounts are mostly fabricated and fictional. However, as Wasserstein argues, they provide a rare and amazing window to understand the dispositions and attributions of an epoch (110). These reports, which are mostly polemical in character but dialectical in appearance, were aimed at presenting religious beliefs and explaining the differences between various sects, and the result was always in favor of the writer's intellectual ideology and religious creed. In this genre, the debaters are occasionally not named and only a general reference is made to the religion of the people in each side. Writing fabricated historical narratives of religious debates was by no mean specific to the Islamic faith. Similar Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Manichean texts exist that attest how common and widespread was this practice (see Thrope 265). As de Jong fittingly states, these one-sided polemical narratives are "not forms of interreligious communication;" they pretend to address and persuade unbelieving audiences but in reality "they are destined to instruct and educate within one's own circle" (in Clemens 64).

A common feature of Shia narratives is that debate is viewed as a combat between right and wrong. The assumption, openly expressed, is that Shia debaters are truth-bearers

and therefore, if the adversary's mind is free of bias, and their heart is free of impurities they must see the truth when the debate ends and submit to it. In many accounts, we see the Shia side invite their opponents to *mobaheleh* – a form of spiritual confrontation in which God is asked to intervene and smite the wrong side since the debate has not resolved the conflict (see Mamouri; and al-Hasan).

Unlike eristic and polemic characteristic of disputes that involved the representatives of other religions or Islamic sects and creeds, there is an old dialogical tradition among Shia scholars based on the view that “properly trained seminary intellectuals have a right to debate and contest interpretations of Islamic law (Kurzman 341). There is an old adage among Shia clerics that, “Truth is the daughter of discussion.” The concept of clash of ideas (*tazarob-e ara*) in the seminary discourse bears striking resemblance to what thinkers of liberalism, such as John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Constant (see Lachs 87-96), had in mind – that clash of ideas eventually constitutes correct knowledge or *savab*. However, this available zone of intra-discussion was a way to reach probability over uncertain matters – matters below the ultimate and sublime Truth (*hagh*) which covered the tenets of Islamic faith.

Most Shia juridical and theological treatises are the product of a dialogical process despite having a monological, prescriptive and authoritative appearance. For instance, Fischer and Abedi in their study of Shia discursive practices cite Khomeini's theory of *velayat-e faqih* (The Jurist's Guardianship) and explain that this doctrine was constructed on the basis of a long argument and even an intense interrogation between the Ayatollah and his students and followers (129-148). Fischer has compellingly demonstrated that

what is known as the tradition of juridical argument among Shia scholars, either students who have just begun their education or high-ranking clerics, has many similarities in its reasoning and argumentation method with other Islamic *madrasas*, the Jewish *yeshiva*, and the Christian *studium*. The prime character of these types of arguments – when they go beyond the level of student practice – lead to debates of approaches and doctrines in which the reasoning of one side rarely convinces the other. Internal Shia debates usually have specific boundaries for being rational and critical, on this basis a large volume of work has been composed – with names like *ilm al-usul* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) and *ilm al-hadith* (principles of citing Quran and *Sunnah*) – which has complex terminologies and sometimes contradictory methodologies for reasoning derived from the interpretation of religious texts and historical representative anecdotes.

Neither Sunni nor Shia Muslims were interested in using the Greek works of rhetoric for the study and practice of debate. Vagelpohl demonstrates in his study that, unlike other Greek works, especially of Aristotle's, understanding rhetoric with its complicated and contextual tropes and topoi was difficult for Muslim intellectuals and this led to many translators offering extremely individual, and yet creative, interpretations of the text. Metaphorical expressions were often translated literally, resulting in assertions which must have confused both the translator and readers (206). (Also see Schaub examining how Muslim intellectuals struggled to comprehend rhetorical concepts.) Ultimately, Muslims treated Aristotelian rhetoric as a logical treatise. The classic Greek tradition and its modern and Western manifestations focus on rhetoric as a discursive civic participation. But the conditions for such a function of rhetoric were not the same within

the *Dar al-Islam*. Therefore, Muslim scholars developed a different view about the role of rhetoric and its proper place eventually considering it as an inferior subcategory of logic, or merely as a “syllogistic art” as al-Farabi, known as the Second Master, defined it (Ezzaher 351). Rhetoric was assigned to private conversations and even to inner self-contemplation, whereas its classic application was to public discourse. “Obviously, this assignment of rhetoric to the field of logic had a huge impact on its translation and interpretation: almost without regard to the relevance of its subject matter to the study of literature, the text was relegated to the field of philosophical inquiry” (Vagelpohl 54; also see Leaman 139-143; Fakhri 145; and Butterworth 193).

Against this background, Aristotle’s notion of persuasion was also translated differently. al-Farabi, used the word *lqna* as the equivalent for persuasion—a term that is, after twelve centuries, still being used with the same implication. For al-Farabi *lqna*, which takes place in the soul of audience, is the telos of rhetoric (see Ezzaher 54). *lqna* means acceding to or accepting a line of reasoning which we know has other oppositional or additional possibilities. Nevertheless, we chose to abandon the pursuit of those possibilities. The function of *lqna* is not to cause the audience to believe firmly in the truth of something, rather to develop sufficient satisfaction. The audience becomes content with an idea and chooses to abandon the pursuit of further enquiries. The term *lqna* is initially connected to the economic realm. It is derived from the trilateral Arabic root that signifies self-restraint. Interestingly modern American rhetoric also uses the trope of marketplace of ideas hinting at a liberal economy of rhetoric. But if this notion relies on and encourages more and more consumerism, the economy of *lqna* is built on frugality and contentment.



Here we can detect a different possibility: One that, while appreciates differences of ideas, suggests a “rhetoric of parsimony” (Combs 53) that exerts the minimum level of expression needed to avoid further confrontation. One example is defining poetry as a condensed form of “syllogistic expression” (Borrowman 351) which provided a productive tool in everyday popular rhetorical interactions. Connected to an economically conscious system of expression, poetry functions as an enthymeme – as a means of delivering arguments without explicitly invoking the lengthy syllogistic process upon which they are constituted. Quoting a verse, or even a prosaic anecdote, has become a customary practice in discussion and argumentation for the purpose of saving expression.

In the context of Persianate and Islamicate culture we can detect such rhetorical conducts having closer similarities with the concepts of communication developed beyond the eastern borders. The Zen and Daoist tradition displays a distrust in language which as a means does not have the capacity to represent meanings and intentions. In their extreme, these traditions not only reject persuasion but also consider it a futile endeavor (Combs 33). We see the same notion in the Sufi literature placing value on silence as an effective and strategic rhetorical practice (Ghaneirad). Paradoxically at times, these traditions encourage application of hyperboles such as *shath*, to transgress from discursive limits—a rhetoric that abruptly becomes extravagant, “audacious and aggressive” (Ernst 39).

There are other also indigenous works on rhetoric in the Muslim world. As Halldén; Smyth; and Merriam have explained, two different disciplines, *balagha* and *khataba*, cover the different topics that are considered rhetorical in the classic Western

classifications. (Even today these two words are used in the translation of rhetoric in Persian.) In both Persian and Arabic, these two disciplines are sometimes considered *ilm* (science) and sometime *fann* (*techne*). *Balagha*, as evident from its literal translation, dealt with clarity, grammar, eloquence, hermeneutics and textual aesthetics, tropes and figures, and of course a considerable volume of the works produced in this discipline focus on studying the Quran as the most important Islamic text. The main purpose in studying *khataba*, as a form of epideictic oratory, was for salvational purposes of preaching and delivering conviction to the populace based on the traditions of the Prophet (Jones 30).

The rules, methods, manners, ethics and techniques of public disputation were not discussed in the body of literature on *balagha* and *khataba* but in a series of works that dealt with *adab* or rituals – titles such as *Adab al-Mubaheseh*, *Adab al-Bahth*, *Adab al-Jadal*, *Adab al-Nazar*, *Adab al-Takhatob*, *Adab al-Khatib*, and *Adab al-Katib*, which discuss the behavioral codes of participating in debate as an *ars disputandi*. These works represent the same definition of *rituel* as Foucault explains, they outline “the qualification which must be possessed by individuals who speak (and who must occupy such-and-such a position and formulate such-and-such a type of statement, in the play of a dialogue, of interrogation or recitation); it defines the gestures, behavior, circumstances, and the whole set of signs which must accompany discourse” (62). In addition to the *adab* genre, there is a collection of consultative literature – similar to the European tradition of *specula principum* that appeared later in the Renaissance period - with titles such as *andarz-nameh* (book of good counsel), *siyasat-nameh* (book of prudence and politicking), *awsaf al-ashraf* (the attributes of the noble) that provide advice on public speaking in various

situations such as when in the presence of the ruler, when one is among the *avam* or the general uneducated public, and when one is among peers and like-minded people. A new terminology was gradually developed in these works defining various public settings for a debate performance. For example, one piece of advice, which was later attributed to Imam Ali, warns debaters to avoid “terrifying sessions” (*majalis al-khauf*) in which intimidation and provocation was common practice. Another recommendation was to avoid “sessions of high officials” (*majalis al-sudur*) where the organizers do not grant the two sides equal sympathy or equal opportunity to be heard. (Stroumsa 74-76).

This quasi-secular body of advice treatises, as well as the religious instructions, generally conceive the participant in debate as a preliminary fixed subject: both a virtuous and a virtuoso who holds the truth but knows how and when utter it (see Rezaee-Rad; Zeidi; Rouholamini). Should such a subject initiate or inter a debate, however, is itself a matter of dispute. al-Ghazali is an interesting example of the contrast in approach and attitude toward debate in Iran’s discursive culture. One can find several citations and referrals to al-Ghazali’s views about debate in the body of contemporary religious literature as well as secular intellectuals (e.g. see Mohsen Renani; also Javad Mohaddesi). At the height of his publicity and scholarly activity, al-Ghazali was ready and keen to debate with the scholars and public figures of his time. He believed “debaters must look for the missing piece” and if they find this missing piece in their opponent they must join the opponent (Eghbal 83). Later, when al-Ghazali undergoes a total transformation, he urges in his *Ehya' Olum al-Deen* to refrain from debating with others as much as possible. He goes on to enumerate the cons of debate as: jealousy from both rivals and peers,

upsetting an opponent, creating a sense of hatred and resentment, cursing and swearing at one another, spreading lies, using the weaknesses and inabilities of the opponent to destroy them, insincerity and hypocrisy, love of being praised, and ultimately resistance to accepting the truth (see 4th *bab* of 1st *Ketab*).

The contentious and antagonistic character of debate has also resulted in a compilation of dozens of *hadith* and religious recommendations cautioning both Sunnis and Shias about the dangers of engaging too much in debate and contentious rhetoric (see Mohammadi 61-66), and sometimes even warning them not to exceed established religious principles of argumentation and not to “speak freely as they desire” (Jamali 31). For many participants in these debates, winning was more important than pious circumspection and sincerity. The theologian Al-Jahiz, who was known as a skilled debater, warned that the “propensity [is to] devolve into charlatany” (see Van Ess 185) and al-Farabi accused the debaters of exploiting the disputations as a means to gain power (Ormsby 306).

Indeed, in many occasions the debaters were either in pursuit of power or at its service. Sometimes after reaching stalemate or even loosing, they tried to hand their opponents over to the police (Stroumsa 67-68). In other times, the debaters acted as prosecutors on behalf of the religious and political establishment. As mentioned before, we can trace a long history of debate as a form of trial to the Pre-Islamic Persian court. The practice continued through the Safavid rule during the process of forceful conversion of Iran to Shia Islam in the 16th century. In one example, Taftazani, the prominent Sunni scholar of Herat, was forced to participate in series of debate sessions with Shia clerics

held at the Royal Jahanara garden. Not convinced during the debates to become Shia, he was summarily executed (Tahmasbi 108). In 1848, Ali Mohammad Shirzai, the founder of Babi Movement in Iran, was brought to a debate session which eventually led to his execution (Amanat 257-258).

### **Modern State Promoting Debate**

It is unfortunate that the rich and complex body of pre-modern Islamic/Persian literature produced for practical recommendation and theoretical examination of debate and discussion is largely neglected in contemporary Iran. We see a discontinuity and rupture after the Constitutional Revolution, at exactly the time when public debate is finding a place in Iran: members of *Majlis* are arguing and disputing, newspapers and magazines are writing about different political and social issues and fresh intellectual and religious disputes are developing and heating up. Estranged from the past literature in this field, we are suddenly introduced to modern Persian terminologies such as *fann-e bayan* (techne of expression) and *sokhanvari* (oratory). Mohammad Ali Foroughi, a prominent post-Constitutional Revolution politician and philosopher, is the first to write a book, (*Ayin-e Sokhanvari* or Rituals of Oratory) based on Western sources of rhetoric for an Iranian audience. In the preface of his book, Foroughi ridicules the classic Islamic/Persian works on rhetoric, calling it a “handful of dry and lifeless jargon that are no longer taught” (6). He concludes that rhetoric is a technique that must now be established in Iran while hoping that its practice will not be used in *tadlis* or dissemble (7). Interestingly, Foroughi explicitly states that he began writing this book following the wishes of Reza Shah because “his holy determination is that debating, preaching and oratory become rational and

speeches that benefit people in this life and in the afterlife be spoken from religious pulpits and [secular] podiums.” He also announces that the Faculty of Theological Studies of the newly-established University of Tehran would be teaching rhetoric and steps would be taken to hold debate competitions in high schools.

Ali-Asghar Hekmat, Reza Shah’s minister of education, was another figure who wrote a book on the “techne of debate” (apparently based on an American pamphlet). In an article entitled *Rules of Debate* published in the state-owned *Amouzesh-va-Parvaresh Journal* in 1937, we once again read that the Ministry of Education is tasked with spreading the culture of debate across Iran. The author of the article, Ali-Pasha Saleh, who was a professor of political science at the University of Tehran, is aware of the developments in this discipline in the U.S. and mentions that the discipline of rhetoric in American universities had recently been separated from the departments of English and literature. He then discusses government’s efforts to establish debate associations (*Anjoman-haye Monazereh*) at the University of Tehran and in most of the high schools in the capital and other major cities across the nation. Pasha-Saleh considers debate one of the causes for the progress of Europe and the U.S. and argues that it brings “independent thought and opinion” – but he never makes any reference to democracy (5-6).

There are limited resources available about the spread of debate during Reza shah’s reign. What we know is that from 1932 to 1939 in many of the top high schools of Iran (like Shahreza of Mashhad and Alborz American College of Tehran) lively student debates were held systematically and regularly. Each debate ran for an hour and a half. For example, one of the debate propositions put forth by Dr. Jordan, the president of Alborz

American College was that “Western civilization is superior to the Eastern one” (note that at this time Iran was enamored by and infatuated with European civilization). The then prime minister of Iran and a parliamentary representative were on the panel of jurors of this debate (Parvin Gonabadi 10).

Interestingly, the literature produced on rhetoric in this era contains no mention of its relationship with democracy anywhere. The goal of rhetoric, particularly learning and practicing debate as is suggested by Foroughi, Saleh, Hekmat, Parvin Gonabadi and others, is not to train citizens suitable for democracy but to train a political subject fitting with the modernization project of Iran. If Iran were to advance like Europe and America, its citizens must learn rhetoric. Saleh considered debate as the stimulating force behind inventing “electricity, airplane, radio, locomotive, telescope and microscope” (20). For Foroughi cultivating statesmen, who would in future be in charge of difficult and serious government tasks, was one of the side benefits of learning and practicing rhetoric. Reza Shah’s promotion of debate in schools was not intended to liberalize the country and to open the public space for free expression, rather it was an effort to modernize the social and political institutions of Iran according to the standards that his establishment saw fit. The press was on a tight leash and all the editorial comments had to follow the lines set by the state.

School debate competitions suddenly stopped once the throne was passed from Reza Shah to his son Mohammad Reza in the midst of the Second World War. But the society enjoyed an unprecedented level of freedom and public debate. The number of press publications suddenly went from about fifty to five hundred as they outspokenly

discussed the political affairs and intellectual matters “with the utmost freedom” (Elwell-Sutton 65). Here, we can also record the first instance of assassination after a debate in Iran in 1946: a group of radical seminary students, also known as the members of the *Fadayan-e Islam* (literally Devotees of Islam), decided to debate with Ahmad Kasravi –a popular public intellectual whose many works were considered blasphemous in the eyes of believers. As (now Ayatollah) Seyyed Morteza Mostajabi, one of the debaters, recalls: “The first day we went for the debate, Kasravi crushed all three of us. He was a well-educated and well-read man. He was a lawyer. Despite all our passion and fervor, he chewed us in one bite.” The fate of the debate however was decided a few months later when *Fadayan-e Islam* assassinated Kasravi (Ghazvini 118).

After the Coup of 1953, the atmosphere suddenly changed and discussing many political topics became off-limits in public. However, religious debates continued in private venues that were open to a limited public. In 1959, the then Institute for Preaching and Islamic Propagation published a lengthy book titled *Osool-e Fann-e Khatabeh* (techniques of oratory), in order to “equip clerics with the modern weapon” for teaching Islam to the “new generation” (11-12). There are numerous records reporting orthodox Muslims attending forums to debate with Bahais. A prominent cleric like Abolhasan Taleqani was known for organizing debate sessions between Muslim scholars and Christians, Jews and Bahai's (Chehabi 104). Accounts of these reports also draw our attention to other forms of power in Iran: Muslims were the organizers and initiators of debate; the other side was always invited (and in many occasions obliged) to participate. Another venue for debate was prison, where heated disputes were common occurrence in



which many political prisoners with different religious, Marxist and liberal ideologies would participate.

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 made debate an inescapable part of the social and political affairs. In the first two years following the 1979 Revolution, the scope and tenacity of political and ideological contention was unprecedentedly larger than ever. An often-neglected fact is that six nationwide elections were organized and held during the very first year after the revolution<sup>10</sup>. No other revolution, or any other form of regime change, in the world history has experienced this concentrated form of public decision-making and electoral campaigning through such a short period. Kianoush Ayari's documentary *Tazeh Nafas-ha* (People with Fresh Energy) captures the ambiance in the streets of Tehran during this time: "It is as if the whole city had turned into a giant agora, in which everyone was unconditionally free and able to express and discuss their opinion" (Salamat 2-3). Informal debates became a daily occurrence on university campuses and sometimes even at busy intersections in Tehran and other major cities as ordinary people would gather to watch. The media printed a large volume of op-eds and commentaries every day targeting adversary groups. Members of the Assembly of Experts for Constitution were involved in daily arguments over drafting every single word and article of the post-revolution constitution (see Ghamari-Tabrizi 36-88). Eventually Iran's state television organized and broadcast debates in order to "start a new chapter in resolving differences

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<sup>10</sup> These elections were held during the first year period after the revolution: 1) The Islamic Republic referendum in March 1979; 2) Constitutional Convention elections in August 1979; 3) Local Councils elections for 156 cities in October 1979; 4) Constitutional referendum in December 1979; 5) presidential election in January 1980; and 6) parliamentary elections in early March 1980.

among political groups,” as a large Keyhan headline from March 2, 1980 proclaimed. Debates did not prevent the escalation of conflict, politically and militarily, but they continued until July 1981 when the worst and fiercest of the struggles begin: the incumbent president was deposed, opposition became involved in street fights, the office of the Islamic Republic Party and then the office of the Prime Minister were bombed, many of the newspapers were closed, The Cultural Revolution purged thousands of students and professors from the universities, and many of the members of opposition parties were arrested or fled the country.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was an important historical moment that constituted the trajectory of public debate and its manifestations in the Islamic Republic. That is why in the following chapters –which examine public debate in the press; in academia; and on television— I start portraying the scene from this moment grounded in the political ontology of *l’eventement* that Badiou conceptualizes. Badiou, himself, examples the Iranian Revolution as an outstanding event: “a historical riot, a break in time, a break in which the inexistent appear” (36-37). This event is both terminal and inaugural; it proclaims breaking with the past, but ultimately returns to the past and transforms it. The event demands reflexive interventions, or what Badiou calls a process of “intensification, contraction, and localization” (70). This understanding of event is remarkably similar to the concept of *kairos* in Greek rhetorics. *Kairos* was always contingent and unexpected: “the uniquely timely, the spontaneous, the radically particular” (Sipiora xiii). It is a situation one should adopt to with propriety and be creative in formulating a strategic response. The Islamic rhetoric was familiar with the concept of

*kairos* and translated it as *moghtazay-e hal*, that which is required upon contingent moment (Hematian & Agha Hosseini 56-57).

The *event* of the Iranian revolution initiated an explosion of public debate. The newly born Islamic Republic attempted to put the genie back in the bottle to no avail. Public debate, itself, became the persistent *kairos* of the new political situation. Instead of total repression, Iran's ruling elite opted for managing the *kairotic* "uncertainty" that public debate carries (Tezcür 220) and the consequent conditions of public mood it creates. Against this backdrop, one can read the four-decade history of the Islamic Republic as various responses to deal with the problematic of public debate – It is a history of debating and struggling over what should (normatively) and what could (practically) lift or limit the public debate.

## **Structure**

In the chapters to follow, I examine three major cases of struggle over debate in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The order begins with the print press as they were at the forefront of expanding public debate after the 1979 revolution and then during the Reform Era (1997-2005). It was the political, cultural and ideological disputes during the Reform Era that led to Iran's Supreme Leader ordering the formation of debate sessions at universities upon receiving a request from a group of prominent Principlist figures opposing to the Reform Movement. Consequently, in the 2009 presidential election we witness the first direct debate among candidates on the regime-run national television, which is directly supervised by the Supreme Leader.

Chapter two analyses the tug of war between the dissident press and the guardians of the Islamic regime. It discusses how the regime has developed a complicated politics of speech through categorizing various publics and assigning different forms of expressions and modes of rhetoric to each category. The dissident press experimentally devised certain rhetorical tactics and strategies to create, elevate, escalate, and ultimately continue debate without getting into trouble with the judiciary under the control of the Principlists. Reviewing a compiled collection of media trials during the 1990s and 2000s, the chapter evaluates the main concerns and complaints raised over the behavior of the press and how successful the strategies employed by the press were in saving them from punishment.

Chapter three explores the experiments that the Islamic regime has conducted to manage and “sanitize” the sphere of debate in academia. These experiments started with the radical Cultural Revolution (1980–1983) to purge all potential opposition in the universities. In early 2003 and at the height of the Reform Era, Iran’s Supreme Leader ordered the reintroduction of debate in academia through an initiative that was dubbed Free Thinking Seats and eventually resulted in the formation of Iran Student Debate Competitions. The chapter reviews available documents and officials’ public statements to understand the presumptions behind, policies for, and performances of these official debate platforms in the universities.

Chapter four examines the emergence of televised debates in Iran. The Islamic regime has rather unpleasant memories of televised debates both in the early years after the revolution and then during the 2009 elections, when the presidential debates

amplified polarization and contention in the society and contributed to the anger that was manifested in a round of demonstration and suppression. Through reviewing televised presidential debates from 2009, 2013 and 2017, the chapter explains how the format and rules of these debates – through a combination of invention, appropriation (mostly from American presidential debates) and modification- were proposed by conservative TV managers, negotiated by political actors, adjusted due to the public pressure and ultimately implemented.

The fifth and concluding chapter tackles with the dilemma of endurance. The fact that the Islamic regime not only permits debate, albeit contained, but also encourages it, and funds and develops its institutions is a curious case, given that it has experienced the potential hazards that public debate and publicizing disputations may bring. The final chapter appraises various explanations given for the existence and endurance of public debate in the authoritarian regimes and particularly in Iran. Four decades after the revolution and inception of the Islamic regime, the discursive confrontation has become ubiquitous in the country. It has also led to the construction of a new pathologic perception about Iran which considers the lack of proper dialogue as the most important problematic of the nation-state. The final pages of this project are dedicated to the portrayal of the current discussions about debate in Iran; how it became to understood as *le grand malade*, and why almost everyone – high-ranking politicians as well as prominent intellectuals – talk about the necessity of initiating a “national dialogue” in order to resolve conflicts and bring health and harmony back to society.

## CHAPTER 2: DEBATE IN PRINTED PRESS: RHETORIC OF DISSENT AND JUDICIAL REPRISAL

In November 2013, the Reformist *Bahar* daily was banned by a court order after only 254 issues. This was the first ban in the first 100 days of the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, who had revived hope in reform and more political freedoms. *Bahar* had been banned three other times in 2000, 2003 and 2009. This time *Bahar* was shut down for publishing an op-ed which mostly resembled a brief theological eulogy. The writer followed the Islamic tradition of argumentation – *kalam* – backed by evidences from a *hadith* and claimed that the first Shia Imam, Ali-ibn-Abitaleb, was merely a spiritual guru and not a political leader.<sup>11</sup> The op-ed appeared one day before Eid al-Ghadir in Iran, a day in which Shia Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad appointed Imam Ali as his successor to rule the Muslim society.

The real argument was hidden between the lines of the op-ed. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has based his legitimacy on this historical event and claims that his rule is the continuation of Ali's rule. The op-ed implicitly called into question the theory of *velayat-e faqih* that is the foundation upon which the Islamic regime has been built.

Contrary to what is believed, banning *Bahar* for publishing this controversial op-ed does not mean that there is no room at all for discussion about such topics in Iran. Articles

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<sup>11</sup> Ghoravi, Ali Asghar, "Imam, Pishvay-e Siasi ya Olgooy-e Imani." *Bahar*, Aban 4, 1392.

have been published addressing and discussing various critiques of *velayat-e faqih* in Iran's academic and theological journals.<sup>12</sup> The most famous book critiquing the theory was published in 1998 which is currently in its fifth edition as of 2008 (see Kadivar, *Hokumat-e Velayi*). The book is the edited transcripts of Kadivar's 1990s graduate seminars at *Imam Sadeq* University which has been run by Principlists.

### **Place(s) of Speech**

Interpretation of sacred Islamic texts and selective reference to historical traditions at the dawn of Islam, invoking the memory and the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding father of the Islamic Republic, and also interpreting the premises and promises of the 1979 Revolution, have all become the dominating modes of argumentation in the partly ideological and partly political debates between the two main political factions of the Islamic Republic.<sup>13</sup> Many secular and nonbeliever intellectuals also participated in these debates, using the regime's available rhetorical tools and modes of argumentation, hoping to peacefully dismantle the Islamic Republic's government and force it to accept popular sovereignty. As discussed in the first chapter, these styles of rhetoric and argumentation were customarily developed in order to play within the regime's sanctioned range of political persuadables. The translation of a book by the Austrian philosopher Hubert Schleichert provided a theoretical basis for Iranian intellectual

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<sup>12</sup> For example, see *Rahbord* 3 (1373); *Andisheh Houzeh* 18 (1378); *Bazteb-e Andisheh* 13 (1380); and *Danesh-e Siasi* 13 (1390)

<sup>13</sup> These two main factions were called the Left and the Right by the press during the 1980s and 1990s. Since early 2000 they are generally referred to as the Principlists (or Conservatives) and the Reformists. For a review of various factional debates in Iran, see Ghamari-Tabrizi, Mir-Hosseini; Siavoshi; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi; Brumberg; and Ayatollahi Tabaar.

dissidents justifying their rhetorical strategy of playing within the field of political persuadables. In his book, *How to Debate Fundamentalists Without Losing One's Mind*, Schleichert suggests a debate strategy that he dubs "internal argumentation:" It pretends to accept the fundamental ground, the basic convictions of defenders of the faith, and partakes in the (re)interpretation and (re)imagination of the religious convictions, aspirations, and affections as the "primary motivators of belief and action" (Crowley 59). Schleichert was aware of the limits of the method he was suggesting, warning that internal argumentation may ceaselessly continue while its ever-increasing subtleties discourage the wider public to comprehend and deliberate (120-139). He even suggests that sometimes the best one can do is to ridicule dogmatic people and make fun of their convictions –a method he calls "subversive laugh" (184). This option has obviously not been on the table due to dissidents' serious fears of repercussion.

Schleichert's book, first translated in 2000, has been republished for three times in Iran and the method of internal argumentation has been commonly applied in order to persuade the guardians of the regime without falling into trouble. But these polemical encounters had little opportunity over the past three decades to persuade and convince the opposing ruling elites to change sides. *Bahar's* op-ed was not different. The newspaper hoped that by appealing to permitted persuadables it could be identified as part of the family. But the regime correctly recognized *Bahar's* internal argumentation as a subversive rhetorical behavior and responded accordingly. This not only shows the futility of persuasion but also demonstrates the eventual failure of identification. Kenneth Burke believed that identification must replace persuasion as the main function of rhetoric.



Identification precedes persuasion. It functions to bridge the gap and narrow the divide between audience and rhetor so that the audience might become persuadable: “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (“A Rhetoric of Motives” 55). Burke considered identity of audience as preexisting while assuming the rhetor has an agency to make it malleable. *Bahar* attempted to exercise a rhetoric within the scope of malleability to no avail. The regime did not identify it as an authentic appeal. This experience displays a paradoxical condition of expressing dissent in the Iranian print press: The Islamic Republic offers dissidents a limited assortment of political persuadables, but, at the same time, conditions that their application ought to be genuine – that it cannot be persuaded if it doesn’t identify those employing the available persuadables as part of the family, as an insider or *khodi*. If *Bahar* were a *khodi* it should not have brought such controversial issues to public in the first place. This is a catch-22 condition.

As Ali Motahari, a lawmaker and a member of the Press Supervisory Board, put it, the problem with the *Bahar* op-ed was that it was published in an unsuitable publication: “Such articles must be placed in specialized journals.”<sup>14</sup> This can introduce an interesting facet of the complex politics of the Iranian regime which is spatialization of modes of expression. Unlike many other authoritarian regimes, the Islamic Republic has not categorically limited freedom of expression and dissent, rather it has restricted various forms of rhetoric and argumentation to specific spaces and particular audiences. The

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<sup>14</sup> *Shargh*, Aban 9, 1392.

regime has also classified various publics for different modes of speech. A controversial film can be screened with far less censorship when it is shown in a limited number of theaters across the country but when the DVD is released to the home video market (*shabakeh namayesh khanegi*) the amount of censorship increases.<sup>15</sup> It is easier for a book written with academic jargon to bypass censorship than when it is written for a popular audience. For the Iranian regime, newspapers fall within the category of mainstream audience - *mokhatab-e a'am* - and magazines fall under the specific audience – *mokhatab-e khas* - category.<sup>16</sup> However, this classification is not homogeneous and the strictness of its enforcement greatly varies depending on “local, medial, institutional and organizational as well as individual factors” (Barck et al. 225). Perceptions about who could write, about what theme, when, where and in which manner and form are ultimately contingent upon the instinctive appreciation of the situation and what it requires. The enforcement of this categorization does not only apply to dissenting content, but to any content even when it is in full compliance with the mainstream Shia discourse. For example, in 2006, *Omid-e Sahel* newspaper was banned for printing segments from a recently published religious book about the promised Mahdi, the Twelfth Shia Imam. The Prosecutor General argued during the trial, “the press cannot reprint any content that is previously published in an officially licensed book. The amplitude and the scope of audience for a book is different than a newspaper; and their level of influence varies”

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<sup>15</sup> The Iranian Film Producers' Syndicate has repeatedly criticized this additional censorship. For example, see *Ana*, Aban 13 1395.

<sup>16</sup> Iran's Public Culture Council has defined these limits of speech in its December 1999 dictum. See "Mabani va Hodoud-e Azadi-e Bayan." Session 330, Dey 1, 1378. *Shoray-e Farhang Omoomi* (PCCI.ir)

(Asnad 80s<sup>17</sup> 2088). The categorization sometimes also reveals ironical contradictions. *Bahar* newspaper with a readership less than 1,000 a day has a much smaller audience compared to Kadivar's book which has sold at least 15,000 copies so far. But just because *Bahar* carries the name newspaper which falls into the general reader category, it must also carry the burden of punishment.<sup>18</sup>

*Bahar* immediately apologized and said it had mistakenly published the op-ed, hoping that this would help to lift the ban.<sup>19</sup> But it didn't. The Prosecutor General took *Bahar* to court on the main charge of "spreading lies to agitate public opinion." A series of lesser charges resulting from the publication of the op-ed were added to the main charge including, "distribution of anti-establishment propaganda, dissemination of material contrary to Islamic values, creating discord among social classes, insulting Islam and its sanctities, spreading rumors and lies, and publishing material against the articles of the constitution."<sup>20</sup>

The entire *Bahar* drama was not an exception or an isolated incident rather it was a pattern that has been repeatedly tested in Iran over the past three decades, and particularly during the Reform Era (1997-2005). Unlike the Principlist press, which could express their

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<sup>17</sup> A compilation of cases of press trials during Persian 1370s and 1380s (from approximately March 21, 1991 to March 20, 2011) is collected by Iranian journalist, Azra Farahani, and published in the seven-volume book "Asnad va Parvande-haye Matbouati-e Iran." This compilation is referred in the in-text citation as 'Asnad 70s' and 'Asnad 80s' for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>18</sup> Cinema and book publication in Iran has to deal with different system of preventive censorship which is called *momayyezi* or pre-screening. For an account of the complex politics of book censorship in Iran see Rajabzadeh; Rahimi; and Siavoshi.

<sup>19</sup> *Fars News*, Aban 4, 1392.

<sup>20</sup> *Irna*, Shahrivar 24, 1393.

intended meaning without concern or restriction, Reformist press and dissident publishers were at a disadvantage for creating and participating in debates. They had to articulate their intended meaning in a way that their readers could comprehend and at the same time give them plausible deniability in front of hostile and suspicious guardians of the regime. New semiotics were created in printed speech forms and new strategies for argumentation were developed to avoid potential repercussions. But despite precautionary strategies and rhetorical tactics to obscure and soften critical expressions, critics of the regime continued to be prosecuted, and almost all dissident press were either temporarily or permanently banned. In this tug of war, dissident press explored available rhetorical means in order to create, elevate, escalate, and ultimately continue debate. But the regime also exploited available judicial means to prevent the press from saying what they meant even when they maintained a façade of respecting the red lines.

### **Pressing the Press**

Print press represents the oldest, yet most challenging form of public debate and expression of dissent and disagreement in contemporary Iran. Since 1837, when the first newspaper was published in Iran, media discourse has focused on the same problems – such as restrictions on freedom of expression, censorship, and repression. The three brief periods of relative press freedom after the Constitutional Revolution (1905 to 1907), the fall of the Qajar dynasty (1910 to 1921), and Reza Shah’s post-abdication period (1941 to 1953), were immediately followed by mass press bans and severe repression.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For an account of censorship and press freedom discourse during these periods see Kohan; Bayat & Kouhestani; and Elwell-Sutton.

The same experience was repeated after the 1979 Revolution. In the first five months following the Revolution, 100 new publications were printed, and a total of 350 publications came out in the two years following the revolution, this is excluding photocopied papers and communiqués (Mohsenian-Rad 65-66). More than two-thirds of these publications were affiliated with newly established political groups and organizations. Print press was the most important discursive tool for competition among revolutionary groups. Numerous articles were published in various religious and secular, right- and left-leaning publications about the censorship experience during the Shah's reign, as well as in defense of the need for press freedom after the revolution.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the press had become the dominant platform for political groups to chart the future of Iran after the revolution. The political bias of the press influenced reporting to such an extent that in April 1979 Ayatollah Taleqani complained that the public was confused by the newspapers: "The press must reflect the realities of society and when they favor a certain political position or ideology, it should not be reflected in their news reporting, but rather a column can be dedicated to opinions and open debate."<sup>23</sup>

In May 1979, and while the constitution was still being drafted, the interim government, a combination of liberal and nationalist figures, drafted the first post-revolutionary press law. The law barred any publication without obtaining a license from

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<sup>22</sup> An acknowledgement is due to *Nashriyah: Digital Iranian History* which is housed in the University of Manchester Library. *Nashriyah* has provided an amazing archive of rare historical newspapers from the 1979 Revolution. Throughout this project, all references to *Kayhan*, *Ayandegan*, and *Mojahed* newspapers during the period of revolution is from the high-quality scans available in *Nashriyah*. See "Iran and the 1979 Revolution" at LIBRARY.MANCHESTER.ac.uk

<sup>23</sup> *Kayhan*, Khordad 3, 1358.

the government and defined prison punishment for offenses deemed against national security or blasphemous to Islam.<sup>24</sup> The media community and Iranian writers, regardless of political affiliation, opposed the bill on the grounds that the state has no right to direct or regulate the freedom of speech.<sup>25</sup> The left-wing satirical magazine *Ahangar* published a cartoon on its front page depicting a funeral for the press butchered by an axe (see image no. 1).<sup>26</sup> In a July 15 open letter to Prime Minister Bazargan, the Iranian Writers Association called the bill “a maneuver to attack freedom of expression and freedom of the press” and threatened that it would not accept it.<sup>27</sup>

In response to the criticism, the Minister of Culture justified that “all free countries of the world and even socialist ones have an article in their constitution, which explicitly states the necessity of defining press offenses.”<sup>28</sup> The new law was very similar to the one enacted by the government of Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1952.<sup>29</sup> It is striking that the two liberal nationalist governments of Iran (Mosaddeq and Bazargan) both enacted laws in which publishing a publication is subject to government approval in the form of granting a license. The press law was passed by the Revolutionary Council - which was dominated by Ayatollah Khomeini supporters - and immediately on August 20, 1979, 22 national

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<sup>24</sup> "Ghanoon-e Jadid-e Matbouat." Mordad 20, 1358, available on *Vekalat Online*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ayandegan*, Khordad 21, 1358.

<sup>26</sup> *Ahangar*, no. 8, Khordad 23, 1358.

<sup>27</sup> *Ettelaat*, Tir 24, 1358.

<sup>28</sup> *Kayhan*, Khordad 22, 1358.

<sup>29</sup> "Layeheh Ghanooni-e Matbouat." Bahman 15, 1331, available on *Vekalat Online*.

newspapers were shut down on the order of the Revolutionary Prosecutor. Interestingly, however, the prosecutor did not invoke the newly enacted law to shut down the press but did so under the pretext of “preventing the agitation of public opinion and order and preventing division among the public.”<sup>30</sup> The “bulk banning of the press” – *toghif-e fal'leyi-e matboo'at*, a phrase used in Iran to refer to the shutdown of dozens of publications overnight – was repeated only once more in April 2000.

By September 1980, when the war between Iraq and Iran officially started, the majority of post-revolution newspapers and magazines were banned or stopped printing under pressure. In September 1980, only one new publication hit the stands: a monthly named *Pirouzi* (victory) which operated under the supervision of veteran journalists who had been unemployed. In the editorial in *Pirouzi's* first issue, journalists emphasized that they wanted to offer a summary of existing debates in the country “every corner of which is the scene of a new movement” without political bias.<sup>31</sup> However, *Pirouzi* was banned after only six issues. The crackdowns of June and July 1981 in Iran - which led to complete control of power by Islamist forces - eliminated the partisan and fiery revolutionary debates from print press, especially from daily newspapers. The third presidential election in Iran was held in October 1980, with Ali Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader, winning the presidency. At the swearing-in ceremony, Khamenei promised to eradicate “any subversion,” whether liberal or left wing.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Kayhan*, Mordad 29, 1358.

<sup>31</sup> *Pirouzi*, no. 1, Mehr 1359.

<sup>32</sup> *Kayhan*, Mehr 22, 1360.

The press atmosphere of Iran in the 1980s was largely static and under the control of official storylines. However, even during this decade, there were safety valves for the expression and dissemination of ideas that did not conform to the sanctioned narrative. The *Tudeh* Party's intellectual magazine was able to continue publishing until 1983. In December 1985, *Adineh* literary magazine was launched where famed intellectuals such as Ahmad Shamlou<sup>33</sup> contributed. The front pages of newspapers were the same, but between the lines of newspaper spreads, particularly in the op-eds, the disagreements between the various factions within the Islamic regime were implicitly reflected, often in a way discernible only by expert readers. *Kayhan Farhangi*, one of the publications printed by the regime's left wing, even criticized the restriction of freedom of expression in the country, writing: "State-run press operate with public funds and public funds must be spent on protecting public rights. . . . The opinions among the ruling elite are not the only opinions in society . . . . All different opinions in society must be reflected" (Mojtahed Shabestari 16-17, ellipses added).

In the mid 1980s during the war with Iraq, a new newspaper called *Resalat* was launched which represented the views of the regime's right-wing and sharply criticized the performance of then Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and his leftist cabinet. As a result of left-wing pressure - which had a greater influence on Ayatollah Khomeini - the distribution of *Resalat* on the battlefield was stopped under the pretext of protecting the

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<sup>33</sup> Shamlou (1925 – 2000) is considered as the most popular modern Persian poet whose "poetic combination of lyricism and defiance became definitive" to several Iranian generations (Dabashi 135). He was also the founder and editor-in-chief of *Ketab-e Jomeh*, a weekly literary and political magazine which was banned in July 1980 after only publishing 36 issues.



morale of the troops.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the paper was distributed without any difficulty in Tehran and other cities. This minimal level of debate, even in the years immediately after the consolidation of power suggests Iran took a different trajectory from other revolutionary countries such as China, Cuba and Russia, as well as similar authoritarian power grips in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Spain, Chile, Egypt and Myanmar. Under the emergent authoritarian conditions, Iran still remained far more open than these other countries.

### **Order and Freedom**

With the end of the war and the subsequent death of Ayatollah Khomeini – Iran’s then Supreme Leader – there was an opening in the press atmosphere. Over the course of a year (1989-1990), over 90 new publications were launched, leading to a 100-percent increase in the total number of print media in the country (Aminzadeh 13; also see Bahrapour 85). The first Press Review Conference of Iran was held in 1990 with the support of Mohammad Khatami, the then Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance (1982-1992).<sup>35</sup> A decade later, nearly all the speakers at this conference became important players in the media sector during the Reform Era (1997-2005). Twenty-one of the 30 speakers at the conference implicitly or explicitly mentioned the difficulties of press work, restrictions on freedom of expression and state censorship. Esmail Razmasa, a veteran journalist, even complained that the article he had submitted to the conference had been

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Sadeq Kharazi, *Modiriat Ertebatat*, no. 4, Shahrivar 1389.

<sup>35</sup> See *Majoomeh Maghalat-e Nakhostin Semianr-e Barresi-e Masayel-e Matbouat-e Iran (1369)*, published by the Bureau of Media Studies and Planning at Iran’s Ministry of Culture, 1387 (2008).

censored and, at the end of his speech, said, “Freedom of the pen means that if one accuses the mayor of a crime, newspapers can print it and after they publish it, the next day no one comes to accuse the writer of trying to overthrow the mayor and because the mayor is appointed by the interior minister by extension the interior minister and because the interior minister is a member of the cabinet , then you intended to overthrow the regime” (64).

Mohsen Aminzadeh, deputy press secretary at the Ministry of Culture, acknowledged at the conference that “the media is the most underdeveloped sector in Iran” and pledged government support for expanding press freedoms (14 – 17). But this promise was conditional in the words of officials: the regime claimed it only wanted to help the development of “healthy press” and those “away from *ghogha-salari*” (clamorocracy).<sup>36</sup> In his opening remarks at the conference, Mohammad Khatami said, “There is no doubt that there should be freedom, but this freedom cannot and should not be damaging to the ideological, religious and security foundations of the establishment.” He then argued that “expanding the space for press” could lead to “creating a new generation that is desired by the Islamic Republic,” a generation that “does not abuse freedom” (7-9). Khatami repeats the same duality that Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters used at the beginning of the revolution to justify restricting the atmosphere for debates: Freedom is good, but “too much freedom that is unregulated leads to *harj-o-marj* (chaos). . . . Not only our young revolution, but no other regime in the world - whether in

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<sup>36</sup> *Ghogha-salari* a modernly invented Persian term meaning ruling by making loud and messy noises and raising a ruckus, derived from *ghogha* (clamor in English, or bruit in French) + *salari* (-cracy, which comes from Greek *kratia* i.e. rule).

the Eastern bloc or in the West - can bear its value system and its security undermined” (11, ellipses added).

Khatami’s rhetoric in 1990 was not that different from the one used by Ayatollah Khamenei, who has become the leader of the Islamic Republic following Khomeini’s death in 1989. He also said that the Iranian regime should “tolerate hearing the opposition.”<sup>37</sup> One year after the beginning of his rule and on the recommendation of Ayatollah Khamenei, *Gol-Agha* satirical magazine was launched.<sup>38</sup> *Gol-Agha* was the first publication in the Islamic Republic that featured caricatures of ministers, members of parliament, and other political figures. Over the past three decades, the Iranian leader has also stressed in various speeches that he is in favor of press freedom, but he has always limited that freedom to conditions: provided that the press is “healthy,” and “free from bias and malice,”<sup>39</sup> a press that “does not divide the nation” and “does not threaten the Islamic faith of the people.”<sup>40</sup>

If a reader unfamiliar with the delicate speech tropes of the Persian language reads Khatami and Khamenei’s remarks, they will have difficulty distinguishing the two. Both praise freedom of expression and freedom of opposition in their remarks, while at the same time making them conditional. Both use similar grounds for their arguments such as

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<sup>37</sup> "Bayanat dar Didar Modiran-e Matbouat." *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehest 13, 1375; also see "Bayanat dar Didar Dnashjooyan." Tir 13, 1395.

<sup>38</sup> "Avalin Jaragheyeh Gol-Agha." *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehest 12, 1396.

<sup>39</sup> *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehest 24, 1373.

<sup>40</sup> *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Esfand 4, 1377.

referring to Islamic morals and philosophy, referring to revolutionary ideals, and referring to Ayatollah Khomeini's words as the founder of the Islamic Republic. In practice, however, each had a different performance with regards to freedom of the press. The reformist Khatami promoted the diversity of press and expanded the limits of expression for dissident intellectuals, while Khamenei supported and encouraged the Principlist judiciary to punish and restrict dissenting voices in the print media.

The conflicts between the Islamic Republic's Right and Left factions, which had emerged in the mid-1980s when Ayatollah Khomeini was still alive, continued with greater intensity and visibility in the 1990s. The new Iranian leader was closer to the right wing and the left wing now saw itself on the brink of complete removal from power. Left wing managers and journalists were laid off from major newspapers across the country such as *Kayhan*, *Khorasan* and *Abrar*.<sup>41</sup> One year after the beginning of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's leadership, the left wing began publishing two new newspapers - *Salam* and *Jahan-e Islam* - and one magazine - *Bayan* - so that they could stay present in the public debate. This political rearrangement brings us to a new situation regarding managing and disciplining the press which has been ongoing since the 1990s, and that is the start of press trials.

## **Error and Trial**

The record for the first press trial in Iranian history goes back to 1907, two years after the victory of the first wave of the Constitutional Revolution. The then king of Iran

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<sup>41</sup> See the interview with Khorasan's former editor-in-chief in *Irna*, Aban 22, 1397.

Mohammad Ali Shah, who had just ascended, sought to revive absolute power and the liberal press strongly criticized him. Tehran's *Rouh al-Qudos* daily published a harsh and offensive article about the King. On November 18, 1907, the newspaper's editor - Sultan al-Olama Khorasani - was summoned to court. The court proceedings were stopped midway as Khorasani refused to defend himself unless the Shah personally came to court as the plaintiff. His bitter fate was sealed out of court one year later. When Mohammad Ali Shah shelled the Majlis in the crackdown on constitutional revolutionaries<sup>42</sup>, Khorasani was arrested, tortured and killed (see Moghaddamfar 20-21).

As fate would have it, the first press trial in the Islamic Republic of Iran was about insulting the country's top official - Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. *Khorasan* daily - which was still run by leftists - published an op-ed on August 25, 1991,<sup>43</sup> criticizing the change in the regime's policies after Ayatollah Khomeini's death. The op-ed contained no offensive words or even a contemptuous tone towards the Iranian leader. In fact, an unfamiliar reader, may be confused as to exactly who the intended target of the op-ed is and what it really intends to say. The op-ed was not even considered progressive based on the standards of its time, and it implicitly criticized the new leader for not continuing the path of the late leader - Khomeini - and instead seeking to reduce foreign policy tensions and increase tolerance in domestic social and cultural policies. As was the style of press

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<sup>42</sup> Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar ascended the throne in 1907, only a year after Iran's Constitutional Revolution. His reign is known as the period of 'Minor Despotism' (*Estebdad-e Saghir*). In 1908 he asked his supporting Russian troops to bombard Iran's first elected parliament (*Majlis*) and suppress the constitutional forces.

<sup>43</sup> Shahrivar 3, 1370.

writing for the past three decades, the author refrained from using direct language and instead used metonymy as a figure of speech, passive voice, as well as collective pronouns - such as “they” - to articulate his critique. These rhetorical considerations were ineffective, and the prosecutor banned the newspaper on charges of “inducing doubt about the leader’s statements” (Asnad 70s 14).

Since *Khorasan’s* leftist editor-in-chief was a member of the clergy, the Special Clerical Court handled the case in a closed hearing. He was acquitted of the charge of insulting the Supreme Leader for lack of sufficient evidence to indicate criminal intent. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to 20 lashes and prison for “agitating public opinion” (Asnad 70s 17). The accused did not have access to legal representation nor was he allowed to defend himself in front of a jury. The press community responded to the verdict, and 64 press executives wrote an open letter to the judiciary chief, demanding that press charges be dealt with in accordance with the press law and in front of a jury.<sup>44</sup> The Ministry of Culture - which was still controlled by the left - criticized the proceeding, calling it a “violation of the constitution and the press law, according to which press offenses must be tried in a special court in front of a jury.”<sup>45</sup> The irony was that despite the law having been passed five years prior, members of the jury had never been selected and it was only after the *Khorasan* trial that the ministry of culture hurriedly tried to form the jury committee.

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<sup>44</sup> *Rasaneh*, no. 7 Mehr 1370.

<sup>45</sup> *Ettelaat*, Mehr 9, 1370.

Establishing legal and judicial frameworks for the press was one of the demands journalists had in the early 1990s. Journalists' efforts were not aimed at changing but enforcing the existing press law (which was last updated in February 1986). From 1989, we witness the emergence of a new discourse amongst journalists that assumes proper enforcement of the existing law would give journalists the freedom to advance the scope of expression and debate (see Mousavi; Forghani; Motamednejad; and Moghadamfar). Part of the concern stemmed from the fact that while cultural productions such as books, films, and music are subject to censorship prior to their release, the press are not censored prior to publication; therefore, publishers or writers may face repercussions after publication (see Rahimi). The suspense and anxiety over outcomes has caused many journalists to turn to "self-censorship" (over the past three decades, the pathological literature of the press has repeatedly pointed out this problem (see Mohsenian-Rad)). Yet this self-censorship has not resulted in speech being absent, rather it has formed certain manners of expression that are supposed to be less perilous. Journalism in Iran has repeatedly been likened to "walking through a minefield without a map."<sup>46</sup> At the beginning of the 1990s journalists believed that clarifying the legal rules could provide them with direction on how to navigate this minefield, as one speaker remarked in the first Press Community Meeting in April 1990.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See Shams-ol-vaezin's speech as the head of Iran's Association for Defending Freedom of Press in *Isna*, Dey 5, 1382; also see *Asriran*, Mehr 12, 1391.

<sup>47</sup> "Neshast-e Hamdeli-e Matbouat." *Ordibehesht* 25, 1370.

The formation of the first press jury - the majority of whom were leftist - gave the journalists some peace of mind.<sup>48</sup> Subsequent press trials resulted in acquittals. One of the most sensational trials was that of *Gardoun* monthly, published by secular intellectuals who had no allies in the regime's ruling factions. The prosecutor had prepared a long list of charges against *Gardoun*, including "questioning the achievements of the Islamic Revolution, suggesting ways and means to oppose the Islamic Republic establishment, spreading rumors against the establishment, insulting officials, insulting the elevated rank and office of the clergy, and questioning the war and sacred defense"(Asnad 70s 27). One of the charges had to do with a critique published by *Gardoun* about the mispronunciation of the Persian words by a host on state-run radio. The prosecution's indictment read, "by adopting an expert gesture and in the guise of technical criticism, the editor-in-chief of the publication seeks to discredit the institutions of the Islamic Republic"(Asnad 70s 28). Along with these charges, numerous other articles were also cited in the indictment, which indicated that the prosecutor was basing the charges on the intended meaning of the magazine and not what had been literally published. One of the articles cited in the indictment was an article entitled "How the 1360s [1980s] Went," although written in passive voice and with ambiguous sentences, the prosecutor claimed "it overall" sought to "manufacture discontent in the public" (Asnad 70s 33).

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<sup>48</sup> Daneshgah-e Enghelab, Shahrivar & Mehr 1370.



The jury acquitted *Gardoun*. And this angered Principlists. *Kayhan's* front page headline read, "Convening a Jury to Save a Counter-Revolutionary Magazine."<sup>49</sup> *Kayhan* went as far as writing a harsh editorial and explicitly attacking the then judiciary chief, something that Reformist papers would have never dared to do. But relying on legal proceedings soon became a nightmare for the press. Since 1993, the majority of jury members, who are selected periodically, have been Principlists. In 1994, a special court - known as Branch 1410 was established in Tehran for the press and Saeed Mortazavi, a notorious judge who became known as "the Butcher of the Press" because of his harsh sentences against journalists, was appointed as its judge.

Just as much as the press explored available rhetorical means to convey their points without getting into trouble, the regime exploited available judicial means to restrict them. One of these laws was the Protective Measures Act which was enacted in 1960<sup>50</sup> by the Shah's regime based on the Swiss legal code *les mesures de surete* (see Jelveh 55; and Danesh). A provision of the law, which authorized judges to arrest dangerous criminals before reoffending, was used to ban the press and even arrest a number of journalists. In the spring of 2000, the judiciary banned eighteen national newspapers, citing this article of law.

One of the most common press allegations in Iran is the vague charge often translated as "agitating public opinion" (*tashvish-e azhan-e oommi*), though a more

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<sup>49</sup> *Kayhan*, Dey 15, 1371.

<sup>50</sup> "Ghanoon-e Eghdamat-e Tamini." Ordibehesht 12, 1339, available on *Majlis Research Center official website (RC.MAJLIS.ir)*.

accurate equivalent would be agitating common minds. This charge has been levelled by the Prosecutor General or other regime's Principlist institutions and officials in 224 of the 367 cases against dissident press during the 1990s and 2000s (see figure 1).<sup>51</sup> The term is not found in any of the Iranian press laws adopted after the 1979 Revolution. Instead, it is referred to the Article 698 of the Islamic Penal Code, which was passed by the Iranian Parliament, *Majlis*, in 1991.<sup>52</sup>

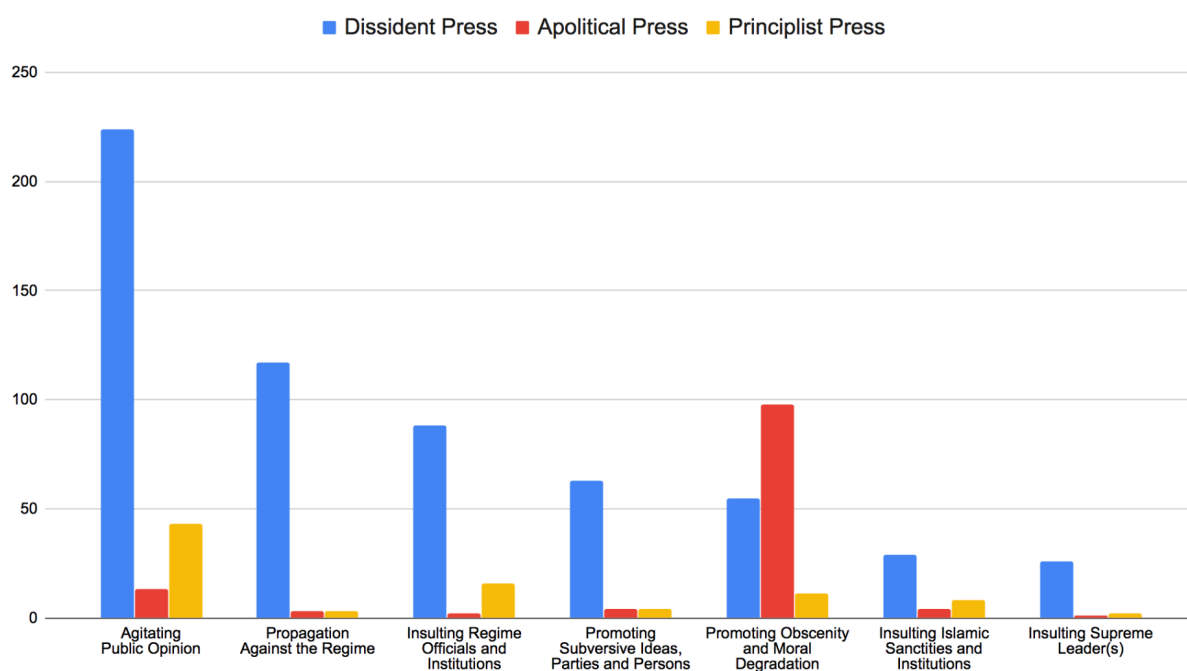


Figure 1: Number of prosecution cases based on the variety of public charges brought against the dissident, apolitical and Principlist press during two Persian decades of 1370s and 1380s (collected and counted by the author from Asnad compilation)

<sup>51</sup> The author was able to collect information and count a total of 720 press cases for all dissident, Principlist, and apolitical publications during the 1370s and 1380s from the Asnad compilation. The total number of press cases during the 1370s and 1380s is estimated to be about 1,000. In some cases, especially during the Ahmadinejad's administration, the license for publication was canceled by the Press Supervisory Board without a judicial hearing. In some other cases, one instance of trial was held combining multiple private plaintiffs' claims with public charges. Also, there is less information about the cases for local press published in provinces, and it is suspected that some might not even have been recorded in the Asnad compilation.

<sup>52</sup> "Ghanoon-e Mojazat-e Eslami." Azar 7, 1370, available on *Majlis Research Center official website (RC.MAJLIS.ir)*.

Despite having Islamic in its name this particular article has been copied from the first General Penal Code of 1934 – during Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reign – which was written based on the French law.<sup>53</sup>

Article 698 prohibits any form of expression that is “against the truth” (even in the form of a judicial complaint or private correspondence) with the intention of “agitating public opinion” (or even “disturbing the opinion of public officials”) “whether uttered explicitly or implicitly.” Iranian jurists have repeatedly criticized the ambiguity of this statutory provision and the government’s abuse of it (see Nourbaha; and Kashani). The law is silent as to what constitutes disturbing of public opinion and, more importantly, how proof of intention is established. There is no record of this article being used to ban the press before the revolution. Instead reports by lawyers show that in the following years after this law was passed in 1934, government agencies - particularly the police - used this article to block public complaints against officers (see Khalatbari 14). As mentioned earlier, “agitating public opinion” was first used by the prosecutor of Iran’s Revolutionary Court in 1979 to ban 22 of the country’s newspapers. Since then, the term has been used to bring a variety of political charges against journalists, feminist activists, and even human rights lawyers.

The regime’s suspicion of any content produced in the dissident press was such that even the Iranian leader warned in 1996 that “in their own [dissident] press, they sometimes use verse, sometimes prose, sometimes allegories and sometimes unfounded

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<sup>53</sup> "Ghanoon-e Mojazat-e Omoomi-e Iran." Updated in Khordad 15, 1313, available on *Majlis Research Center official website (RC.MAJLIS.ir)*.

reports, to lead the story to places [they want]. We should not judge them by their appearance (*zاهر*). The hidden meaning (*باطن*) is that they oppose the foundation of our regime (*nezam*) and they fight it too."<sup>54</sup> The obsession of Principlists with decoding and uncovering the hidden meaning sometimes leads them to conclusions that were not intended by the content of dissident press. For example, one of the charges against *Gardoun* was publishing a poem about nature named "the Republic of Winter," which the prosecutor claimed had intentions to "disseminate lies against the regime" (Asnad 70s 188). In another case, a caricature of a soccer player published by *Farad* magazine was interpreted as an insult to Ayatollah Khomeini because the prosecutor and Principlist media determined a small resemblance between the footballer and the Ayatollah's bearded face (Asnad 70s 22). In May 1998, in the trial of the editor-in-chief of *Zanan* magazine for publishing an article entitled "What Does Feminism Seek?," the accused was charged with "promoting prostitution and immoral culture" (Asnad 70s 505). The article written with academic jargon contained a handful of sentences that pointed out Plato's definition of love was same sex love. The editor-in-chief's clever defense in front of the judge ultimately saved her. She argued that as Plato was not a Muslim, therefore the article did not harm an Islamic figure.

Another widely-used charge against dissident press was "propagation against the regime" (*tabligh alayh-e nezam*). The press law prohibits "the promotion of content that

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<sup>54</sup> "Bayanat dar Didar Modiran-e Matbouat." *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehest 13, 1375

harms the foundation of the Islamic Republic."<sup>55</sup> The ban is attributed to the higher Islamic Penal Code, Article 500 of which, under the heading of "Crimes against the national and foreign security of the State," criminalizes "any propagation against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations." Even one of the deputies of the judiciary admitted<sup>56</sup> that, because of the legal ambiguity of this provision, it can criminalize a wide range of critical behaviors and practically become a "legal swamp" for the press (Habibzadeh & Mojab 132). This article has also been borrowed from the Penal code of the pre-Islamic Revolution. In 1979, during the negotiations of the Assembly of Experts for the Constitution, discussions broke out over whether the media should be allowed to write critically about the new regime, and interestingly pro-Ayatollah Khomeini members of the assembly were opposed to including "propagation against the regime" as the conditional clause for the restriction of press freedom. Mohammad Beheshti, the first Chief Justice of post-revolutionary Iran asked, "Suppose someone wrote a book that says the Islamic Republic regime is bad, can the book be stopped?" Mohammad-Javad Bahonar, another influential cleric who became the first Prime Minister in the Islamic Republic answers, "No! It is only a problem when it raises to the level of uprising and action, but it is permissible in the form of comment and expression of opinion" ("Mashrooh-e Mozakerat" 651).

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<sup>55</sup> "Ghanoon-e Matbouat." *Esfand* 22, 1364 (updated Farvardin 30, 1379), available on *Majlis Research Center official website (RC.MAJLIS.ir)*.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Mirsadeghi, *Isna*, Tir 23, 1398.

There was no such offense in the first edition of the new regime's Islamic Penal Code adopted in 1983. The Principlist MPs of Majlis added it later to the revision of the law in 1996. At that time, some lawmakers were concerned that the passage of such a provision could prevent "healthy criticism and allow public officials to abuse their power by punishing critics" (Mirmohammad Sadeghi 73). Two months before the law was passed in parliament, Ayatollah Khamenei, in a speech had defined the red lines for the press as "not questioning the Islamic Republic:"

There are red lines even in the so-called most democratic countries ... If today there is a group in America that writes about, talks about and promotes secession in America, or chants America must be divided into forty-nine states, how will they be treated? If, today, someone in America stands up and says that because there are forty or fifty million blacks living in the United States, they should have a separate country so give them part of America to form a government. What would the US government do to them? Wouldn't they not do the same thing they did to the Branch Davidians where they set everyone in the building on fire? These are the red lines of a nation.<sup>57</sup>

## **Expanding the Limits of Criticism**

It was not only the dissident press that fearfully and experimentally attempted to extend the borders of political speech. The Principlist press, who always claimed to follow and have the support of the Iranian leader, also played a role in pushing some red lines. It was mentioned earlier that *Gol-Agha*, the first satirical magazine to draw caricatures of

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<sup>57</sup> "Bayanat dar Didar Modiran-e Matbouat." *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehest 13, 1375.

Islamic Republic officials, was launched with the direct support of Ayatollah Khamenei. *Gol-Agha* had unwritten protocols. The cabinet ministers and political appointees of the executive branch and the non-clerical members of parliament were easily criticized in the publication, but the chiefs of the three branches of government and the clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader were never ridiculed. Other Principlist publications – such as *Kayhan* newspaper and *Sobh* weekly – published sharp criticisms and revelations against the policies of the then president’s cabinet – Hashemi Rafsanjani – especially on topics such as corruption, and excessive public spending. Many of these critiques were, of course, also directed at the tolerant cultural and social policies pursued by Hashemi Rafsanjani which, in fact, the dissident press supported. By 1997, there was a considerable number of lawsuits brought by ministries and agencies supervised by the executive branch against Principlist press - usually for disseminating false information. Almost all of these trials led to acquittals.

The victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election led to a sudden widening of the gates to press debates. In his campaign, Khatami had pledged to “provide a space” where all intellectuals “could express their views.”<sup>58</sup> In just the first two years of his presidency, 780 licenses were issued for publications which constitutes more than half of all licenses issued for the entire 1990s (Bahrapur 85). Dissident publications - now relying on the support of the Reformist government - produced a new discourse on

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<sup>58</sup> Hamshahri, Esfand 18, 1375.

sanctifying journalism in which “knowledge was the right of the public”<sup>59</sup> and print press was the “fourth pillar of democracy” and the driving force behind political change (Khiabany 22). The Reformist and Principlist press were engaged in debates on a variety of issues on a daily basis, from general topics on the priority of Islamic orders over popular demand to micro policy issues such as the proportion of the budget allocated for military and environmental spending. The issue of press freedom itself was one of these important debates. Reformists called for the need for diversity and pluralism in society, the need to promote a culture of tolerance,<sup>60</sup> the recognition of the right to dissent,<sup>61</sup> and even “the right to be wrong.”<sup>62</sup> And on the other side the Principlists were worried about “deviation from Islamic values,”<sup>63</sup> “undermining the revolution and the *nezam*’s achievements,”<sup>64</sup> and “inflaming society.”<sup>65</sup>

Press circulation had reached its highest point since the 1979 Revolution. A government poll in 1998 showed that more than 83 percent of literate Tehran residents read a newspaper for half an hour a day. Of this 83 percent, 37 percent read at least two

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<sup>59</sup> *Sobh-e Emrooz* newspaper chose this phrase as its branding slogan and published it next to logo.

<sup>60</sup> Iran President Mohammad Khatami speech, *Isna*, Esfand 12, 1378.

<sup>61</sup> Iran's deputy state minister speech, *Isna*, Azar 17, 1381.

<sup>62</sup> “hagh-e Na-hagh boodan.” *Kian* monthly, no. 24, 1374.

<sup>63</sup> *Marefat*, Tir 1384.

<sup>64</sup> Iran’s Chief Justice official statement, Tir 7, 1379.

<sup>65</sup> Iran’s Student Basij official statement, *Isna*, Azar 2, 1382.



newspapers and 18 percent read three newspapers every day.<sup>66</sup> One can look at the front pages of these newspapers to discern a rather significant characteristic of the era; front pages are filled with opinions instead of hard news. To thoroughly enjoy following the daily debates, many people, particularly students, had placed Principlists newspapers in addition to Reformist ones in their consumer basket.

The space opening on press debates was accompanied by a change in rhetoric. The dissident press became more straightforward and did not shrink from directly referring to regime officials and institutions. There was fierce competition among the dissident press over which publication printed more radical headlines and content, and journalists and op-ed writers tried to measure their courage by the number of red lines they crossed. "It was as if journalists were springs that had been recoiled and as soon as the space opened up, the pressure was lifted from the spring, and the press' behavior became more radical," Behzadi, a veteran journalist explained the then conditions.<sup>67</sup> *Jame'e* newspaper, the most famous daily printed during the Reform Era, creatively used "[...]" to indicate which sections it had self-censored in order to adhere to the redlines. Thus, the reader not only saw the censorship closely but could guess what the censored phrase was and fill in the blanks (Rezaee-Rad). Another well-known Reformist newspaper, *Sobh-e Emrooz*, published by political figures close to Khatami - printed the sharpest attacks on security and military institutions as well as on the agencies under the supervision of the Supreme

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<sup>66</sup> "Olgooy-e Masraf-e Rooznameh dar Tehran." *Rasaneh* No. 48, 1380

<sup>67</sup> *Euro News*, Farvardin 22, 1397.

Leader - particularly the Guardian Council and the judiciary. According to Alawi-Tabar, a member of its editorial board, *Sobh-e Emrooz* intentionally wanted to be a “line crosser” and “adopted positions that would enrage the opposition party.”<sup>68</sup> In March 2000, Saeed Hajjarian, the director of the newspaper, survived an assassination attempt by a team of young Principlist supporters. For the past twenty years, Hajjarian has remained confined to a wheelchair and has difficulty speaking.

To regain control over this space Principlists introduced a bill to amend the press law in Majlis where they held the majority. The proposed bill included more restrictions on press work, such as penalizing the writer in addition to the director-in-charge of the publication. Principlist MPs even incorporated the leader’s favorite phrase into the bill, conditioning the press right to criticize regime officials to “constructiveness.” The amendment defined constructive criticism as “criticism that is based on logic and reasoning and avoids insult, debasement and destruction [of character].”<sup>69</sup>

The proposed bill drew a strong reaction from Reformist press (see Bahrapour 26-27). *Salam* newspaper ran a frontpage story with a bold headline that claimed the bill was the brainchild of an Islamic Republic security official who had been recently outed as the person who ordered the killing of dozens of dissident intellectuals – including several journalists – in previous years.<sup>70</sup> *Salam* was banned one day after printing this story. To

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<sup>68</sup> *Irna*, Mordad 30, 1398.

<sup>69</sup> "Eslahieh Ghanoon-e Matbouat." Farvardin 30, 1379, available on *Majlis Research Center official website (RC.MAJLIS.ir)*.

<sup>70</sup> *Salam*, Tir 15, 1378.

object to the ban, students held a protest in Tehran University Campus. This was the first serious political protest in the Iranian capital since the days of the revolution. Police quashed the protest, but Reformist press covered the news without censorship, and the role of the military in the Islamic Republic was added to the list of public debate topics. In April 2000, MPs passed the new press law. The next day, Ayatollah Khamenei attacked Reformist press in a fiery speech: "Newspapers pop up whose sole purpose is disturbing public opinion and creating skepticism about the regime; 10 to 15 newspapers which appear to be coordinated from the same place, they run headlines that makes one think everything is lost in the country! They kill hope in the youth, they weaken the spirit of trust in the authorities, they weaken *nezam's* institutions [...] Even Western Press are not like this, this is a form of press charlatanism."<sup>71</sup> One day after this speech, 18 Reformist publications were banned for "creating tension in society."<sup>72</sup>

But it was a cat and mouse game. Publishing licenses were under the purview of Khatami's government, and dissident publishers could start another newspaper under a new name as soon as the old one was banned. This behavior caused Principlists to call Reformist newspapers "chain press". Another nickname, borrowed from Khamenei's remarks, was "brawlers" (*janjal-afarin*) and *ghogh-salar*. Many Reformist journalists and press executives now believe that their radical and unmeasured behavior during the first two years of the Reform Era was what led to the radical reaction of the regime in

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<sup>71</sup> "Bayanat dar Didar Modiran-e Matbouat." *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehesht 1, 1379.

<sup>72</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 4, 1379.

suppressing the press. As the editor-in-chief of *Jame'e*, Mashallah Shams-ol-vaezin, says, "The Reformist press mistakenly thought that their high circulation and social depth would give them immunity and prevent the government from attacking them."<sup>73</sup> But Principlist press believed that their rivals were engaged in "psychological warfare and not healthy journalism," as *Kayhan* editor, Safar-Harandi put it.<sup>74</sup>

### **Meaning-without-Saying**

Following the ban, new strategies were employed by dissident press to avoid prosecution. In most national newspapers a new position called internal reviewer was created. The job entailed reading the pages of the newspaper usually at night before it went to print and removing or rewriting anything that was considered politically sensitive and potentially prosecutable based on a momentary judgment.

Newspapers once again resorted to using implicit language and used nicknames in reference to individuals and political groups instead of using their actual names. For example, Principlists were initially called "authority-seekers" (*eghtedar-talaban*), then "conservatives" (*mohafezeh-karan*) and, eventually, "a certain faction" (*jenahi khas*). Many press reports even preferred to use terms such as "some people" to refer to the Principlists. In imitation of the presidential rhetoric, using the collective first-person pronoun became commonplace in articles so that instead of the demand being directed at the regime and the institutions controlled by the Supreme Leader it resembled a collective invitation to

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<sup>73</sup> *Javan*, Aban 8, 1389.

<sup>74</sup> *Isna*, Farvardin 26, 1380.

“all of us.” The coverage of stories related to Ayatollah Khamenei also changed. At the beginning of the Reform Era, dissident press used the-less-glorious “leader of the revolution” and published his speeches in marginal spaces. But after the press bans, Khamenei was again dubbed “The Leader Whose Position is Supreme” and his remarks became the front-page headlines.

In 2000, Reformists won the majority in Majlis. Instead of publishing sensitive opinions by staff writers, dissident press used this opportunity to get MPs to go on the record in daily phone interviews and give them their desired quotes. Newspapers who feared the price of writing their own opinions fed their desired statements to newcomer Reformist MPs thirsty for fame.

The Reformist press hoped that this would shift the legal responsibility onto lawmakers. The news and commentaries from other countries whose events could be adapted and interpreted in the context of the political situation of Iran were also extensively covered by the press. Numerous articles were published criticizing the Taliban’s policies in Afghanistan, Pinochet’s militarization of Chile, and the repression of intellectuals in Soviet Russia, which were implicitly criticism of the Iranian regime’s policies.

These tactics were unsuccessful. The press trial records during the Persian 1370s and 1380s<sup>75</sup> (see figures 2 and 3) show that despite their best efforts to publish critical content in a format that was not considered offensive by the Iranian regime, the dissident

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<sup>75</sup> The Persian calendar begins at vernal equinox which is usually day of March 21 of the Gregorian calendar. The year 1370 thus began in March 21, 1991 and ended in March 20, 1992. The year 1389 began in March 21, 2010 and ended in March 20, 2011.

press still faced bans and legal prosecution. Even criticizing the legal procedure used by the judiciary for the press could result in prosecution. In one example, the prosecutor brought charges against *Azad* newspaper for printing the following sentence, “Those who crackdown on the press under the pretext of religious concerns [in reality] seek to preserve power.” In accordance with the rhetorical strategies of the time, this statement was vague without a specific target. But in court the prosecutor said, “It is clear who was intended by this statement” (Asnad 80s 355). *Iran-e Farda* monthly, which did not directly mention the Principlist faction referring to them only as the “monopolist faction” and “discriminating faction” was tried for “insulting the devoted servants of the sacred regime of the Islamic Republic.” One of the statements published in the magazine – “people don’t like being patronized” – was considered an example of insulting the Supreme Leader (Asnad 70s 439-440).

Dozens of the lodged complaints had to do with publishing the remarks of Reformist MPs. The director-in-charge of *Aftab-e Emrooz* – who was sued over publishing MP Rajabali Mazroui’s remarks about police brutality during the protests – argued in court that “we are not responsible for censoring the remarks made by officials,” but he was still convicted of “propagation against the regime” (Asnad 70s 1195-1199). The same pattern repeated for several other publications including *Hambastegi*, *Norouz*, *Bonyan*, and *Nasim-e Saba* (Asnad 80s 133; 209; 310; and 763).

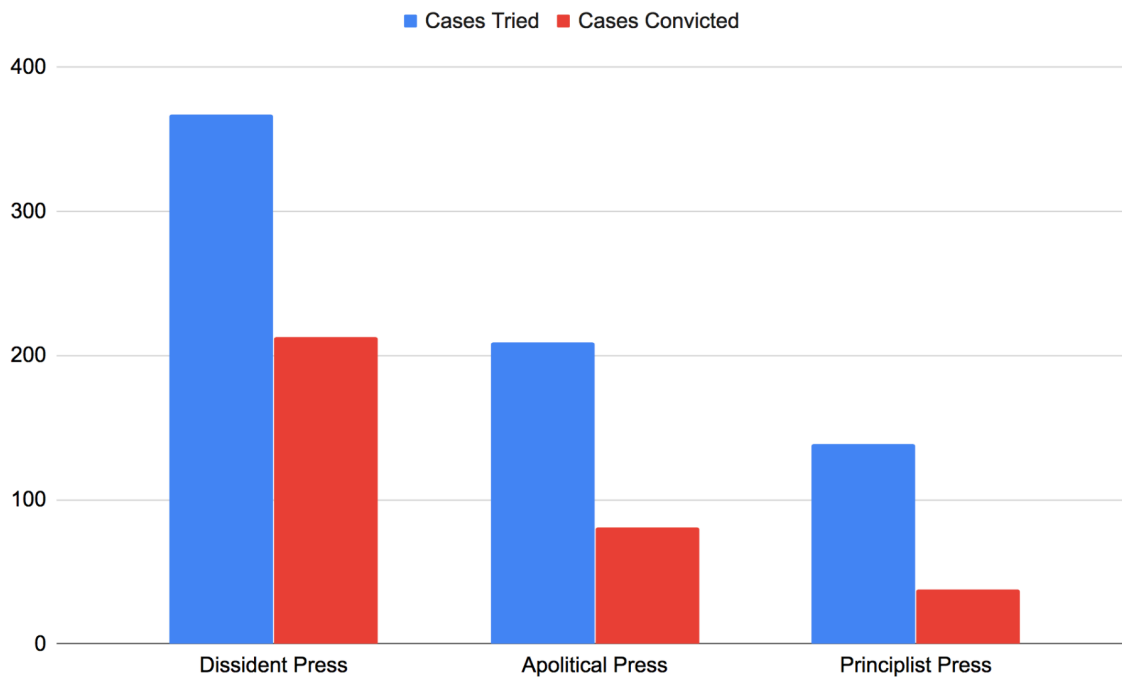


Figure 2: Number of press trial cases during two Persian decades of 1370s and 1380s (collected and counted by the author from Asnad compilation)

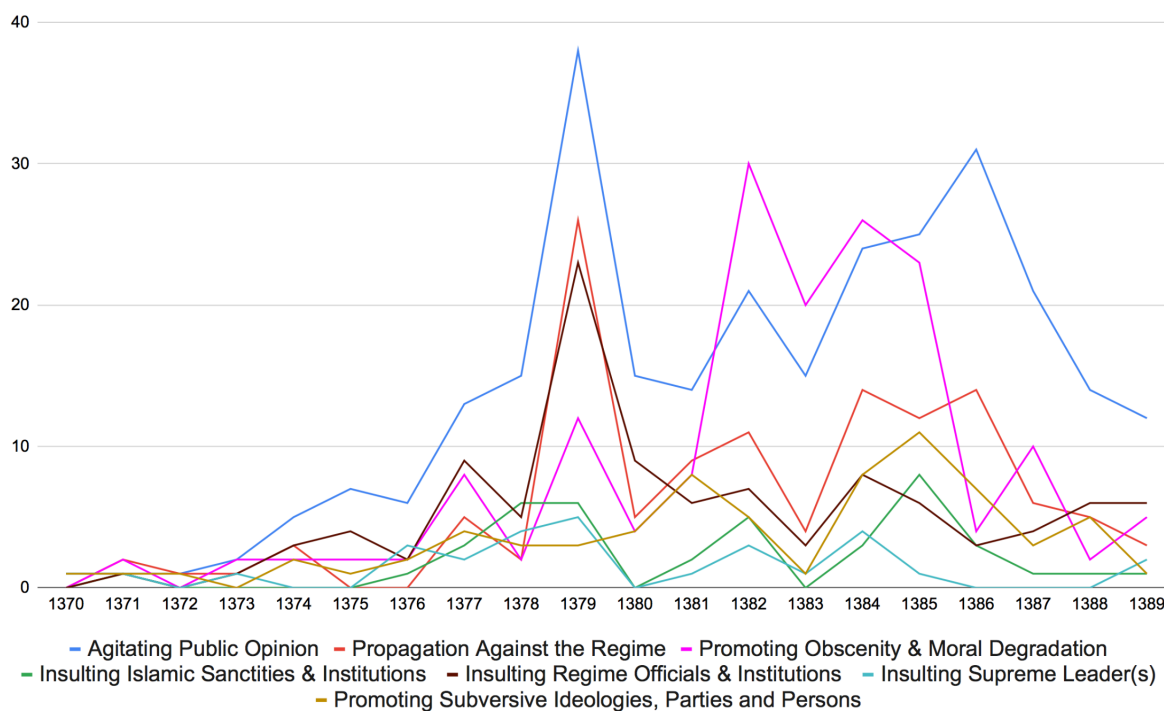


Figure 3: The frequency of public charges brought against the press based on their variety during two Persian decades of 1370s and 1380s (collected and counted by the author from Asnad compilation)

During the court hearing in April 2006, *Bamdad-e No* newspaper's lawyer denied that the ambiguous article in the paper, titled "The group committing violence in the name of Religion," was referring to a hardline Principlists group called Ansar-e Hezbollah that attacked peaceful student protests with batons and bats as the repressive arm of the Principlists. "You have misunderstood us. We were talking about people who are outside the regime in this article, and therefore there is no reference in our choice of words or their meaning to the *nezam* or its officials" (Asnad 80s 343). His line of defense didn't help the newspaper. In the verdict sheet for *Salam* daily, the judge even cited a parable from Islamic jurisprudence "implicity is franker than explicitness" (الكناية ابلغ من التصريح) as proof that the newspaper was guilty of insulting conservative MPs even without clearly mentioning them (Asnad 70s 871). *Ava weekly*, in an article written on the occasion of the birthday of the first Shia Imam, mentioned a story about Ali appearing in court like an ordinary citizen. The title of the article, "When Ali did Not Consider Himself Above the Law," was considered a quip at the Supreme Leader and again "propagation against the regime" (Asnad 70s 1305-1307).

For centuries, the Persian rhetorical culture has developed implicit modes of utterance, such as *kenayeh* – which signifies a hidden meaning – and *eiham* – which suggests double and even antithetical meanings (Mirzania 171). Application of such devices was considered as both technical and strategic. They were techniques for achieving the highest standards of eloquence in Persian poetry and prose. They were also political strategies for safe expression in public without running the risk of repercussion. Their function was similar to the Aristotelian concept of enthymeme as an effective



instrument of persuasion – that the intended audience would receive the incomplete message and would infer the intended meaning using the shared assumptions and premises (see Bitzer 408; and Areni 172). The dissident intellectual Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh (1812–1878) wrote the short novella *Yusef Shah Serraj* depicting a fictional Persian king who was promoting social and political reform. His audience understood that he was asking the then Qajar despot to modernize and liberalize the country. The revolutionary clerics used the same strategy campaigning against the former Shah’s regime. A famous preacher Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Falsafi cautioned his followers that the regime “apparatus is surveilling you, [thus] you should be very careful and express your intended speech in *kenayah*.”<sup>76</sup> The dissident press deployed the same strategies in the Islamic Republic. They did not expect being prosecuted for tacit assumptions, but for the regime intended meaning was important, not its form of expression.

Some of the trials contain interesting humor. For example, one of *Arya* newspaper’s charges was the publication of an interview with the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, which stated that “In Iran, there is freedom of speech, there is no freedom after speech.” The paper’s director-in-charge indicated that if acquitted it would automatically discredit the Special Rapporteur’s claim, nevertheless the judge convicted him of “propagation against the *nezam*” (Asnad 70s 1093).

Numerous examples of judicial double standards can be detected in these trials. In April 1998, *Ettelaat* weekly, close to the Reformists, was tried and convicted of “agitating

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<sup>76</sup> Ezharat-e Ayatollah Falsafi." Savak Records from Ordibehesht 24, 1346. Document available on Political Studies and Research Institute website *Sanad-Name* (IR-PSRI.com).

public opinion” for publishing a critique on the length of military conscription (Asnad 70s 711). Two months earlier, *Sobh* weekly - one of the Principlists’ flagship publications - printed a similar story but was acquitted in court (Asnad 70s 683). While the judiciary was dealing with dissident press, the executive branch, under Khatami, had an unwritten policy of not suing the press for criticizing the government. Khatami even dropped a lawsuit he had filed during his presidential campaign against the hardline *Shalamcheh* for publishing fake news. Despite the withdrawal of the suit, judge Mortazavi - known as the Press Butcher - criticized Khatami in the verdict sheet for filing suit, saying “Islamic Republic officials should be role models in restraint and patience, and even tolerate false accusations in order to institutionalize criticism and freedom” (Asnad 70s 677).

Many press directors appealed to ethos during trials, citing their past as executives in the service of the Islamic Republic. Hamid Reza Jalaiepour, the director-in-charge of *Jame'e* newspaper, mentioned his revolutionary activities, his service in the IRGC, and that three of his brothers were “martyred” in the war, and even reminded the court that the leader visited his home: “My colleagues at *Jame'e* are all genuine revolutionaries, some of them even know half of the Quran by heart.” He argued that he considers the newspaper under his care the “protector of the achievements of the revolution and the Islamic Republic,” but believes that these achievements “will remain intact with political opening” (Asnad 70s 549-554). The editor of *Kian* monthly - the flagship magazine of religious intellectuals - also initially characterized himself as “a member of the revolution cadre” and established that he was imprisoned for fighting the Shah’s regime: “This magazine is the fruit of martyrdom” (Asnad 70s 1520-1521). Even secular intellectuals

such as Abbas Maroufi - the then editor of *Gardoun* who later sought asylum in Germany - called his publication the “defender of the Islamic Revolution values”, and said, “respecting the *velayat-e faqih* is an obligation to me” (Asnad 70s 180).

In other cases, directors tried to show that press trials were to the detriment of the regime. “If we do not publish these critiques, our audiences will think they live in a society filled with censorship and this will have undesirable outcomes for the *nezam*,” said the director of *Aftab-e Emrooz*, who was on trial for propagation against the regime. (Asnad 70s 1196). The director of the *Iran-e Farda* political monthly pointed out that his work actually has promotional value for the Revolution and the Islamic Republic: “The press is a place for clash of opinions. If you have an objection, write an article. If you don’t think my publication is worthy of your article, publish it somewhere else to help debate and discussion grow culturally. Bringing lawsuits in court won’t allow cultural growth.” (Asnad 70s 457).

Abdullah Nouri - one of the most senior Islamic Republic officials in the 1980s and 1990s - was the only one who, as editor of *Khordad* newspaper, turned his trial into a debate with the judge. *Khordad* newspaper’s charges were a collection of the regime’s favorite charges: “insulting the illuminated laws of Islam and religious sanctities,” “insulting the founder of the Islamic Republic,” “agitating public opinion,” “propagation against the sacred *nezam* of the Islamic Republic,” and “insulting officials and the institutions of the regime” (Asnad 70s 921). In addition to the Prosecutor General, a group of private plaintiffs - including “the families of martyrs,” the students of seminary, members of the student Basij and the Headquarter for Enjoining Good and Forbidding

Wrong - had also sued *Khordad* over the same offenses. This was also one of the tactics used by Principlists against dissident press during the Reform Era where a group of private plaintiffs sued the publication for offenses that had no direct bearing on them. Dissident press called them “professional plaintiffs” who brought nuisance suits (see figure 4).<sup>77</sup>

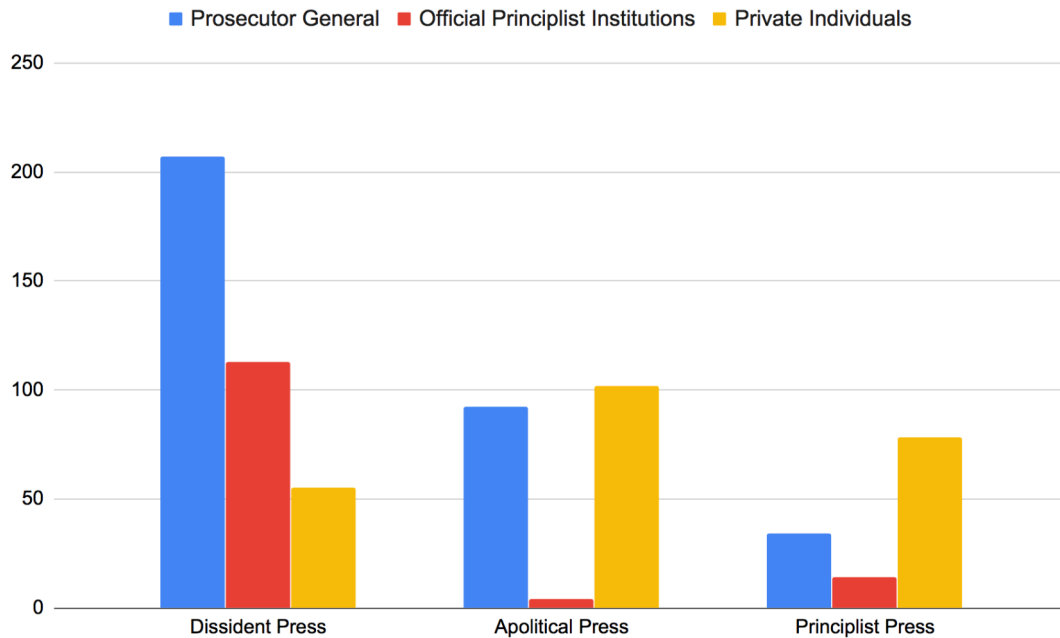


Figure 4: Charges brought against press by the type of complaining party during two Persian decades of 1370s and 1380s (collected and counted by the author from Asnad compilation)

Abdullah Nouri’s lengthy defenses and his quarreling with the judge resulted in seven court sessions. Other press printed Nouri’s daring remarks against the regime’s policies using the excuse that publishing court hearings was permissible, and all his defenses were immediately published in book form. In just one year, 15 editions of the book sold with a circulation of nearly 150,000. Nouri was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison (Asnad 70s 1035).

<sup>77</sup> See interview with director-in-charge of *Iran* newspaper, *Isna*, Khordad 11, 1381; also see interview the Mazroui, a Reformist MP, *Isna*, Esfand 22, 1382.

## Not for Public Consumption

As much as Principlists were concerned about the topics and the content of the public debates started by dissident press, they also felt threatened by the debate itself, and considered their back and forth “constantly provoking the people” and “disrupting the stability of the public sphere” (Khuoshrouzadeh 196). In a meeting with a group of media representatives, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei advised them not to “make the atmosphere of the country one of press ferment; in other words, this newspaper should not argue with that one, and that one should not insult this one and that other one.”<sup>78</sup> In IRGC religious advisor Javad Mohadissi’s opinion, “debate and polemic” is “the biggest scourge of the media:” “Under the guise of free discussion and dialogue the press implant negativity, create doubt, destruction and create hypes and they agitate public opinion. When such discussions take place in a small meeting with a limited audience, their impact is limited to that group, but when it becomes public it becomes sensitive” (116-117).

With the rise of dissident press in the Reform Era, a new trend emerged in Iran’s clerical literature that sought to examine the conformity of press behavior with the Islamic principles. (see Saadi; Fakhari Tousei; Zibayinejad; Pirmoradian; and Qane). The main concern of this new discourse was to justify the restriction of the press based on an old jurisprudential ruling on *Kotob-e Zal’leh* or misleading publications –those that deviate from the path of the righteous. Almost all Shia grand jurists consider the sale, purchase, and study of such publications *haram* or prohibited. There is only one opposing record

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<sup>78</sup> "Bayanat dar Didar Modiran-e Matbouat." *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehst 13, 1375

from a lesser-known jurist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Yusuf ibn Ahmad Bahrani, who believed that there was no primary source in Islam on such a ruling. (Ironically, the book Bahrani wrote on this topic has been described by other clergy as an example of misleading books, see Sarshar 47).

Jurists have given lavish interpretations on what constitutes as an example of misleading, including anything that is not right, anything that contradicts the beliefs of Muslims, or anything that will mislead the public. The first Iranian press law (1908), most of which was copied from the progressive French freedom of the press law (1881), banned the misleading publications, and the press was not allowed to publish anything that was “harmful to Islam”.<sup>79</sup> The ban continued in all subsequent editions of the press law. A similar ban was included in the early drafting of the constitution in 1979: “The press is forbidden from publishing anything that might mislead the public.” Some members of the constitution assembly like Beheshti believed not being misled and not misleading others was the responsibility of every Muslim and that “the government must not intervene and use force to prevent (people from being) misled.” The phrase was eventually excluded from the final edition due to its generality and ambiguity, instead an evenly ambiguous phrase was used that banned the press from “expressing subjects that are disruptive to Islamic principles” (“Mashrooh-e Mozakerat” 1728-1730).

Principlists believed “the masses of general public” (*avam*) were not ready to be exposed to debates, especially those involving theological issues and the interpretation of

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<sup>79</sup> "Motammam-e Ghanoon-e Asasi-e Mashrouteh." Dey 8, 1285, available on *Majlis Research Center official website (RC.MAJLIS.ir)*.

Islamic law (Ghane 60-69): "It is okay to publish an article in an academic book or discuss it on an academically-inclined television network that has an expert audience, but when the press, which have a general audience rather than an expert one, reject religious laws, even those non-essential or ancillaries, it results in the people's loss of faith or at the very least creates doubt in them and therefore it is not permissible" (Saadi 253). Using this argument, the judge banned *Saba* newspaper in 2003 for publishing a summary report from an informal university panel discussion entitled "The compatibility or incompatibility of Shia Thought with Democracy."<sup>80</sup>

Juxtaposing "freedom of the press" against the "security of the *nezam*" has become one of the major concerns of the regime since the early 1990s. Shams-ol-vaezin, the editor-in-chief of *Jame'e* newspaper who served jail time, says interrogators told him that "the regime needs a dissident newspaper like *Jame'e*, but only on the condition that it accepts and respects some protocols [to ensure the security of the establishment]."<sup>81</sup> In the Media and Political Stability in the Islamic Republic of Iran conference, organized by the Institute for Strategic Studies in 1999, one participant pointed to the experience of heated press debates during the Glasnost which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, warning that the Islamic Republic must not face such a fate. Another participant argued the exact opposite, claiming that the collapse of the Soviet Union was because it opened the atmosphere of the press too late. How can one give freedom but at the same time prevent

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<sup>80</sup> *Ilina*, Azar 2, 1382.

<sup>81</sup> *Javan*, Aban 8, 1389

this freedom from weakening the regime or its collapse? A Principlist political scientist suggests that the Islamic Republic should adopt a different model for the press, a model that is neither “like closed societies” nor “resembles chaotic [Western] societies in which norms are constantly broken” (Eftekhar 100-101). Finding this favorable model of press behavior has become the unsolved dilemma of the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile the dissident press continues exploring all avenues for expressing all that can be feasibly expressed.

### **Daring to Debate**

We now return to this fragile space of speech. The space we know may be taken away from people at any moment, on a whim. We come back, and in this bitter return, in this bitter existence, we want to continue the work that has become more difficult than before. We want to keep speaking under conditions that we all know is still very difficult to say many things; but we must find a way to do so, we are trying to do so as best we can, and we can't stay silent because silence often means surrendering to annihilation. Our tale is the tale of passing through a narrow passage where the end is unknown, and return is impossible and any which way you fall is hell. So as long as we are here, we will stay together and we write.<sup>82</sup>

This was the editorial published by the online daily *Meidaan* on November 24, 2019 after seven days of being offline due to the Internet shutdown in Iran. At midnight on Friday November 15, the Iranian government unexpectedly announced that gasoline prices would increase in the country as of tomorrow. Enraged and in a state of shock, Iranians took to the streets in over 100 small and major cities across the country. The

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<sup>82</sup> *Meidaan*, Azar 3, 1389.



government blocked access to the World Wide Web in order to stop the flow of information and communications, just as 110 years ago Mohammed Ali Shah Qajar had ordered the cutting of telegraph lines across the country to prevent people from learning the news about the Constitutional Revolution (Kasravi 581). It was as if Iran had returned to the pre-Internet era overnight. On social media - especially Telegram, Instagram, and Twitter –which have now become the main platforms for public debate in Iran – news and views from inside Iran were rarely broadcasted. Protests in Iran were severely suppressed, with at least 300 killed and thousands arrested.

However, throughout the week of unrest, newspapers were regularly published in Iran. The protests were covered very conservatively by the print press. While they were not completely censored, they did not become the main topic of discussion and reporting on the front pages. On November 24, *Hamshahri* daily - which belongs to the Tehran municipality and currently has Reformist tendencies - ran the bold headline “The Press Void of People’s Voices” to criticize the situation.<sup>83</sup> *Hamshahri* wrote,

“Print press, which has been losing readers in recent years due to the popularity of social media and satellite TV channels as well as heavy censorship , failed to play a significant role in reflecting the people’s voice of discontent in one of the country’s most important social and political developments in recent years, even when the Internet was shut down and in the absence of a digital competitor. . . newspapers are either facing censorship or have become so accustomed to self-censorship that they have closed their eyes on the most important news.”

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<sup>83</sup> *Hamshahri*, Azar 3, 1398 (ellipses added).

*Hamshahri* did not have a better performance than the rest of the newspapers. Protests were badly covered by Iranian press - especially in the hard news format.<sup>84</sup> However, the debate over protests, interpretations and analysis of the triggers and the protesters' demands, as well as the war of words between political factions blaming one another, were ongoing in the press from day one. *Shargh* daily – which should have been more cautious with four judicial suspensions on its record – discussed the protests in every issue printed since they erupted and in its November 23, 2019 issue mentioned the high number of casualties and even criticized the police for their brutality towards protesters.<sup>85</sup> The protests did not make the frontpage headline or photo of Iranian newspapers - except when they repeated the talking points of regime officials, calling the protests riots and looting - but they were not completely absent: less news but more analysis. There are many written and unwritten red lines for press work in Iran, which becomes particularly bold in times of crisis, such as protests. Nevertheless all Reformist press tried to keep the flame of debate about this important national event alive to some degree by navigating the storm. And this is one of the contradictions in the situation of freedom of the press in Iran: even under extraordinary circumstances, one can still find a minimum level of debate and criticism in the press.

*Meidaan's* editorial, mentioned above, illustrates this paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the author points to the lack of freedom, and, on the other, feels enough

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<sup>84</sup> According to a recent survey, the top 20 national newspapers published more than 1600 pieces of news and views about the protests during the ten days of unrest. Only 25 percent of these pieces were critical of the government. (See *Hamshahri*, Dey 25, 1398).

<sup>85</sup> *Shargh*, Azar 2, 1398.

freedom to point out the lack of freedom. Although they know it is “very difficult to say many things,” they try to find a way “to do so” anyway.

When it comes to freedom of the press, over the past two decades Iran has constantly been at the bottom of the international rankings. In the World Press Freedom Index, which is compiled and published by Reporters Without Borders, from 2002 to 2019 Iran is placed next to the most authoritarian regimes like Azerbaijan, Cuba, Laos, Syria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In fact, in most years, Iran ranked worse than these countries. A similar trend can be detected in the annual Freedom of the Press reports published by The Freedom House. From 1993 to 2017, the condition of press freedom in Iran has been frequently rated worse than Saudi Arabia. The methodology in both of these annual indexes is a combination of the factual numbers of the instances of abuse and violence against journalists and media outlets, as well as a survey of a handful of experts who provide their own perceptions of the state of press freedom in each country (see Reporters Without Borders; and Freedom House).

Iran has been one of the worst places for journalism in the past two decades, more than 300 journalists have been arrested, tried, jailed and some even killed; more than two hundred magazines and newspapers have been banned; and thousands of media sector workers have lost their jobs.

However, the ambiance of debate and expressing dissent and disagreement in Iran is nothing like that of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Azerbaijan, Cuba or even China (see Peter 403). One need only randomly compare a daily newspaper printed in Iran with one from any of these countries. Iranian newspapers do not give the impression to readers that everything

is “flowers and nightingales” –a Persian expression which means everything is calm and desirable. The press publishes official news, but there is a great deal of criticism and disagreement over various political policies and ideologies. The recognition of the debate space in the press is not necessarily a deliberated and well-calculated decision by the Iranian regime, but rather a result of Iran’s civil society’s efforts to create spaces for dissent and disagreement although temporary and volatile, spaces that are created based on intuitive judgement calls and through opportunities resulting from the dynamics of division among the ruling elites. “Resourceful and resilient journalists do not simply roll over because the state orders them to do so,” rather they find creative ways to express their criticisms (Semati 163). But just as much as the press has tried to expand the borders of speech, the regime has tried to tame the press at great expense and with considerable difficulty.

There is no evidence in the regime’s official literature, but it seems that an unwritten policy has been accepted which has emerged from the decades-long tug of war between the press and the regime and adopted through trial and error: elected institutions and individuals – including the Executive and Legislative branches, and the bureaucratic offices – can be criticized. Alternatively, unelected institutions and individuals – the leader and all the institutions under his control which have been run by Principlists for the past three decades such as the Judiciary, the Guardian Council, the military and law enforcement, the IRIB, and Friday prayers leaders, etc. – are better left alone. However, there are numerous violations that indicate such policy has not been homogeneous. Principlist press criticize the policies of unelected individuals and institutions; although

they do it less frequently and with minimal concerns for potential repercussions. Dissident press has more difficulty in criticizing elected institutions when controlled by Principlists. They continue to be engaged in criticizing unelected institutions – especially the Guardian Council and the IRIB – but try to avoid punishment by applying rhetorical tactics and toning down their criticism.

The prosecution of the press and journalists remains the regime’s main way of disciplining the space for speech. This judicialization of rhetoric and its modes of dissent may provide “greater adaptive flexibility” for the Islamic Republic; but, at the same time, it demonstrates the confining criteria for displaying legitimacy – criteria that the regime has developed through its own “discursive and normative notions” of legitimacy since its inception (Reinoud 180). Even the widely despised Judge Mortazavi boasted about the “transparent judicial process” that occurs in the eye of public opinion as a sign indicating the extent of press freedom in the country.<sup>86</sup>

But this is a costly and troublesome method, with a lot of budget and time spent on training staff and maintaining institutions that are solely tasked with monitoring and retroactively punishing the press. The news of each case of press prosecution is reported by domestic and international media fueling a new debate and creating more negative publicity for the regime in international human rights circles and media community. Saudi Arabia and many other authoritarian regimes in the region face such problems less

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<sup>86</sup> *Isna*, Mordad 18, 1382.

frequently (see Duffy). When less public expression occurs in these regimes consequently there is also less public punishment after expression.

Iran presents a peculiar case when it comes to press freedom. Since Siebert et al. wrote their *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), the general supposition among media and journalism scholars is that “democracies facilitate and enhance free and open media” while “authoritarian and totalitarian regimes impose strict controls,” and restrain the press “contributions to civic participation and public debate” (Vaca-Baqueiro 2). Political scientists assume that authoritarian regimes allow certain levels of public debate in the press either when they are “resource-poor” (Egorov et al. 645) or when they are more sophisticated and, thus, could use “more subtle mechanisms of repression” (Levitsky & Way 53). Iranian regime is not resource-poor, and it does use more subtle methods of control; nevertheless the newspapers have not adopted a cringing submissiveness to their respective rulers.

## CHAPTER 3: DEBATE IN ACADEMIA: TRAINING CRITICAL THINKING WITHOUT CREATING CRITICAL CONDITIONS

“Is Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz an effective strategy in dealing with international pressures?” This was the topic of the finals of the 7th Iran Student Debate Competitions (ISDC), which was held in Tehran on December 9, 2018. The 200-capacity conference hall was almost full. The closing ceremony was scheduled to be held immediately after the final debate. Unlike previous years, where a group of government officials - including at least one of the vice presidents - were present at the closing ceremony, this year, only members of academia were in attendance. One week before the competition, and in response to US threats and sanctions on Iran’s oil and gas, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that “the United States must know that if it blocks Iranian oil, no oil will be exported from the Persian Gulf.”<sup>87</sup> The debate topic was one of two mostly discussed issues in the country - the other one was the possibility of Instagram, the second-most popular social media network in Iran, being filtered which the powerful Principlist block, supported by the judiciary, was demanding.<sup>88</sup>

The debate lasted a little over half an hour. Members of both affirmative and negative teams were all male. But the two finalist teams were interestingly representative

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<sup>87</sup> *Isna*, Azar 13, 1397.

<sup>88</sup> *Tabnak*, Azar 6, 1397.

of the country's two political blocs. The *Jim* team members were students from Imam Sadeq University, a university considered the most important center for educating young Principlists. Members of the other team, who were from the Isfahan University of Technology, named their group *Rah-e Sabz-e Omid* (the Green Path of Hope), a title which explicitly alludes to the political platform of the Green Movement leader, Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has been under house arrest since February 2011. The fact that a student debate team can take part in official national championships with a name attributed to the Green Movement - and its name is repeatedly mentioned in official news - demonstrates the heterogeneous and fluid state of politics in Iran. The Green Path of Hope team has used the same name to participate in debate competitions for the past three years. This is while the highest-ranking Iranian official, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, still refers to the movement as "sedition"<sup>89</sup> and mentioning its leaders in the press is a red line.

The debate begins. The affirmative team argues that Iran, like all countries should, in the event of conflict, put its national interests ahead of international law, and that threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz is one of the available trump cards for advancing national interests. "We need to have different cards to play. Just like having centrifuges helped Iran to bring the US to the negotiating table." But the Negative team argues that Iran's national interests are defined within the current world order, and violation of international law will only increase tensions and accusations that Iran is disrupting world

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<sup>89</sup> See the tagged keyword "Fetneh 88" on *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*.



peace. "Closing the Strait of Hormuz threatens the interests of different countries, including oil exporting countries, as well as our regional friends, like Iraq, as well as the interests of Russia and China. . . . There is even a greater risk that military action may be taken against Iran." In response, the affirmative team calls its rivals idealists who "live in a beautiful but imaginary world," who do not know that "in international affairs a country that displays more might is most influential." The opponents respond, "when we constantly threaten but never follow through it becomes an empty and ineffective threat." Even using this card as a threat is not in Iran's interest: "The United States will benefit most because it will strengthen its presence and arms sales in the region and will prove that the claims it made about Iran were right."

The affirmative team responds, "The United States continues its behavior even if Iran doesn't make any threats. By the way, there is no reason that threats have to be empty. Gamal Abdel Nasser blocked the Suez Canal and got what he wanted." The Negative team, however, has a better counterexample, "In 1987, Iran threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz if Iraq was not declared as the aggressor. Iran closed the strait for eight hours and opened it again, however, it did not get its demand. Does our opposing team have any evidence that shows threat to close the Strait of Hormuz has benefitted Iran?"

Time passes quickly and the two teams must now deliver their summation speeches. The affirmative team offers statistics to show that "oil continues to play an important role in the global economy" and therefore threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz can be effective. "What should we do if we do not threaten? Should we be

passive?" In response, the negative team points out that Iran's economy is heavily reliant on oil, and therefore closing the Strait of Hormuz, will create a serious challenge for the country: "Can our economy do anything without oil? No. Does the United States know this? Yes. So how can America take our threat seriously?"<sup>90</sup>

The three judges deliberate. Each one must fill out an evaluation form in which there is a long list of indicators for rating the performance of the two debate teams. The winner is the negative team, which, went against the official position of Islamic Republic officials, and argued that closing the Strait of Hormuz is not an effective policy. This is one of the wonders of student debate competitions in Iran. In every year of these competitions, we encounter many examples of the team that opposed the official position of the regime being recognized as the winner of the debate.

But the 2018 final had another interesting feature. In public discourse, Principlists have been proponents of Iran threatening to close the Straight Hermes, and Reformists have been opposed to such a threat, demanding that Iran avoid creating any tensions. But in this debate, the place of the opponents and proponents had been switched. The proponents of the statement were the *Rah-e Sabz-e Omid* team, whose members were student supporters of the Reformists, and the opponents were the *Jim* team, whose members consider themselves Principlists. Let's summarize this strange situation: the team whose members are in line with the official position of the Principlists and the political and military officials of the Iranian regime, who believe Iran's threat to close the Strait of

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<sup>90</sup> A full recorded video of this session is available on "Ekhtetamieh-e Haftomin Doreh-e Mosabeghat." *Isna*, Azar 20, 1397. A summary of debate is also available on *Iran Student Debate Competition Official Website (ISDC.ir)*.

Hormuz is an effective policy, argued as the opponents of this policy in this debate, and were recognized as the winners.

Student competitions are not the only place where one can oppose Iran's official policy on the Strait of Hormuz. There is considerable criticism published in the country's print and online media about foreign policy on a regular basis.<sup>91</sup> But the framing of these critiques, as well as the types of arguments used, are far more conservative and implicit than what was outlined in the debate competitions.

### **Commanding "Free Thinking"**

All the officials in charge of launching and managing the student debate competitions attribute the idea to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Khamenei quotes are in the preface to all the documents relating to the competition. These quotations refer to a decree Khamenei issued in February 2003. This is a time when the Reform Movement (1997-2005) in Iran is gradually becoming weary and demoralized and losing hope for success. The passionate debates that began six years prior in the public sphere, especially in the print press, on fundamental issues such as the interpretation of Islam, democratization, freedom of thought and expression, and relations with the West, have now come to a standstill and are pinned. It was nearly 18 months since the start of the second term of Iran's reformist president, Mohammad Khatami. The opponents of reform in Iran – who are now being called Principlists – and who enjoy the support of Iran's Supreme Leader, were blocking the advancement of the Reformist agenda

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<sup>91</sup> For pieces criticizing Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz see for example *Etemed*, Mordad 1, 2 and 17, 1397; *Shargh*, Tir 19 and 20, Mordad 1 and 17, 1397; and *Donyay-e Eghtesad*, Mordad 10, 1397.

which sought to increase political and civil liberties. Students, who made up the most committed part of the social body of the Reform Movement supporters, had become desperate and disappointed and shifted their critique toward the Reformist politicians and President Khatami at the top. Alarmed by these criticisms, Khatami decided to cancel his annual meeting with students in December 2002.

On January 28, 2003, the Supreme Leader met with members of the Iranian Pen Association - a seemingly independent, but under-state-control association, which, although homonymous with the famed PEN International, a worldwide association of writers, its members are only Principlist writers. Two weeks prior to this meeting, the Reformist newspaper, *Hayat-e-No*, was shut down by the judiciary. The Supreme Leader's remarks during the meeting with writers not only surprised the Reformists but also raised eyebrows among many Principlists. He spoke of "the necessity of institutionalizing free thinking" and added, "One of the tasks of the Islamic Republic of Iran is to explicitly support the clash of thoughts in a healthy way." Khamenei simultaneously emphasized that "the use of liberty has rules", and "we do not have the culture of free thinking because of the history of autocracy in the country." He stated that "free thinking" is caught in an extreme dualistic frame, "one group in the name of free-thinking, questions all sacred principles (referring to the Reformists), and another group that is prejudiced and fanatical, does not allow anyone to say something new (referring to Principlists)." He suggested a middle ground: promoting free thinking "through a respectful, logical, fair, courageous and scientific argumentation." In the opinion of Iran's Supreme Leader, this model of free thinking should be practiced in a contained environment, "Thinkers should

be able to express their thoughts in a specialized environment, away from heckling, demagoguery, and unnecessary ruckus. In this environment, their views must be critiqued; they may be completely rejected at one time, or fully accepted at another, or they may be corrected when subjected to critique and take on their proper form."<sup>92</sup>

As was common practice among Reformists they did not pay much attention to the Supreme Leader's remarks and silently passed by it. Principlists on the other hand quickly invested in it. The Reformist newspapers of the time buried Khamenei's remarks among their stories while Principlist newspapers made it their front page headline. Two days later, eleven prominent Principlist figures, including Sadeq Larijani who later became head of the judiciary (2009 - 2019), wrote a public letter to the Supreme Leader in which they voiced support for his remarks and suggested establishing new platforms (*korsis*) in seminars and universities to "encourage the culture of debate," "ensure a healthy environment for dialogue" and, finally, "to institutionalize the freedoms provided in the Islamic Republic and to promote the decorum to use these freedoms . . . through creating institutions for transparent and reasonable dialogue."<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the authors of the letter voiced concerns about the ongoing debate among the public and in the press – which they deemed *ghogha-salar* (clamorocratic) – and highlighted the need for an atmosphere where new doubts could be responded to and seemingly seductive arguments could be confronted. "Refining dialogue and then guaranteeing the survival of a healthy

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<sup>92</sup> "Bayanat dar Didar ba Jami az Aza-ye Anjoman-e Ghalam." *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Bahman 8, 1381.

<sup>93</sup> See the public letter on *KHAMENEI.ir*, Bahman 13, 1381 (ellipses added).

and scientific atmosphere for discussion and debate is a necessity for the Islamic Republic establishment." Principlist media called this letter "the manifest of free-thinking" in the Islamic Republic.

Ayatollah Khamenei responded to the authors of the letter by welcoming their suggestion. He called the atmosphere of debate in society a "melee" (*balbasho*), which has caused "the level of social thought to go down, cheapened, vulgarized and propagandized the level of dialogue, wasted a national opportunity, and frayed the nerves of the nation." In his opinion, in such an atmosphere, "society will not move forward, and disputes will become repetitive, shallow and cheap, and there will be no new ideas or words, rather people will keep repeating themselves." At the same time, the Iranian leader stressed that these concerns should not prevent freedom of speech and the formation of any discussion: "To awaken the collective wisdom, there is no other way than to consult and debate, and without a healthy and free space for critique and without freedom of speech and freedom of expression, civilization and socialization will become impossible. These debates should be supported by our Islamic state and guided by scholars and experts."<sup>94</sup>

In Khamenei's view, the balance point between "chaos" and "dictatorship" must be identified and fixed, the atmosphere of debate in society should not fall into a "swamp-like silence," or become "entangled in a vortex-like swarm." "Yes! One should not fear freedom, flee debate and turn critique and criticism into a contraband item or ceremonial

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<sup>94</sup> "Pasokh Be Nameh . . . ." *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Bahman 16, 1381.

affair. At the same time, instead of debating, one should not engage in polemic, misuse and abuse freedom, and fall into the trap of revilement and evading responsibility.”

The Supreme Leader issued an order “to institutionalize freedom of expression and free dialogue in the Islamic establishment” through setting up “Free Thinking korsis”<sup>95</sup> in universities and seminaries. “New ideas must be filtered in these korsis before being made available to the public through the media. If these issues are addressed in certain environments, there definitely will be less problems.” Khamenei tasked the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution with executing this order. The Council which was initially setup to prevent debates in the chaotic and tumultuous, post-revolutionary academic environment, was now tasked with revitalizing and restructuring the debate environment in universities in line with the regime’s vision.

### **Too Much Discussion for A Revolution**

Just a month after the victory of the revolution, Iranian universities resumed their activity and nearly 180,000 students returned to classrooms in more than 70 cities (Sobhe 276). University campuses were not ready to continue education and scholarly work and instead had become a forum for political and ideological debates between various parties and political groups. The left – especially the *Fadaiyan-e-Khalq* (The Organization of Iranian People’s Fedai Guerrillas), the People’s Mojahedin Organization (MKO) and the Communist Tudeh Party – had a better and more organized penetration in the academic

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<sup>95</sup> *Korsi*, originally an Arabic term, literally means a seat. In the seminary tradition it also means a permanent platform for teaching a certain topic that a cleric has secured. Here, *Korsi* has spatial connotation, referring to a space under certain governing rules and regulations that is conditioned for “free-thinking.”

environment, and of course, had produced more intellectual literature for the consumption of students during the years of struggle. But pro-Ayatollah Khomeini Islamists also acted quickly and in April 1980, they set up the Islamic Association of Students to stay in the competition. The geographical mobility of students had increased exponentially; debaters and speakers from major universities in Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad were traveling to smaller cities to prepare students for winning debates. In the first few months following the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini even encouraged Islamist students to “speak” with their political opponents, particularly leftists “without fighting and quarreling.”<sup>96</sup>

The heated environment for debate in universities was open to the public and even teenagers attended these debates. Morteza Mostafavi – a prominent Islamist writer and filmmaker in the 1980s and 1990s - participated in these debates even though he was only 15 at the time of the revolution:

Directly across from Tehran University gate was where political groups and parties gathered for discussion and debate. Every day around 4 or 5 pm we would go to the university and start arguing with different groups which were positioned in different corners of campus. Around 10 o'clock at night when we went back home, we had to start work. We had to read our own intellectual books in order to stay on top of the argument and we also had to read the books of the other groups to see what they said so we could trap them [in arguments] and slam them. The

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<sup>96</sup> Khomeini's speeches of Khordad 23, 1358; and Shahrivar 29, 1358, available in *Sahifa*, Vol 8 p 139; and Vol 10 p 73.



next day at 4 o'clock, it was the same thing all over again. That was what we did every day."<sup>97</sup>

Many class sessions, even in the STEM-oriented departments, were disrupted by student quarrels and could not function. Professors – who based on the adopted academic tradition from France and Germany did not expect their authority to be challenged in class – were now complaining that students did not respect their authority. In February 1980, university administrative officials held a meeting to discuss the problem of “student-teacher conflicts” and called for government intervention. But the then President Bani Sadr disagreed, “You must solve the problem with the students through open discussions.”<sup>98</sup> On the order of Mahdavi Kani, the then caretaker of the Interior Ministry, police were given permission to enter university campuses to enforce order at debates between political groups.<sup>99</sup>

In many cases, academic debates led to physical skirmish. The supporters of one group would turn over the table of the other group and tear up their pamphlets. Aziz Jafari - commander of the Revolutionary Guards from 2007 to 2019 - who studied architecture at the University of Tehran at the time of the Revolution, proudly recalls in his memoirs that he had become a regular member of groups that disrupted student political discussions, “Sometimes we were able to convince the younger sympathizers and

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<sup>97</sup> *Hayat (Imam Sadq’s Student Basji periodical)*, No. 2, 1385.

<sup>98</sup> *Kayhan*, Esfand 14, 1358.

<sup>99</sup> *Etelaat*, Esfand 14, 1358.

sometimes we had to grab them by the collar.”<sup>100</sup> Another group of pro-Ayatollah Khomeini Islamist students were worried about continued debates in universities. A photo of a group of these students shows them in the street holding a placard: “Brothers and sisters! As discussions in these sensitive situations have become a divisive factor, we, Muslim students, urge you to avoid any form of discussion for the sake of preserving unanimity and solidarity” (see image no. 2).

In April 1980, leftist students interrupted Hashemi Rafsanjani’s remarks at the University of Tabriz. In response, pro-Ayatollah Khomeini students took over the university and threw out leftist professors and supporters. The clashes spread to universities in Tehran and other cities, even in small towns like Arak and Babolsar. The Revolution Council – controlled by Ayatollah Khomeini’s supporters – convened for an emergency session and ordered political groups to close their student union offices within three days. But this ultimatum led to the spread of student protests. More than 600 people were injured in demonstrations in Mashhad and Shiraz universities.<sup>101</sup> Sadeq Zibakalam – now a dissident professor teaching at the Political Science Department of the University of Tehran - complained in an op-ed in *Kayhan* newspaper that the country’s universities had become the venue for “absurd pseudo-intellectual discussions and verbal conflict” and “in such an atmosphere focusing the intellect on scholarship is not only difficult but practically impossible.”<sup>102</sup> His suggestion, backed by many of Ayatollah Khomeini's

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<sup>100</sup> Jafari, Aziz. *Kalk-haye Khali*. Behzad, Hossein (ed.), Sooreh Mehr, 1391 (2011) p 142.

<sup>101</sup> *Sobh-e Azadegan*, Farvardin 28, 1359; and *Ordibehesht* 1, 1359.

<sup>102</sup> *Kayhan*, *Ordibehesht* 13, 1359.

supporters, was to “close universities” in order to control the “chaotic and contaminated political atmosphere.”<sup>103</sup>

In June of the same year, a three-day colloquium was held in the city of Qom entitled “Seminary, University, Cultural Revolution.” The colloquium’s resolution stated “an Islamic revolution must be created in universities and the counter-revolutionary and western-leaning culture must be abolished and fundamental changes must be made to the educational system and educational quality, in teaching methods and course content as well as in screening professors and students.”<sup>104</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini immediately endorsed the statement and ordered the formation of a “Cultural Revolution Council” to “purge” students and professors associated with Eastern and Western ideologies and turn universities into a “healthy environment” for “Islamic higher education” (For a detailed account of Cultural Revolution see Reza Razavi).

In the winter of 1983, when universities were reopened, nearly 60,000 students and 9,000 professors had been purged.<sup>105</sup> There was no more any trace of “endless political debate among students” which Jomhuri-e Eslami, the official newspaper of the ruling Islamists, viewed as the regime’s “main reason” for closing universities.<sup>106</sup> Only Islamic student associations - now called the Office for Consolidation of Unity (OCU) - were allowed to operate in universities. And a new organization was set up under the

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<sup>103</sup> Jafari, Aziz. *Kalk-haye Khali*. Behzad, Hossein (ed.), Sooreh Mehr, 1391 (2011) p 133.

<sup>104</sup> *Pirouzi*, No. 5, Bahman 1359.

<sup>105</sup> *The Louh monthly*, No. 7, 1378.

<sup>106</sup> *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, Dey 27, 1359.

supervision of the Cultural Revolution Council to continue the “purge of academic and cultural environments of materialistic thoughts.”<sup>107</sup> The organization, which was named *Jahad-e Daneshgahi* (Academic Jihad), had a central committee in every university in the country consisting of one professor, one student, and one administrative staff. In every university, the professor member of Academic Jihad was also dean.

### **The Calm and the Clamor**

Iran’s academic environment in the 1980s was free of the confrontation of ideas and ideologies. The only rhetorical competition in this decade was the “Student Public Speaking Competition” held for three rounds in December from 1987 to 1989 by the Academic Jihad. Participants were given a list of sanctioned topics to choose from for their speech; either theological subjects such as the status of women in Islam, and Imam Ali’s worldview, as well as the regime’s favorite political issues such as explaining the reasons for accepting the ceasefire with Iraq, and the West’s cultural war with the Islamic Republic. Among the criteria used by judges to evaluate the quality of public speaking was the use of “Special Effects” which was borrowed from cinematic jargon.<sup>108</sup> As written in the guidelines for judging these competitions, special effects were used to evaluate things such as “passion and vitality of speech, ability to draw the attention and gain the trust of the audience, use of allegory and comparison, eloquence, outward appearance and attire, subtlety of taste and temperament, good opening and closing, measured

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<sup>107</sup> *Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution Official Website (SCCR.ir)*, Azar 19, 1389.

<sup>108</sup> *Daneshgah-e Enghelab*, no. 81, Dey & Azar 1369, pp 16-17

speech, grasp of timing and the naturalness of speech.” An article published after the last round of these competitions in *Daneshgah-e Enqelab* journal complained that “most students imitate the speech and speaking techniques of the country’s high-ranking officials, contestants’ voices were loud and some just shouted.” The writer of the report advises students to “be themselves and discover their own voice in order to have a better impact on the audience.”<sup>109</sup>

The academic calm rapidly changed with the end of the war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. The postwar construction government quickly put the development of university centers on the agenda. Divisions between the two political factions of the regime also extended to universities where Reformist students took control of many Islamic student associations and promoted the ideas of the rising generation of dissident intellectuals (Mashayekhi 293). The case of Abdolkarim Soroush can best illustrate the evolution of the debate environment in universities in the 1990s. As a young revolutionary, Soroush was a supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini and participated in televised debates with leftists on behalf of the Islamists. He was also one of Ayatollah Khomeini’s trusted appointees in the Cultural Revolution Council for the purge and Islamization of universities. In the early 1990s, Soroush underwent a fundamental awakening and became the intellectual leader of the new generation of post-revolutionary dissidents who became known as “religious intellectuals.” His classes and lectures at the University of Tehran were very popular among students, and provoked outrage in the

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<sup>109</sup> *Daneshgah-e Enghelab*, no. 61, Dey 1367, pp 54-59

regime's Principlist wing. In 1995, Soroush was banned from teaching at university. However, part of the student body of the Islamic Student Associations invited him to speak at Tehran's Polytechnic University in defiance of regime pressures. A radical Principlist group named *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, announced that it would not allow Soroush to "promote his poisonous and anti-*velayat-e faqih* views in academic environments" and he would only be allowed to speak at the university "on the condition that he participates in a debate."<sup>110</sup> On the day of the event, radical Principlist supporters gathered outside the debate venue, holding a symbolic noose. Student supporters of Soroush responded with chants and songs in defense of freedom of expression. With the intervention of security forces, the power to the convention hall was cut to disperse students. Soroush was detained by security agents before the event and was kept in custody until midnight. Student organizers of the event were told that the then President Hashemi Rafsanjani was worried that tensions would overshadow a government propaganda campaign for inaugurating a rail project on the country's northeastern border, and that is why the debate had to be postponed.

With the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election, the student movement became the most important and active social base for promoting reform, and along with the new generation of journalists - most of whom were students or recent graduates - they became the most annoying troublemakers for the regime in expressing dissent and disagreement. In 2000, the Iranian regime faced its greatest security

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<sup>110</sup> Afshari, Ali. "Yek Ordibehesht-e Motafavat." *Soroush Official Website (DRSOROUSH.com)*, Ordibehesht 1385

challenge since the 1979 Revolution and tried to suppress student protests in Tehran against the banning of the Reformist *Salam* newspaper. The student population, which after universities were reopened following the Cultural Revolution stood at 100,000, had reached 2,700,000 in 2003.<sup>111</sup>

Although many of these students were not majoring in Social Science and Humanities, they studied the writings of dissident intellectuals and read the newly-translated Western literature. There was a significant increase in speeches, seminars, and academic roundtables, and the activism discourse was dominated by keywords such as freedom, democracy, secularism, open society, human rights, and pluralism. Enjoying the more relaxed regulations during the Reform Era, dissident students created a new form of gathering in campuses across the country which was dubbed *Teriboon-e Azad*. During these “free tribune” events, students were able to voice out their anger and criticism at the regime’s policies and officials. Principlist supporters of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei were unable to manage formal and informal academic debates and provide convincing answers. It was against such a backdrop that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ordered the establishing of Free Thinking Korsis.

### **Debate and Its Paperworks**

It took a year to put the order of the Leader into motion. In February 2004, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution established a Support Committee to devise the launch mechanism, implementation policies, protocols and work plans for three types

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<sup>111</sup> Zarifian, Gholam-Reza. "Daneshgahi ke Nemi-arzad." *Tejarat-e Farda*, no. 238, Shahrivar 25, 1396.

of korsis in universities and seminaries.<sup>112</sup> At the time of its launch, all twenty members of the committee were Principlist figures. As stated in the committee's charter, the goal was to "promote free thinking in Iran" and start "a national movement for critique and ideation." The objectives mentioned in the charter to achieve this goal include "reducing intellectual tensions and spiritual and cultural crises," "reining in *ghogha-salari* and demagoguery," and "making political, social, and cultural dialogues specialized." The charter also pointed out that discussing specialized topics in "public circles" could lead to political abuse, weakening of the people's faith and beliefs, and disturbing public opinion, but in "specialized assemblies" an "official and legal opportunity must be created for presenting ideas, and critiquing and scrutinizing them."<sup>113</sup>

Approximately 16 months after the committee was founded, the by-laws for holding korsis were also drafted and published. In these by-laws, we come across an interesting taxonomy of various korsis. In the first edition of the by-laws, three types of korsis have been categorized: 1. Innovation and theorization Korsis. 2. Critique Korsis. 3. Debate Korsis.<sup>114</sup> In the next edition of the by-laws, Korsi categories changed and new names were added. Eventually the korsi categories became so complicated that the Support Committee established a new agenda in its 87th official meeting to "define and

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<sup>112</sup> *Mehr News*, Dey 10, 1382

<sup>113</sup> "Nezam-Nameh Heyat-e Hemayat az Korsi-ha." Sessions 531, 532 & 534 of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, Dey 9 to Behman 7, 1382.

<sup>114</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Korsi-ha." Dabir-Khaneh Komiteh-ye Hemayati, 1385.



reclassify korsi in order to create a unified system."<sup>115</sup> The 2008 edition of the by-laws become so complex that different tables were drawn to explain the definition and the criteria for holding each korsi.<sup>116</sup> When holding any of these korsi, a panel of judges must be present. But the number and type of judges varied depending on the Korsi's name. There are also a number of categories for how public a korsi can be – in some of these korsi only faculty members have permission to attend, while in some others, all students of a university are allowed to attend. For each of these korsi different red lines and a different range of freedom of expression was defined.<sup>117</sup>

The most significant change that emerged in the 2008 by-laws was the addition of a new type of korsi which aimed to provide a space for individuals where they could "make their unconventional comments in the presence of an elite audience."<sup>118</sup> Unlike other korsi,<sup>119</sup> judges were not required to evaluate the quality of debate and arguments. Rather it was only anticipated that a committee of critics should be present at the meeting to criticize and provide responses to the "views opposing the common (i.e. regime's) position."<sup>120</sup> It was no longer a requirement that participants be faculty members; and anyone from outside the university can be invited to contribute. This new type of platform

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<sup>115</sup> *Support Committee News Letter*, Khordad 1387.

<sup>116</sup> "Nezam-Nameh Heyat." *Dabir-Khaneh Komiteh-ye Hemayati*, 1387.

<sup>117</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Tashkil Korsi-ha dar Daneshgah-ha." *Dabir-Khaneh Komiteh-ye Hemayati*, Aban 1387.

<sup>118</sup> *Maaref monthly*, no. 89, Dey and Bahman 1390.

<sup>119</sup> "Ashnayi ba Heyat-e Hemayat az Korsi Monazareh." *Dabir-Khaneh Komiteh-ye Hemayati*, Shahrivar 1385.

<sup>120</sup> "Sanad-e Jame-e Korsi-haye Azad-Andishi." *Dabir-Khaneh Komiteh-ye Hemayati*, Shahrivar 1388.

was dubbed Free Thinking Korsi referring to the order that Iran's Supreme Leader had originally issued.

Contrary to the common practice in the Islamic Republic, the general rules governing a korsi, and in particular the Free Thinking Korsi, are vague and few in number. The by-laws state that holding any type of Korsi in academic institutions and seminaries requires obtaining a permit from a local oversight committee. All university- and seminary-affiliated associations, whether professional, scientific or technical, can apply for permits. Also, any faculty member can do so individually.<sup>121</sup> However, students must be at least a group of three to meet the requirement for requesting a permit. Students are required to state the names of affirmative and negative team members as well as the moderator of the debate in their application form. General and ambiguous criteria have been set for assessing the qualifications of debate participants such as "being well-versed in the topic" and "ability to critique" --in explaining this final condition, it is stated that the organizers must carefully select the figures participating in the debate so that their rhetoric or the content of their speech "is not beneath the dignity of the university." In the end it is the local oversight committee that decides whether or not to issue a permit. If the request is accepted, participants in the debate must promise to honor the following five conditions: "Observe the academic decorum, respect the freedom of speech, respect for

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<sup>121</sup> "Dastoor-ol-Amal Ejrayi Korsi-haye Azad-Andishi." Moavenat-e Daneshjooyi, Sharivar 6, 1391.

the character and dignity of individuals, avoid making politicized and partisan assertions, and avoid superficiality and populism."<sup>122</sup>

### **Freedom After Thinking Aloud**

The first Free Thinking Korsi was held in March 2010 at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Tehran. Less than a year had passed since the Green Movement protests started over voter fraud in the 2009 presidential election – which led to the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – and tensions were running high. During the protests, more than 6,000<sup>123</sup> people had been arrested across the country, and dozens were killed. The last call to street protests by the Green Movement in February 2010, coincided with the Revolution anniversary celebrations and led to increased repression and more restrictions on freedom of expression. Under such circumstances, two figures famous for having controversial rhetoric faced each other to hold the first Free Thinking Korsi debate: Sadeq Zibakalam and Hassan Abbasi. Nearly a thousand people were present in this session. The clamor sometimes made it difficult to hear the debaters and several times during the debate the negative and affirmative supporters exchanged heated words. The topic of the debate was about the very possibility of holding free thinking korsis in the Islamic Republic. Zibakalam called the Iranian regime's support for free thinking hypocritical and contrary to its actions: "You have fired university professors for having different opinions." Hassan Abbasi, rejected this argument and said Zibakalam

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<sup>122</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Tashkil Korsi-ha dar Daneshgah-ha, Updated Edition" Dabir-Khaneh Komiteh-ye Hemayati, 1389.

<sup>123</sup> "Leaked Iranian Justice File." *Reporters Without Borders (RSF)*, February 7, 2019.

himself freely teaches and lectures in university, "Tell me where you were punished because of your thoughts?"<sup>124</sup>

Two months after this debate, Ahmadinejad's Ministry of Science drafted a directive for Free Thinking Korsis. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, which claimed that any policy on the korsis must go through it, initially opposed the directive. Finally, it was agreed that the directive would be enforced for one year subject to later review after all stakeholders reached an agreement. The directive allowed students to participate as debaters in the korsis, and "express opinions, exchange ideas and discuss a particular topic in a free, structured, logical and scholarly manner."<sup>125</sup> Thus, it was no longer required of students to be mere observers of debates among professors or non-academic figures, and they themselves could now take part in the debate. The directive contained an addendum in which permissible issues for debate were listed, issues such as male female relations, enforcing hijab (the veil), relations with the US, and Iran's support for Palestine and Lebanon. Many of the other widely-discussed topics of the day, especially domestic politics, were left off this list. However, debate participants also had limitations, such as they were not allowed to mention illegal parties and groups (which was intended for the Islamic Iran Participation Front, the Reformist political party affiliated with the former President Khatami which was outlawed in the aftermath of the 2009

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<sup>124</sup> *Isna*, Farvardin 22, 1389

<sup>125</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Korsi-haye Azad-Andishi." Moavenat-e Daneshjooyi, Ministry of Science, Bahman 8, 1389.

protests), additionally debaters were required to show “support” for the Islamic Republic regime and even “the current administration in office.”<sup>126</sup>

Debate participants had to sign a commitment letter in which they agreed to “express their opinions in a well-argued manner, be completely respectful of their rival, not talk outside that topic, not insult absent or present individuals, not offend the regime and regime officials, have patience and the capacity to accept criticism, avoid winning the debate by any means, respect the order of the session and not interrupt their rival,” and ultimately, “believe that their rival is their Muslim brother or sister and not their enemy” (see image no. 6 for a copy of commitment letter). Although the majority of contributors were men, women were also equally permitted to apply for and participate in these korsis. There was no gender segregation policy enforced. Females and males were not only allowed to debate with one another, but also to form mixed teams and collaborate together.

The directive also set specific conditions for selecting a moderator for the Free Thinking Korsis; such as the moderator must have “adherence to the Islamic Republic,” hold at least a master’s degree, and not be a member of any political group. A successful example of Free Thinking Korsi was introduced in the appendix of the directive. Surprisingly, the example was the “Your Turn” show on BBC Persian, a network TV broadcast from London which is banned by the regime. The directive stated “we know there are malicious objectives behind BBC Persian programs,” however, this example is

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<sup>126</sup> See “Pishnahad-e Anavin va Mozooat-e Korsi-ha.” Moavenat-e Daneshjooyi, Ministry of Science, 1389.

“useful for learning” and demonstrates “how by choosing a capable mediator, well-considered topics, an appropriate method, and precise planning one can execute a debate in Free Thinking Korsi.”<sup>127</sup>

The official statistics released on different types of korsis held in different years are highly inflated and unreliable. For example, it is claimed that in 2017 more than 700 korsis were held in universities where nearly 1,000 faculty members (from the total of 70,000 across the country) participated.<sup>128</sup> This same statistical example shows the disproportion between the participation of debaters and the number of korsis. According to a member of the Support Committee, the tallying of korsis is “done very generously and even a friendly meeting between two professors is included in the statistics.”<sup>129</sup>

Alongside the quantitative statistics presented to illustrate the success of the ideas of korsis, there are a considerable number of minutes of meetings, interviews and assessment reports that actually show the lack of success and underwhelming reception of this project by the academic community. A pathology discourse (*asib-shenasi*) discussing the shortcoming of korsis can easily be traced in dozens of 61 issues of the support committee’s internal newsletter (which was originally published under the name *Idea*, but later it changed to *Nazar* as *Idea* was deemed a non-Persian word). Over the past few years, the Support Committee has repeatedly tried to find ways to encourage the academic community’s participation in korsis with different incentives and rewards. One of these

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<sup>127</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Korsi-haye Azad-Andishi." Moavenat-e Daneshjooyi, Ministry of Science, Bahman 8, 1389.

<sup>128</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 11, 1396

<sup>129</sup> *Research Institute of Islamic Culture and Thought Newsletter*. Bahman, 11 1396

incentives included earmarking (and increasing) the amount paid as honorarium.<sup>130</sup> A rating system was also introduced which would help increase the academic rank of professors.<sup>131</sup>

In 2013, the Support Committee commissioned a field study to identify the “obstacles and harms of free thinking” in the country’s universities. The results of this research were presented one year later and the most important challenges for holding korsis were ranked as follows: 1) The conservatism and fear of university officials; 2) The lack of a clear explanation about the essence and nature of Free Thinking Korsis for students; 3) The lack of a culture and an etiquette of criticism and the lack of capacity to accept criticism in debate 4) The lack of a correct understanding of the need for promoting free thinking among university officials (see Mahjoub et al. 139-144).

In 2014, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution added several resolutions to the by-laws for korsis. One of these resolutions would allow “all material from korsis to be reflected in newspapers and public media.”<sup>132</sup> Contrary to the initial opinion of the leader of the Islamic Republic, who wanted to have debates in a limited environment with a limited audience, now a wider public could be exposed to these debates.

The other resolution gave the local committee of each university the power to decide whether or not to issue korsi permits, and emphasized, “No individual or legal entity outside academia is allowed to enforce their opinion or interfere in the process of

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<sup>130</sup> See for example "Bakhsh-Nameh Tashkil-e Korsi-ha.", Mordad 1388, and Ordibehesht 1397.

<sup>131</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Jadid Ertegha-ye Martabeh Azay-e Heyat-e Elmi." Ministry of Science, 1395.

<sup>132</sup> *Tasnim*, Bahman 1, 1393.

holding or canceling korsis."<sup>133</sup> The context which resulted in the issuance of this resolution can be found in the statements made and interviews given by members of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution who were complaining about the meddling of security agencies – such as the Intelligence Ministry, the Revolutionary Guards, and Judiciary – to cancel korsi debates in different universities.

Such a dispute between two regime entities, both of which are controlled by Principlists may appear strange to an ordinary observer of Iranian politics. The members of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, who were trusted precisely for being Principlists to create a contained and controlled space for debate in the country's universities are now engaged in fights and bargaining with other Principlist agencies and figures who are worried about the security implications of these debates. Meddling by national security agencies has even provoked complaints from the Supreme Leader's direct representatives in universities.<sup>134</sup>

But the most important concern for the officials- and the biggest challenge they perceive – is the lack of interest among students and professors to participate in the korsis for fear of repercussions.

In a rare interview, Ali Akbar Rashad, head of the Korsis' Oversight Committee, said the reason for the failure to implement the idea of korsis was the "scientific poverty" of the Principlist academics: "We don't have enough theorists, we have little valuable and

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<sup>133</sup> *Isna*, Bahman 7, 1393.

<sup>134</sup> See for example "Hameh ra be Cheshm-e Zed-e Enghelab Nabinim." *Iqna*, Ordibehesht 25, 1397; and "Azadi baad az Bayan ra Tamin Mikonim." *Ilna*, Khordad 25, 1398.



presentable scientific critique, we do not know the logic and method of scientific critique . . . . If scientific poverty didn't exist, intellectual exuberance and the exchange of ideas would spontaneously take place." But Rashad, who is a prominent Principlist cleric, did not stop there, and added that the main reason for scientific poverty is "self-censorship and the lack of courage among Iranian intellectuals and academics:" "In Iran there is an illusion of lack of freedom . . . therefore people refrain from expressing their views." To show that the notion of lack of freedom is just an illusion, Rashad continues,

We have many instances where opinions seriously opposed to the regime, the constitution, religion, and policies of the regime, have been propounded and no one stopped them. One example is the frequent anti-religious articles and opinions that even question the existence of god but no one has been arrested for [writing] such an article or [expressing] such an opinion. Now, if someone has an ideological opinion and at the same time is engaged in political activity, they might act against [national] security and be arrested for this reason, but they are not arrested because they proposed an ideological theory in the field of scholastic theology or philosophy.<sup>135</sup>

This kind of compartmentalization between speech and act has a long history in the Islamic Republic and it proved doomed from the beginning. The founders of the regime claimed to agree with the "expression of opinion" from the start, but they always restricted it to speech that does not result in "conspiratorial" action.<sup>136</sup> Morteza Motahari,

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<sup>135</sup> "Korsi-haye Azad-Andishi: Kamyabi-ha, Nakami-ha va Chalesh-ha." Dabir-Khaneh Komiteh-ye Hemayati, Farvardin 1388 (ellipses added).

<sup>136</sup> Khomeini's speech of Ordibehesht 4, 1357, available in *Sahaiifa*, Vol 4 p 371.

the most influential post-revolution Islamic Republic ideologue, explained this contradictory setting:

In the Islamic nezam, everyone must be free to express the outcome of their thoughts. Proponents of Islam must not think that the way to defend Islamic beliefs is by preventing others from expressing their opinions. Rather, it (Islamic beliefs) must be defended by the force of science and by giving freedom to dissenting ideas and with an explicit attitude and scientific approach. But one should not confuse freedom of thought and expression with freedom of deception and conspiracy. Perverse or misleading content should not be propagated under the guise of Islam (10-12).

This articulation once again shows the regime's paradoxical conception of debate. On the one hand, it encourages composed and reasonable argumentation with dissenter, and on the other hand it reserves the right to prevent the expression of dissenting opinion which it perceives may induce action. Opinions are allowed to be expressed in a contained and isolated environment but uttering them in public carries the risk of contamination: speech triggers persuasion and persuasion leads to action and action leads to subversion and therefore, for the regime, it is not merely considered speech but a speech act.

Such a perception of dissenting speech as a subversive action is directly connected to the concept *shobhe* which is regularly summoned in the regime's official discourse. The literal definition of *shobhe* is something that is questionable or doubtful. In the traditional discourse of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), *shobhe* is the equivalent of the French word *problématique* and refers to something that an educated jurist does not know its exact religious ruling (Mohaghegh Damad 53). But in *kalam* literature *shobhe* implies a suitably

persuasive and compelling argument used by the opposition to cast doubt on Shia ideological foundations. This connotation of *shobhe* goes back to the triconsonantal root of the word, which signifies similarity – it is “an argument that by creating a resemblance with truth and false, or by melding right with wrong, makes it difficult to distinguish what is truth and thus challenges religious canons” (Alizadeh Mousavi 70). The regime’s clerical authorities frequently complain that they are not able to respond quickly and conclusively to all of the *shobhes* because of their growing number and variety in society.<sup>137</sup> For them *shobhe* carries a formidable persuasive power and thus it can be used by those opposing the Islamic *nezam* for sowing the seeds of "sedition and for misleading" public opinion (Rayshahri 524). “Hence it must be confronted in a professional and measured manner” (Alizadeh Mousavi 65). According to the cleric guardians of the Islamic Republic, ordinary people “do not have the power to scrutinize *shobhes*” and therefore the spread of *shobhes* in public must be prevented before it turns into “a viral virus” (Javadi Amoli 9). Open space is not the place for discussing and presenting *shobhes*, rather its proper place is in a controlled room – such as a Free Thinking Korsi – where a response could be given immediately to resolve the *shobhe*.

In a February 2013 conference that was held to review the performance of korsis, Khosrow Panah, head of the Support Committee, pointed to one of Iran’s most famous political jokes in the past two decades. “They jest that there is freedom of speech in Iran

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<sup>137</sup> See Khamenei’s statements on *shobhe* in “Bayanat-e Rahbari dar Zamineh Pasokh-gooyi be Shobahat.” *Rasekhoon*, Mordad 21, 1391. Also see Supreme Leader’s Representative at Universities complaining that “responding to social and political *shobhes* is the biggest challenge” for the regime, *Isna*, Aban 12, 1395.

but freedom doesn't necessarily exist after speech... but participants in the Free Thinking Korsis should rest assured that they will also have freedom after speech."<sup>138</sup>

The Principlists knew from the beginning that Free Thinking Korsis would not be welcomed unless the security of participants after debates was guaranteed. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution even approved a resolution for establishing the "National House of Free Discussion" in 2006.<sup>139</sup> The house was supposed to be the ultimate safe space to say anything that should not be said in the Islamic Republic, "even making statements that question the existence of God or putting forth theories for bringing down the regime."<sup>140</sup> Such a house, however, never came to reality, it only became an annual excuse for the press to ridicule the decision-making system in Iran by reminding the number of years passed without executing the resolution.<sup>141</sup> In 2012, Ahmadinejad's last year as president, the fancier name "Free Thought Club"<sup>142</sup> was chosen for the house, and it was mandated that a space be dedicated in every academic institution for "completely free dialogue" in which expressing any opinion would be "free of judicial

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<sup>138</sup> *Nameh Shora*, no. 84 & 85, Mordad & Shahrivar 1394.

<sup>139</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Bargozari Jalasat-e Khaneh Melli-e Goft-o-goo Azad." The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, *Merh* 1, 1385.

<sup>140</sup> Rashad, Ali Akbar "Az Khaneh Melli-e Goft-o-goo Azad Che Midanid?" *Howzeh Tehran*, Farvardin 23, 1388.

<sup>141</sup> *Fars News*, Esfand 8, 1388.

<sup>142</sup> *Mehr News*, Tir 25, 1390.

prosecution."<sup>143</sup> These clubs are still not launched as of the end of 2019 due to opposition from the judiciary.<sup>144</sup>

In March 2013, a new article was added to the by-laws of Free Thinking Korsis, according to which statements made by professors and students in these korsis cannot become the basis for judicial action, thus attempting to allow participants in these debates immunity.<sup>145</sup> However, the judiciary, whose chief at the time, Sadeq Larijani, was one of the authors of letter to the Supreme Leader proposing the establishment of korsis - has so far refused to ratify this article. The judiciary has cloaked its objection under the excuse of protecting individual rights, that if there is an accusation or insult made during a debate, persons must have the right to sue for libel.<sup>146</sup>

Challenges to ensure the safety of participants in Free Thinking Korsis highlights one of the lesser-known political nuances in Iran: a group of Principlists who have gained the actual experience of implementing the initiative, are in favor of offering immunity in light of their concerns over the failures of korsis, and another group of Principlists which initially proposed the idea opposes it.

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<sup>143</sup> *Student News Network (SNN)*, Mehr 1 , 1394.

<sup>144</sup> In December 2019, a new proposal was drafted for establishing "National Center for Dialogue, Debate and Free Thinking." *Isna*, Azar 26, 1398.

<sup>145</sup> *Mehr News*, Esfand 3, 1393.

<sup>146</sup> *Hamshahri*, Bahman 14, 1394.

The judiciary's resistance has even drawn criticism from representatives of the Supreme Leader in universities. For example, Hamid Vahedizadeh, the Supreme Leader's Representative at Ardabil University, said in an interview:

Anyone who participates in a Free Thinking Korsi and argues ideas contrary to religion or the [Islamic Republic] regime, should not be met with judicial and [national] security measures. If the korsi is held in an academic and expert circle and the discussions are specialized and fair, even if the most sensitive issues are debated, it is religiously permissible. Even Imam Sadiq engaged in debate with the materialists of his time, and they denied [the existence of] God and Imam Sadeq would prove the existence of God. Unless there is a sense of security in these sessions, one cannot have hope in the development of such Korsis.<sup>147</sup>

Referencing the "remarks of his excellency the Supreme Leader that one must not fear [giving people] freedom," deputy science minister Zia Hashemi added, "There are those who think that by discussing certain things, the Islamic establishment will be threatened even though [our] highest ranking political official advises [us] to let people be free."<sup>148</sup> Members of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and even the Leader's appointed representatives at universities have repeatedly tried to assure participants in Free Thinking Korsis that they should not be concerned about their safety and enjoy complete freedom of speech, despite the lack of formal endorsement by the judiciary.<sup>149</sup> But such promises were unable to encourage professors and students to

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<sup>147</sup> "Nahad-haye Gheir Elmi Dekhalat Nakonnad." *Iqna*, Bahman 17, 1396.

<sup>148</sup> *Isna*, Dey 17, 1396.

<sup>149</sup> See *Mehr News*, Tir 21, 1394; *Irna Dey* 9, 1394; and *Ilina Khordad* 25, 1398.

embrace this initiative. In a 2018 interview, Khosrowpanah, the chairman of the Support Committee, explicitly acknowledged the failure of the plan, saying that the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution “in practice does not have the power to successfully implement” Supreme Leader’s 2003 directive.<sup>150</sup>

### **The Birth of Student Debate Competitions**

Free Thinking Korsis became one of the ambitious and yet malformed experiments of the Islamic Republic in creating sanctioned discursive forums. In the nearly 17 years that have passed since the idea was put forward by Iran’s Supreme Leader, the staff at the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution has conducted over 100 meeting sessions,<sup>151</sup> discussing defining and redefining its methods of implementation while the bureaucratic laws, regulations and protocols have been subjected to repeated changes. Hundreds of promotional conferences and seminars have been held at national, regional and local levels to introduce and advertise the Initiative, but there is still no comprehensive system for setting up and running these korsis, and it has not been welcomed in academic circles.

Ironically, the successful experience of expanding the environment of debate in Iranian universities came from a parallel initiative called Iran’s Student Debate Competition (ISDC), which also cites the famous January 2003 order by the Supreme Leader for its justification. But the idea of launching ISDC tournaments goes back to October 2009, when the regime was at the height of a legitimacy crisis and dealing with

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<sup>150</sup> *Mashregh News*, Farvardin 14, 1397.

<sup>151</sup> Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution Official Website (SCCR.ir), Bahman 16, 1398.

ongoing Green Movement protests both in streets and at universities (see Labi). In response to these conditions, the level of freedom of expression in the country declined. Many students were either arrested by security forces or expelled from the universities. It is estimated that at least one third of the total number of detainees arrested during the Green Movement protests were students.<sup>152</sup> Many of the regime's elites believed that the presidential debates were one of the reasons behind the unrest (see Chapter 4), which further polarized society and enraged the supporter bases of the rival Principlist and Reformist camps. Under such circumstances, officials at the Academic Jihad - an organization under the Ministry of Science and thus controlled by the Ahmadinejad administration - began planning the launch of debate competitions. Academic Jihad was one of the institutions set up during the Cultural Revolution to restructure the management of universities. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution is directly controlled by the Supreme Leader, but Academic Jihad while in close coordination and collaboration with this council falls under the purview of the president and thus has more executive power in the country's decision-making chart. The Ahmadinejad administration, whose polemic and demagogic style in presidential debates had drawn criticism from both public and the ruling elite, now claimed it wanted to teach students to "practice debate and disagreement in a peaceful and logic-based environment."<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Nesvaderani, Tara. "Iran Students Keep Opposition Alive." *Politico*, June 11, 2010.

<sup>153</sup> "Ketab-e Gozaresh-e Mosabeghat-e Melli-e Monazareh Danshjooyi." Dabir-Khaneh Mosabeghat, 1392.



The student debate competitions are one of the few phenomena in the history of the Islamic Republic which have had the support of all political factions. Although with every administration alteration, Iran sees the abandonment or dismantling of many of the previous administration's plans and initiatives, the government of Hassan Rouhani, who won the election in 2013, continues to hold these competitions. The government even succeeded in gaining the endorsement of the members of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution. Figures close to Iran's leader – such as Hamid Parsania and Abdol Hossein Khosrowpanah – have called the competitions “an upgraded version of the Free-Thinking kosis proposed by the leader” and “an ideal model for Islamic dialogue.”<sup>154</sup>

The first round of the competitions was held as a pilot project in 2012 – the last year of Ahmadinejad's presidency – without publicity and with only 16 student teams from the capital's universities participating. The competition was designed based on the intercollegiate American tournaments, especially the United States Universities Debating Championship and National Debate Tournament.<sup>155</sup> As this method of debate was not practiced in Iran, students were required to participate in training workshops while participating in the competition. Only students from Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines were allowed to participate in the first two years of the competitions but later it

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<sup>154</sup> See *Iran Student Debate Competitions official Website (ISDC.ir)*, Azar 28, 1394; and *Iqna*, Dey 5, 1394.

<sup>155</sup> An entry on the *ISDC* website on "The History of Debate in the World" only discusses this history in the United States as well as the old tradition of debate in Iran.

was opened to all majors. By the fourth year, student teams from all 31 provinces were able to participate in the tournaments.<sup>156</sup>

As the popularity of these competitions grew among students, changes were made to the way they were held. Competitions were now held in three stages. In the first stage, student teams in each province compete against one another. In the second stage, teams are selected from four geographical regions of the country and ultimately the 12 finalist teams get to go to the capital to participate in the final stage of the competition.<sup>157</sup> Both academic and political figures attend the closing ceremony. Since the fifth round of the competition, when a championship platform was also constructed at the venue, a trophy cup has been awarded.<sup>158</sup> In order to show that debate in Iran is a longstanding tradition, the championship trophy was named after Khaje Nasir-al-din Tusi, a 13th century Shia philosopher who wrote one of the first guides to debate in simple Persian entitled *Asas-al-Eqtebas* (Foundation of Invention). Since the sixth round, the final matches have been broadcast live on IRIB Channel 4. In the seventh round a separate competition was held in English to prepare students for international competitions. In 2019, when the eighth round of the competition was held, 625 four-person student teams (57% male and 43% female and 77% undergraduates in total) from all 31 provinces participated (see figure 5).

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<sup>156</sup> See Annual Reports of Competitions ("Ketab-e Gozaresh-e Mosabeghat.") 2012; 2013; 2014; and 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Motamedi, Bashir, et al. *Rahnamay-e Karbordi-e ISDC*. Jahad-e Daneshgahi. 1394

<sup>158</sup> *Tasnim*, Azar 23, 1394.

Academic officials in Iran are now saying that their goal is to make Iran “one of the top 10 ranking countries” in student debate competitions in the world.<sup>159</sup>

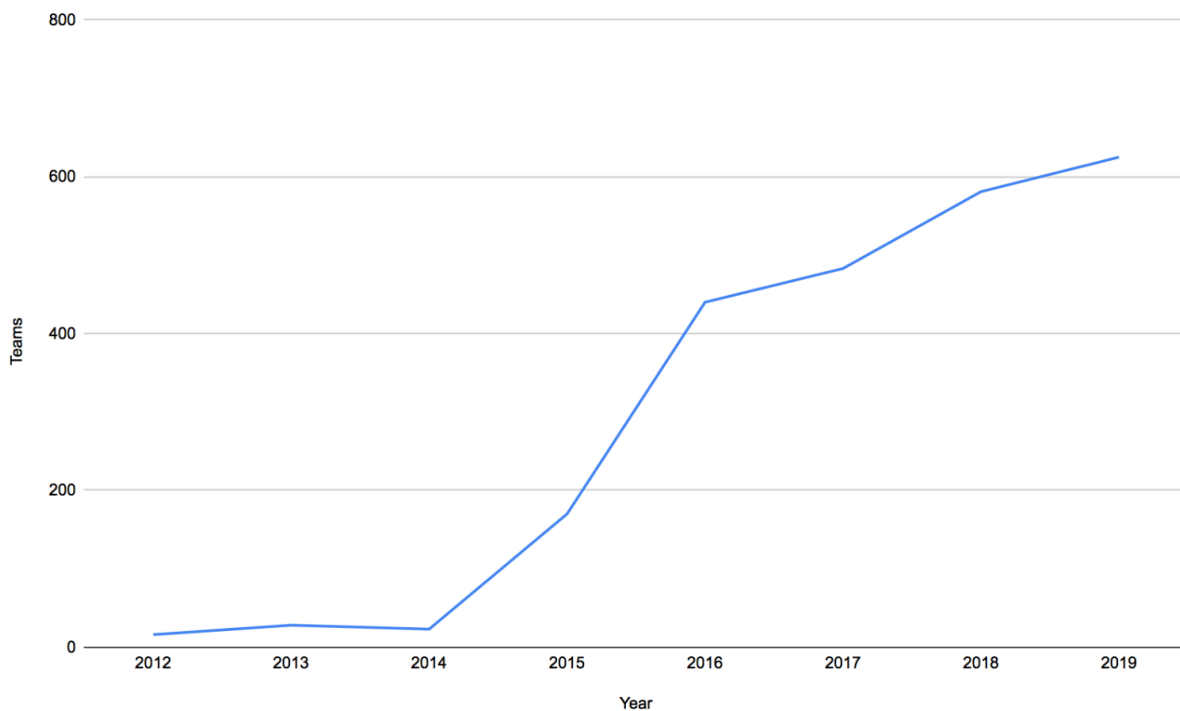


Figure 5: Total number of four-person teams participated in the annual Iran Student Debate Competitions 2012 – 2019 (collected and counted by the author from ISCD Annual Reports.)

In the first round of ISDC during the Ahmadinejad era, less sensitive political and religious resolutions were designed for the competitions. Before the competition a list of topics was compiled by a panel of university professors and then had to be approved by officials from the Ministry of Science, Supreme Leader Representative Office at Universities, and the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. ISDC organizers faced a dilemma in designing debate resolutions, “On the one hand they want the hot issues of the day to be public and want enough freedom of expression to debate them, and on the

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<sup>159</sup> *Isna*, Esfand 22, 1395.

other they do not want debating a particular issue to become troublesome.”<sup>160</sup> Some conservative Principlist clerics, such as Dorri-Najafabadi, have warned that “the redlines of the establishment and fundamental beliefs” should not be among the debate resolutions.<sup>161</sup> In recent rounds, however, resolutions have been chosen for debate, many of which are the regime’s policy redlines, for which there is lesser space to challenge in public. Unfortunately, there has been no complete record of match results based on position in the past eight years, but through the review of annual reports, available video footage from the debates, as well as abstracts in academic newsletters, a significant portion, if not the majority, of the debates can be found in which the team that has opposed the regime’s official ideology and policy has won. These resolutions are highly varied: the government has no right to enforce the veil, sex education should start from childhood, executions should not be held in public, the Arab Spring has not been influenced by Islamic Republic discourse, attacking the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was wrong, population growth causes environmental disruption, and premarital relationships do not jeopardize the fabric of the family.

During the seventh and eighth rounds, some of the statements that were related to Iran’s Supreme Leader’s directives on macro policies (such as the need for jihadi management and a resistance economy) were put to debate. The resolution of the 8th round’s finals, which was held in December 2019, was a reference to remarks made by

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<sup>160</sup> *Academic Jihad Official Website (ISOJD.ir)*, Azar 25, 1398.

<sup>161</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 20, 1395.

the Supreme Leader one month earlier - in November - about countering US sanctions, "The solution to the country's economic problems is to promote quality domestic production."<sup>162</sup> The team arguing against this statement was announced the winner.<sup>163</sup>

Unlike the Free Thinking Korsis' bylaws that keep debaters from talking about the regime's redline issues, the bylaws of the Student Debate Competitions have no restrictions.

Contestants are only required to adhere to decency and ethics and to "strictly avoid any browbeating, insults, mockery, sophistry, and negative emotions."<sup>164</sup> Since the third round of competitions, a grading rubric has been created to evaluate debate teams and each juror completes them individually. At least one of the three jury members that announces the winner of each competition is selected from the professors affiliated with Principlists (the government tries to show positive bias to include Principlist jurors so that the competitions face less opposition) and many of these same jurors have declared teams that defend views in opposition to their political and ideological orientation as winners.

### **Winning the Debate Vs. Proving Convictions**

Classic Muslim debaters were familiar with the rhetorical technique of *utramque partem*, arguing on both sides of a question. Ibn al-Rawandi (c. AD 827 – 911) was known to be a master of this technique, while his critics were "afraid of the temptation to use the skill for both the affirmation and negation of anything" which could dangerously loosen

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<sup>162</sup> *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Aban 28, 1398.

<sup>163</sup> *Isna*, Dey 2, 1398.

<sup>164</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Bargozari-e Mosabeghat Monazereh Daneshjooyi, 8th Round" 1398.

the faith (Stroumsa 79). A similar controversy arose during the state debate competitions. In the first round of ISDC, the affirmative and negative teams were chosen by lot and at random, and the personal convictions of team members were likely to be different than their position in the debate. The ISDC bylaws also stated that “debaters must be able to speak in both negative and affirmative positions.”<sup>165</sup> Yet, some of the Principlist students in the competition were not happy about having to argue against their convictions. Their criticism prompted Mehdi Qoreyshi, the deputy head of the Supreme Leader’s Representative Office for Universities, to intervene which resulted in adding a new article to the bylaws that stated “debaters’ defense of a position must be genuine in competitions.”<sup>166</sup> After the draw, the two rival teams were given a two-day opportunity to reach an agreement on which position they would like to adopt in the debate, affirmative or negative, “based on their real opinions and beliefs.”<sup>167</sup> Competition officials proudly cited this principle as one of the differences that reflects “the moral superiority of debates in Iran,” unlike the US and other Western countries.<sup>168</sup> In practice, however, upholding this principle made it difficult to arrange the competition, and therefore from the sixth round, officials quietly reverted to assigning the teams’ positions at random. In some cases, the two rival teams are Principlists and have to debate a resolution they both support. For example, in 2016 the two teams *Tadbir* and *Safirān Taqrīb*, both from the

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<sup>165</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Bargozari-e Mosabeghat Monazereh Daneshjooyi, 1st Round." 1391.

<sup>166</sup> "Ayin-Nameh Bargozari-e Mosabeghat Monazereh Daneshjooyi. 4th Round" 1394.

<sup>167</sup> ISDC Official Website, Mehr 26, 1396.

<sup>168</sup> *Iqna*, Ordibehesht 16, 1395; also *Iqna Dey* 1, 1394.

University of *Taghrib-e Mazaheb*, debated the resolution that “the presence of clerics in politics alienates them from the people” and the affirmative team was declared the winner.<sup>169</sup> In Qazvin Province’s 2017 competition, two Principlist teams *Otagh-e Aseman* and *Mersad* debated the resolution “using the death to [America] slogan undermines Iran’s diplomacy position in the international arena” and once again the affirmative team won.<sup>170</sup>

Even in the United States, the practice of debating both sides was developed out of practical reason and for allowing more student teams to participate in the tournaments. Conservatives in the United States raised similar concerns about the ethics of this form of debate, especially during the Cold War “that the practice would indoctrinate America’s youth, while giving aid and comfort to the enemy” (English et al.). Murphy in a famous article in 1957 stated that “a public statement is a public commitment” (2). Other scholars responded that debating both sides is, in fact, “the highest ethical act” (Day 7; also see Cripe). In 2005, Greene and Hicks argued that such a practice creates a gap between debaters’ “embodied speech act” and their “speech convictions,” in order “to inculcate students with liberal norms of democratic decision making” (120). They also claimed that debating both sides has become a means for advancing the imperialistic hegemony of the United States around the globe. Their argument, more than anything, proves how any rhetorical technology could be appropriated by agents in such a way and under certain

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<sup>169</sup> *Iqna*, Esfand 8, 1395

<sup>170</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 23, 1395

conditions that would ironically betray its initially constructed *raison d'être* –In this case debating both sides serves as an alibi for justifying intervention in publics which do not separate conviction from speech. But even Greene and Hicks admit that “In a world increasingly dominated by fundamentalism (religious and otherwise) the development of a respect for pluralism, tolerance and free speech remains political valuable” (121).

Can a classic rhetorical tradition like *utramque partem* or its modern manifestation in randomly assigning the debate sides – strengthen tolerance? *Utramque partem* should, in a manner, accompany *audi alteram partem* which connotes a technique that Ratcliffe presents as “rhetorical listening:” “a stance of openness” (17) that allows an interlocutor to “cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication” (25). At the finals of the ISDC tournament, the debate resolution was, “The most important obstacle to the development of free thinking in universities is the feeling of lack of freedom of speech,” and a Reformist team that had randomly been assigned to the Negative side won.<sup>171</sup> The Affirmative team - *Mobin*, which consisted of members of the Student *Basij* from the *Farhangian* University of Alborz Province- had to cite statistics about the security crackdowns on students in their speech. Defending a position that was not the personal conviction of the debaters was an interesting experience for the Student *Basij* members. One member of the team said, “Imagine you don’t believe in an issue, but you have to go and read about it and defend it. As we researched the subject, we realized that the people who disagree with us on that issue have specific and even strong and

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<sup>171</sup> *Isna*, Azar 18, 1397



logical arguments. This means that our difference of opinion with them is not because opposition groups are irrational." Another team member added, "If people who strongly agree or disagree with an issue go and read the opposition's views, take off their spectacles of self-absorption and [stop] looking at the world from the window of their own mind, it is only then that things can get better in society."<sup>172</sup>

This is precisely what regime officials - Reformist or Principlist - state as their purpose in supporting the continuation of student debate competitions: "fostering a new generation"<sup>173</sup> of political and social leaders and elites who possess "creative and critical thinking" abilities<sup>174</sup>, "an inquisitive spirit " and "courage to express their opinion" while being able to "abandon self-righteousness,"<sup>175</sup> "tolerate opposing views"<sup>176</sup> and adhere to "rational dialogue"<sup>177</sup> that is "away from being ruled by emotions and dogmas, and fanaticism."<sup>178</sup> Ultimately debate is considered as "the way to create a developed society," as Molaverdi, an aide to Iran president declares.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> "Donya-ye Ghalb va Baad az Monazereh." *Iqna*, Dey 8, 1397.

<sup>173</sup> *Iqna*, Ordibehesht 21, 1396

<sup>174</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 18, 1391

<sup>175</sup> *ISDC*, Azar 17, 1397.

<sup>176</sup> *Isna*, Azar 29, 1394

<sup>177</sup> *Isna*, Dey 17, 1395

<sup>178</sup> *Isna*, Dey 2, 1398

<sup>179</sup> *Isna*, Esfand 9, 1396.

The rationales that the Islamic Republic officials put forth for training debate strongly correspond to the existing literature on intercollegiate debate, as a civic education, especially in the United States. Participating in debate competitions, helps students learn engaging even “a hostile audience with civility and respect” (Mabrey 133). Debate, as Hogan and Kurr pertinently summarize,

teaches students not only to be better speakers and critical listeners, but also more informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. By studying and participating in debate, students develop a keen appreciation for solid research, well-reasoned arguments, and effective delivery. Student debaters develop a better understanding of the rights and responsibilities of free speech, and they become more attuned to the tricks and deceptions of demagogues and propagandists. They learn how to solve problems collaboratively, and they develop a better appreciation for the diversity of perspectives and opinions in our complex, multicultural society (85).

Could this be also the subversive element of debate endangering the stability of the regime, or making it gradually loosen its dogmatic grip? Could the next generation of Iran’s ruling elite adhere to the ideals of “humane citizenship” (Hink 178) and become free “from idées fixes, blind spots, obsessions and other pathologies of judgmental life” (McGeer & Pettit 64)? When one enters the official website for Iran’s Student Debate Competitions, there is a quote from Supreme Leader saying, “There is no other option but deliberation and debate to awaken the collective rationality.” But the deliberation that occurs during student debate competitions has not resulted in a change in the regime’s policies. Different variations of the resolution that “the government has a duty to enforce the Hijab” have been offered for debate in all eight rounds of the competition and, except for a few instances, the Negative teams have won but this has not led to a change in the

overall policies of the regime with regards to enforcing Islamic veil for women. One student participant in the debate points out this irony that even though the regime's policies are refuted in the debates, outside the competition they are "absolutely accepted by authorities as if there was no room for criticism."<sup>180</sup> Bijan Abdol-Karimi, a dissident intellectual who is a professor of philosophy at Tehran's Islamic Azad University, likens the debate to "greenhouse cultivation" where discussions have no bearing on the real disputes taking place in the society outside these competitions.<sup>181</sup> Nematollah Fazeli, an anthropology professor, is even more pessimistic and views the debate competitions "as a cover for the scarcity and lack of genuine free dialogue in society:" "Under circumstances where workers and labor unions, women and women's movements, intellectuals and dissidents and other groups do not have an available platform to voice their demands out loud, holding these competitions, although not necessarily bad, does not mean that we are practicing democracy or dialogue in the true sense of the word."<sup>182</sup> Nevertheless, Abdol Karimi, Fazeli and many others dissident academic figures participate in these competitions as members of the panel of jury.

For the Islamic Republic, academia has always been possessed with a disruptive energy and a subversive potential. The regime has tried various techniques such as "co-optation," "selective inclusion/ exclusion" and "infiltration among activists" in order to "contain and control dissent in the universities" (Rivetti 5-10). The student debate

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<sup>180</sup> *Academic Jihad Official Website (ACECR.ir)*, Azar 18, 1397.

<sup>181</sup> *Iqna*, Azar 24, 1397.

<sup>182</sup> *Iqna*, Azar 17, 1397.

competitions, could provide a new technique for the regime to contain dissent within the parameters of campuses – that students sit and talk together instead of pouring into the streets to protest. Debate, in this sense, functions as a sophisticated form of engineering appeasement without necessarily raising the ceiling of dissent and disagreement in the general public. It provides an opportunity for dissenters to utter their speech without precipitating a disrupting action.

Debate is also perceived as a technocratic solution for managing and reducing tensions among the political factions of the regime – tensions which have exponentially increased since the start of the Reform Era (1997) and have become harsher and more public with every passing year. Mohammad Reza Zayeri, a principlist cleric believes, “Debate is practicing disagreement with one another without being overcome by emotions” which can “calm the atmosphere of the country and reduce the current rousing conflicts.”<sup>183</sup> The training booklet for students participating in competitions says the same thing, “Debate is a form of martial arts and not brawling. Be careful that the debate does not turn into a brawl, because it is in no one’s interest, in a brawl whatever blow you deal, you will receive in kind.”<sup>184</sup> In a speech at the closing ceremony of the sixth round of the competitions, Hesamodin Ashna, a former Iranian presidential aide and a former deputy minister of Intelligence, described the 40-year history of tension in the Islamic Republic the result of the lack of proper debates. “We started the revolution with dialogue; after that

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<sup>183</sup> *Isna*, Dey 27, 1395.

<sup>184</sup> Vakili, Shervin. *Fonoon-e Monazareh*. Jahad-e Daneshgahi, 1392.

when the path of dialogue was closed assassination continued, and these assassinations closed the door on dialogue. If the proper culture of dialogue and debate were taught in our country, the presidential election of 2009 would not have resulted in conflicts . . . and certain individuals [i.e. Ahmadinejad] would not have been able to gather millions of votes with demagogic pseudo-arguments.”<sup>185</sup>

In 2018, Majid Qoreyshi, the Supreme Leader’s newly-appointed representative in Universities pointed to the tensions between the dissident student body and the pro-Khamenei student Basij members, and suggested that instead of picketing against one another and shouting slogans they should follow the debate competition model, “Why don’t you sit face-to-face in a friendly environment and debate rationally and without prejudice?”<sup>186</sup> Majid Qoreyshi is an upgraded example of the generation of Islamic Republic clerics and principlist officials who believe that by changing the format and packaging of the Iranian regime’s official ideologies they can manage the discontent of the younger generation of students. He has launched a program to revise the compulsory Islamic knowledge courses - which all students must pass - to make them more “attractive” and “tailored to the youths’ social media-oriented culture.”<sup>187</sup> In his opinion, debate is also a modern method to defend the regime’s ideology. Such a debate is not supposed to lead to the rejection of the regime and its leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s, official positions; rather it is expected that at the end of the debate convincing arguments

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<sup>185</sup> *Iqna*, Dey 1, 1394 (ellipses added).

<sup>186</sup> *ISDC Official Website*, Mehr 12, 1395

<sup>187</sup> *Tasnim*, Bahman 3, 1397

are made to silence dissident students. In the first three decades of its life, the Islamic Republic sought to prevent questions that challenge it from being posed in universities. This approach has been reviewed in the last decade: Now raising doubtful questions – *shobhe* - is permitted, provided that it is posed in an enclosed environment where vetted representatives of the regime can give a suitable response. As Qoreyshi says in an interview, “In the approach that we have in mind, raising a question is not a problem . . . but there must be room for responding to these issues. When a young person raises a *shobhe* at a meeting of 700 students, that issue becomes a question for a large number of attendees, and when no response is given, it results in nearly 700 people leaving that meeting with a new question on their minds.”<sup>188</sup> This understanding of debate is similar to the narrative provided by the Iranian regime and the clergy of the historical debates of the Shia Imams where they always won the debate. Participating in a debate is not about being open to change opinions, rather it is about proving the legitimacy of a conviction.

The effort to create “healthy spaces for dialogue” once again illustrates the paradox of the Islamic Republic: on the one hand, it is concerned about the arguments and conclusions that emerge from public debate, and on the other, it believes that with “proper guidance” and by “training skillful rhetoricians” it can defeat rivals in debate. Prior to launching Free Thinking Korsis in 2003, there were serious discussions in the Principlists camp on how they should upgrade their methods of argumentation and persuasion, that they should learn how to detect fallacies in their opponents’ speech and

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<sup>188</sup> *Farhikhtegan* newspaper, Shahrivar 16, 1393.

how to become skillful rhetors ready to defend their convictions in the public. In 2002 a research center affiliated to the Islamic Propagation Office of the Qom Seminary published a book titled *Fallacies*. The publisher explained in the preface that, due to the complexity of arguments and the tools and methods of persuasion, “distinguishing between right and wrong has become more difficult” and hence the need was felt for publishing such a book (Khandan 14). The Iranian leader and many Principlist politicians believed that they could nurture a new generation of their supporters who could better argue in defense of their convictions and use rhetorical techniques to win debates with dissidents and respond undermining *shobhes*. The social truth was not expected to become constructed in these debates. Rather it was preconceived in advance. A dialogical procedure was only required to display to the audience that the regime’s prepackaged positions were legitimate and resilient to any criticism. The outcome of the student debate competitions may have gone beyond what they expected. In these debates Principlist students can win even when they are asked to defend a resolution against the regime’s position.

## CHAPTER 4: DEBATE ON TELEVISION: DEFINING THE OPTIMAL EXCITEMENT WITHOUT DISTURBANCE

Televised debates between candidates and even elected officials have become fashionable around the world. The United States' Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), a non-profit organization which has produced presidential debates since 1988, boasts about exporting this *nouveau chic* to "some 45 countries."<sup>189</sup> There is no exact count, but CPD estimates that by 2019, at least "95 countries and regions have held debates."<sup>190</sup> CPD's partner in this global export, the National Democratic Institute, consider these debates "as benchmarks of a healthy, maturing democracy" (Dippell 12). Television viewers can watch debates even without enjoying a full-menu of democracy – for example, "under the terms of the Russian constitution, state-owned federal television channels are legally obligated to broadcast election debates" (Burrett 176). And there is always room for local adaptations when needed. There were cigarettes, beer and bread snacks in the first debates broadcast on the than Czechoslovak Television after the Velvet Revolution (Eibl & Petrova 21-22). Sometime these televised debates get physically

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<sup>189</sup> See "International" page tab on *CPD official website (DEBATES.org)*, retrieved Feb 18, 2020.

<sup>190</sup> See "Countries" page tab on *Debates International (DEBATESINTERNATIONAL.org)*, retrieved Feb 18, 2020.



violent, as it happened in Azerbaijan,<sup>191</sup> Georgia,<sup>192</sup> and Greece.<sup>193</sup> In Jordan, a member of parliament pulled out his gun during a live TV debate.<sup>194</sup> Verbal sparring is also becoming a new rite of passage during some electoral debates, in the United States,<sup>195</sup> Brazil,<sup>196</sup> France,<sup>197</sup> Russia<sup>198</sup> and Japan<sup>199</sup> among others. After all, these “debates provide a view into a candidates’ personality and character through how they respond to a high-risk situation, attacks and unexpected questions” (Carlin). Iran has not been different; all three presidential election debates of 2009, 2013, and 2017 became a scene for fierce and bitter exchanges between candidates. But Iran’s history of staging political leaders debate on television is older than many countries. It goes back to the early days of 1979 revolution.

The Iranian revolution was not televised, however the official day of the revolution, February 11, is when the news of the victory was announced on television. It had been

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<sup>191</sup> "Televised Azerbaijani Presidential Debate Descends into Chaos." *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (RFERL.org)*, September 19, 2013.

<sup>192</sup> "Georgian Politicians Fight During Live TV Debate" *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (RFERL.org)*, September 27, 2016.

<sup>193</sup> "Arrest Warrant Issued after Fight on Greek Election TV Debate." *The Journal*, June 7, 2012.

<sup>194</sup> "Gun Brandished During Live Jordanian TV Debate." *BBC*, July 7, 2012.

<sup>195</sup> "In Second Debate, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Spar in Bitter, Personal Terms." *The New York Times*, October 9, 2016.

<sup>196</sup> "Brazil Candidates Engage in Verbal Sparring in TV Debate." *BBC*, August 27, 2014.

<sup>197</sup> "Macron Hailed as Winner of Bruising Le Pen TV Debate." *The Guardian*, May 4, 2017.

<sup>198</sup> "I'll Break Your Jaw!: Mud, Threats, and Tears in Russian Presidential Debates." *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 16, 2018.

<sup>199</sup> "Abe Clashes with Koike in TV Debate." AFP News Agency, October 8, 2017.

twenty years since TV broadcast started in Iran. During the Shah era, there was strict control over radio and television programming. It was only in September 1978 – in the short-lived period of reform and liberalization of the Sharif Emami government – that the live broadcast of parliamentary debates was allowed for the first time. The episode lasted a little over a month, and was stopped once a military government came to power (see Beeman 153-154). In the pre-revolution broadcasting lineup, there are few traces of pre-recorded discussion-oriented programs.<sup>200</sup> However, the greatest stage for debate was not radio, television, or the press, nor even universities and cultural circles. Rather, it was prisons in Isfahan, Mashhad, Ahvaz and most importantly Tehran’s notorious Qasr and Evin Prisons where sentenced intellectuals and dissidents - affiliated with a variety of radical and religious conservative, Marxist, liberal, nationalist, and mixed ideologies - engaged in debating with one another.<sup>201</sup>

Prison, as Ayatollah Montazeri said, was a place where “one could debate with those who one did not have access to on the outside, a place for the exchange of ideas” (224). Based on the debates that took place between Marxist and Islamists during his time in Qasr Prison, Montazeri wrote a 50-page booklet entitled *Hassan and Bijan’s Debate* to serve as a guide for future prisoners (225).

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<sup>200</sup> The most notable discussion-oriented program was the weekly *Beyond This and the Other Side of Time* (*In Soo va An Soo-ye Zaman*). Broadcast began airing in 1977 on the recently launched Chanel Two Television which was intended for the cultural elite audience. Many prominent Iranian academicians and intellectuals, of those who were politically considered safe for the regime, participated in the program. It became one of the most popular TV shows before the revolution, although the topics of discussions were highly theoretical and hard to digest for an average viewer (see Mirsepassi 142-157).

<sup>201</sup> These informal debates have been referenced in memoirs by different political activists; for example, see Askaroladi, Mansouri, Ezzat Shahi, and Samakar.

Pre-scheduled debates rarely took place outside prison. One of the few interesting examples are debates between the People's Fedai Guerrillas (IFPG) and the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MKO) that secretly took place in their safe houses (*khaneh teami*) in Tehran in October 1975 and August 1976 – audio recordings of which secretly circulated in cassette tapes. One of the debates took place at a location where the MKO made hand grenades and other guerrilla ammunition. To avoid being able to identify one another, debaters were blindfolded and taken to the location on motorcycles, each party entered from a different entrance and they sat on opposite sides of a curtain to avoid seeing one another.<sup>202</sup>

These informal debates are likely to have influenced the idea of holding televised debates immediately after the revolution. As noted in the previous chapters, in the two years following the 1979 Revolution, we saw an extraordinary volume of political and ideological contention that has remained unparalleled in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Informal debates took place on a daily basis in public, academic environments, and sometimes on crowded intersections in Tehran and other cities, where ordinary people gathered to watch. Political activists – such as Abdulhamid Dialema, one of the founders of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) – sometimes traveled hundreds of miles to attend a debate in a remote town.<sup>203</sup> Partisan media, enjoying what is

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<sup>202</sup> A series of audio files of these debates are available on *Archive of Iranian Opposition Website* (IRAN-ARCHIVE.com).

<sup>203</sup> "Nezam Daghdaghe Eghna Dasht." *Hamshahri*, Esfand 1, 1391; also see "Shahid Dialameh va Korsi-e Azad-Andishi." *Markaz-e Nashr-e Asar-e Dialameh*, Mehr 7, 1396.

referred to as the Spring of Freedom (*bahar-e azadi*), published large volumes of op-eds and commentaries against their adversaries on a daily basis.

But the story of radio and television was different. In the days leading up to the victory of the revolution, there was fierce competition over the control of these two national media institutions, and soon pro-Ayatollah Khomeini Islamist forces won. Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, a member of Khomeini's inner circle in Paris, was appointed as the head of the national radio and television (*Seda va Sima*), soon to be called Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).

### **In the Streets, and On the Air**

Less than a month after the revolution, rival political groups were complaining that censorship on television had returned to pre-revolutionary levels. Despite numerous requests from political parties, as well as intellectuals such as Massoud Behnoud,<sup>204</sup> Shahrokh Meskoub<sup>205</sup> and Reza Barahani,<sup>206</sup> the IRIB head was reluctant to broadcast debates. But on April 9, 1979 – less than two months after the victory of the revolution – pressures yielded results. Without prior planning, it was suddenly announced on television that a debate between Abolhassan Banisadr, a member of the Revolutionary Council, and “a Marxist” would be broadcast that same day. Banisadr, who at the time had close ties with Ayatollah Khomeini, convinced television officials to air the debate. The program

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<sup>204</sup> *Ayandegan*, Ordibehesht 6, 1358.

<sup>205</sup> *Ayandegan*, Farvardin 30, 1358.

<sup>206</sup> *Ayandegan*, Ordibehesht 18, 1358.

was announced just a few hours before it was aired. However, many political activists went to the streets carrying cardboard signs to inform drivers and passers-by to watch the debate.<sup>207</sup> The very same day, the front-page news was the execution of Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, former Prime Minister of Iran, and a group of senior administration and military officials of the Shah's regime on that day.

Banisadr was a gifted orator who knew how to navigate the borders of political disputes with a combination of Islamism, nationalism and socialism. He has long been known for his famous motto: "open discussion" (*bahs-e azad*) for resolving disputes in the country.<sup>208</sup> And he became the first person who televised debates. His opponent in the debate was Babak Zahraie, a student who had just returned from America and was a member of a small, insignificant Maoist party called the Socialist Workers. Banisadr seemed to have deliberately chosen such a weak and unknown opponent so as to easily overcome him. The debate lasted about two hours and became the subject of further public discussion in the following days.<sup>209</sup>

*Kayhan* newspaper claimed that this two-person debate was the most popular television program since the revolution.<sup>210</sup> In an editorial the same day, *Ayandegan* newspaper wrote that television had finally performed its most important function, namely, "broadcasting the debate in order to reach mutual understanding and find a

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<sup>207</sup> *Ayandegan*, Farvardin 22, 1358.

<sup>208</sup> See Banisadr's editorial in first issue of his own newspaper, *Enghelab-e Eslami*, Khordad 29, 1358.

<sup>209</sup> A full transcript of the debate is printed in *Ayandegan*, Farvardin 22, 1358.

<sup>210</sup> *Kayhan*, Farvardin 21, 1358.

solution:" "No matter which side of the debate wins, what matters is that a viewer who has suffered under dictatorship and repression for many years and never had the opportunity to see the clash of different and conflicting opinions, can now weigh different opinions and make his/her own decision. This is one of the [most important] characteristics of democracy."<sup>211</sup> In the following days, a large ad was published on the second and third pages of several major newspapers in the country inviting those interested to participate in debates: "Due to the unprecedented reception of the televised debate, henceforth there will be a debate every week with an impartial person as judge and before an audience present."<sup>212</sup>

Although Banisadr had succeeded in demonstrating the superiority of Islamic economics over socialist economics in the debate, pro-Ayatollah Khomeini Islamists were not happy with its broadcast and, despite earlier promises, they prevented the debates from continuing.<sup>213</sup> Leaflets were distributed throughout the city that described such discussions as useless for Islam and the country. The IRIB head announced that the responsibility of television is "to broadcast Islamic worldview."<sup>214</sup> In reaction to the ban on broadcasting debates, Banisadr issued a harsh statement: "For the sake of freedom of expression one can even engage in *Jihad* and take up arms." He cited a verse from the Quran, "Blessed are those who listen to speech and follow the best of it. Those are the

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<sup>211</sup> *Ayandegan*, Farvardin 21, 1358.

<sup>212</sup> See for example *Ayandegan*, Ordibehesht 12, 1358

<sup>213</sup> *Tehran Mosavar*, Farvardin 31, 1358.

<sup>214</sup> *Kayhan*, Ordibehesht 4, 1358.

ones Allah has guided, and those are people of understanding."<sup>215</sup> He then pointed to the tradition among Shia Imams to engage in debate with atheists and followers of other religions. The second debate session took place on May 30, 1979 at the University of Tehran and without TV coverage, while 20,000 people sat on the grass to watch. *Ayandegan* newspaper reported that unidentified individuals had attacked people in different parts of Tehran distributing banners advertising the debate.<sup>216</sup>

Public attention quickly turned to the elected members of the Constitutional Convention. Their heated discussions over every single article of the new regime's constitution were televised live for three months, from August 15 to November 15, 1979. In December the majority of the population voted on the Islamic Republic's constitution which was close to the wishes of religious groups and included principals such as *velayat-e faqih*, and limited freedom of speech, allowing it only on the vague condition that it is not against Islam and national interest. Immediately afterwards, the first presidential election was held in Iran, which ended in a landslide victory for Banisadr. Nevertheless, the constitutional referendum and the subsequent presidential election failed to determine the post-revolutionary status quo and reduce political tensions. The political squabbles continued. Verbal exchanges could easily lead to physical altercations. This was portrayed by Kambiz Derambakhsh, a well-known Iranian cartoonist, in the form of a chaotic battle of the axes in *Ayandegan* newspaper (see image no. 12). At the same time, the country

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<sup>215</sup> *Kayhan*, Ordibehesht 8, 1358.

<sup>216</sup> *Ayandegan*, Khordad 9, 1358.

was involved in civil war in various regions, including predominantly Kurdish areas in west Iran and Turkmen areas in the northeast. On February 5, 1980 – the president’s first day in office – the bloodiest clashes between the Revolution Guards and the People’s Fedai Guerrillas allied with local Turkmen forces took place outside the city of Gonbad Kavous.

In his first speech as president, Banisadr declared that “everyone is free to debate, but we will deal with armed opposition decisively.”<sup>217</sup> The Open Discussion project was at the top of his political agenda. In a commission issued to appoint the new IRIB head, he stressed that three types of Open Discussion must take place on television: “Ideological discussions to clarify the righteous nature of the [Islamic] system for the country’s younger generation, political, economic or cultural discussions to find solutions to the country’s day-to-day issues, and the discussions about the imperialism” (Javedani 112). Banisadr managed to receive a pale endorsement from Ayatollah Khomeini: “[It is fine] if a communist comes [on TV] and says what he wants to [on the condition that] someone else responds to him right there; this is not a problem.”<sup>218</sup>

### **Resolution on Screen**

On March 2, 1980, *Kayhan* newspaper’s bold headline drew attention: “The start of a new chapter in resolving disputes among political groups.”<sup>219</sup> The newspaper was

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<sup>217</sup> *Ettelaat*, Bahman 16, 1358.

<sup>218</sup> Khomeini’s speeches of Ordibehesht 23, 1359, available in *Sahaifa*, Vol 12 p 290.

<sup>219</sup> *Kayhan*, Esfand 13, 1358.



referring to a four-hour debate that was due to air on television that night. Debaters included Iran's then-president, Banisadr, as well as the governor of Mazandaran province, three Army generals – including the commander of the ground force – one representative from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (Mohsen Rezaei), and members from the leadership council of the Marxist group People's Fedai Guerrillas who at the time of the debate were engaged in armed confrontation against the young revolutionary government. Five days earlier, news of the massacre of 23 people in Gonbad Kavous, including several Turkmen opposition leaders, had been circulated in the press, outraging public sentiment.<sup>220</sup>

The participation of the president in such a debate, was so unexpected and strange that Banisadr himself spoke out before the debate started, saying: "Undoubtedly, in the modern history of the world and if not the last few centuries of human society, this is the first time that the president of a country is participating in a free discussion with individuals, who have taken up arms against a government born out of a revolution." He expressed hope that these free debates would prevent new clashes in the country and would be a good start to "continue peaceful dialogue."<sup>221</sup>

The TV studio set for the debate was very basic, and with an apparent revolutionary simplicity and ineptitude. The two sides were not even facing each other, but were seated close to one another behind an L-shaped desk. The camera could never show all the

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<sup>220</sup> Kayhan, Esfand 8, 1358.

<sup>221</sup> A full transcript of the debate was printed in *Kayhan*, Esfand 13, 14 & 15, 1358.

debaters in one shot. The president was seated in the middle next to the moderator almost as if he were a mediator rather than a debater. (see image no. 13 of the debate, also see image no. 14 which shows a cartoon published by *Kayhan* newspaper.) However, what surprises a present-day viewer most was how calm debaters were and how orderly and respectful they behaved.

*Kayhan* newspaper published its editorial on the front page, describing the debate as “an unparalleled democratic experience in the world;”

In which country does the highest-ranking member of the government along with the most important army, IRGC, provincial and local officials sit down to debate with a group fighting its government? In which socialist state in the world [does this take place]? In which one of the so-called progressive world governments can one find such a phenomenon? The heads of which one of those democratic countries is willing to participate in such a debate and leave judgment up to the people . . .? Our president gave the nation the greatest gift in the early days of his administration: the gift of free discussion, teaching the truth, arguing with logic, and the right way of challenging each other.<sup>222</sup>

Suddenly televised debate became the new fashion of politicking in the country. Chamran, the then defense minister, called for a debate with the Kurdish separatists, saying, “I hope the debate process continues so that truths come to light and the atmosphere of lies and rumors is eliminated.”<sup>223</sup> The Muslim Students Association called

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<sup>222</sup> *Kayhan*, Esfand 14, 1358 (ellipses added).

<sup>223</sup> *Kayhan*, Esfand 15, 1358.

for a debate on the Majlis electoral system.<sup>224</sup> Even the employees of the Red Crescent, who were unhappy with their boss, gave him an ultimatum for a debate by running an ad in the newspaper: “Obviously, should you fail to accept this invitation within a week, you will be condemned in the presence of the martyr-rearing nation and Imam of the *Ummat* (i.e. Khomeini).”<sup>225</sup>

The pro-Ayatollah Khomeini Islamists – who had recently founded the Islamic Republican Party – for the first time announced that they were ready for debate with their main political rival, the MKO. A debate between Hassan Rouhani – currently serving as the president of Iran – and MKO leader Massoud Rajavi was scheduled at Abuzar Mosque in Tehran. But Rajavi was a no-show. The debate turned into a Rouhani sermon, in which he took jabs at the MKO. “The *Mojahedin* claim [to believe in] democracy . . . we wanted to debate respectfully and in a brotherly fashion so that realities and truth would become more clear for the people. . . . How long can the MKO dodge debates? On how many occasions? How many times?”<sup>226</sup> Another debate between Mohammad Beheshti, the secretary general of the Islamic Republican Party, and a few MKO members at Sharif University of Technology became so heated that Beheshti ends the session midway complaining that “it is turning into a boxing ring.”<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> *Kayhan*, Esfand 15, 1358.

<sup>225</sup> *Kayhan*, Khordad 10, 1359.

<sup>226</sup> “Majarey-e Monazereh Rouhani ba Rajavi.” *Asriran*, Tir 7, 1392 (ellipses added).

<sup>227</sup> “Monazereh Beheshti ba Mojahedin-e Khalgh.” *Kalameh*, Shahrivar 20, 1391.

Debate fever ran so high that even Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, the former radio and television head who had put an end to broadcasting debates, demanded a televised debate to defend his performance. The program aired at peak viewing time on November 15, 1980 despite two of the participants withdrawing from the debate at the last minute, stating that it was not expedient for them to participate in the debate “because of the ongoing war” (Javedani 125-126). Forty-five days before this debate, Iraq had officially declared war on Iran and had occupied important parts of Iranian soil amid the unpreparedness and disorganization of the revolutionaries. Broadcasting the debate drew harsh criticism from clerics and IRGC members. The Supreme Council for Defense protested the debate saying it “fomented internal conflicts in war time” and the next day the Prosecutor General issued a warrant for the arrest of Ghotbzadeh.<sup>228</sup>

### **A Debate to End Debates**

Debates were supposed to prevent feuds from escalating and to end street clashes. But in practice it was only after the often-violent street clashes that the two parties would propose a debate. The Islamist revolutionaries had far more organizational and military power, and at the same time showed an exceptional ability to mobilize the masses. The opposition tried to assert its power by holding a political rally on March 5, 1981 at the University of Tehran, but the event turned into the scene of intense clashes between Ayatollah Khomeini’s supporters and the opposition.<sup>229</sup> One week after the clashes,

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<sup>228</sup> Kayha, Aban 17, 1359.

<sup>229</sup> Kayhan, Esfand 16, 1359; and *Enghelab-e Eslami*, Esfand 16, 1359.

Banisadr released a statement, inviting three high-ranking Islamic Republican Party leaders – Beheshti, Rafsanjani and Rajaei – to a televised debate on “the [justifiability of] club-wielding and [also] identifying the culprits of the skirmish.”<sup>230</sup> He also announced plans to organize talks between the country’s political forces through the presidential office.<sup>231</sup> His proposal was quickly hijacked by the Islamists who now had complete control of the radio and television and had purged all non-aligned administrative and technical staff. Ali Larijani – the then head of the IRIB and current speaker of the Iranian parliament – announced that the IRIB itself intended to organize a debate between political forces. “We will use the weapon of debate and logic to convert the world to Islam,” Hossein Ghafari, a deputy at IRIB proclaimed and added that “It is the best way to disarm the opposition. This approach is a source of prestige for the Islamic Republic, which has no fear of free speech” (Hariri 12-13). Opposition groups, however, were hesitant. On the one hand, they knew that the Islamists’ aim was to subdue the president and take away his initiative. On the other hand, they thought that by participating in these debates, they would show the Islamists in power that opposition groups are willing to participate in their political game. The communist Tudeh Party leaders viewed debate as one of the few opportunities under these circumstances, “to directly share their positions with the people, and reduce political tensions and the risk of street clashes” (Fatapour).

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<sup>230</sup> *Enghelab-e Eslami*, Esfand 23, 1359.

<sup>231</sup> *Enghelab-e Eslami*, Esfand 24, 1359.

Pre-debate coordination meetings were held with representatives from the most important parties of the time – comprising the Islamic Republican Party, which was in power, and the Tudeh party the MKO, People’s Fedai Guerrillas, and the National Front which were all opposition parties. For the first time a systematic structure for debate was defined. Each participant had five minutes for an opening argument and five minutes for a summation, and 20 minutes for speaking during the debate. The MKO set the condition that the program should be “held before the people in a public place and broadcast live without censorship.”<sup>232</sup> But the IRIB directors insisted that it had to be recorded in a studio without an audience present. “It will be aired later when the time is right,” said Ghafari.

One of the major concerns of the opposition was ensuring security for debate participants. The MKO representative at the meeting asked, “How can we send our leaders to participate in a debate when our meetings are raided. How can we be sure that for example, when our party leader comes here to take part in the discussion, one of the IRGC guards present won’t shoot and assassinate him?” (Fatapour). The Islamists refused to give any clear assurances and only said that there would be security on the television campus. The MKO used this as an excuse to decline participation in the debates, and in its official newspaper called the debates “an excuse to continue repression, crime and ritual slaughter of dissidents under the guise of open discussion.”<sup>233</sup> Massoud Rajavi, the leader

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<sup>232</sup> *Mojahed*, no. 116, Farvardin 27, 1360.

<sup>233</sup> *Mojahed*, no. 122, Khordad 7, 1360.

of the MKO, said, "When you hold a club over someone's head and point a G3 to his heart and put a dagger to his side, how can you claim to have free debate?"<sup>234</sup>

The remaining opposition representatives wanted the debates to be about the country's current political controversies. But television officials insisted political discussions would intensify disputes and tensions in the country, and that ideological and theological differences should first be debated, before entering political debates. Their proposed subject for the first debate was "the relationship between the soul and matter," a topic that would lead to discussing the existence of God. Ehsan Tabari, one of the top leaders of the Tudeh communist party, objected and accused television officials of trying to put forward discussions that are related to "people's fundamental beliefs" in order to portray the Tudeh Party "is atheist" (Sadri).

The first pre-recorded program of ideological debates aired in April 1981. A special studio was designed for the debates and each debater had a predesignated place. At the beginning of the program, the moderator gave a detailed speech about "the righteousness of Islam" saying, "among the honors of the Islamic system of governance is that it allows other schools of thought and ideologies to debate and battle with Islamic ideology, argue [with one another] in order to answer all issues that are raised and resolve their differences."<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> *Mojahed*, no. 118, Ordibehesht 10, 1360.

<sup>235</sup> "Matn-e Kamel-e Monazerat-e 1360." *Parsine*, Ordibehesht 4, 1391.

Yet, participants had no intention of resolving disputes. What stands out in reviewing the available records of these debates is their polemic and extremely dissent-oriented quality. It is clear from the start that all sides have entered the debate with the presupposition that they are right and therefore victory is rightfully theirs. Of course, we have no criteria to gauge the public opinion following the debates with interest but one can fairly assume that a large portion of the society, conservative, uninformed or uninterested-in-politics, would better identify with the ruling Islamists. This was consistent with Islamists' general strategy to show that other sides of the debate were not as committed as they were to religion or that they are even anti-Islam. Both in choosing the topic of debate, and also while it is ongoing, Islamists tried to use issues pertaining to religious beliefs that would be particularly challenging for Marxist groups. They repeatedly and explicitly mentioned the fundamental ground or premise of their argument referring to Islam as the source of legitimacy and validity of all claims. It was difficult for the opposite side to continue the debate, as they could not directly reject this ground – because they would be considered unbelievers – and they couldn't accept the ground as that would mean they are playing in the field comfortable for their opponent.

Unlike previous occasions, these ideological debates did not receive proper press coverage. The MKO reacted in its daily and weekly prints, calling the debate “courtship” (*moghazeleh be jay-e monazereh*) and accusing other opposition parties of complicity abetting “religious fanatics.”<sup>236</sup> The MKO had instead proposed holding a “real” televised

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<sup>236</sup> *Mojahed*, no. 122, Khordad 7, 1360.



debate between the arrested and tortured members of their organization, the wardens of Evin prison and the Prosecutor General, Mousavi Ardebili.<sup>237</sup>

The situation in the country was critical. It had been eight months since the beginning of the war and Iraqi forces were advancing quickly. Armed street clashes had peaked. Many supporters of opposition political groups had been arrested. Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters were preparing to oust president Banisadr. Tehran's prosecutor banned demonstrations by opposition groups and in particular by the MKO.<sup>238</sup> Independent newspapers had mostly been banned and censorship had increased in wartime Iran. Mohammad Yazdi, a spokesman for the Press Arbitration Board – which, despite the name, was tasked with media censorship – argued that “preventing the open discussion of disputes and contentious issues is not censorship, rather it is most expedient in these extraordinary circumstances when country is at war.”<sup>239</sup>

On May 22, 1981, in an odd twist of decision, the IRIB broadcast the first segment of the pre-recorded series of political debates. Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti, then Chief Justice of Iran and a strong debater for the Islamists, took part in this debate which simultaneously aired from channels one and two in prime time after the nightly news. In the opening, the moderator recounted the recent developments in television since the “the new Islamic management” took over and said the purpose of the debate show was “to familiarize the heroic nation of Iran with the issues of society . . . and reduce the pressure

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<sup>237</sup> Mojahed, no. 117, Ordibehesht 3, 1360.

<sup>238</sup> Kayhan, Khordad 2, 1360.

<sup>239</sup> Kayhan, Ordibehesht 31, 1360.

behind the frontlines during the imposed war (with Iraq) and prevent tensions that are sometimes created to divert public opinion."<sup>240</sup> Television officials had framed the topic of debate as "freedom or disorder" (*azadi ya harj-o-marj*), a duality that became the main framework for arguments by the Iranian regime to restrict freedom of speech over the next four decades.

However, the political fate of the country was determined before this debate. In June, Banisadr was impeached and removed as president. In his last address, once more he complained about censorship and said, "let us prevent the clash of ideologies from turning into the clash of clubs and weapons through real free discussion. . . . Rest assured our people have wisdom and maturity and will not be provoked by provocative words or articles."<sup>241</sup> Within a few days Beheshti was killed in a bombing allegedly carried out by the MKO. Two high-ranking members of the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas who had participated in the debates fled the country and two high-ranking members of the Tudeh Party of Iran were imprisoned and tortured. A brief piece of report in newspaper adequately describes the then political climate of the country. The governor of the small city of Qaemshahr in Mazandaran Province in northern Iran, said at a rally of Islamic revolutionary forces chanting slogans in favor of suppressing opposition, "I call on

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<sup>240</sup> A summary of this debate is available in *Mehrnameh* Tir 13, 1390 (ellipses added).

<sup>241</sup> See the Transcript of Majlis Sessions ("Mashrooh-e Mozakerat-e Majlis." Jalaseh 163, Khordad 24, 1360") in *Hashemi Rafsanjani Official Website* (*RAFSANJANI.ir*, ellipses added).

all opposition groups to hold a debate in front of the governor's office, if they don't come they do so at their own peril!"<sup>242</sup>

The rest of the pre-recorded debate sessions were never broadcast from TV. Debate returned to prisons again, but unlike pre-revolution debates these are not prisoners freely debating with one another. Rather "*monazereh*" and "*bahs-e azad*" were then names that Islamists chose for their interrogation sessions and extracting confessions from prisoners (Baradaran 65; also see Mahbaz). Mohammad Kachouyi, the warden of Evin Prison proudly talked about the success of free discussions in prison in helping prisoners to repent.<sup>243</sup> Some of these so-called "debates" between prisoners and their interrogators were broadcast on radio and television, including one with Ehsan Tabari, the prominent communist philosopher and Tudeh Party leader who had previously participated in TV's ideological debate.<sup>244</sup> The goal of the revolutionary jailers was to show the public that they are able to change the opposition's views with their Islamic arguments. Many of these prisoners were severely tortured prior to their debate (Abrahamian 143-144).

### **The Evolution of Revolutionary Television**

For nearly two decades debates, either as a form of TV programming or as a way of televising disagreements, were absent from the Islamic Republic's channels. At the height

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<sup>242</sup> *Enghelab-e Eslami*, Ordibehesht 3, 1360.

<sup>243</sup> *Sobh-e Azadegan*, Khordad 19, 1360, reprinted in *Tarikh Irani*, Tir 9, 1395.

<sup>244</sup> Recently one of those so-called free discussion (*bahs-e azad*) programs was rebroadcast on Iran television. The program, which was made in the spring of 1984 upon the request of the Mashhad prosecutor general, featured five leftist prisoners sitting next to and discussing with the then Minister of Heavy Industries, Behzad Nabavi. Nabavi went on to become a prominent Reformist figure and was sentenced to six years in prison after the 2009 Green Movement Protests.

of the political suppression of the 1980s, we continue to see heated parliamentary debates that the public could listen to only on the radio as long as they were open sessions (Baktiari). Entering such debates was mostly reserved for the ruling right and left factions of the regime who later became known as the Principlists and the Reformists.

In 1989, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the constitution was revised. Radio and television had been controlled by a council consisting of the three executive, legislative, and judicial branches, but after the constitutional revision they were placed under the control of Iran's new leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. All of the IRIB heads appointed by the Supreme Leader since 1993, have so far without exception been from the regime's right wing Principlists and have controlled all aspects of television policy-making and programming. After the Reformists won in 1997 presidential election, the IRIB became the most important media institution used by the Principlists to confront their rival political party.

Ironically, the first discursive dispute broadcast on TV was the trial of Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, the renowned mayor of Tehran, who was tried for corruption in 1998. His trial was the first major attempt by Principlists to level the political field in Iran since losing the presidential election. Karbaschi, a skilled rhetor, along with his team of high-powered attorneys argued with the court's conservative judge, who according to the then judicial system, was at the same time the prosecutor. The recorded court proceedings were broadcast from IRIB Tehran channel in the dead of night, sometimes at 2 am. Nevertheless, more than 80% of the capital's population watched at least three of the court sessions, making the Karbaschi trial "the most popular non-entertainment event on

television since the debates of the early days of the revolution" (Mohsenian-Rad 71). In a poll conducted by the National Institute for Public Opinion Research, the majority of respondents said they preferred watching the trial to soccer or a movie. The mayor's polemic against the judge increased his popularity, with 70% of society believing he was innocent (64-71). Contrary to their expectations, televising political disputes hurt the Principlists.

Throughout the rest of Khatami's presidency, television practically became a debater against the Reformists. Reformist intellectuals and politicians expressed their arguments in daily publications or in speeches at universities, and television sought to promote Principlist critiques without covering the other side. The Reformists, who complained of lack of access to the country's most important media tool, began to criticize the IRIB's impartiality in their discourse, calling *Simaye Melli* (the national TV) acting as *Simaye Meyli* (the biased TV).<sup>245</sup>

Oddly the end of the Reform era was the precise moment when TV reconciled with debate. In 2005, when the presidential elections reached a second round and society was extremely polarized, the cultural and economic representatives of both candidates faced off on TV. The debate, according to the only survey conducted by Seyed-Emami, had an important effect on forming public opinion, and leading to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory (64-65). Rafsanjani's representatives carried out personal attacks on Ahmadinejad in the debates, mocking his inexperience and low standing in Iran's political

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<sup>245</sup> This dichotomic terminology is still being used by the Reformists, see for example *Isna*, Bahman 5, 1394.

hierarchy. But these tactics did not pay off. Most of the respondents in the survey stated that they had decided to support Ahmadinejad after seeing his campaign's calm and measured responses to harsh attacks (85).

The successful experience of Principlists in 2005 encouraged them to upgrade presidential debates in 2009. The Ahmadinejad campaign – which was running for reelection - was the first to propose a direct debate between the candidates – instead of their surrogates. The most radical Principlist figures, such as Qom MP Hamid Rasaei<sup>246</sup> and Mashhad MP Javad Karimi Ghodousi,<sup>247</sup> backed televised debates. Holding the elections as well as its television coverage were completely under the control of the Principlists, and they felt comfortable in creating some public excitement.

The appetite for debate had intensified in Iran's political arena as well as in public opinion. Universities across the country were the scene of debate events between representatives from opposing and rival political parties. The secretaries of Principlist student organizations, such as the Student Basij and the Islamic Student Association, which were normally against inviting opposition politicians and intellectuals to speak at universities, were now encouraging students to “spread election fever” by holding debates.<sup>248</sup> Rival political groups claimed that they would be easily able to defeat their opponent in debate. In the last days of March, Ahmadinejad's campaign released a formal statement, claiming that Reformist rivals had repeatedly rejected debate offers.

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<sup>246</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 21, 1388.

<sup>247</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 21, 1388.

<sup>248</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 1 and 6, 1388.

Presidential campaigns in Iran operate in a short span of time. Campaigning usually begins in less than two months from election day, in the last days of spring. During this period, candidates must do their utmost to attract public attention and inevitably employ tactics to impress the voters faster.

But the general election in Iran is not just a matter of candidates and their political parties winning or losing. The Iranian regime has also heavily invested in bringing high voter turnout as an indication of its popularity and legitimacy. State TV and other government-affiliated media ran a campaign in tandem with the presidential campaigns with the aim of mobilizing society and increasing voter participation. Metaphors such as “warming up the election oven” (*garm kardan-e tanoor-e entekhabat*) are often being used in Iran’s official political discourse to explain various tactics employed to enthuse the public.

### **Special Programming: Presidential Debate**

In the early days of April 2009, the five-member Commission for Overseeing Presidential Campaigns, which was completely under the control of the Principlists, sent a circular letter to the IRIB telling it to prepare itself for the live broadcast of presidential debates. The justification for this decision was stated as presidential debates would “create excitement”, “show that there is real competition” and thereby help “increase the international reputation of the Islamic regime (*nezam-e eslami*) in the world.”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> *Isna*, Farvardin 23, 1388.

All four candidates welcomed the idea of a debate. In a speech to students of Ahvaz University, Mir Hossein Mousavi, the main Reformist contender, recalled television debates in the early 1980s and said debates represented “an atmosphere of freedom of thought at the beginning of the revolution. We will not lose from this freedom and the clash of ideas. Preventing debate is harmful at every level.”<sup>250</sup>

There was disagreement about how to hold the debates; three of Ahmadinejad’s rival candidates were in favor of holding a group debate with everyone present. However, IRIB officials were insisting on live one-on-one debates between the candidates, and eventually publicly announced their decision without getting the approval of the campaigns. Ezzatollah Zarghami, the then IRIB head, argued that holding a group debate was “less exciting” and not appealing enough to the public.<sup>251</sup>

Ahmadinejad’s campaign strongly welcomed one-on-one debates. The other three candidates faced a *fait accompli* and did not publicly oppose this form of debate, but privately they sent letters of protest to the IRIB chief calling for the cancellation of the debates or having surrogates participate in their place. Ahmadinejad’s campaign leaked the correspondence and took a swing at the Reformists saying that “it is very strange to see the so-called proponents of freedom of expression and those who say people have the right to be informed, oppose such a blessing that is taking place for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic and is in line with the promotion of democracy.”<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> *Isna*, Farvardin 26, 1388.

<sup>251</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 30, 1388.

<sup>252</sup> *Isna*, Khordad 5, 1388.



More conservative politicians in both Reformist and Principlist camps were still concerned about the debates. The election was highly antagonistic, and negative campaigning had caused tensions to peak between the supporters of different candidates. Nevertheless, just two days before the first debate, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, also gave his blessing: "I am not opposed to debate, dialogue and criticism, but everybody must try to do it in the right religious and moral frameworks, the people are mindful, they understand and they judge." Khamenei urged all four candidates to avoid hostility and hatred and not resort to "bashing one another to prove themselves."<sup>253</sup> No one listened to his advice.

The debates were scheduled for the very last week before the election, so it would have the most impact on mobilizing voters.<sup>254</sup> The debate order was determined in a raffle ceremony. General instructions were also given to each campaign asking their candidates "to abide by the established codes of political conduct, and to keep in mind the interests of the regime (*nezam*) in their remarks."<sup>255</sup>

At the last minute, the debate studio design was changed by the order of Zarghami, the IRIB head.<sup>256</sup> A new set was built in four days using azure blue to express peacefulness. The two debaters were to sit behind a round table and across from one another with a large image of the Iran's Supreme Leader hanging in the background. The

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<sup>253</sup> *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Khordad 14, 1388.

<sup>254</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 30, 1388.

<sup>255</sup> *Etemad* newspaper, Khordad 13, 1388.

<sup>256</sup> "Ekhtelaef-e Saligheh dra Tarahi-e Decor Monazerat." *Isna*, Khordad 8, 1392.

IRIB head believed a round table would lighten the mood and make the debate friendlier. Instead of a skilled host, the director of Channel 4 was chosen as the moderator, because they thought that someone with a higher political standing could better manage the debate.<sup>257</sup> This calculation turned out to be wrong. The moderator was too inept to make timely interventions.

The campaigns of the two Reformist candidates – Mousavi and Karroubi – were adept at print advertising, canvassing and street carnivals. But they made little effort to prepare their candidates for the debates. Ahmadinejad, however, had focused on the debates coming off as a “street fighter ready to cut you with both a knife and a smirk” (Malekzadeh). He wanted to portray all of his rivals as the representatives of the establishment’s corrupt front, old guards who are united to oust him as the sole supporter of the underprivileged. Ahmadinejad was able to take full control of the dynamism of the debate, forcing his rivals to dance to his tune. He repeatedly interrupted his opponents, forcing them to snap at him and continue the debate more in an increasingly more direct and frank manner. He would avoid answering at the right time, deflect the subject or use sophistry and manipulated statistics to respond. During one debate, Mehdi Karroubi, a Reformist candidate and former Speaker of the Iranian parliament, mentioned official Central Bank statistics which showed the rising rate of unemployment and increasing annual inflation under the Ahmadinejad administration. Ahmadinejad, however, produced a different set of statistics, claiming the inflation rate had never been as low as in his

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<sup>257</sup> Isna, Khordad 10, 1388.

administration. Frustrated by Ahmadinejad's misleading statistics, Karroubi told him, "Even my *nan-joon* (illiterate grandmother) can feel the current high inflation."<sup>258</sup> Ahmadinejad's behavior even forced the only other Principlist rival Mohsen Rezaei – a former IRGC commander who had pledged to demonstrate the right Islamic debate conduct with tranquility – to engage in the thrilling game of exchanging accusations. Rezaei pointed to Ahmadinejad's attempts to "fudge numbers" and added, "He is changing the unemployment definition and is now counting two hours of work a week as employment. But the Iranian people can judge for themselves."

The election had become the scene of a "sacred jihad" (Ghaneirad 43), and the debates helped amplify and intensify tensions. People were invited to an unprecedented experience: six back to back live and uncensored debates. The supporters of rival candidates rallied in the streets after each television debate which ended at midnight. Ahmadinejad's debate with Mousavi was the peak of these tensions. Ahmadinejad shook papers in front of the camera claiming that they contained proof of Mousavi's wife's nepotistic exploitation. Mousavi reacted with rage, pointing his index finger at Ahmadinejad in a foreboding manner: "We have a phenomenon who stares into the camera and lies." Public attacks on a wife are considered unacceptable and a "cheap shot" in the traditional Iranian decorum. The Reformists invested heavily in Mousavi's reaction, calling it a sign of Iranian masculine zeal (*gheyrat*) and decency (*haya*)" (Sarzaeem 244-244). Ahmadinejad's supporters did not agree, and they believed revealing

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<sup>258</sup> Full video records of the 2009 presidential debates and the 2013 and 2017 are available on Iranian video sharing platform *Aparat*. A transcript is also available on Iranian administration official website, *DOLAT.ir*.

the fraud of a first-degree relative showed Ahmadinejad's courage, and his seriousness in fighting corruption.<sup>259</sup>

Immediately after the vote result was announced, the largest street protests in the history of the Islamic Republic were held in objection to what was called voter fraud and simultaneously the largest political repression since the events following the Islamic Revolution took place. Mousavi's finger gesture pointing to Ahmadinejad during the debate became a prominent visual symbol repeatedly used in the Green Movement protests that erupted in June and continued through July 2009 (see image no. 17).

Would Iran still have witnessed unrest and protests after the 2009 election if the debates had not been aired or if they were organized differently? There is no reliable information to answer these questions without speculation. When tensions are high, presidential debates can increase political polarization. Strikingly, "the greatest polarization resulting from debate exposure occurs in those who are least polarized before they view a debate" (Warner and McKinney 520). The debates helped to provoke public sentiments especially among the Reformist supporters who felt they had not found closure during the debates. Iranian television had promised that these debates would "teach the younger generation of the revolution, free-thinking and correct method of dialogue."<sup>260</sup> But only a week after the election, everyone was talking about the "bitter experience" of the debates<sup>261</sup> and the civility crisis in politics. In the first evaluation after the 2009 debates at

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<sup>259</sup> See *Tabnak*, Khordad 14, 1388; and *Aftab-e Yazd*, Khordad 15, 1388.

<sup>260</sup> "Matn-e Hokm-e Rasmi-e Rayis-e Sdea va Sima." *Isna*, Khordad 10, 1398.

<sup>261</sup> *Isna*, Shahrivar 15, 1388; also see *Etemad* newspaper, Dey 10, 1388.

the Iran Broadcasting University, it was concluded that “the high level of psychological warfare used by candidates, the lack of fairness and refusal to refrain from insulting and ridiculing opponents indicates a considerable gap between the debates that took place and the ideals of Islamic debate” (Belashabadi).

There came a torrent of criticism mostly from conservative clerics arguing that the idea of televised presidential debates is originally Western and unhealthy for Iranian society.<sup>262</sup> Nevertheless, Iran’s Supreme Leader praised the debates as “an important initiative,” saying, “he enjoyed the freedom of speech” he witnessed: “These debates were a punch in the mouth for those from the outside who propagated that election campaigns were staged and unreal. . . . If these kinds of debates continue throughout the year and over the course of four years, they will no longer be explosive during the elections; everything will have been said and heard over time.”<sup>263</sup>

### **Formatting and Reformatting**

Contrary to what is expected from an authoritarian regime, particularly when fighting popular street uprising, not only were the televised debates not canceled but at the height of the 2009 disputes, Iran’s state-run television decided to live broadcast more debate shows. In November a debate was aired over the wrongfulness of the US Embassy takeover between Hossein Shariatmadari, one of the most hardline figures who is the editor-in-chief of the *Keyhan* daily, and Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, a former hostage taker

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<sup>262</sup> *Tabnak*, Tir 16, 1388; also see Farda News, Mehr 2, 1388.

<sup>263</sup> *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Khordad 29, 1388 (ellipses added).

turned repentant. Public opinion was in shock that this debate had been allowed to air. The Reformist *Aseman* weekly ran the headline “Behind the Scenes of the Debate,” and Asgharzadeh himself later admitted he did not believe this debate would actually be broadcast.<sup>264</sup>

In January 2010, once again, Green Movement supporters took to the streets in Tehran and other cities. Violent clashes broke out in Tehran and the country’s Internet was shut down. Concerned about the influence of foreign Persian-language channels, state TV executives suddenly decided to hold a series of debates between opposing political figures hoping this would release some of the accumulated steam from the safety valve.<sup>265</sup> For these debates, a young television presenter who was known for being too radical even in Principlist circles was chosen. In a series of these programs entitled *Be Sooye Farda* (Towards Tomorrow) aired live on Thursdays at 10:30 pm on Channel 3 there were lively, heated discussions between the remaining Green Movement supporters who were not in jail and Principlist politicians. Still many public figures declined the invitation to the debate program on the grounds that it was inappropriate to participate in debates in the “current turbulent” climate (Rouzi Talab 12). At the same time, pressure from the more conservative Principlists led to the program dropping Reformist figures altogether.<sup>266</sup> In one of the programs on “Post-Election Events and Foreign Involvement in the Unrest in Iran,” two Principlist figures – Rouhollah Hosseinian and Alaoddin Boroujerdi – were

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<sup>264</sup> *Mehr News*, Aban 17, 1391.

<sup>265</sup> See Rouzi-Talab for an inner-circle account of the state TV deliberations over holding these debates.

<sup>266</sup> *Ebtekar*, Bahman 11, 1388.

supposedly debating with one another but repeatedly spoke in support of the other's statements and thanked one another. It got to a point where it even drew criticism from Principlist media: "they call a friendly gathering, debate."<sup>267</sup> The show was canceled for four months and once it began airing again the format was changed into a question and answer session with pundits.

Meanwhile, Iran's media atmosphere practically became the scene of a debate about the television debates. Dozens of articles, interviews, and discussions about the pros and cons of debates were published in Iran's print and online media. One of the most fascinating features of these discussions was that one could not easily distinguish the views of Principlists from the Reformists along a simple line. Both factions generally believed that the debates would increase the "ability to accept criticism among officials"<sup>268</sup> and increases "public enthusiasm,"<sup>269</sup> "people's confidence in the regime,"<sup>270</sup> and "public awareness about current affairs."<sup>271</sup> The Reformist press saw debates as a means to "open the country's political atmosphere,"<sup>272</sup> while Principlist press saw debates as "a new tool to promote genuine Islamic dialogue" and "the emergence of truth."<sup>273</sup> Both political

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<sup>267</sup> *Asriran*, Bahman 2, 1388.

<sup>268</sup> *Jam-e-Jam* newspaper, Bahman 7 1338; also see Azar 21, 1391.

<sup>269</sup> *Resalat* newspaper, Bahman 4, 1388.

<sup>270</sup> *Etemad* newspaper, Dey 29, 1388.

<sup>271</sup> *Tabnak*, Khordad 4, 1389.

<sup>272</sup> *Etemad*, Dey 30, 1388.

<sup>273</sup> *Bultan News*, Bahman 7, 1391.

factions criticized the biased TV moderators,<sup>274</sup> believed that the debate topics were general and vague, and that debaters were rude and unfair and used unreliable statistics and examples in order to prove their claims.<sup>275</sup> Yet there was a significant gap in the perception of political factions over who has the right to participate in the television debates. Some Reformists called the shows a “sham,” “artificial debates” in which the two pre-vetted sides had no genuine difference.<sup>276</sup> On the other hand, the more radical Principlists were uncomfortable with “troublesome” figures being invited to the shows. Some argued that “holding a debate when the debate culture is weak in Iran will cause turmoil and crisis.”<sup>277</sup> But others defended the principle of debate and argued that criticism is only directed at how debates are held and the best way to hold debates can only be found through trial and error. The Principlist *Mellat-e Ma* newspaper wrote, “Clashes and even verbal confrontations are normal and they should not be used as excuses to cancel debate shows.”<sup>278</sup> Finally, the IRIB chief insisted that “the leader’s view is [to allow] debates [to continue] to encourage openness to criticism” and that debate shows would continue to be created:<sup>279</sup> “Our main concern should now be institutionalizing debate at

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<sup>274</sup> *Aftab-e Yazd* newspaper, Tir 1, 1388; Farda News, Day 25, 1388.

<sup>275</sup> *Mehr News*, Bahman 11, 1388; Newsban, Aban 22, 1391.

<sup>276</sup> *Ilna*, Mordad 31, 1389.

<sup>277</sup> *Mashregh News*, Azar 29, 1391.

<sup>278</sup> *Melat-e Ma*, Azar 14, 1390.

<sup>279</sup> *Fararu*, Esfand 6, 1388.



the IRIB. We will eventually find our own style," IRIB Deputy Chief Hassan Khojasteh promised.<sup>280</sup>

The 2009 experience placed a new dilemma in front of regime officials, how can they increase voter turnout by increasing excitement while preventing the polarization of the elections? How can they "warm the election oven" without igniting a fire that spreads and burns everything in its path?

Ahead of the 2013 presidential election, these questions were seriously raised for Islamic Republic politicians. Society had not yet recovered from the 2009 trauma and many political activists and ordinary protestors were still in prison. Against this backdrop, once again the conservative body of Principlists tried to prevent the presidential debates from taking place. Even Reformist MPs were cautious; for instance, MP Gholamreza Tajgardoun recalled the 2009 debates, saying, "Given that society has been injured by these debates, more caution is expected in the upcoming election."<sup>281</sup>

But IRIB executives took lessons from the 2012 US Republican primaries and decided to hold debate with all 8 candidates at the same time.<sup>282</sup> The idea was accepted by all political factions. For the first time, a debate code was prepared which candidates had to sign before participating in the program. The new code would give candidates subjected to false accusations during the debate the chance to defend themselves on

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<sup>280</sup> IRIB's internal evaluation report on debate programming: "Barresi Amalkard-e Barnameh-haye Monazereh." 1391

<sup>281</sup> *Isna*, Ordibehesht 29, 1392.

<sup>282</sup> *Isna*, Khordad 12, 1392; also see *Shargh* newspaper, Khordad 12, 1392.

television afterwards. The debate time was increased to 210 minutes, but in practice each candidate had about 20 minutes to speak – almost half of the time they had in 2009. A professional moderator was chosen and given permission to intervene in the discussion and manage the debate based on the responses. It was also decided that the spring semester of universities would be finished sooner so that student bodies would not have the chance to have any election activity – a decision which even drew criticism from the pro-regime student bodies.<sup>283</sup>

These measures were to ensure that in the three rounds of election debates there would be the least amount of confrontation among the eight candidates, unlike in 2009. The first two debates were so boring that it drew criticism not only from the candidates themselves but also the presenters of the state TV. Public opinion mocked the new debate format likening it to the Iranian general quiz show “Weekly Competition.”<sup>284</sup> A political satirist wrote, “They could make the debates more interesting if they eliminated candidates who get the answer wrong just like on Weekly Competition!”<sup>285</sup>

But the third debate – held on Friday June 7, 2013 – suddenly became heated. Not only did the Reformist and Principlists candidates harshly attack each other but the Principlists ones – who were supposed to be in a coalition – also went after one another. The most heated exchange took place between Ali Akbar Velayati, the Supreme Leader’s advisor on international affairs, and Saeed Jalili, Khamenei’s representative on the

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<sup>283</sup> *Hamshahri*, Ordibehesht 10, 1392.

<sup>284</sup> *Fararu*, Khordad 10 1392; and *Jahan News*, Khordad 11, 1392.

<sup>285</sup> *Khabar Online*, Khordad 10, 1392.

Supreme National Security Council and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. Velayati accused Jalili of being incompetent in nuclear negotiations and took a jab at him, saying, "Diplomacy is not a reading statements from behind a table. We have had more problems since you were put in charge." Jalili responded by revealing some of Velayati's mistakes during his tenure as foreign minister. All of a sudden, television audiences were encountering a large amount of information about Iran's foreign policy decisions and performances that had been kept secret from them until that moment. The day after the debate, *Shargh* newspaper ran the headline "Confidential Nuclear Secrets Revealed."<sup>286</sup> The candidates were supposed to portray a calm image of unity and harmony in the Islamic Republic regime, but when they were put in front of the camera, it became personal for them. They aired the dirty laundry that the regime preferred not to be visible in public. The candidates realized that even in the new restrictive debate channels they could navigate and create waves.

### **Keeping it Live!**

Broadcasting electoral debates once again became the hottest topic of national conversation ahead of the 2017 presidential election. It was suddenly announced that the Commission for Overseeing the Campaigns of Presidential Candidates had decided not to broadcast the debates live. The Reformist media initially speculated that the decision was made under pressure from Principlists and their two representatives in the commission – the Prosecutor General and the head of the IRIB. But it soon became clear that the

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<sup>286</sup> *Shargh*, Khordad 18, 1392.

Rouhani's own administration was behind this move. In defense of the decision, the interior minister argued that live debates "multiply the probability of election security problems:" "In any live program, whatever is said is no longer manageable. We saw what was said in the 2009 debates and what impression that left on public opinion, and the price we had to pay and the tensions it created."<sup>287</sup>

In an ironic twist, Principlists unleashed a full-force campaign in defense of live debates. *Kayhan* newspaper dedicated a bold headline to the issue.<sup>288</sup> Rouhani's main rival in the election, Ebrahim Raisi, said in an official statement, "the people have a right to the live broadcast of the debate."<sup>289</sup> The head of the IRIB immediately announced that he strongly opposed the decision while his deputy argued that "Live broadcasting the debates helps raise public confidence in society, marginalizes rumors, and demonstrates the behavior of presidential candidates garbed in this (presidential) vesture, as well as strengthening accountability. Live debate means defending transparency and that knowledge is the right of people."<sup>290</sup> Even the ultra-orthodox Friday Prayers leader of Tehran came to the defense of live broadcasts: "Is it not said that people must become insightful? One of the best ways (to achieve) insight is for the public to see and hear."<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> *Bashgah-e Khabarnegaran-e Javan (YJC.ir)*, Ordibehesht 2, 1396.

<sup>288</sup> *Kayhan*, Ordibehesht 2, 1396.

<sup>289</sup> *Tasnim News*, Ordibehesht 1, 1396.

<sup>290</sup> *Mehr News*, Farvardin 31, 1396.

<sup>291</sup> *Shabestan*, Ordibehesht 1, 1396.

Under pressure from public opinion, the commission quickly backed down and accepted that the debates would be broadcast live.

Supporters of Rouhani's Reformist campaign were confused: in the previous election, the live debates had helped Rouhani, who is skilled at ad lib responses, win. But it was as if the president's fear of provoking public opinion during the election had overpowered his lust for victory. Iran analysts usually follow a simple logic for classifying the positions of political players: Reformists seek to make the public more dynamic, while Principlists like static security. The controversy over the live broadcast of presidential debates showed that these lines were ambiguous. In practice, the Principlists helped institutionalize debates as an important part of the rules of the electoral game.

Very soon, a much more attractive subject caught the attention of the public. President Hassan Rouhani and his VP Eshaq Jahangiri, both decided to run in the elections. There were six candidates in 2017, four of whom were Principlists. The logic for such a decision was that Rouhani would have an assisting team member in the debates.<sup>292</sup> The Rouhani campaign made no attempt to disguise this strategy and from the start promised its base that Jahangiri would withdraw from the race before election day. It was as if winning the debate was more important than winning the election. I do not know of any similar examples in the world where the candidates made such an arrangement. Many of the Rouhani campaign advisers were worried because they feared the Vice President's

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<sup>292</sup> *Irna*, Farvardin 28, 1396.

good performance in the debates would lead people to choose him over Rouhani and his withdrawal from the race would confuse or even alienate some of the voters.

The Principlist candidates were surprised. They gave Jahangiri the nickname “borrowed player” (*yar-e komaki*) for the debate and mocked Rouhani for not being able to handle the debate on his own.<sup>293</sup> One of the Principlist members of the IRIB Supervisory Council even demanded that Jahangir be dropped from the debate: “The debate is like a race in which contestants are not allowed to cheat. You can’t bring five more people to help you.”<sup>294</sup>

As election day approached, negative campaigning from all candidates intensified. Concerned about escalating tensions, the IRGC-affiliated *Javan* daily warned candidates and TV executives against going beyond religious and ethical principles in the upcoming debate and making revelations about one another: “Holding healthy presidential debates is no less important than holding elections.”<sup>295</sup> A few days later, the warning was repeated by Iran’s Supreme Leader: “The debates between the gentlemen should not go so far as to create hostility and resentment . . . [which can] be exploited by the enemy.” Once again no one listened to the Supreme Leader.<sup>296</sup>

To avoid political excitement from the debates from erupting all at once, this time debates were broadcast live for three consecutive weeks at 4:50 pm on Friday afternoons.

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<sup>293</sup> *Resalat*, Ordibehesht 11, 1396.

<sup>294</sup> *Vatan Emrouz*, Ordibehesht 6, 1396.

<sup>295</sup> *Javan*, Ordibehesht 12, 1396.

<sup>296</sup> *Supeme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Ordibehesht 9, 1396 (ellipses added).

In the middle of the debate, there was a 15-minute break to allow candidates to consult with their advisers. At the same time, the break gave TV executives a chance to intervene and ask candidates to behave. At the beginning of the debate, an announcement from Iran's Commission for Overseeing Presidential Campaigns was read out and the candidates were again warned not to "disrespect anyone or they would face punishment."<sup>297</sup>

All these warnings were forgotten as soon as the debates started. For the first time, TV programmers decided to zoom the camera on the candidates' faces, and viewers were able to see all of their facial expressions and body gestures. The candidates exchanged words that, under normal circumstances, are considered regime red lines and unspoken secrets. Personal attacks and revelations filled the entire third and final round of the debates. Perhaps the mere expression of even one of the accusations made in the debate would have been enough to land a journalist or an ordinary citizen in prison. But because of the election and in their quest for seizing executive power, the candidates – all vetted by the Guardian Council as morally fit for the *nezam* – fearlessly attacked one another. A lawmaker who was present in the studio said that some of the candidates were so overwhelmed by the arguments that they suffered a drop in blood pressure and needed something sweet during the break.<sup>298</sup> It was now clear that the Rouhani campaign's strategy for having a "borrowed player" in the debate was successful. One Reformist

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<sup>297</sup> A full record of these debates is available on YouTube and also on the Iranian video sharing platform Aparat.

<sup>298</sup> *Khabar Online*, Ordibehesht 29, 1396.

weekly was so pleased with Jahangiri's performance that it ignored the taboo and reprinted the image of Mousavi pointing his index finger at Ahmadinejad from 2009. Several press reports and even cartoons about these debates portrayed them as boxers or even commando forces combating their enemies (see images no. 20, 21 and 22 for example).

This trend of martialization and "athleticization of the political processes" (see Herbeck 462), is no different than the rest of the world and particularly the United States. Presidential debate programs borrow "ingredients from sports spectacles and entertainment extravaganzas and refashion them into a political event that is *sui generis*" (Schroeder 283). Ali Motahari, a prominent lawmaker, called the debates "cock fighting spurs" for entertaining and "exciting audience." He suspected that the psychological settings of these debates stimulates a form of behavior in the candidates that makes the fight personal. The regime expects of them to be men of character and good manner, to be examples for other Iranians to follow. But in the midst of debate and on TV screens they forget that they are in the presence of *nezam* and that they should abide by the collective identity: "One side says something, and the audience cheers; The other side, in order not to fall behind, says something more radical."<sup>299</sup> In effect, these debates became "the purest forms of the interaction between the candidates and the public" (Skoko 116).

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<sup>299</sup> *Iqna*, Azar 29, 1394.



Were these debates really effective in helping voters decide, or were they, as Rouhani's media adviser put it, "just an entertaining reality show"?<sup>300</sup> The scholarly literature in the United States is highly skeptical that presidential debates would bring a substantial impact on citizens' vote choice (see Stimson; Erikson & Wlezien). The primary function of these debate is not deliberation, rather it is for solidifying a partisan identification – it is not to make the audience persuadable; rather it is to make them more resistant toward, and unpersuadable by rival messages. But conditions in Iran are different. A survey conducted by Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA) – a center that is known for providing reliable and sound data – estimates that 53 percent of the population – about 40 million people – watched the debates,<sup>301</sup> and that half of them were undecided before the third and final debate.<sup>302</sup> A study on the impact of the 2013 debates on college students across the country found that almost all of the sentences that were remembered from the election campaigns were related to the presidential debates (Sharifi et al.). Another study that sampled the residents of Tehran's District 4 – which has diverse cultural and political demographics– concluded that debate is the most effective way of persuading voters, and that the most important criteria people consider in evaluating debaters is their ability for quick responses and their eloquence (Najafi et al.). The results of these studies are not surprising. Political orientation in Iran is very fluid, and only slightly more than 10% of

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<sup>300</sup> *Iana*, Ordibehesht 6, 1396.

<sup>301</sup> The IRIB claims that 77% of people across the country watched at least one of the debates, *Irna*, Khordad 16, 1396.

<sup>302</sup> *Etemad*, Khordad 9, 1396; also see ISPA's official Telegram Chanel (@ispa95) reports on the polls from May 4 to May 19, 2017.

Iranians consider themselves politically affiliated with one of the Reformist or Principlist factions (Harris & Tavana). More than half of the voting population makes their decision in the one-month period prior to election based on what they have learned about the candidates.<sup>303</sup> As mentioned earlier, high voter turnout in elections, especially for presidential race, matter for the Iranian regime. Presidential debates could potentially create the conditions that increase the possibilities for encouraging higher public participation. A considerable portion of Iranians, particularly those who constitute the Reformist's base, are cynical about elections. They regard elections as window dressing, a staged exhibition of democracy without necessarily granting substantial change in political directions of the country. Ironically, staging television debates display a sense of realness – that disagreements between political elites are real, and, thus, may generate radically different policies. The limited research in the United States also shows that presidential debates increase the chances of political engagement among cynical citizens: the more they become “confident in their political knowledge, they are more likely to vote; and those who have less political cynicism are more likely to vote” (McKinney & Warner 254).

The shortness of the campaign period forces campaigns to try and mobilize their supporter base and impress potential voters as fast as possible. This is why as election day draws closer, candidates become bolder in crossing political red lines. In addition, candidates are no longer hidden behind their campaigns in presidential debates, and thus are under mounting pressure to prove their ethos to voters even at the cost of undermining

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<sup>303</sup> *ISPA*, Ordibehesht 3, 1396.

the regime's desirable public persona. In the words of Amir Mohebian, a prominent Principlist writer, the candidates "take an ax to the roots of the revolution tree and its achievements to gather votes."<sup>304</sup> In an interview several months after the election, Ezzatollah Zarghami, the former IRIB chief who started the presidential debates, said that "the price the establishment paid as a result of the debates in 2009, 2013 and 2017 was too high." But in his opinion the bigger problem is the election itself which "has turned into the bane of our existence."<sup>305</sup> For the Islamic Republic, a desirable election debate should be similar to drinking decaffeinated coffee, "it tastes like coffee but you are not supposed to get a high caffeine buzz from it" (Eshraghi). They plan hard to generate this decaffeinated condition by adopting an optimal format and question content. But, ultimately, these measures have not been enough to discipline candidates' behavior once they are live on television.

### **Some Like it Hot!**

Media policymakers, and especially Iranian television executives, have faced a challenging dilemma with regards to debate. On the one hand, they worry that debate would provoke public sentiment, destroy national harmony, and lead to the expression of things that are best left unspoken. On the other hand, they are well aware of the appeal of this genre of television programming – which is, also, the cheapest. Many Principlist figures have attempted to argue that debate will ultimately strengthen the national

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<sup>304</sup> *Ana*, Farvardin 29, 1396.

<sup>305</sup> *Arman Emrooz*, Ordibehesht 15, 1397.

unanimity (*vefagh-e meli*). Take famous television presenter Morteza Heidari, for example: “Debates do not cause unrest, on the contrary they reassure, soothe, and drain people’s potential for excitability. You watch TV and you feel like someone is saying what you want to say, and you feel . . . a sense of relief but if you feel that no one is saying what you want to say and no one has heard it you might shout it on the streets.”<sup>306</sup> Reza Talaei-Nik, a deputy with the Expediency Council Secretariat, makes a similar argument, “Conflicts of opinion [resulting from debate] in the country, limit the scope of foreign media influence and thwart their plots and play an effective role for Iran in soft war.”<sup>307</sup>

At first Iran television evaded showing disagreements between Iran’s political elites and viewed it as detrimental to political stability of the regime. However since 2009 it has taken slow steps to portray more and more disagreements, though in a managed, mediated, and contained manner. Media policymakers reached a consensus that debate could “play a legitimizing function for the political system” (Athari 9).

The first regular debate-oriented program – entitled *Zavieh* (The Angle) – began to air on a weekly basis from Channel 4, just three years after the Green Movement protest crisis abated. Channel 4 offers cultural and academic programs for a highly educated audience and respectively has the lowest number of viewers among IRIB channels. The debate topics in the program often are often coated with academic jargon yet represent fundamental disputes that exist between the Reformist intellectuals and the Principlist

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<sup>306</sup> *Khabar Online*, Ordibehesht 31, 1392 (ellipses added).

<sup>307</sup> *Tabnak*, Dey 28, 1388; also see the interview with Pour-Mohamadi, IRIB’s former deputy chief, in *Didban*, Azar 28, 1391.

public figures – topics such as feminism, secularism, or contrasts between rationalism and scholastic seminary thought. The head of the IRIB and his deputy for television were directly involved in the selection of debate topics and guests to ensure this new way of television programming would not land them in hot water.<sup>308</sup> One of the behind-the-scenes concerns for TV officials was that even the moderators and participants in the debate program, were still very hesitant to utter the term *monazereh* (debate), and instead often used words such as *mobaheseh* (discussion) and *miz-e gerd* (roundtable) that imply less confrontational discursive practices.<sup>309</sup>

IRIB-affiliated research centers simultaneously launched different studies to find the optimal method of producing debate-oriented programs. On the one hand, foreign examples – especially from the United States, United Kingdom and France – were examined, and on the other hand, ways of reconciling debate with Islamic doctrines were placed on the agenda.<sup>310</sup> And yet, sometimes, recommendations were made to make the debate program more inclusive, which is noteworthy even in comparison with the experiences of countries such as the UK and the US, for instance giving equal opportunity to debaters “who are not verbally fluent” on the grounds that the national television “should not exclude people who have strong arguments but are inarticulate.”<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> *Isna*, Dey 19, 1391.

<sup>309</sup> IRIB’s internal evaluation report: “Barresi Amalkard-e Barnameh-haye Monazereh.” 1391. (The author was able to obtain a few of IRIB internal documents and memos as they are referred to further in this chapter.)

<sup>310</sup> For instance, see the two internal reports written by Mahboubeh Ali Mohammadi, a staff expert at the IRIB Research Center.

<sup>311</sup> IRIB’s internal evaluation report: “Barresi Amalkard-e Barnameh-haye Monazereh.” 1391.

Immediately after the 2013 presidential debates ended, a weekly show – plainly called *monazereh* – was launched on Channel 1 to offer debates over the country’s major political, social and economic issues. This program is still being aired on a weekly basis. Initially, the same set from the 2013 presidential debates was used for the show. In order to find a “unique model that fits the cultural and social conditions of Iran”,<sup>312</sup> various considerations were taken into account in the planning study for the show such as how many moderators should be used? what role should the moderator play and what qualifications should she or he have? what questioning methods should be used? the set for the show, the seating arrangement for the debaters, duration, number of guests, etc. were considered. Ultimately it was decided that at least five people should participate in the debate to “reduce the likelihood of tension between the debaters by dividing the talk-time.” An IRIB planning report even had tips on how to minimize possible tension: “The set design and the seating arrangement for debaters must be in a manner that minimizes tension on the show: debaters must sit side-by-side, and not across from one another. This corresponds better with Iranian culture which prefers the display of peacefulness and respectfulness (*aberoo-dari*) and strives to resolve disputes in private.” The length of the program was set for two and a half hours so that participants would not feel that because of time constraints they must communicate their views in a way that quickly impress

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<sup>312</sup> IRIB’s internal planning report: “Estekhrāj-e Moalefeh-haye Tahlili-e Monazereh.” 1392.

viewers. The show was set to air Friday nights at 11 pm, the weekend in Iran, a time when many people do not watch TV.<sup>313</sup>

Such conservative measures have, of course, led to criticism within the body of television executives. The author of another internal evaluation report expressed concern that people view the debate programs as theatrically staged and “regime-ordered” (*farmayeshi*). That is why the author recommends that debates must be “hot and challenging” (*dagh va chaleshi*) in order to make them more appealing to viewers. The author advises reducing the number of debaters and making them, in the best-case scenario, one-on-one debates as well as trying to choose two debaters with the widest possible differences in their positions. The author also stresses that the moderator must remain “impartial” and, because s/he guesses impartiality would be hard to digest for the Principlist IRIB executives, continues: “Although this may have unintended and unpleasant consequences, accepting these costs in order to obtain the major blessing of national union at this critical junction and in the age of communications is unavoidable.”<sup>314</sup> Another IRIB researcher recommends reducing the duration of the debate program and giving it a faster pace. “A fast pace and maintaining the thrill of the debate is key to keeping viewers in front of TVs.”<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> IRIB’s internal planning report: “Estekhraj-e Moalefeh-haye Tahlili-e Monazereh.” 1392.

<sup>314</sup> IRIB’s internal evaluation report: “Amalkard-e Barnameh Monazereh az Manzar-e Elghay-e Yek Bahs-e Vagheyi.” 1392.

<sup>315</sup> “Tadvin-e Olgooy-e Bargozari Monzereh-haye Entekhabati.” *IRIB Research Center*, 1394.

Some of these recommendations were eventually implemented. For instance, the duration of the show was reduced to 90 minutes. The opening statements by debaters were also dropped from the show and the airtime was changed to 11 am on Friday morning, when more people watch TV. The first series of debate programs were filmed without a studio audience. Gradually a limited number of people were allowed to sit in the audience. The majority of audience members were men, with a few women appearing in the dimly-lit back row.

Debate as one of the talk-oriented genres of television programming now exists on all Iranian television channels. Even the news channel, *Shabkeh Khabar*, has tried to offer news analysis packages featuring experts with different views and positions. Television officials have also ordered provincial channels to incorporate debate shows on local issues into their programming until 2020.<sup>316</sup> Many of the most important and current issues of society, over which there is real disagreement, are discussed in television debate shows. There have been many instances in which one of the debaters has said things contrary to the Iranian regime's political codes of public expression. Soundbites of these beyond-the-red-lines expressions are usually circulated for a long time on social media, especially on Twitter and Telegram.<sup>317</sup> However, the fundamental foundations of the regime are never the subject of debate, and there is never an opportunity to criticize and scrutinize them. The topics of debate are about the governing of the country and not its ruling.

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<sup>316</sup> *Fars News*, Bahman 9, 1392.

<sup>317</sup> For example, a video clipped from Zavieh debate show went viral during the 2018 popular protests, in which a dissident sociology professor blames the state-run television for "systematically lying and manipulating people." See *Tabnak*, Dey 16, 1396.



As of February 2018, a seemingly new debate-oriented program was added to Channel 3's broadcast schedule which sought to show that criticizing everything is free in the Iranian regime. The official trailer of the program said: "We talk about taboos here, we want to challenge the Islamic Republic's *raison d'etre* forty years after its establishment." The producer and moderator of the show *Bi-Tavaghof* (Nonstop) was initially Rahimpour Azaghadi – a Principlist celebrity who is remarkably notorious for his dishonest and manipulative tricks. Initially the program was pre-recorded and edited. The program featured a number of youth – all men who had been carefully handpicked – sitting around a table discussing various political issues with Rahimpour. The Iranian media – often Reformist but even some Principlists – published many critiques of the program's staged nature. *Etemad* newspaper even pointed out that the young debaters on the show had been handpicked and wrote, "They are insulting people's intelligence, they have chosen a group of people whose appearance shows they have no difference of opinion with Rahimpour and they ask pre-designed questions and at the end of the program they show that everyone had become convinced!"<sup>318</sup>

The broadcast was suspended for a while and the moderator was changed. The new program which has an attractive set began airing on a daily basis in February 2019. Depending on the subject of each program, a respondent was placed in the central seat. Six critics, selected from among individuals who responded to an official call by state TV to participate in the program, challenge the respondent. A 50-member studio audience is

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<sup>318</sup> *Etemad*, Esfand 5, 1396.

present and they can express their opinion in allocated time slots as well as raising cards to show whether they agree or disagree with positions and arguments. Respondents are still chosen from among vetted Principlist figures, for instance Imam Sadeq University professors, a spokesman for the Guardian Council and the head of the Islamic Promotion Organization (IPO).<sup>319</sup> There is no opportunity for one-on-one debate in the program. The six critics have to summarize their opinion, and the respondent then gives a lengthy speech in their response. Nonetheless, for the first time, the most sensitive political issues were raised on national television: the legitimacy of *velayat-e faqih*, the enforcement of hijab and the restriction on the right to run for elections in Iran. And for the first time, Iranian television showed a studio audience, who to an extent represents diversity of thought and appearance in society – young women whose hair is showing and young men wearing colorful foreign t-shirts. The program’s new advertisement tells the viewer, “You can be comfortable here and ask any question you want without censorship.” The producers of the show justify the new format by citing the Supreme Leader’s insistence on promoting “free thinking” in the country.<sup>320</sup> But the ending of the show is clear: regime-vetted spokesmen give seemingly convincing answers to questions. This is the updated version of the same old model that, in the regime’s Islamic vocabulary, responding to *shobhe*. A citizen can raise a *shobhe* and asks doubt-inducing question only in the presence of an expert who can deliver convincing answer and clear all qualms. In the

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<sup>319</sup> An archive of aired programs is available on *IRIB Chanel 3* official website (TV3.ir).

<sup>320</sup> *Fars News*, Mehr 3, 1397.

old format, *shobhe* was only supposed to be expressed in a contained setting and in the presence of a limited audience. But the upgraded mechanism proactively stages *shobhes* on the widest public screen provided that the conclusion is in favor of the official position.

“Debate programs are the national broadcaster’s winning ticket in attracting viewers.” This is the opening sentence of a 2018 internal evaluation report commissioned by Iranian state TV to assess the quality of its debate programs.<sup>321</sup> The anonymous author of the report points to the Iranian regime’s media challenges saying: “As we face the predicament of foreign satellite channels and the serious cultural, political and religious threats they pose in our time, broadcasting debates is very important. By sitting officials across from the people debates give people the feeling of having a live relationship with political affairs. It gives people a sense of participation and involvement in governing the country, and thereby strengthens solidarity with the government. . . . Debate induces a sense of being present at the event in the audience. It is a very pleasant sense.” In conclusion of the report, the author cautions that the control of debate must remain in the hands of television program creators: “In new programming, we must beware that television debate programs does not become televised debates.”

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<sup>321</sup> IRIB’s internal evaluation report: “Motaleah-ye Charchoob-e Yek Monazereh-ye Rasmi Televisioni.” 1396.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The Islamic Republic of Iran has just turned 40 years old. Forty in Islamic literature has a symbolic meaning. It signifies becoming a grown up, an age when one reaches intellectual maturity, and resolves inner self debates about one's identity and destiny.<sup>322</sup> This is an ideal that some of Iran's Principlist ruling elites – with high authoritarian tendencies – have pondered for years and must now be displeased that things are not calm and that their remarks are not considered the final say on matters.<sup>323</sup> Over the past three decades, literature on Iran - whether in academia or in media - has given much attention to the efforts by the civil society and the Reformist elites within the state to democratize and expand the discursive field in the country. These efforts are usually evaluated in the form of a simple dichotomy of democratic struggle versus authoritarian resistance. Such a framework does not allow us to identify and analyze trends that “may take place even under the most authoritarian conditions” (Tezcür 201) and may ultimately result in opportunities for expressing dissent and disagreement in public. Over the past four decades and through trial and error, the Iranian regime has attempted to contain and channel

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<sup>322</sup> The Islamic texts usually refer to Quran for the significance of reaching forty years of age: “[He grows] until, when he gains maturity and reaches forty years [...]” (Surah al-Ahqaf 46.15). It is also believed that Mohammad became prophet and received the first revelations when he reached forty.

<sup>323</sup> See for example *Javan's* editorial on Bahman 14, 1397. The issue of identity was also raised during a seminar on the 40th anniversary of revolution held at a center associated with Iran's Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution: One speaker warned about the ongoing “disagreements” and “diverging interoperations over the identity” of the Islamic Republic (see *SCCR.ir*, Tir 18, 1398).

debate in various spheres and scopes, sometimes deliberately and with preplanning, and sometimes retroactively in response to contingent situations.

In the media, the regime has used its judicial capacities to increase the cost of expressing disagreement for the print press and to prevent dissident voices from becoming institutionalized. However, the very judicial process that the regime developed to counter print press was exceedingly public, which in turn led to generating new heated debates about issues such as the legal limits of freedom of expression, fair trials and judicial independence which were simultaneously discussed and pursued in the same media. In academia, the regime tried to institutionalize sterilized forms of scholarly and intellectual debates – forms that would not provide opportunities for student mobilization or diffusion of critical intellectual discourses. However, those speeches that were generated and expressed from within these complex and repeatedly revised forms and formats of debate still undermined the moral and political legitimacy of the regime. Principlists who have been running national television, the primary source of entertainment and political news for most Iranians (Harris & Tavana), designed and broadcast presidential debates and other debate shows in order to increase the regime's prestige and display a spectacle of dissenting views. But even the most trusted regime officials behaved in a manner that provoked public sentiments and challenged the regime's desired political behaviors. In the meantime, the dissidents and revisionist elites have tried to seize the opportunities provided by these various debate venues, and express their opposition to the regime. These sites – the print press, academia and television – continue to be a battleground where the ruling elite and dissidents struggle over the expansion or shrinkage of public

debate. Both sides have remained disenchanted with this struggle. However, public debate has not only persistently survived as one of the characteristics of the Islamic Republic regime, it has become more dynamic and contentious over the past decades.

What does this now constantly swelling amount of debate in public mean for a country that is not a democracy? "Democracy and dictatorship have been viewed as methods for solving social problems," Milton Dickens wrote in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1947: "Thus, the characteristic role for individuals in a democracy is participation; in a dictatorship, obedience. The chief technique for securing participation is group discussion; that for securing obedience is propaganda" (156). The case of debate in the Islamic Republic of Iran challenges the functions ascribed to debate and usually manifested in and associated with Western democracies (for example see Keith's *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement* in which he defines democracy as "governance through talk" 2). A major trend in the Western theories of rhetoric and democracy presumes that antagonism leads to expression, and in turn expression prompts a more pluralist public and hopefully a more democratic setting for civic participation. Public controversies are considered as the loci of critical diversification and innovation (Dascal & Chang xv). Democratic theories posit debate as the privileged form of discursive practice "on the assumption that different views must be laid open to public scrutiny if the best decision about action is to be reached" (Goldhill 2). The prevalent notion is that deliberation and democracy go hand in hand. It not only assigns public debate to democracies (Carpini et al. 316), but also presumes that democracies nourish from and flourish in a civil culture that appreciates and practices

discussion and debate (Almond & Verba 338). Iran begs to differ, that debate and deliberation could not only be permissible under authoritarian regimes but could even be initiated or encouraged by such regimes.

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has been heavily engaged with developing rhetorical performances and pedagogies and negotiating norms of public speech and exchange. The case of Iran defies the implicit bias that considers the existence of debate and conflict as a sign of strength and sustainability for a democratic system and decadence and erosion for an authoritarian one. Paraphrasing Carole Blair, the worth of rhetorical theories is based on their competence and aptitude making “rhetorical practices understandable” (420). The field is still largely dominated with theories and assumptions that confines rhetoric to the context of the development of democratic institutions and ignores other historical trajectories as well as possibilities for different processes of communication and, specifically, persuasion (see Longaker 215-217; also Logan 10). The relationship between rhetoric and socio-political order is not a linear one. Different rhetorical performances could function under participatory frames and forms of politics. But adopting and developing participatory forms of discursive practices may not necessarily bring about a more inclusive and democratic conditions and styles of politicking.

### **The Dilemma of Endurance**

In Iran, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the state has been directly involved in the introduction and formation of modern debate. In the 1930s, Reza Shah, a secular autocrat, attempted to reduce the influence of religious elites by introducing western rhetoric and

debate and to foster a new generation which was in line with his efforts to modernize the country. Seventy years later, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, initiated a similar project, this time to counter the influence of secular intellectuals and nurture desirable citizens for the Islamic Republic.

The reasons that are explicitly or implicitly given in the statements made by Islamic Republic officials about the necessity of teaching and practicing debate are very similar to the ones repeatedly used to justify debate in literature on rhetoric and democracy. Iran's official website for Student Debate Competitions introduces debate as a "dialogical and interactive form of participation" that "increases the capacity of society for exposure to difference of opinion" and, as a result, helps "cultivate a trained and educated public capable of critical thinking, deliberation and making reasoned choices."<sup>324</sup> Such an assumption is akin to the Western understanding of debate as a "civic virtue," or as a "technology of citizenship" (Greene and Hicks 106). It is along the same line that editors of the journal *Argumentation and Advocacy* write in their introduction to the special Issue on Civic Education in Competitive Speech and Debate on the "important role" that "debate training can play in preparing young people for responsible and engaged citizenship" (Hogan and Kurr 83; also see Herrick; Kock & Villadsen; Day; Benson; McDorman & Timmerman). We can compare this with the official website of the Iranian debate competitions which states its mandate as "developing the culture of dialogue,"

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<sup>324</sup> See "Darbareh Mosabeghat." *Iran Student Debate Competition Official Website (ISDC.ir)*.



“forming critical and creative thinking,” and “encouraging society to become informed.”<sup>325</sup>

Iranian officials sometimes point out other objectives as well. For example, Hesamodin Ashna, a current advisor to President Rouhani and the former deputy minister of the intelligence ministry, points to the lack of rhetorical training among citizens and says in 2009 this was why a demagogue (referring to Ahmadinejad) won: “If we don’t increase the people’s knowledge of analyzing debate, individuals can use populist reasoning and sophistry to cast themselves, despite having no roots, as the servants and saviors [of the people].”<sup>326</sup> Interestingly, now we hear the same argument in the United States that emphasizes teaching rhetoric and debate to citizens as the main way to prevent results like the 2016 elections which led to Donald J. Trump’s victory (Matheson).

If practicing debate makes people “better critical thinkers” and ultimately “cultivates capacities for democratic citizenship” (Lundberg 303), then why does Iran’s regime promote such practice? Why does it want to teach citizens to be critical of their government? A limited number of scholars (e.g., Moslem; Brownlee; Lachapelle; Ansari; Keshavarzian; Chehabi) consider the existence of public debate in Iran as one of the characters of the Islamic Republic that separates it from other authoritarian regimes. But why should such a regime create trouble for itself by allowing debate to take place especially when it has seen its dangerous costs and destabilizing results? It is against the

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<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>326</sup> “Aghaz-e Tafakkor-e Eslami ba Davat be Andishidan.” *Iran Student Debate Competition Official Website (ISDC.ir)*, Dey 1, 1394.

expected behavior of an authoritarian regime which, as Isaiah Berlin said, should “eliminate the very habit of questioning as subversive” (quoted in Jahanbegloo 93). Some of these costs are not just a threat to the power and legitimacy of the regime but also – and because of the inability of elites involved in the debate to manage the conflict – put the security of the nation-state at risk.

To answer this question Brownlee has looked at the structure of the Iranian regime and considers debate in Iran to be the result of divisions in Iranian politics and persistent elite factionalism that, unlike other revolutionary regimes, has existed since the inception of the Islamic Republic. One can add to this explanation by saying that factions in the regime look at debate as a form of conflict resolution – a civic process of bringing together parties in conflict. A collateral consequence of having debate as such is that each political faction takes its issues and reasoning to the public and tries to find allies and supporters outside the closed circle of the ruling elite (Geddes 320-324). On the other hand, marginalized and excluded parts of the public exploit the ongoing debate between factions as an opportunity to insert their own arguments and trigger dynamics of transition (Schedler 35 and 48). Brownlee, however, correctly points out that regime elites have not formulated and developed well-established mechanisms to moderate the debate and “mediate interfactional conflict” (157) and therefore “debates escalate into battles for political life or death” (41).

But this analysis cannot explain why the Principlist faction, which has a monopoly over repression, does not opt for terminating, or at least silencing, the disruptive disputations in public. Even at times when the opportunity for consolidating power existed

(for example after the 2009 presidential elections) various forms of public debate and expression of dissent were still permitted and even encouraged. Factionalism is common feature of various authoritarian settings such as the Soviet Union (Rigby), China (Hillman), and even North Korea (Kristof). But elites in these regimes carefully tried not to make their disputes public as it undermines the facade of cohesion, stability and unity that the regime intends to display.

Other scholars have pointed to the regime's constitutional and normative character and its simultaneous emphasis on Islam and republicanism (Boroujerdi; Brumberg; Gheissari and Nasr). But this explanation is also not fully satisfying. The majority of the world's autocratic countries have constitutions that protect freedom of expression and freedom to dissent (Bhagwat 64). North Korea's constitution proclaims that, "Citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, demonstration and association (Green et al. 398). The Ba'athist Iraq's 1970 Constitution had also many republican and democratic features which were never respected and never fueled a debate. Political agents have the power to enforce or ignore the constitution – to quote Orwell "the law is no protection" (40).

Another explanation could be that the Islamic Regime has made a rational and strategic choice of co-opting debate, using it as a fashioned form of channeled pluralism – an institutionally mediated form of expressing dissent while confining and containing its more potentially radical and disruptive forces that may lead to political mobilization and collective action (see Gandhi 180-188; and King et al 328-330). Scholars of China have even coined new terms, such as "authoritarian deliberation" (Hess); "phantom

democracies" (Keane); and "consultative authoritarianism" (Truex) to explain this intentional regime-sponsored project of providing a limited space for public debate. Here debate functions as a "safety valve" that permits disgruntled citizens to "blow off steam" (Bhagwat 91-95). It benefits the regime "both to monitor and gauge, but also to engage the populace so that they have a sense that they are being heard" (Keane 39). Debate can even help the regime to "disorganize citizens if they find themselves split over government policies" (Chen & Xu). Such interpretation is similar to Habermas' discussion of "representative publicness" (5) as if debate is theatrically staged and demonstrated for citizens in order to increase public participation and provide legitimacy to the regime.

The scope of permissible debate in China is still very narrow and invariably dominated by micro policies, local matters and apolitical issues (see Lei; He; and Jiang). In contrast, Iran has witnessed extremely heated and contentious discussions over the highest national policies and ideological canons. Still the cost-benefit question remains: maintaining, managing and mediating channels of expressing dissent is an expensive endeavor and it needs high level of sophistication. Moreover, Iran's regime has learned that even contained debate has the potential of being exploited and threatening the social and political stability; it has learned that it cannot control the flow and direction of conversation and expression; and that it may lead to unknown consequences. Why not opt for a cheaper and simpler form of securing popular obedience as many other authoritarian regimes do? (e.g. see Wedeen's discussion on Syria's strict guidelines for public speech and behavior; also see Abbott & Givens' analysis of Malaysia's strategic censorship.)

The structural, constitutional, and instrumental frames cannot provide a fully satisfying explanation of why lively political discussion and dissent exist and endure in Iran. But combined together, these frames of analysis shed light on important aspects and features of the Islamic Republic and is a benefit to the growing body of literature that deals with understanding the syncretic and kaleidoscopic quality of “hybrid regimes” (Abdolmohammadi & Cama) and other similar coined terms such as “limited democracies” (Collier and Levitsky), “partial democracies” (Goldsmith), “praetorian democracies” (Singh & Bailey), “illiberal democracies” (Zakaria), “inclusionary autocracies” (Neundorf et al) or “competitive autocracies” (Zaccara) – terms that are often used to explain Iran’s political regime.

There is another possibility to explore, using Occam’s razor, that dissent and disagreement is built into the system. To quote Orwell again, “If large numbers of people are interested in freedom of speech, there will be freedom of speech, even if the law forbids it” (40). One can look at Iran’s historically constructed argumentative culture and the theological and epistemological assumptions and traditions associated with debate. A culture that favors debate and open deliberation and praises it as a civic discursive practice, as *al-jidal al-ahsan*. The Shia scholastic tradition endorses disputation among insiders and considers disagreement between “properly trained seminary intellectuals” a blessing (*rahmat*) for the community (Kurzman 341-343). It also craves for debating with outsiders, assuming that with the force of reason (*hojjat*) on its side, it can overcome any adversary. But, at the same time, it conceives truth as something predetermined before debate; that debate can only help it become revealed or excavated. Thus anyone who has

an open mind, “a pure heart without bias (*gharaz*) or illness (*maraz*),” and “a pious character” should accept the righteous conviction (*Marefat*). And if one’s convictions are true, one can resort to force and violence to suppress dissent and banish the other side during or after the debate. If difference of opinion is not resolved through *monazereh*, then the righteous side should be identified through *mobaheleh* to resolve the conflict.

Islamic Republic officials have repeatedly quoted Ayatollah Khomeini as saying, “We have *hojjat*. One who has *hojjat* is not afraid of freedom of expression. But we will not allow conspiracy.<sup>327</sup>” In *kalam* literature, *hojjat* is used in its conventional definition, as a line of argument, or as a proof appealing to reason. But in Shia jurisprudence discourse, *hojjat* finds a sublime meaning: it becomes the decisive and irrefutable proof that an opponent is compelled to accept (Manouchehri and Moradi 168-172). Based on such an interpretation, the failure of persuasion indicates the opponent’s intention to conspire against the truth: “A debate and disputation that is based on bias (*gharaz*) and illness (*maraz*) and indicates of conspiratorial and menacing [intentions], constitutes [the charge of] corrupting (*efsad*) and must be suppressed” (*Marefat* 163).

Such assumptions behind debate in Iran are similar to the Puritan concept of rhetoric and debate which, as Roberts-Miller argues, has had an important influence in the formation of the public sphere in the contemporary United States. She asks, “Why do Americans have so much trouble disagreeing productively?” (“Voices in the Wilderness” 168). And the answer she finds through analyzing the impact of Puritan culture is that

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<sup>327</sup> “Sokhanrani dar Madreseh-e Feyzieh Qom.” *Esfand* 10, 1357. Available in *Sahaifa*, Vol 6 p 277.

debate was conceived as a battleground of good and evil. It is a culture strongly drawn to the ethos of a lone but confident “voice in the wilderness:” “a good person will demonstrate his/her integrity by acting like Isaiah (or John the Baptist), announcing a hard truth to which all right-thinking people must assent” (7). One can see remarkable similarities with this analogy in Iran’s historically constructed culture of debate embedded in the religious understanding of self, society and truth. This understanding has created a paradoxical situation for debate in the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, the regime’s normative notions force it to embrace public debate and boast that it does not fear freedom of expression and it can convince opponents through reason. On the other hand, as soon as it fails in persuasion it becomes frustrated and swings to silence or to end the dispute by other means.

### **Debate and Its Discontents**

The current state of public debate in Iran and the United States has an interesting similarity. Both countries are trapped in a discursive deadlock; animated and fevered debates over small and big issues are ongoing in the public sphere but disputes, rather than being resolved, pile up and multiply. The impasse leads to despair. Helplessness and inability to drive the discussion becomes frustrating, deepens discord and division, and ultimately fuels hatred and violence.

Both Iranian and American cultures are self-consciously discursive. Though, one appreciates frankness and exchanging explicit codes of communication in public (rhetoric of “what gets said”), while the other admires subtleness and refinement and enjoys discovering the implicit signs of speech (rhetoric of “how gets said”). Both cultures value a

form of debate that brings unanimity and both dismiss disharmony and conflict as something abnormal. Yet both are capable of creating a condition in which public debate turns into an antagonistic battle between enemies, rather than an agonistic exchange between opponents. This condition imposes a dualistic framing on debate that, far from bringing harmony, deepens conflict and creates crisis—a crisis that does not necessarily seek a discursive solution. It generates a condition in which, as Ivie and Giner describe, “a rhetorical art of democratic dissent,” is substituted for “a debased rhetoric that demonizes otherness” and responds to dissent with repression (142).

In the United States, this crisis is often interpreted and pathologized either under the discourse of civility (e.g. see Herbst; Boatright et al, Thiranagama et al.) or America’s adversarial culture (Tannen) and its religious traditions (Roberts-Miller). In Iran, however, this problem is articulated in a more radical form, as a crisis of dialogue. In the 1990s and 2000s, Iranian intellectuals and political elites were obsessed with issues such as economic development, the modernization of social order and behavior, good governance, freedom, civil society, and democracy. These issues were regarded as the most important national problematics or *mozalat-e melli*. At the beginning of the 2020s, and as Iran enters a new century, the 1400s in the Persian solar calendar, none of these problems have yet been resolved. But now all of them are being interpreted under the overarching problematic of dialogue. The pathological narrative presented by Iranian intellectuals and politicians paradoxically views dialogue as a *pharmakon*, as if it is both poison and cure. On the one hand, they express concern about the ubiquitous and unending state of debates in the country, and on the other hand, dialogue is considered a



necessity for the nation-state to exit this crisis. At the same time, the lack of conditions of possibility for proper dialogue, due to a deficiency of necessary skills and cultural etiquette is viewed as an obstacle to meeting this need.

Polity and public sphere have both become more contentious and quarrelsome in Iran than ever before. In the past decades, some areas, occasions, topics and persons were left out of the debate. But now everything has become disputable. A television program, broadcast on January 8, 2020 to commemorate the Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani five days after his assassination by the United States, quickly became the scene of intense clashes between the high-ranking guests over Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Disputation has become an ever-present and everyday situation in Iran. In the past, rank and file forces were tasked by the regime's top officials and upstream institutions to do the arguing. The heads of the regime (*saran-e nezam*) tried to maintain the appearance of amity and respect for one another in public. But now everyone is debating with everyone else – a situation that Abbas Abdi, a renowned Iranian political columnist, calls a “tribunal feud” (*neza-haye teribooni*).<sup>328</sup> Most interesting is that the discursive interaction in Iran has become much franker and more direct. The Iranian rhetorical culture has for centuries used verbal subtleties and rhetorical techniques such as ambiguity, irony, and allegory to draw the venom out of speech and reduce tension, but now blatant language and sharpness of the tongue have become more visible in the confrontation.

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<sup>328</sup> Derived from the French word *Tribune*, in Farsi *teriboon* usually connotes an official platform with a megaphone given to a speaker. See Abdi, Abbas "Posht-e Pardeh Neza-haye Teribooni dar Iran." *Fararu*, Bahman 12, 1398.

The social Media has exponentially increased the opportunities for expressing dissent and disagreement, but it has also increased the granularity of debate. In recent years, important research has been conducted on the damaging effects of social media on democracies, and particularly on the democratic public sphere (e.g. see Sunstein; Ceron & Vincenzo; and Deb et al). But there still remains a romanticized notion of social media as a “liberation technology” (Diamond 3) against authoritarian regimes. Questions such as how social media with characteristics such as “dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority” (Suler 184) can affect the transitional democratization process has received much less attention. Iranian cyberspace has fostered a cacophony of various debates that undermine the authority and sustainability of any kind of meta-narrative. Prior to the age of social media, the citizens of the Islamic Republic had to spend a lot of time contemplating how to express themselves to avoid any dangerous consequences. But now thinking out loud has become the dominant mode of expression on social media. In many cases, dissident figures and currents have become more engaged in disputation among themselves than with the regime’s ruling elites. Exposure to such a high volume of public debates - in which numerous points of views are simultaneously competing with one another - could in fact hinder political activism, a condition Mutz calls the dilemma of participation versus deliberation (132-136).

It is not only in politics that dialogue is seen as the solution to all problems and key to all of Iran’s locks. Public speaking classes (which are called in Persian *fan-e bayan* or techniques of expression) have become extremely popular. Sharif University, renowned

for recruiting and training the “smartest” talents in Iran in the fields of engineering and technology, launched a competition called *Sokhan-Savaran* (Riders of Speech)<sup>329</sup> in 2014 to familiarize students with the skills of “proper talking.” The state-run Radio Maaref, which produces religious programs has recently launched a new show for teaching “healthy conversation at home,<sup>330</sup>” in order to promote what Iran’s Supreme Leader has called “Iranian and Islamic Style of Living” (see image no. 23). Even seminary publications complain about the lack of “dialogue in families” and recommend reading the translation of Deborah Tannen’s book, *That's Not What I Mean*, to religious families<sup>331</sup> so that couples can reconcile differences and thereby reduce the increasing rate of divorces in the country (one divorce per every three marriages in 2019).<sup>332</sup> Criticism has also been directed at the Iranian education system. The head of the Academic Jihad Organization complains that “unlike European countries,” Iranian children do not learn “to talk about apples and oranges” in daycare,<sup>333</sup> and Iranian intellectuals criticize the teaching method in universities as it does not teach the country’s cultural elites scholarly debate and critical thinking (Fazeli 129-163).

Against the backdrop, many high-ranking politicians, as well as prominent Iranian intellectuals talk about the necessity of initiating a “national dialogue,” but they vary in

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<sup>329</sup> See *Sharif Speech Competition Website (SOKHANSAVARAN.ir)*.

<sup>330</sup> *Radio Maaref Website (RADIOMAAREF.ir)*, Azar 18, 1398.

<sup>331</sup> "Honar-e Goft-o-goo dar Khanvadeh." *Hawzeh*, Mordad 7, 1395.

<sup>332</sup> *Isna*, Mordad 12, 1398.

<sup>333</sup> *Isna*, Azar 21, 1395.

their perceptions about the format, scope and purpose of such dialogue; and unsurprisingly this has just added a new debate to the many ongoing ones – a debate over whether dialogue is really a national need; and if it is, how it should be and what functions should it serve.

The Reform Era inserted dialogue as the new buzzword into the Iranian public vocabulary. In his inaugural address on August 4, 1997, the newly elected President Khatami called for a *détente* with the west and proposed his famous agenda for “dialogue among civilizations” in order to bring peace to the international order. His idea was welcomed by the United Nations General Assembly which proclaimed 2001 as the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. The year turned out to be drastically different than its baptismal name with the September 11 attacks, subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and rising tensions over Iran’s nuclear dossier. Optimistic attention to dialogue as the solution to all Iran’s problems reemerged in 2015, when the Rouhani government was able to reach an agreement in nuclear talks with the United States and five other world powers and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was struck. Two months after the deal was signed, the Iranian president announced that nuclear talks could be used as a model for a “domestic JCPOA” or a “national joint comprehensive plan of action”<sup>334</sup> with the aim of reaching an agreement among political elites for reconfiguring the way of playing and sharing power.

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<sup>334</sup> *Ana*, Bahman 14, 1394.

Reformists dubbed this domestic JCPOA the project of “national reconciliation” (*ashti-e melli*): the past, the Green Movement protests of 2009 and their violent suppression by the Principlists would be forgotten, political prisoners would be released, and the field of political participation would be expanded. The Tehran municipality, which has been controlled by Reformists since the 2016 election, installed large city-wide billboards to encourage people to engage in dialogue at all levels from family and business to community and politics (see image no. 24). But hardline Principlists did not welcome the initiative and regarded it as a new trick “to disrupt public peace and initiate fundamental changes in the structure of the regime.”<sup>335</sup> The official government newspaper responded to the allegations in an editorial,

We are seeing a political divide in the country. This gap is beyond what we might call a [healthy] clash of opinions. Tiffs, misunderstandings, and bitterness, have amalgamated that harm national interest . . . . Dialogue can help political groups understand and acknowledge their differences, [and define a way to] cooperate and politically compete with one another. It is only then that political differences will not weaken national interests and instead will create a vibrant atmosphere of political participation in the country.<sup>336</sup>

Some moderate Principlists welcomed this effort. A new committee was formed in *Majlis* to build mutual understanding among representatives from rival political factions.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> *Fardanews*, Bahman 20, 1395.

<sup>336</sup> *Iran newspaper*, Bahman 26, 1396 (ellipses added).

<sup>337</sup> *Tabnak*, Farvardin 23, 1396; and Ordibehesht 21, 1398.

The meetings of the committee were never made public, and it sparked a new criticism from dissident intellectuals such as Mohammad Reza Tajik, who is one of the commentators in Iran of Laclau and Mouffe's work: "National dialogue does not mean two factions agreeing on how to divide power. This is a deception of public. All people must decide their own future and their own fate in a great agora; this is what national dialogue should be!"<sup>338</sup> But powerful, Principlist elites were not interested in negotiating with their Reformist rivals. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in one of his public speeches, categorically denied the need for any political reconciliation in the country.<sup>339</sup> The public enthusiasm that was created after the nuclear deal to improve the situation in the country soon gave way to despair. The new US president, Donald J. Trump, withdrew from the nuclear deal and reimposed severe economic sanctions on Iran. The inability of the regime's political elites to agree on a way to resolve various economic, social, environmental and political crises led to two rounds of protests in nearly 100 cities across the country in the winter of 2018 and fall of 2019. Less than a month after the brutal and bloody crackdown on the nationwide fall 2019 protests in Iran, President Hassan Rouhani once again stressed that "our country needs a national dialogue, particularly in the current situation."<sup>340</sup>

But there is still no sign to indicate that the ruling elites are interested in any negotiations for conflict resolution. *Pooye* journal, which belongs to dissident

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<sup>338</sup> *Ilna*, Shahrivar 13, 1398.

<sup>339</sup> *Supreme Leader Official Website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Bahman 27, 1395.

<sup>340</sup> *Tasnim News*, Dey 2, 1398.

intellectuals, devoted one of its issues in Summer 2019 to the problem of dialogue in Iran. According to the editors of the journal, Iran is in a state of “*ensdead-e siasi*” or political obstruction (Beheshti 69) and it is only through dialogue that politicking can be resurrected: “The current situation in Iran and the variety and congestion of social, economic, cultural and political issues is such that dialogue at different levels - and most importantly national dialogue - has become an inevitable necessity rather than a choice” (Khaniki).

The prevailing political stalemate, and its complementing sense of exhaustion, trepidation and desperation have made debate problematic for the body of Iranian intellectuals, politicians and even bureaucrats, and have led to the formation of a new pathologic discourse over the shortfalls of Iranian deliberative/discursive culture and its antagonistic potentials. Many prominent and famous intellectuals claim Iranians do not know how to dialogue with one another (e.g. see Malekian; Renani; Kashi; Pouladi; Pedram; Ghaneirad; Ahmadi; Movahed; and Farasatkah). Such self-criticism is best summarized in the words of a well-known translator of philosophical works and literary critic: “We Iranians [suffer from] civic deficiency. We are loquacious. We resort to sophistry. We ignore the logic of the conversation. We practice polemics. This is why society suffers from tension” (Baghaei Makan).

For some intellectuals, the cultural deficit of dialogue in Iran is the main reason for the country’s underdevelopment and the continuation of political struggles since the Constitutional Revolution (see Malekian; and Qahramanpour). “One of the major problems Iranians face is their impatience and inability to talk. We don’t know how to

have a serious but ethical and rational conversation. The heads of the three branches of government respond to one another in speeches and interviews, but they cannot sit down face to face, talk, settle their differences and reach a conclusion” (Ranani 93). In Kashi’s view, even Iranian intellectuals do not have the capacity for dialogue and cannot tolerate critique of their theories (106).

Sousan Shariati attributes the emergence of this new discourse that is obsessed with the problematic of dialogue to “becoming weary of fighting and confrontation” (24). But the fact that dialogue is still being formulated as a lifesaving solution to “too much debate” is striking on its own. Even in democracies when people become distressed by endless debate and the constant airing of disagreement, they develop authoritarian tendencies, and look for someone to have the final say and bring order and unity back to the political system (Stenner 333; see also Hibbing). The optimistic hope for dialogue as the solution to Iran’s current political problems is in contrast to research that shows that there is little chance of attracting empathy and changing the view of the opponent through arguing and dialogue (see e.g. Feinberg & Willer; Kahan; and Bail et al.).

Yet the majority of Iranian intellectuals, at a time when society feels tired of piling controversies without any resolution, still prescribe the solution as correctly engaging in debate instead of stopping it altogether. The pathological rhetoric presented by intellectuals about the lack of a culture of dialogue in Iran could provide an opportunity to constitute a new collective identity, one that defines itself in performing ideal democratic dialogue – what Asen calls “mutual recognition among members of diverse cultures”



(346). As Peters argues believing in debate and believing in the legitimacy of deliberation is in itself a component of the collective identity of participants in public debate (109).

The moral standards that Iranian intellectuals provide for civic and democratic dialogue are usually drawn from Habermasian norms that have become the dominant and even fashionable framework for intellectual analysis in Iran over the past two decades (see Paya & Ghaneirad). They hope that by training and practicing skills (such as “active and patient listening; respectful, peaceful, honest and explicit expression; open mindedness; avoiding the monopolization of truth; suspension of presumptions and bias; empathy and constructive support for the opponent; and always seeking to learn more”)<sup>341</sup> they can nurture a new generation of Iranian citizens and politicians who are committed to the modern ideal of democratic dialogue – a model “according to which dialogue seeks a commitment to debate and the challenging of each other’s positions, as well as an accommodation – but not necessarily a resolution – between opposing perspectives” (Greenwood 23).

But paradoxically at the same time, these intellectuals regard the “national dialogue” to be both a solution and a resolution. They expect warring factions of the ruling elite, as well as the opposition, to engage in a “national dialogue” in which through compromise and concession they would reach the resolution of democratic dialogue as their future way of politicking. In other words, to talk to each other and through this preliminary talk, come to the conclusion “that they cannot eliminate the opponent and

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<sup>341</sup> Renani, Mohsen. "Natavani dar Goft-o-goo az Amir-Kabir ta Sheikh-e Shoja." *Renani Official Website* (RENANI.net), Mordad 26, 1396.

must recognize each other<sup>342</sup> and that they should resolve their differences through further talking to each other, and eventually in this way, democracy as “the only game in town” (Przeworski 26) becomes consolidated. Let’s talk about why we should talk and you will also be convinced about why we should keep talking! As Roberts-Miller says, “This notion of the power of civil discourse is wonderfully optimistic, as it suggests that there might be a discursive solution to every conflict, that violence happens when only rhetors make their arguments badly” (“Fanatical Schemes” 5).

It is not that the Principlists are openly opposed to the standards of ideal dialogue proposed by dissident and Reformist intellectuals. Principlist clerics even provide an interpretation of the Ashura movement in which Imam Hussein sought dialogue and it was his opponents who chose war (see Mehrizi). Principlist religious and political texts are filled with similar advice on the etiquettes and manners of dialogue, even with non-believer opponents. For example, consider the following account, which is cited in most of the seminary guides to debate: One of Imam Sadiq’s disciples becomes furious while discussing existence of God with an atheist and lashes out. The atheist tells him: “If you are one of the companions of Imam Sadiq, [know that] he never speaks to us in such an acerbic manner, he listens to us well; he has never used foul language with us and has never been disrespectful in his responses. He is patient, composed, wise and firm, and free of unreasonableness, foolishness, and irritability. He hears our words and listens to us, asks us to lay out our arguments so we can give him our reasoning” (Fathi et al.).

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<sup>342</sup> Abdi, Abbas. “Goft-o-goo-ye Melli Shart-e Lazem-e Residan be Tafahom.” Iran newspaper, Dey 24, 1396.

But these same religious accounts emphasize that Imam Sadiq and other Shia Imams did not allow their followers who did not possess unshakable faith to participate in debates (see Shariati Sabzevari; Ghavami & Sobhani).<sup>343</sup> Based in this very logic an official speaker at the closing ceremony of Student Debate Competition advises that debaters must have “enough strength of faith that if defeated that [defeat] does not make them change their [religious] conviction” (Motaghian). In none of the accounts of Shia religious debates does the outcome of the debate result in a new and mutual understanding. The debaters enter the debate with prior convictions and exit the debate after demonstrating the superiority of their convictions. Such a debate, as Amossy describes, seeks dissent and disagreement from the start and does not want to achieve common consent (2), and therefore generates a polemical rhetoric that leads to increased antagonism and polarization.

There has always been a teleological expectation of redemption attached to public debate. An expectation that at least one side (the one that is just, that is rational, that is expedient, that is best, that is more compassionate etc.) wins; other sides acknowledge it or are forced to yield as a result of public deliberation; conflict becomes resolved and case closed. Perhaps the ideal notion of public debate is that it allows the use of speech “instead of violence to settle differences” (Darr 606). But historical experiences show that public debate can also fade into violence and generate new processes of repression and demonization. As Jørgensen points out, despite all the concerns that public sphere and

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<sup>343</sup> See "Emam Sadeq Tashayo ra az Tahrif Nejat Dad." *Ana*, Tir 18, 1397.

public discourse scholars have about the ethics of debate and the ideals they put forth, we are, in reality, increasingly witnessing public debate “as an eristic act” in many parts of the world (441).

Claude Lefort once famously wrote that, “Modern democracy invites us to replace the notion of a regime governed by laws, of a legitimate power, by the notion of a regime founded upon the legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate – a debate which is necessarily without any guarantor and without any end” (39). By such a definition, the Islamic Republic is far from the basic conditions of a democracy. But in Iran, there is serious debate about these two different notions that Lefort articulates: a debate about whether one can actually define what is legitimate and what is not legitimate through debate. This debate has haunted the Iranian regime since its inception in 1979. It has been reinforced since the beginning of the Reform Era in 1997 and has remained the most prevailing topic of controversy. But this debate has now become exhausting and the parties to the conflict are desperate.

In his statement addressed to the Iranian nation on the fortieth anniversary of revolution, Supreme Leader continued to insist that there should be no “revision.”<sup>344</sup> But his words, contrary to what is officially expected, are no longer the final words – *fasl-ol-khetab* – in Iran’s public debate. The seventy-year-old Hojati Kermani, a prominent cleric well-known for being moderate and reserved in his speech, critiqued Khamenei’s opinion in an op-ed he wrote in *Ettelaat*, which is known as the most insipid and politically neutral

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<sup>344</sup> “Bayanieh Gam-e Dovom.” *Iran’s Supreme Leader official website (KHAMENEI.ir)*, Bahman 22, 1397.

newspaper in Iran, saying, “Shouldn’t our revolution after forty years, revise its childish behavior and speech? . . . Why not just confess the obvious fact that we were once kids, then we became teens and then young adults and now it’s time to behave according to the *kairos* (*moghtazay-e hal*) of forty?” Hojati Kermani is disenchanted with the 40-year-old Islamic Republic, “We are hitting [each other] and breaking [things] and fighting over each other’s toys . . . We think we are better than everyone else. In disputes we practically uphold no values or standards.”<sup>345</sup> In his view, turning forty should mean all political groups – both political factions within the regime and the opposition – reconcile and choose the right method for resolving Iran’s pressing social problems. But he has no hope, “I’m not talking anymore, I don’t have the patience anymore, and I’m exhausted, and I feel like writing more of these articles won’t solve anything. . . . The revolution needs comprehensive chemotherapy.”<sup>346</sup>

Hojati Kermani’s views and feelings could be treated as the representative anecdote of the current mood in Iran. If this exhausting grand debate is resolved, the destiny of the Islamic Republic will become clear. But how can one debate and deliberate to reach a democracy in a non-democracy? Would participants in this debate “share enough in the way of values, expressive norms, and, therefore, protocols of persuasion to lend their talk the quality of deliberations aimed at reaching agreement through giving reasons?” (Fraser 69).

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<sup>345</sup> *Ettelaat*, Esfand 8, 1397 (ellipses added).

<sup>346</sup> Interview with *Etemad* newspaper, Mordad 27, 1398 (ellipses added).

Contemporary public sphere and deliberative democracy theorists are concerned about how indirect mechanisms of exclusion, such as “calls for objective and dispassionate speech,” can prohibit different identity groups from entering the debate (Asen 345; also see Reid-Brinkley 154). The situation is remarkably different in Iran. The dissident intellectuals are demanding tolerance for more rational discussion that is independent from interlocutors’ religious convictions and affects

The opposing sides of the intense debate raging in the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Republic have different identities, perceptions, and expectations of debate and its functions. Dissidents expect all polity actors to “be willing to examine and weigh contending positions in a rational fashion, aiming for compromise where this is possible and settling for tolerance where it is not” (Crowley 21). But this invitation for “tolerant deliberation is itself a belief, part of an ideology that rigorously excludes those who value other sorts of proof, such as gut feelings, or who appeal to various sorts of authority, such as faith or tradition or human nature or God, in order to authenticate their claims” (Crowley 44). Crowley rightly describes the liberal rhetorical theory’s impasse, but she cannot offer a clear-cut solution. She suggests that instead of being obsessed with *logos*, as a means of appeal, one should invest more on *pathos* and *ethos*. Her recommendations are general and vague, such as investing more in the art of story-telling to religious fundamentalists (197) in order to induce empathy, or sketching images of an ideal world – where there is freedom, tolerance, rationality, and *amor patriae*. Perhaps, then, they become interested to participate in coloring such beautiful fantasies. Crowley is searching for basic identification with those whom she has no respect for their beliefs (and they

know this very well). For the past three decades, Iranian dissidents have tested these methods to no avail – they applied internal argumentation as an appeal to opponent’s *logos*, they exhibited caring about the same affects and sentiments, and they portrayed their character as caring devotees to the well-being of the *nezam*. But the regime’s guardians have vigilantly realized the prosthetic quality of their appeals, that they are not authentic, and that they are instrumentally deployed, and therefore, they have not identified with the utilizers of such appeals. Applying the same *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos* that an opponent considers admissible does not necessarily make one a *khodi* or an insider.

Public debate bears the potential for peaceful conclusion when it induces some form of *a priori* mutual identification while simultaneously constituting a process for forging new collective identity *a posteriori* – “an identity-shaping process strong enough to enable the solving of the collective action problem” (Eriksen 2). This process seems more dysfunctional than ever in the Islamic Republic at forty. The ruling elites hope to nurture a new generation of citizens who are able to resolve their differences through dialogue and debate and to design collective decision-making mechanisms for solving social problems. But these elites themselves do not demonstrate the capacity, competence and commitment to trigger such a process in the current state of the country.

There are two principal features in public debate that are at times in contrast, other times compatible and can sometimes even compel or complete one another. On the one hand, there has always been a communitarian string attached to the notion of public debate. On the other hand, it follows a thread of contention and discord. This echoes

Burke's notion of "congregation" and "segregation" ("The Rhetorical Situation" 264-269). Focusing on either one of these aspects can yield different possibilities for inclusion and exclusion and ascribe different functions to public debate. The Islamic Republic is familiar with these two features. For four decades, pro-regime Principlists have spoken of the need to avoid debates, or at the very least refraining from making some debates public, in order to maintain unity and prevent division. Today, however, dissident intellectuals and the Reformists who are on the verge of being cast out, are the ones speaking of the need for dialogue and debate to maintain unity and restore harmony. In their view, dialogue is necessary "to avoid the tragic fate of destruction from befalling Iran" (Pouladi 55). They hope that debate will reinforce a sense of community and create a new shared ethos in Iranian society. But there is no guarantee that such an outcome (i.e. an imagined discursive community) will emerge from the discursive confrontation that is currently taking place in Iran. How can you persuade the other side to become open to persuasion through discussion? Coming to terms with dialogue does not necessarily happen through a prior dialogue. Accepting that one could achieve a resolution, a resolution that is not predetermined, through a dialogical process – and a combination of negotiation, compromise, deliberation and persuasion – is ultimately a political decision. It is a decision that the parties to the conflict make when they cannot perceive a better alternative for themselves and in their calculations for power.

Public debate in Iran is at a critical juncture. It carries the conditions of possibility of two extreme trajectories in the short term: One can lead to the expansion of the political sphere and it becoming more inclusive and participatory. The other can lead to



shrinkage of this sphere and the emergence of more authoritarian, discipline-oriented and exclusionary behaviors and forms. It can find harmony in more empathetic talking or it can find it in less talking and more silence. Both of these trajectories have been intermittently tested in Iran over the last hundred years, and after the 1979 revolution.

Iran's public and polity attitudes are both currently demonstrating more pessimism. They have become frustrated by the unending debate. They anxiously believe that country's growing ailments and piling problems can be cured and resolved not through discussion but by determination. But hope is a contingent construction which can appear through mysterious and unexpected ways. In 2013, just four years after the severe repression of the Green Movement and its ensuing mass depression, the hope for reform re-emerged through presidential campaigns and debates. Historical perspective shows us that despite all efforts to suppress and control, the level of public debate and its scope in the Islamic Republic has grown steadily higher and larger. This process may be interrupted for a period, but it should return stronger.

# IMAGE APPENDIX



Image 1: A Cartoon depicting funeral for the press on the front page of Ahangar magazine, 1979 (Nashriyah: Digital Iranian History).



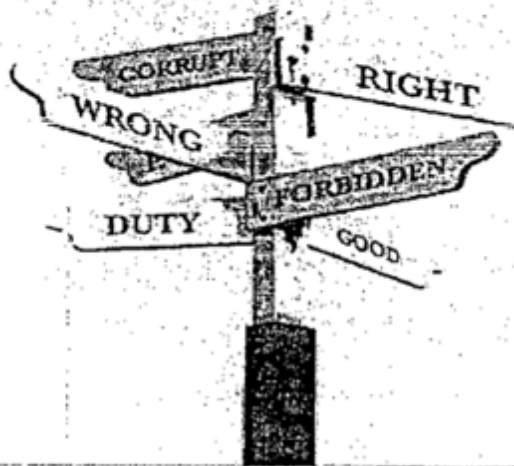
**Image 2:** Pro-Khomeini students holding a placard: “Brothers and sisters! As discussions in these sensitive situations have become a source of division, we Muslim students, urge you to avoid any form of discussion for the sake of preserving unanimity and solidarity” (unknown photographer).



**Image 3:** Front page of *Sobh-e Azadegan* newspaper, April 21, 1980. The large headline reads, “Today [all] Universities Will Become Clean of Political Groups” (*Tarikh Irani*).

### مقایسه اشکال مختلف کرسی آزاد اندیشی

نوع کرسی	سطح علمی ارائه دهندگان بحث	سطح علمی مخاطبین و حضار	نقش حضار	هدف اصلی
کرسی آزاد فکری	دانشجویان و اساتید عادی متفکر (غیر متخصص)	افراد عادی (غیر متخصص)	توجه و استفاده از بحث	عقلانی سازی فضای دانشگاه و مقدمه سازی برای تولید علم
کرسی مناظره	دانشجویان و اساتید صاحب نظر	افراد عادی (غیر متخصص)	توجه و استفاده از بحث	عقلانی سازی فضای دانشگاه و افزایش بصیرت و علم
کرسی نظریه پردازی	دانشجویان و اساتید صاحب نظر	متخصصین و صاحب نظران	ارائه نظر و نقد (حضور فعال)	تولید علم
کرسی نقد و نظر	دانشجویان و اساتید صاحب نظر	اساتید متخصصین و صاحب نظران	ارائه نظر و نقد (حضور فعال)	تولید علم



**Image 4:** A table explaining different types of Free-Thinking Korsi (screenshot taken from "Ayin-Nameh Tashkil-e Korsi-Haye Azad-Andishi").

### فرآیند تشکیل کرسی آزاد اندیشی در دانشگاه ها

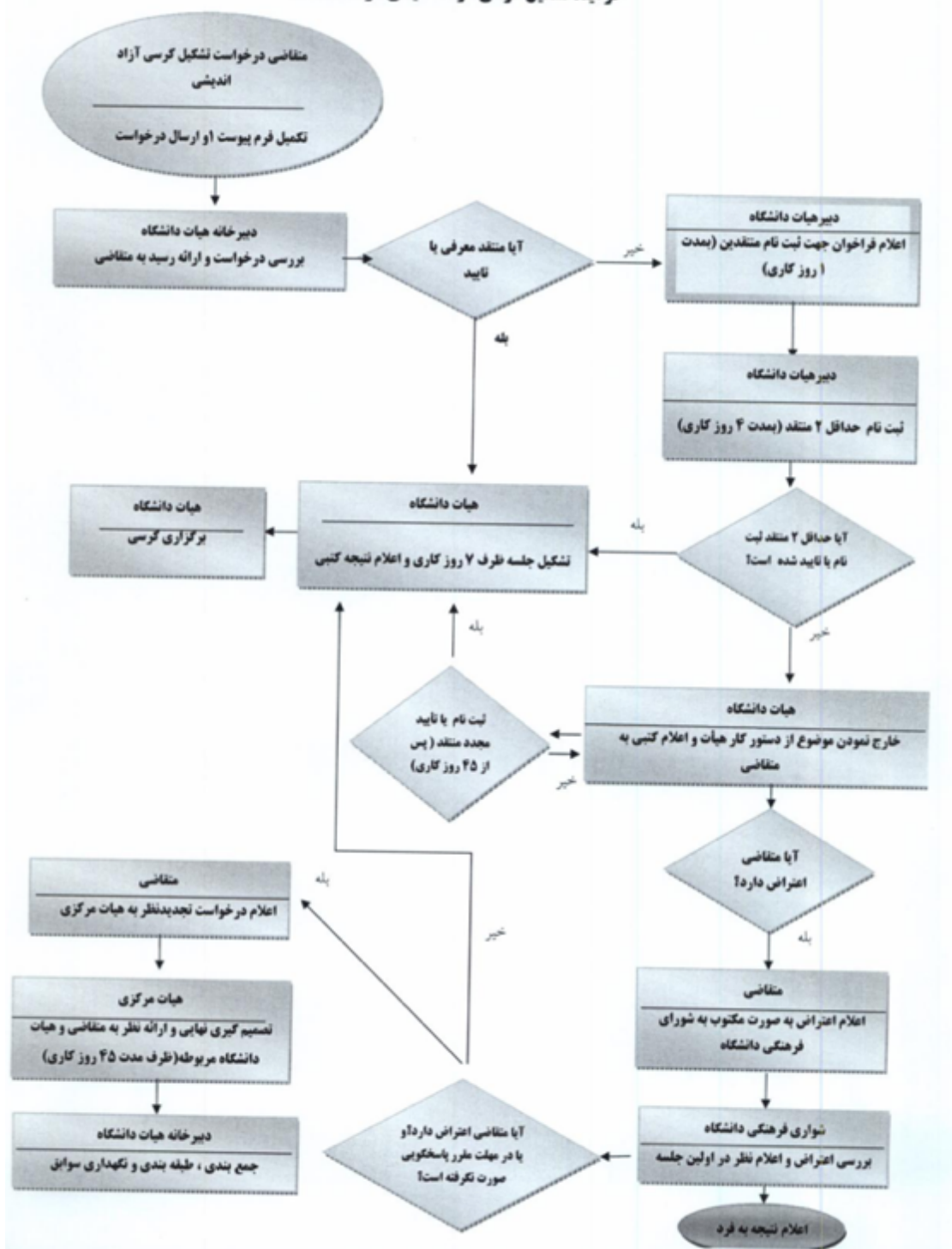


Image 5: A chart explaining the process for granting permission for Free Thinking Korsi (screenshot taken from "Dastoor-ol-Amal-e Korshi-haye Azad-Andishi" 1391).



**Image 6:** A copy of the commitment letter that Korsi debate participants have to sign (screenshot taken from "Ketab-e Kar-e Bargozari-e Korsi-haye Azad-Andishi" Mehr 1389).



**Image 7:** An infographic explaining the process of student debate tournaments (screenshot taken from "Ashanyi ba Mosabeghat-e Monazreh Daneshjooyi" 1393).



# اولین دوره مسابقات مناظره دانشجویان

نشان  
خواجه نصیرالدین طوسی



ویژه دانشجویان رشته های علوم انسانی در کلیه مقاطع تحصیلی

آخرین مهلت ثبت نام

۱۰ اردیبهشت ماه ۱۳۹۱

زمان برگزاری

۲۴ و ۲۵ اردیبهشت ماه ۱۳۹۱

برگزاری کارگاه های آموزشی "فنون مناظره" پیش از برگزاری مسابقات و اعطای گواهینامه

جوایز مسابقات

گروه اول: نشان خواجه نصیر + ۱۰ میلیون ریال جایزه نقدی

گروه دوم: لوح افتخار + ۷/۵ میلیون ریال جایزه نقدی

گروه سوم: لوح افتخار + ۵ میلیون ریال جایزه نقدی

خیابان انقلاب - خیابان فخر رازی - خیابان شهدای زاندارمیری - پلاک ۷۲ - طبقه اول  
دفتر تماس: ۶۶۹۷۸۰۰۰ - ۶۶۹۹۱۵۳۶

دبیرخانه

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Image 8: The poster designed for the very first annual round of Iran's Student Debate Competitions in 2012 (ISDC Official Website).



Image 9: Champions of the fifth annual round of Iran's Student Debate Competitions in 2016 holding their trophy (Isna, Hossein Kazazi).



Image 10: Winners of the local round of Student Debate Competitions in Yazd Province (unknown photographer, Yazd Farda, Khordad 9, 1395).





**فرم امتیازدهی داوران**  
**پنجمین دوره مسابقات ملی مناظره دانشجویی**  
**(نشان خواجه‌نصیرالدین طوسی)**

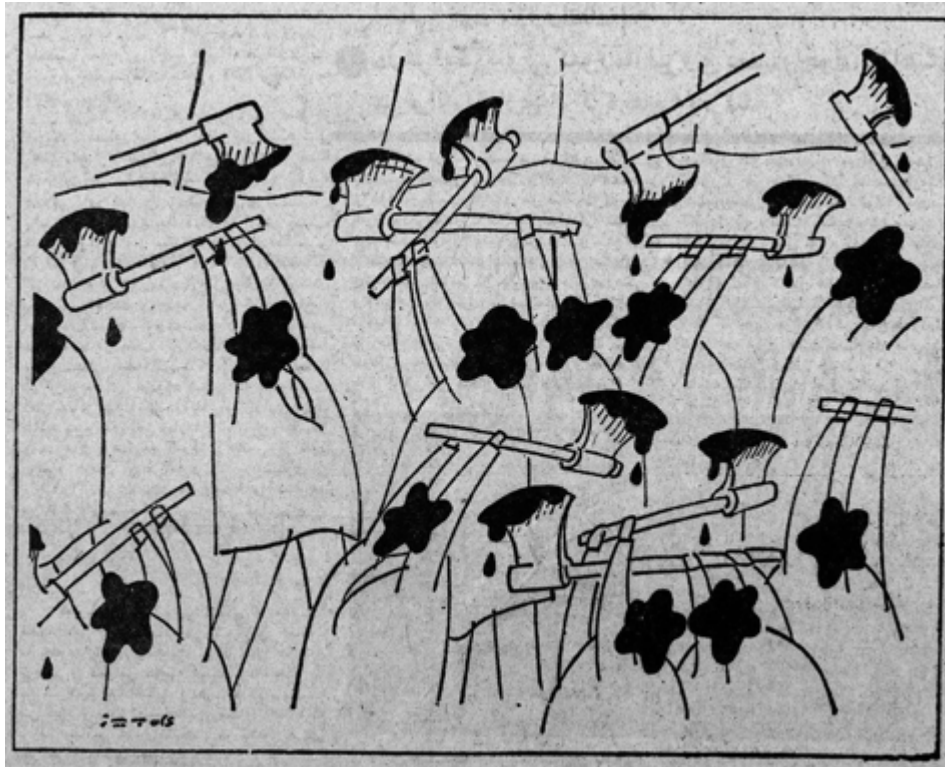


سازمان دانشجویان

موضوع مناظره: ..... محل برگزاری: .....  
 نام گروه: ..... موضع: .....  
 تاریخ: ..... ساعت: .....

امتیاز داور										معیار داور
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<b>رعایت شرایط و ضوابط مندرج در آیین‌نامه</b>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<b>برنامه‌ریزی و هماهنگی و انسجام تیمی</b>
1	2	3	4	5	انسجام مطالب و پایایی مطالب مطرح شده					
1	2	3	4	5	قابل تمیز بودن رئوس، سر فصل‌ها و جزئیات مباحث مطرح شده					
1	2	3	4	5	حمایت و پشتیبانی اعضاء گروه از یکدیگر					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<b>رعایت اخلاق مناظره علمی و احترام به آراء و نظرات مخالف</b>
1	2	3	4	5	حفظ حرمت اشخاص، وزانت و منانت ادبی					
1	2	3	4	5	برقراری ارتباط صحیح					
1	2	3	4	5	رعایت صراحت و صداقت					
1	2	3	4	5	دوری از تعصب بی‌جا و القاء نظرات و عقاید					
1	2	3	4	5	استفاده از گزاره های منطقی، اصول و مبانی تجربه شده و علمی					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<b>توجه و رعایت فرایندهای علمی، منطقی و مستدل از طرح مسأله تا نتیجه‌گیری</b>
1	2	3	4	5	اجتناب از تعدد و پراکندگی مبانی نظری قابل استفاده در سخنرانی‌ها					
1	2	3	4	5	انتخاب سبک مناسب مناظره و سیر منطقی گسترش مفاهیم					
1	2	3	4	5	تحقیق و پژوهش در ارتباط با موضوع و جمع‌آوری و استناد به اسناد و مدارک معتبر					
1	2	3	4	5	به‌کارگیری انواع برهان‌های علمی و خودداری از بیان دلایل غیرعلمی و عامه‌پسند					
1	2	3	4	5	انتخاب روش مناسب جهت مناظره متناسب با موضوع و توانایی افراد					
1	2	3	4	5	پرهیز از سوءاستفاده و بزرگ‌نمایی منابع و مأخذ					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<b>فن بیان و رعایت نکات دستوری</b>
1	2	3	4	5	رعایت دستور زبان فارسی و به‌کارگیری لغات سره					
1	2	3	4	5	پرهیز از طولانی‌کردن و کوتاه‌کردن سخن به شکل غیرمعمول					
1	2	3	4	5	پرهیز از به‌کارگیری اصطلاحات غیرفنی، غیرتخصصی و عوامانه					
1	2	3	4	5	استفاده از آیات و روایات و سخنان حکیمان و بزرگان					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<b>احاطه و اشراف نسبت به موضوع مورد بحث</b>
1	2	3	4	5	جامعیت، ژرف‌اندیشی و انعطاف در تحلیل علل مسائل و پاسخ‌گویی به سؤالات					
1	2	3	4	5	شناخت مسأله و چگونگی طرح آن و پرداختن به نظریات موجود در ارتباط با مسأله					
1	2	3	4	5	به روز بودن مسائل و مباحث مطرح شده					
1	2	3	4	5	ارجاع به مسائل تاریخی و منطقی					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<b>خلاصیت در طرح مسأله، سؤالات، تعاریف و نتیجه‌گیری سخنرانی‌ها</b>
1	2	3	4	5	قابل استفاده بودن مطالب برای جامعه دانشجویان					
1	2	3	4	5	ایجاد سخنرانی‌های دارای ویژگی‌های اطلاع‌رسانی، آگاهی‌بخشی و آموزشی					
1	2	3	4	5	نوآوری در مفاهیم و توجه به مصادیق تازه و بدیع					
1	2	3	4	5	استناد به منابع و اسناد معتبر					

Image 11: Grading rubric for the jury committee of Student Debate Competitions (ISDC Official Website).



**Image 12:** Cartoon by Kambiz Derambakhsh, Ayandegan Newspaper, Ordibehest 20, 1358 (*Nashriyah: Digital Iranian History*).



**Image 13:** Iran President Banisder (third person from the left) participating in the TV debate on March 2, 1980 (screenshot taken from the recorded video).



Image 14: Kayhan newspaper's cartoon depicting Banisadr as a moderator trying to calm down other sides of the debate air on television on March 2, 1980 (Nashriyah: Digital Iranian History).



Image 15: Kayhan newspaper's front page on March 2, 1980. The large headline reads, "The Start of A New Chapter in Resolving Disputes Among Political Groups" (Nashriyah: Digital Iranian History).



**Image 16:** TV debates between rival political parties, May 1981 (*Mashregh News*).



**Image 17:** Mousavi's finger gesture during debate with Ahmadinejad became a symbol of The Green Movement and widely circulated on the social media (Illustration by Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour).

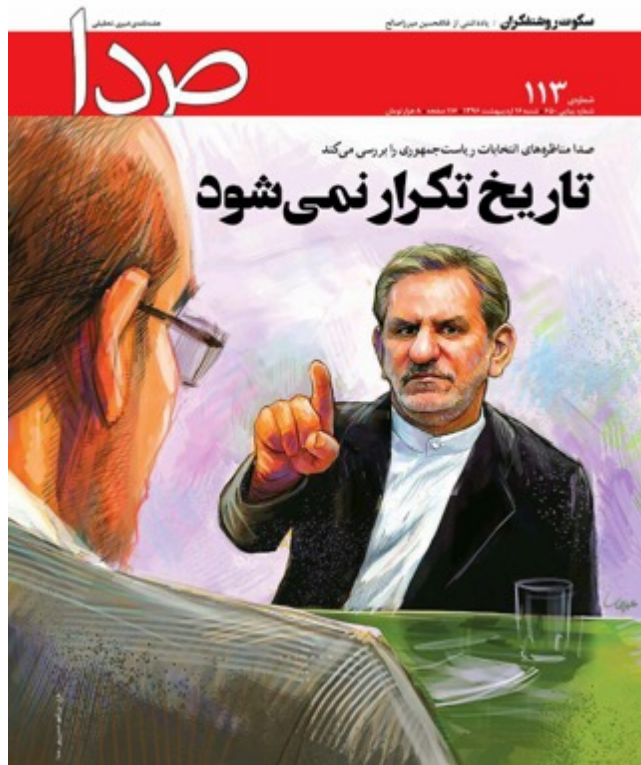


ISNA/PHOTO:ARASH KHAMOOSHI

**Image 18:** Iranians poured into streets of Tehran after watching Mousavi's debate with Ahmadinejad during the 2009 presidential elections. (*Isna*, Arash Khamooshi)



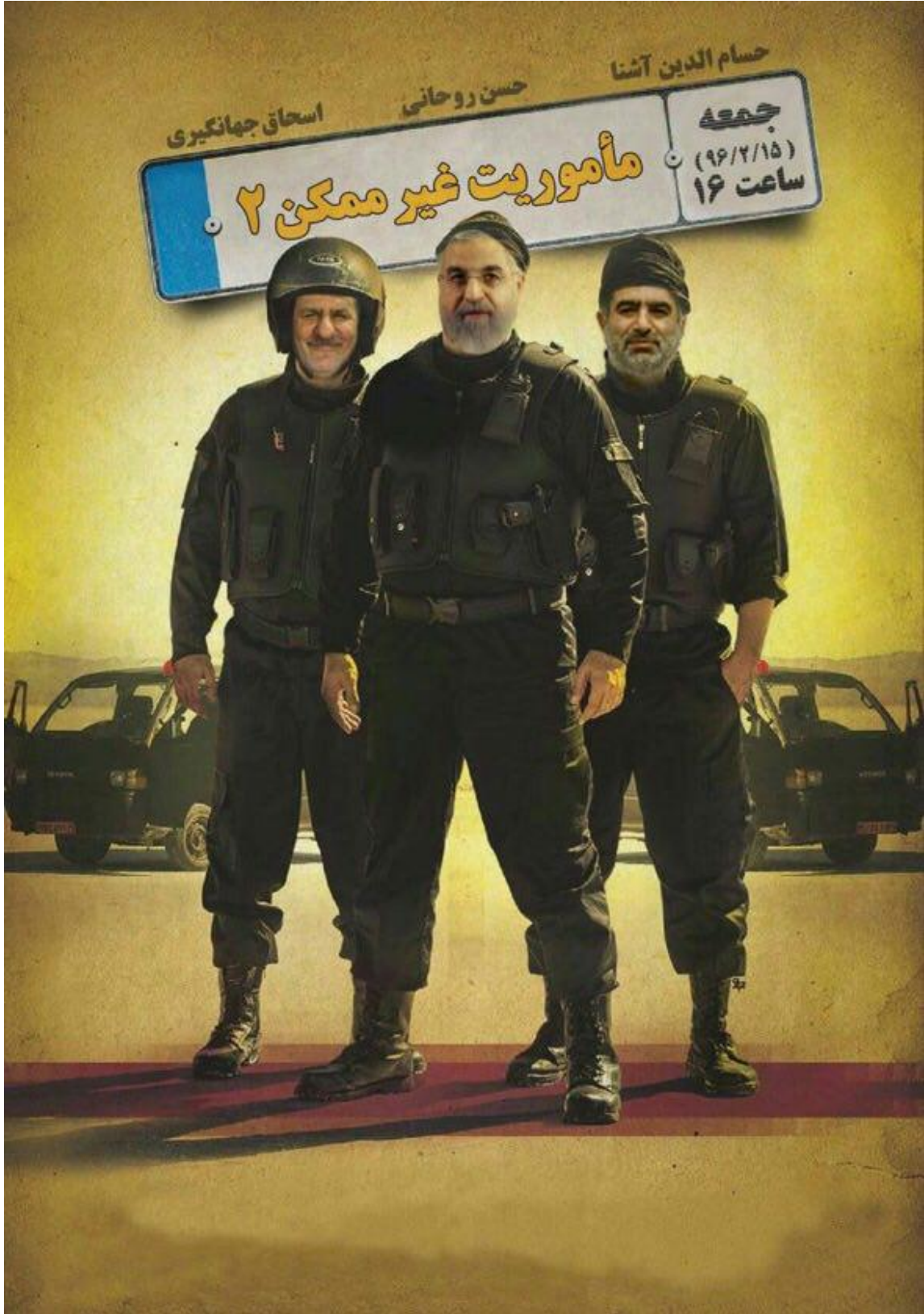
**Image 19:** Eight candidates are standing on the stage for the 2013 presidential debates (screenshot taken from the recorded video).



**Image 20:** The cover of Seda weekly magazine depicting Iran's vice president, Eshagh Jahangiri in 2017 presidential debates (Seda no. 113, 1396).



**Image 21:** A cartoon showing Iran's vice president, Eshagh Jahangiri defeating Tehran's mayor, Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf during the 2017 presidential debates (cartoon by Vahid Jafari, Telegram Chanel).



**Image 22:** This cartoon was widely distributed on social media prior to the final round of the 2017 presidential debates. The title reads, “Mission Impossible 2” (Emtedad Telegram Chanel).



**Image 23:** Advertisement for a show produced in Radio Maaref promoting “healthy dialogue in family” (Radio Maaref Official Website).



**Image 24:** Billboards installed by Tehran municipality encouraging people to engage in dialogue (photographers unknown, Telegram Chaneles).



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