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On: 08 August 2013, At: 09:10

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Democratization

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

Civil society in Syria and Iran: activism in authoritarian contexts

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Published online: 01 Aug 2013.

To cite this article: Democratization (2013): Civil society in Syria and Iran: activism in authoritarian contexts, Democratization, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2013.809337

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.809337>

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BOOK REVIEW

Civil society in Syria and Iran: activism in authoritarian contexts, edited by Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta, Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013, 259 pp., \$22.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-58826-857-0

Beginning in the 1980s, the concept of civil society once again emerged as a major research topic in comparative politics, political theory, and comparative sociology. In the tradition of Western-liberal thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville, scholars discussed the role of civil society activism in liberalization and democratization processes in the wake of the so-called “third wave” of democratization.¹ Civil society was widely seen as the “missing link” between political, social, and economic developments and a stable democracy in the transformation countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and East Asia.² However, these assumptions about an inevitable linear development of societies from authoritarianism to democracy were further questioned with the persistence of autocratic regimes in the new millennium correlating with the emergence of the “authoritarian resilience” paradigm. At the same time, scholars are still divided over the question of whether civil society activism stimulates democracy or reinforces authoritarianism.

The starting point of the book is to overcome this “interparadigm” debate and to “depart from a normative definition” or “traditional understandings” of civil society in order to shed light on civil society activism that characterizes the two authoritarian countries of Syria and Iran. The editors define civil society as “the space between the state and the family, where citizens on a voluntary basis engage with issues of societal relevance” (6). They thereby provide a broad definition of civil society and emphasize that they not only focus on formal organizations but want “to look at non-formal processes of activism such as the ones that take place online, which involve individuals who might be physically disconnected with one another but are activated as citizens” (7). Consequently, the special focus of the book lies in “the dynamics that occur outside formal groups” and the reaction of civil society actors to “authoritarian upgrading”.³ According to the editors, the innovative contribution of the book is twofold: First, by focusing on non-traditional civil society actors who create new dynamics of interaction between society and authoritarian regimes, the authors want to examine civil society activism in both countries “through new theoretical lenses” (11). The second contribution is of an empirical nature. Syria and Iran are underexplored with regard to the development and forms of current civil society activism compared to other countries in the region, such as Egypt or Morocco, for example.

From a theoretical perspective both cases are interesting, with Iran displaying a stronger tradition of a mobilized population than Syria, but currently showing a higher level of authoritarian resilience. Overall, the volume is a useful contribution to an expanding focus of scholarly endeavour, one which aspires to unravel the dynamics of civil society activism within a seemingly unfavourable authoritarian context.

The chapters are an eclectic bundle, focusing on various civil society actors: In Chapter 2, Line Khatib convincingly argues that processes of political and economic liberalization in Syria in the last decade empowered Islamic groups and businessmen that would otherwise have been less influential. The economic and political reforms were adapted by the authoritarian elites in order “to survive as a political entity without having to resort to full-fledged democratization” (22). Ali Fathollah-Nejad shows for the Iranian case that international sanctions on the regime had a counterproductive effect with regard to the development of vocal civil society groups by indirectly reducing the space of democratic activism. In Chapter 4, Bassam Haddad picks up Khatib’s argument and demonstrates that the development of the private sector in Syria and the emergence of a new business class in the 1990s did not translate into processes of democratization. Rather, the “development of a class-biased civil society contributed to the resilience of authoritarian rule” (89). The ambiguous role of private sector actors is also highlighted in Peyman Jari’s contribution on Iran. According to Jari, entrepreneurs’ inclination to oppose authoritarian states largely depends on three factors: their collective power, state dependency, and fear perception. In the case of Iran, “entrepreneurs are weak in structural and organizational terms, are largely dependent on the state, and fear the working class and the potential disruption of the poor” (105f.), thereby hindering political liberalization. The next two chapters analyse the challenges and opportunities for the Syrian and Iranian activists that emerge from the spread of new technologies such as the internet. Cavatorta and Shaery-Eisenlohr suggest for the Syrian case that the internet “remains an effective tool for expressing political, cultural and social protest” (137), which connects formerly isolated individuals. Honari’s contribution on the internet and online activism in Iran is very useful as he makes a sound theoretical argument by applying the structural-cognitive model proposed by Karl Dieter Opp on the role of online activism in the Green Movement. His rich empirical analysis of the genesis of the Green Movement is very convincing. The growth of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) is explored in Kawakibi’s and Rivetti’s contributions on Syria and Iran respectively. Al-Sayyid concludes that “a major feature of all authoritarian regimes is the absence of an overall framework for the organization of state-society relations” (215). The two governments of Syria and Iran, however, successfully limited civil society activism to areas where they did not interfere with government policies. Nevertheless, the opportunities provided by cyberspace and new media to organize and connect formerly isolated individuals pose a serious threat for both governments.

On a critical note, a lack of theoretical and methodological focus diminishes the comparative merit of the book. Only a few chapters provide a sound theoretical argument and unveil the mechanisms behind the dynamics of state–society relations in both countries. Too many chapters rely on anecdotal evidence and fail to connect consistently the nature of the regimes with civil society activism. Therefore, it remains disputable how far the edition contributes new theoretical lenses to the examination of civil society activism in both countries. In sum, scholars who hope to gain new theoretical insights into state–society relations may be a little disappointed, whereas analysts interested in civil society actors in Syria and Iran will benefit from the book.

Notes

1. Diamond, “Rethinking Civil Society.”
2. Alagappa, *Civil Society and Political Change*.
3. Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism*.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.809337>