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The New Middle Class of Iran and the Demand for Reforming Domestic and Foreign Political Relations

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ABSTRACT

The new middle class of Iran, which expanded rapidly after the Islamic Revolution, has been one of the most dynamic forces and a leading actor in demanding reform of the political system's approach to domestic and foreign relations. This article examines the reformist movement of this class from the mid-1970s to 2021, with an emphasis on electoral participation. The main question of the article is: in what manner and through what instruments has the new middle class acted to change and reform the system's policies? The hypothesis of the article is that the new middle class, given its hegemony within civil society, has sought to achieve this objective through electoral participation. The finding of the article is that this class has been successful in mobilizing forces to advance electoral objectives, but has failed to attain its broader goals.

Keywords: *New middle class, electoral participation, political policy reform, political change, international relations*

Introduction

One of the important events of the years after the Islamic Revolution has been manifested in the enthusiastic presence of the people in the arena of electoral participation. This presence has simultaneously indicated both important demands and meaningful fluctuations. In the first two decades after the Revolution, the unified presence of the people at the ballot boxes, like their presence on the battlefield, signified their support for the anti-colonial ideals of the revolutionary leaders, as well as the consolidation of the foundations of the newly established Islamic system. However, from the middle of the third decade, a turn toward the demand for reconsidering the mode of governance became more prominent in the form of support for the slogan of reformist change in the 1997 elections. Surprisingly, before these demands could bear fruit, in the mid-2000s, during the ninth and tenth election cycles, the demand of the impoverished masses for greater attention to the welfare condition of society took center stage. Yet this demand, too, before receiving an adequate response, once again gave way in the eleventh and twelfth elections to the demand for reforming the mode of governance. Regardless of the various factors whose influence



in these developments may be assumed, it seems that the role of the new middle class, whether in its turn toward the ballot boxes or in its withdrawal from them, played an important role in the aforementioned developments. This article seeks to focus on the role of the new middle class in these developments.

The main research question is how the role of Iran's new middle class in the political developments after the Islamic Revolution can be evaluated in terms of advancing reformist changes in the mode of governance.

The main hypothesis of the research is that the new middle class, given its rapid growth after the Revolution, has become a driving force in advancing political change through electoral participation.

The argument of the article is as follows:

1. Contemporary social and political movements in Iran have essentially emerged through the participation and leadership of the middle strata.
2. The role of the new middle strata in the formation of transformative political discourses has been highly decisive.
3. These discourses have appeared as a ground for the solidarity and coordination of broad groups of people and as a means of mobilizing them for important national goals such as constitutionalism and democracy-seeking.
4. The development of the capacity of the new middle class in the post-revolutionary period transformed this class into an important force for demands for reform in governance through the direction of electoral participation.
5. The phenomenon of elections in the 1990s and 2000s can be regarded as a movement of the type of "new social movements," whose main force and leadership were assumed by the new middle class.

Analytical Approach of the Research

One approach to examining the causes and grounds of political events is to refer to class analysis and to rely on the conflict among social and political forces. While paying attention to developments related to social structures as the infrastructural foundation of society, class analysis fundamentally emphasizes the conflict among social and political forces over defining and determining the political order of society and the mode of managing it.

In this regard, the agential role of human forces in political developments is discussed. In analyzing Iran's political developments in the important political events of the post-revolutionary period, the role of the new middle class is of unique importance. The turn of groups from the new middle strata toward the seventh and eighth, as well as the eleventh and twelfth, presidential elections for the election of Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani, and their withdrawal from the ballot boxes in the tenth and eleventh presidential elections, had a decisive effect on the political turning points of the post-revolutionary period.

With such an approach to the political developments of the post-revolutionary period, especially the events that occurred in connection with the seventh and eighth elections on the one hand, and the ninth and tenth elections on the other, this article divides its discussions into three sections: first, a theoretical section on the method of analyzing political events with emphasis on the role of the new middle class in advancing political change and social movements; second, an examination of the condition of Iran's new middle class in terms of the growth, status, and capacities of this class; and third, a phenomenology of the presence of this class in transformative and reformist movements and the causes of its success and failure.

Research Background

Extensive research has been conducted on the role of social classes in general and the role of the new middle class in political developments and new social movements in particular, and comprehensive discussions have been raised from various perspectives. In this article, although briefly, a section has been devoted to this issue. In this section, by reviewing works conducted on the class position of the new middle class and the definition of this class, the position of this class in the leadership of new transformative movements has been identified. At the same time, the most important sources in this field of discussion have been introduced.

Regarding the new middle class in Iran and the evidence of its growth and influence on election results, articles have also been published in Persian and English, which have been used in this article. These articles have also been introduced or reviewed in the relevant discussions as required by the structure of the argument. Therefore, the author has considered it unnecessary to deal with the research background separately here. Nevertheless, it should be noted here that no similar work has been carried out on the role of Iran's new middle class in the effort to advance reformist changes through elections.

The New Middle Class and Its Role in Political Change

In selecting a theoretical strategy to explain the position of the new middle class in advancing democratic political changes and stimulating new social movements, this article relies on the views of scholars in the tradition of critical sociology. While criticizing the structuralist perspective associated with technology-centered theories, these sociologists are divided into two groups: one group that has emphasized structural changes in the capitalist system and has referred to concepts such as capital accumulation in Marx's political economy (1, 2); and another group that, while referring to structural transformations in the capitalist system, including the mode of production, has emphasized the emergence of the new middle class, class conflict, and the vanguard role of the new middle class in mobilizing popular forces to carry out reformist changes (3-7).

There have been many discussions and numerous published works on the nature and identity of the new middle class. In this article, while refraining from a detailed discussion in this regard, only brief remarks are made. A social class is a stable group whose members have a similar position in the social organization of the production and distribution of goods, in benefiting from the economic surplus of society, and in possessing economic, cultural, and political capital; while possessing consciousness, they are involved in social and political conflicts. In this way, they possess identity and agency in social action (8). This definition includes several elements, such as individuals' position in the relations of production and distribution, possession of cultural and political capital, and the acquisition of consciousness and readiness for political agency in collective action.

Unlike the old middle class, the new middle class is composed of different and heterogeneous layers. Some of its layers, such as university students and school students, are changeable, and their positions shift. Some layers, such as government employees, include sections that are subordinate to state ideology, whereas other sections are located in the middle and lower ranks of salaried employees.

The Constituent Layers of the New Middle Class

Although there are still those who continue to support Marx's theory of the polarized division of society into two main classes—one being the non-productive class that owns the means of production and, because of this position,

can appropriate the economic surplus of society, and the other being the direct producer who is deprived of ownership of the means of production and is compelled to sell labor power in exchange for means of subsistence—today, few Marxists regard this theory as worthy of serious attention (2). Most contemporary Marxists emphasize the inadequacy of the above theory and, by accepting today's pluralized condition, have attempted to subject the position and status of the new middle class to precise examination. Marx predicted that the middle strata, including the petty bourgeoisie, would be proletarianized in the process of capitalist development and would be absorbed into the working class. This, however, did not happen, and in late capitalist society we witness various middle layers, including the growth of new middle layers, or the new middle class. Among these are managers, members of the independent professional occupations such as physicians, engineers, and lawyers, and salaried employees, who are located between the two classes of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Strata of this kind, like the proletariat, do not own the means of production, but to varying degrees they participate in the process of production as well as in the control and management of capital. They also participate, to certain degrees, in supervising workers who are directly engaged in production and enjoy certain privileges on this basis.

Placing these new strata among the proletariat is not consistent with Marx's own criteria of classification. As some scholars state, the new middle class is not only not situated on the declining margin of capitalism, but is located at the focal points of the system of social relations (1). Anthony Giddens, drawing on the theories of Marx and Max Weber, divides the middle class into three sections: the old middle class, or owners of small capital, owners of local shops, and small farmers. These groups have consistently declined over the past two centuries, although they still have a share of the total population. The upper middle class includes those who have managerial or professional occupations. Among this section, the proportion of individuals with liberal views on social and political issues is high. The lower middle class includes office workers, sales representatives, teachers, and nurses (9).

John Burris, on the basis of his Marxist insight, classifies occupations related to the growth of the new middle class according to the requirements and contradictions of capital accumulation in the following way:

1. Supervision and control over the labor process: managers, technical supervisors, foremen, and the like.
2. Reproduction of the social relations of labor: primary-school teachers, secondary-school teachers, social-welfare workers, health and medical specialists, state managers, judicial officers, and cultural-sector employees.
3. Workers in the sphere of the realization of surplus value: accountants, bankers, sales specialists, and insurance-sector employees.
4. Agents of the reform and improvement of the technical means of production: engineers, researchers, scientists, and research-and-development workers in the production sector.

These occupations, which have grown increasingly from the middle of the twentieth century to the present, have provided the grounds for the growth of the new middle class (1).

The Growth and Condition of Iran's Middle Class

On the basis of occupational status and the divisions of major occupational groups, Iran's middle class can be divided into traditional and new sections. Iran's traditional middle strata include bazaaris, shopkeepers, artisans, and clerics, excluding clerics who own land or capital. The new middle strata, on the basis of employment, include physicians, lawyers, engineers, architects, primary-school teachers, secondary-school teachers, employees, nurses, and the like. These new middle strata differ greatly in terms of income and level of education, but they share

certain important characteristics. They are distinguished from the upper classes, namely capitalists and employers, and from the lower class, namely workers, that is, those who sell their labor power.

Although public-sector employees work in the state bureaucracy and are dependent on the state in terms of income and earnings, it cannot be said that all of them are necessarily subservient to the state in their attitudes and orientations. University students, academics, and intellectuals have a particular prominence within Iran's middle class and are regarded as pioneers in the field of agency for political change (8). Whereas Iran's traditional middle class resides in both cities and villages, the new middle class is essentially urban. After the Islamic Revolution, a significant part of the expansion of the new middle class resulted from the increase in public-sector employees, which has always followed a markedly rapid trend, disproportionate to the needs of society.

The growth of the new middle class is one of the determining features of Iranian society in the post-revolutionary period. The factors that provided the grounds for the unprecedented growth of the new middle class in Iran are numerous. Among the most important of them are the rapid growth of urbanization, especially as a result of rural-to-urban migration, the youthfulness of the population, the rapid expansion of universities and higher education, and the development of literacy.

Structural Transformations in Social Stratification

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 produced a significant transformation in the structure of stratification in Iranian society. Along with the Revolution, changes were set in motion through which the entire upper class of pre-revolutionary society—including the royal family, courtiers, high-ranking commanders of the armed forces, capitalists, large landowners, and remnants of the aristocracy—was removed from the social structure and political life. The revolutionary state brought a large part of economic enterprises, approximately two-thirds, under its control (10). Through the nationalization of industries, banks, and agricultural enterprises, the state took control of the key sector of the economy. In June 1979, twenty-six private banks were declared nationalized. The major merchants of the bazaar, who had accumulated significant capital because of the rise in oil prices and oil revenues in the late 1960s, together with the growth of imports and the boom in consumer goods, greatly elevated both their position among the upper strata of society and their position in the new management of society.

After the end of the Iran–Iraq War, a shift occurred in political outlook and economic policy that aligned the approach of a group of political leaders, including the government of Hashemi Rafsanjani, with the global neoliberal approach, and was accompanied by policies such as economic liberalization, exchange-rate adjustment, subsidy reduction, and privatization of state assets. Development programs that originated from the outlook of the “Construction State” adopted an economic-adjustment policy that emphasized a market-oriented economy, privatization, linkage with the global economy, and an eye toward international economic institutions. The trend of economic opening also continued under the government known as the Reform Government. However, these policies were not successful. Nevertheless, the rise in oil prices during the Second Economic Development Plan helped improve the economic situation (11).

Abdollahi has depicted the structure of social classes in 1996 as follows:

Table 1. Social Classes in 1996

Occupations / Classes	Capitalist Class	Petty-Bourgeois Class	Middle Class: Private Sector	Middle Class: Public Sector
Expert personnel	Modern: 24,353	Modern: 127,853	159,758	134,735
Technicians and assistants	50,213	38,864	—	—
Scientific–technical occupations; managers	—	—	—	—
Total	74,566	166,717	207,108	1,530,108
	Traditional	Traditional	Private sector	Public sector
Employees	3,359	10,535	79,502	498,938
Administrative	88,246	858,333	297,513	—
Clerical	122,200	250,010	—	—
Store sellers	13,566	481,088	1,026,892	34,811
Commercial workers	11,815	87,941	72,285	993,412
Total	1,265,000	7,037,000	4,722,000	2,834,000
Grand total	1,529,000	8,050,000	7,556,000	2,954,000
Percentage of total	7.61	40.07	37.61	14.70

Source: (12)

The Growth of Urbanization

The growth of urbanization, in its dominant form and to varying degrees, is accompanied by the growth of the middle class, including the new middle class. The years after the Revolution constituted a period of very rapid urbanization, in such a way that the ratio of urban residents to rural residents changed completely within approximately two decades. In 1976, the percentage of urban residents in the total population was 37.9 percent, and the percentage of rural residents was 62.1 percent. In 1996, on the threshold of May 23, 1997, this ratio was almost reversed, meaning that the percentage of urban residents in the total population increased to 61.3 percent, while the percentage of rural residents decreased to 38.7 percent. Continuing this trend, in 2006 the proportion of urban residents in the total population reached 68.46 percent, while the proportion of rural residents decreased to 31.54 percent.

Table 2. The Trend of Urbanization Growth from the Revolution to the Reform Period

Year	Total Population	Urban Population	Rural Population	Urban Percentage	Rural Percentage
1976	33,708,742	15,854,680	17,854,064	37.9	62.1
1986	49,455,001	26,844,561	22,349,351	47	35
1996	60,055,488	36,817,789	23,026,292	61.3	38.7
2006	70,472,865	48,245,075	22,227,771	68.46	31.54

Source: Statistical Center of Iran

From 1979 to 2009, Iran's population almost doubled and reached 70 million. This population was essentially young: 80 percent of it was under the age of 40, 70 percent under the age of 35, and 50 percent under the age of 25 (13).

The results of the censuses in the decades leading to the Revolution and after the Revolution also indicate a continuous decline in the share of the traditional sector of the middle class and an increase in the share of the new sector of this class. Thus, the share of the five traditional sectors decreased from 86.8 percent of all middle layers in 1956 to 49.4 percent in 1996, while the share of the new sector increased from 13.2 percent of the total in 1956 to 50.6 percent in 1996. Table 3 reflects this inter-sectoral transformation.

Table 3. Middle Layers by Traditional–New Division: Percentage of the Total Class Population

Year	Traditional	New
1956	86.8	13.2
1966	81.3	18.7
1976	63.4	36.6
1986	54.8	45.2
1996	49.4	50.6

Adapted from (8)

Growth of Literacy and Education

The years after the Revolution also witnessed remarkable growth in literacy and education, including university education at various levels. A similar transformation occurred in the growth of women's education and their presence in the arenas of work and employment. In intellectual fields, including philosophical discussions, literature, and political debates, there was also a surge of activity (14). The literacy rate in the country more than doubled over three decades, rising from 48 percent of the population at the time of the Revolution to 90 percent in 2009 (13). As Table 4 shows, during the years 1984–2008, the number of university students and faculty members nearly doubled. The growth in the number of students and academics during the twenty-five years after the Revolution was 15 percent annually.

Table 4. Development of Higher Education from the Revolution to the Ninth Presidential Election Period

Year	Number of Students	Total Number of Members and Faculty	Total Number of Faculty Members in Educational Institutions
1984	145,809	—	—
1988	34,848	10,660	13,357
1996	1,192,329	11,526	19,906
2000	1,516,673	12,444	33,244
2004	2,117,471	13,750	42,625
2008	3,581,070	18,229	63,289

Source: Statistical Center of Iran

With such an exceptional trend in the growth of urbanization, literacy, and university education, as well as the growth of the proportion of young people in the total population, the demands of the new middle strata for political change and reform in the mode of governance had become visible from the early 1990s. This young and educated population had also been nurtured during years of political agency and war. For this reason, it possessed a high capacity for agency and for presence on the political scene in order to advance demands for reform in the mode of political governance. The interests and outlook of this young and educated population differed greatly from those of conservative leaders.

Intellectuals constitute the core of the political force of Iran's new middle class. They form the most dynamic and politically active strata of this class. Islamic associations, which flourished with the Islamic Revolution and grew rapidly, became important organizations for political agency. From the mid-1980s, the Islamic Association of Students, with new orientations and identity, became a progressive force for reformist demands in the mode of governance. This section of the new middle layers played an important role in the electoral events of the seventh and eighth presidential elections and in the protests of 2009.

The New Middle Class and Electoral Behavior

One of the discussions of this article, which focuses on the central issue of the relationship between the growth of the new middle class and the effort of this class to advance reformist changes, is centered on the electoral behavior of this class. Elections in Iran, during several cycles beginning on May 23, 1997, resembled a social movement more than a conventional election. It was a social movement in which the new middle class was the vanguard of the demand for extensive political changes. The success or failure of these efforts and their causes constitute the subject of the article's discussions. Some analytical approaches have expressed doubt that a causal relationship exists between the two phenomena of the growth of the new middle class and the movement of civil society to advance reformist changes. However, field observations in Iran's political developments over several decades have displayed many signs of correlation between these two phenomena.

Researchers have long paid attention to the electoral behaviors of the new middle strata and have studied them. Martin Lipset and Samuel Huntington are among the well-known names in this field (15, 16). The social factors affecting electoral behavior constitute one of the areas of study in political sociology. Electoral behavior is also one of the manifestations through which the political and social demands of citizens are articulated, just as it is one of the indicators that displays the degree of legitimacy of a political system (17). The degree and pattern of political participation of Iran's new middle class, especially the section that includes intellectual layers, is of particular importance. In the 1990s, these layers became more or less clear in terms of consciousness, ideology, and political strategy for directing the reform movement.

The relationship between educational development and the pattern of electoral participation has also been studied by various researchers. The result of one of these studies appeared in an article titled "Educational Development and Electoral Participation: A Case Study of the Ninth Presidential Election," written by Ali Saei. As argued in that article, as a result of educational development, new social forces emerge, such as educated individuals, university students, intellectuals, professors, and specialists in various professional fields, who, given their modern outlook, seek political participation in order to influence the political system. According to the findings of this research, there is a covariational relationship between educational development and political development, such that the greater the degree of educational development, the more political participation improves both quantitatively and qualitatively (18).

Electoral Participation as a Political Movement

The election of May 23, 1997, was more than an electoral phenomenon and resembled a political movement. This election was the first uprising of the new middle class, especially the educated and intellectual sections of this class, to advance political change through electoral participation. May 23, 1997, was the beginning of a series of electoral events with highly important political themes and manifestations. The electoral behavior of the Iranian people in this election contained a meaning that carried it beyond the meaning of an ordinary election. Among other things, it conveyed a message to political leaders regarding the need to reconsider the principles of political governance practiced in the preceding years. The unexpected nature of the election results, from the perspective of observers, itself carried a message of this kind. In this election, two candidates confronted each other in a situation in which, under ordinary circumstances, the outcome of the election seemed predetermined: Seyyed

Mohammad Khatami, a relatively unknown figure and the moderate minister of culture and Islamic guidance, against Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, a well-known figure in various political arenas, institutions, and political assemblies.

From the early years of the Revolution, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri had the support of major sections of various institutions and well-known political groups: the Combatant Clergy Association, the Association of Guilds and Merchants, the Chamber of Commerce, the seminaries, the offices of Friday prayer leaders, the Islamic Coalition Party, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The people's votes for Mohammad Khatami were, in fact, a critique of the tendencies and performance of all these forces, which together constituted the ruling conservative front. Khatami's only capital, however, was his support for freedom and his opposition to censorship in cultural domains. Khatami's electoral program included strengthening civil society, "treating the ailing economy," dialogue among civilizations, political pluralism, support for women's rights, and the rule of law (19).

Table 5. Participation Rate and Votes Obtained in Eight Presidential Election Cycles: Nationwide

Election Cycle	Eligible Voters	Number of Participants	Votes Obtained by the President	Public Participation Percentage	President's Vote Percentage
First cycle	2,993,643	14,152,887	10,709,330	67.5	35.5
Second cycle	22,687,017	14,744,803	12,722,000	64	85.7
Third cycle	22,687,017	16,847,717	16,800,579	74	99.7
Fourth cycle	25,993,802	14,238,587	1,223,870	55	84.5
Fifth cycle	30,139,598	16,452,677	15,537,394	55	53.6
Sixth cycle	33,156,055	16,796,787	10,555,912	51	63.1
Seventh cycle	36,466,478	29,147,745	20,078,178	80	70
Eighth cycle	42,170,230	28,155,819	21,659,053	68	76.9

Source: Statistical Center of Iran

The rise in the level of electoral participation after three successive cycles of decline indicated a new event in Iran's political atmosphere. The 80 percent participation rate and the 70 percent vote share of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami indicated public reception of the discourse of civil society, cultural freedoms, and political opening that Seyyed Mohammad Khatami had put forward. The political atmosphere, once again like the early years of the Revolution, became full of vitality and hope. This vitality and hope continued in the Sixth Parliamentary Election, which was held two years later, and produced a new surprise. Participants in the election of the Islamic Consultative Assembly once again displayed their firm determination to advance the demand for political change toward the consolidation of democracy. Once again, the new middle class and its educated and university-based sections played a pioneering role in political mobilization for elections in order to advance reformist demands. The results of the Sixth Parliamentary Election indicated the decisive victory of the front known as the Reform Front and the voters' insistence on the demand for change and reform. The reformist front won an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats. The Participation Front, one of the leading groups in this coalition, won 90 percent of Tehran's parliamentary seats. The thirty representatives who constituted Tehran's quota in the Islamic Consultative Assembly obtained the necessary votes to be elected in the first round and, in total, received 31,709,000 votes. This means an average of 1,057,000 votes per person, whereas in the Fifth Parliament this figure was slightly over 500,000. Another interesting phenomenon was that the average votes of the elected women were higher than the average votes of the men.

Table 6. Coefficient of Dispersion of Party Votes in the Sixth Parliament

Party or Political Group	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Dispersion
1. Independence Party of Iran	454,861	100
2. Chekad-e Azadandishan	253,486	96
3. Society of Researchers	388,416	82
4. Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution	467,120	78
5. Executives of Construction Party	259,631	72
6. Islamic Civilization Party	259,631	72
7. Moderation and Development Party	302,736	71
8. Workers' House	438,104	67
9. Islamic Society of Students	251,218	66
10. Assembly of Combatant Clerics	420,619	53
11. Society of Devotees of the Islamic Revolution	204,054	53
12. Office for Strengthening Unity	383,759	40
13. Combatant Clergy Association	112,477	28
14. Candidates of the May 23 Press	243,443	24
15. Islamic Iran Participation Front	224,051	21

Source: Research Center of the Parliament

If we consider the voting pattern of participants according to the concentration–dispersion index, we arrive at another meaningful electoral behavior in the Sixth Parliamentary Election. That is, in this election, the orientation of votes in terms of turning toward political parties and groups clearly tended toward concentration (Table 6). In other words, the distribution pattern of votes was less indicative of voter “confusion.” Voters knowingly and purposefully sought to select the candidates of their preferred party or group and send them to parliament.

The totality of evidence from the seventh presidential election, the Sixth Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the first cycle of city and village council elections indicated the voters' decisive demand for creating changes in past policies and carrying out reforms toward improving the conditions of governance. However, the changes and reforms that Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's government, the Sixth Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the first cycle of city and village councils were able to advance, given the prevailing balance of forces, were not acceptable enough for voters and public opinion. Conservative and principlist forces inside and outside the system had the capacity to contain the reform movement and limit the scope of the demanded changes.

The Difficult Path of Advancing Political Change

Successive and evident victories in the arenas of presidential elections, elections to the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and city and village councils for the reformist front did not mean victory in carrying out the desired changes demanded by the new middle class, especially its cultural and university-based sections. Advancing the vast array of reformist demands exceeded the capacity of the new middle class within the balance of forces between transformation-seekers and conservatives or principlists. The transformation-seeking forces gained part of the base of political power, but an important part of it still remained in the hands of the principlists. The institutional capacity of the political system, formed by the Constitution, made it possible to accept only certain limits of change.

The Reform Front, which took shape after Mohammad Khatami's unexpected victory, did not have much experience as a political coalition. Its internal forces were not unified and did not have a single strategy for articulating and pursuing reformist demands (20).

The coalition of the traditional middle class with the new middle class in this election was a fragile and unstable coalition. The radicalism of groups within the Reform Front could distance the traditional middle class, which was

concerned about political stability, from alignment with reform, as occurred in the ninth and tenth presidential elections and the Seventh Islamic Consultative Assembly.

On the other hand, the principlist forces, which had initially underestimated the capacity of the reform movement, gathered their forces around the leadership of the system and attempted to contain it. Approximately two weeks after Mohammad Khatami's victory was announced, the Fifth Parliament, whose majority belonged to the principlists, elected Nateq-Nouri as speaker of the parliament. The commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was replaced, and the new commander, Yahya Safavi, soon became one of Khatami's critics. More than twenty reformist newspapers were closed. Some leaders of the Reform Front called on Khatami to confront these moves. However, Khatami refused to take steps along a path that went beyond the limits of the Constitution (21).

Under conditions in which the principlist forces present in the power base did not agree to changing the situation in order to align with the voters' demands, advancing reformist promises was difficult. The large traditional bazaars, as the major base of the traditional middle class, which had initially supported Mohammad Khatami, began establishing relations with the principlists because of the opposition of the system's leaders to Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's programs and also because of their sense of danger regarding certain radical actions by extremist groups among his supporters, out of fear of instability in the system (13).

The May 23 election marked the beginning of a new period in post-revolutionary political developments. From then onward, new coalitions and factional alignments took shape. The formation of two major factions called the principlists and the reformists, as two major actors in the political arena, gave political competition in Iran its own specific characteristics. Factional competition replaced party competition, and these two factions became the principal actors on the political scene. The reformist faction more or less assumed representation of the new middle class's demands for democratic reforms. The reformist and principlist factions, in fact, appeared largely in the form of two parties (21).

The Ascendancy of Populism over Democracy

The surprising victory of the reformists had been achieved through the alignment of the new middle class, the impoverished masses, and sections of the traditional middle class. This class coalition was not a stable coalition. With the blockage of political reforms, part of the new middle class became disappointed with the mechanism of advancing political change through elections and, as a result, ceased active support for the reformists. The traditional middle class became concerned about political instability and returned toward the principlists. The broad masses of the poor, however, also gained no benefit from the reformist government. These broad masses were drawn in the ninth and tenth election cycles to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's slogans of justice-seeking and compassion. As a result, the public backing of the reformist movement was lost.

The Reform Government, which, because of obstacles created by the principlists, was unable to advance political reforms in the sphere of citizenship rights to a degree acceptable to sections of the new middle class, also did not undertake any significant action in the economic and social spheres for the impoverished masses. The class gap in society continued and expanded. During the presidency of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, the top 10 percent of society held 34 percent of national income, while the bottom 10 percent held only 2 percent of national income (13). When the 2005 electoral campaigns for the ninth presidential election began, a large portion of the country's deprived population felt that, with Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's failure to advance the promises of reform and

change, it had been entirely ignored. Reformist leaders had no program for attracting the deprived masses of society to their camp.

A rising faction of the principlists, which in political literature came to be called “neo-principlist,” benefited from the condition of failure and confusion that the principlists had created for the Reform Government. The neo-principlists took aspects of the declared goals of both factions, both traditional principlists and unsuccessful reformists, in order to build a new faction that could replace and push back both. In this way, they presented themselves simultaneously as defenders of values and of reform, so as to push back the principlists for refusing reform and the reformists for ignoring the values of the Revolution. The neo-principlists entered the field with the slogan of an “efficient government” and apparently, with a view to the Chinese model, hoped to provide both economic development and social justice for the country at the same time. Alongside religious attachments, the neo-principlists added economic and social concerns to their political program. Compared with traditional principlists, they belonged to a younger, more educated, and more pragmatic generation. Nevertheless, they shared many views with traditional principlists, who defended authoritarian and paternalistic rule, the preservation of a traditional way of life, the ideal of national self-sufficiency, and social unity (22).

In the ninth presidential election of 2005, the reformists put forward the same previous slogans, such as cultural freedoms, strengthening civil society, and reforming the status of women. But they said nothing about how they would be able to remove the difficulties that had been placed before them during the previous eight years. In their slogans, they presented nothing new indicating special attention to the needs of the broad masses of the people. On the opposite side, however, the neo-principlists, with populist slogans, addressed the injured masses, the urban and rural poor, and the people of deprived regions as the main audience of their electoral slogans. Their electoral promises included expanding social justice, economic development, improving the standard of living, and strong government. These slogans were attractive both to the “oppressed” masses, who were waiting for the fruits of the “Revolution of the Oppressed,” and to the traditional middle class, which was concerned about economic stability and social security.

The results of the ninth election cycle were determined by the presence and role-playing of the deprived masses and the absence of an important part of the new middle class. The absence of urban middle strata and the orientation of the votes of the broad masses in deprived regions clearly reveal the position of the new middle class in the political destiny of society, this time in a negative sense. In the 2005 election, the votes of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the winner of the election, were 24.8 percent in large cities and 42 percent in small towns and rural areas. In deprived provinces, except Sistan and Baluchestan, where ethnic issues were prominent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s votes exceeded those of the reformists. In the 2009 election, as statistical data extracted from a number of constituencies show, in areas where low-income strata lived, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s votes were higher, while in areas where high-income strata lived, Mir-Hosseini Mousavi’s votes were higher.

Table 7. Votes of the 2009 Presidential Election Candidates in Selected Areas of Tehran

Candidate / Polling Area	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	Mir-Hosseini Mousavi	Mehdi Karroubi	Mohsen Rezaei	Invalid Votes
High income					
Sardabad	116 (7.4%)	1,359 (87%)	35	45	6
Niavaran	276 (8.4%)	1,502 (78.4%)	83	43	13
Shahrak-e Gharb	352 (13.7%)	2,072 (80.5%)	59	78	13
Middle income					
Kerman Street	538 (19.3%)	1,204 (65.5%)	13	57	25
Khosh Street	732 (35.8%)	1,197 (58.5%)	31	46	39

Mehrabad	921 (41.8%)	1,172 (53.2%)	16	54	41
Low income					
Javadiyeh	568 (54.4%)	439 (42%)	1	11	26
Fallah Square	1,350 (77.9%)	327 (18.9%)	5	19	31

Source: (23)

Reconciliation with Elections

Apparently, eight years of neo-principlist government ultimately left many strata of society dissatisfied. The section of the new middle class that boycotted the election and, by turning away from the ballot boxes, helped Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory gained nothing from this action. The dream of this section of the new middle class, which had become aligned with the opposition outside the country, was that by boycotting the elections it would damage the legitimacy of the system and perhaps bring it down, but it gained no result from this wishful thinking. The deprived masses also lost what they had obtained, or could have obtained, because of the radical foreign policy of the neo-principlists and the sanctions resulting from it. The traditional middle class, too, could not accompany tension-generating policies in foreign relations. The only strata that benefited from the domestic and foreign policies of the neo-principlist government were rent-seeking layers that had emerged in the form of foundations and "quasi-private" entities from the "privatization" of state assets.

Therefore, once again, the option of change through reform became an option of interest not only to the new middle class, but also to the traditional middle class and the broad masses of the people. An important section of the new middle class, which had turned away from the ballot box in order to damage the backing and credibility of the system by lowering electoral participation, returned to elections so as not to lose more than it had already lost. They, too, moved from an idealistic approach to the practice of choosing between bad and worse. The eleventh presidential election of 2013 once again pushed the new middle class toward continuing its political aspiration for political change through elections. Once again, for the reasons noted, broad strata and groups of the people entrusted their demands to the advancement of the goals of this class. The result was that, as in the seventh and eighth presidential elections, electoral participation peaked and exceeded 72 percent.

Hassan Rouhani's promises on issues of citizenship rights, political freedoms, and the settlement of the nuclear dossier attracted both the new middle class and the masses of the people, who saw the solution to the country's problem in resolving the nuclear dossier. The support of two moderate and reformist figures, Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, for Hassan Rouhani made his decisive victory over the principlists and neo-principlists certain.

Conclusion

The new middle class in Iran, whose process of growth began during the time of Reza Shah, has always been an influential class whose influence in the social and political arenas has been far greater than its demographic weight. This class, which also had considerable influence in the Islamic Revolution of Iran, experienced rapid growth after the Revolution. The rapid growth of urbanization, the rapid expansion of literacy and university education, and the youthfulness of the population, as shown by the statistical data presented in the article, clearly demonstrate the successive increase in the weight of this class in post-revolutionary Iranian society. Electoral experiences in the post-revolutionary period testify to the significant role of this class as a vanguard in advancing demands for political change and reform through electoral participation. This role had particular significance and meaning in the seventh,

eighth, eleventh, and twelfth presidential elections and in the Sixth Islamic Consultative Assembly. The election of May 23, 1997, phenomenologically contained a turn in the general orientations of the people, which occurred through the vanguard role of the new middle class. Elections in the Islamic Republic acquired special importance from the outset. The broad presence of the people in the arena of political participation, including electoral participation, has displayed the popular backing of the system in confrontation with the global system of domination. By understanding the transformative capacity of elections, the new middle class began an extensive effort to use them to articulate and advance its demands for democratic change. The surprising election of May 23 marked the beginning of a period of struggle along this path. When Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, with the slogan of opening the political atmosphere and strengthening civil society, won against a very powerful rival such as Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, the prospect of a turn in the general orientations of society under the guidance of the new middle class became visible. The following year, the city and village council elections, and two years later the elections to the Islamic Consultative Assembly, strengthened the backing of the emerging orientations and the prospect of change through electoral participation.

However, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's victory paradoxically also brought with it a parallel path toward the consolidation of principlist power. The principlists organized and united their forces around the leadership of the system and were able to contain the mobility of transformation-seeking and reformist forces. The forces gathered around Seyyed Mohammad Khatami were not unified. Bazaaris, as the most organized component of the traditional middle class, who had benefited from the collapse of the previous system, were concerned about the radicalism of some groups forming the reformist coalition because they regarded it as a threat to the country's security.

The deprived masses, who had expectations from the "Revolution of the Oppressed," viewed the Reform Government from a different perspective, while the Reform Government had no program to respond to the demands of the deprived masses.

After two terms of reformist presence in the management of the country, significant sections of the forces that had formed the coalition supporting Khatami separated from him. The deprived masses preferred the slogans and programs of the rival neo-principlists. Sections of the new middle class that had become frustrated by the blockage of the reform path were attracted to the slogans of the opposition outside the country calling for an election boycott. Sections of the traditional middle class that had moved from the principlist camp to the reformist camp returned to their previous positions. The inability of reformist leaders to adopt an intelligent strategy and gather their forces under a single umbrella also helped the neo-principlists eventually traverse the difficult path to victory. The 2005 election ended with the victory of the neo-principlists.

However, the defeats of 2005 and 2009 were a lesson for the new middle class, which it used in the 2013 election. Some layers of this class also learned and gained insight into the elementary principles of politics, namely movement from the possible toward the desirable. Had this insight existed in 2005, many things could have been different. The deprived masses, too, lost again, through foreign-policy adventurism that brought economic sanctions with it, what the neo-principlist government had given them with one hand in the form of certain welfare concessions. This issue also dissatisfied the traditional sections of the middle class. Everything was ready for the formation of a new coalition in the 2013 election. The new middle class once again entered the field in the hope of bringing its desired changes to fruition and, with the support of the lower strata of society, registered another success in the electoral arena. But will it be able to advance the changes it seeks?

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