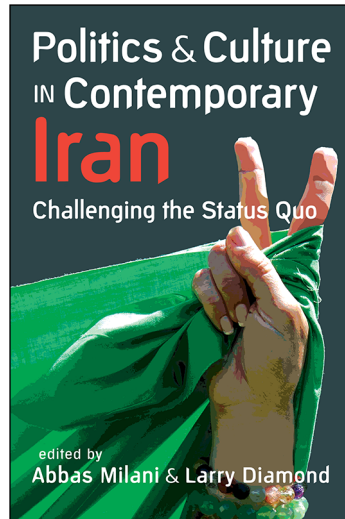


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# Politics and Culture in Contemporary Iran: Challenging the Status Quo

edited by  
Abbas Milani  
and Larry Diamond

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# Introduction

*Abbas Milani and Larry Diamond*

In his annual State of the Nation message, delivered the day after the Persian New Year (Nowrooz) in 2014, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei lamented at some length over what he said was the country's cultural malaise. A few weeks later, he told a meeting of the eighty-six-man Assembly of Experts (also known as the Council of Experts)—constitutionally responsible for choosing and overseeing the work of the supreme leader—that what keeps him awake at night is the culture war and the fact that the country is drifting away from what he considers the safe and sanguine ethos of Islamic values. Since then, hardly a week has gone by when some high-ranking official, close to Khamenei's coterie of power, has not voiced anxiety about the country's cultural drift.

A hint of the sources of his anxiety could be seen in the 2014 annual Fajr Festival—a film festival organized each year in Tehran around the time of the Islamic Revolution's victory in 1979. Iranian cinema has been much acclaimed internationally, but domestically eight years of the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency produced stagnation and a proliferation of "Islamic" movies. These were invariably a poor imitation of old Hollywood, Bollywood, or even crassly commercial movies of prerevolutionary Iran, laundered with a superficial dose of piety and repackaging the cardboard heroes of previous blockbusters as martyrs of Islam or of the eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988). In 2014 something unusual and telling happened at the festival. Every movie that had a whiff of "official" or "Islamic" ideology was booed and interrupted with incessant clapping. Of course, clapping itself is a taboo according to the official ideology; singing the praise of Allah and his Prophet or the supreme leader is Islamic, while clapping is dismissed and derided as a relic of Western influence.

Iran today is undergoing a profound, even historic sociocultural transition. Much of the media, however, and many scholars have ignored this transition to focus instead on either the nuclear issue or the political and economic aspects of the country's turmoil. Sometimes, the issue of sanctions and the falling value of the Iranian currency and other times Ahmadinejad and his denial of the Holocaust have been the focus of attention. Occasionally, the increasing role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in every facet of Iranian society and its growing economic dominance has caught the attention of Western media and scholars. For a while, the functions and rising power of the IRGC's elite unit—the Qods Brigade—and its commander, General Qassem Suleimani, took center stage. At times, commentators have contemplated the relative power of Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC. Iran's command economy and the endemic corruption in a system partially dominated by *bonyads* (foundations) and directly controlled by Ayatollah Khamenei himself have not failed to attract some attention. Ayatollah Khamenei's possible sickness, his penchant for anti-Americanism, and the already raging battle to shape the process of choosing his successor have been a favorite topic of commentators and journalists. During Ahmadinejad's last two years as president, his cantankerous relations with Khamenei, as well as Khamenei's increasingly tense relations with his friend of fifty years, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, have been hard to ignore. Other analyses have focused on the rift between the heads of Iran's three ostensibly independent branches of government. Of course, there has also been much attention devoted to the crisis over Iran's nuclear programs and the prospects for a broader rapprochement between Iran and the United States. But other elements of Iran's dynamic society have received less than adequate attention. In particular, the ongoing struggle for freedom and its often subtle but persistent efforts to defy the regime's procrustean prescriptions, not just on politics but on every facet of daily life and culture, has received less attention than it deserves.

When the tumults of Iran have appeared in the form of a mass-mobilized movement for democracy and against electoral rigging—as they did in June 2009, when by some estimates 3 million people came out in the capital city of Tehran alone to peacefully protest against what they thought was a rigged election—the world certainly paid attention. But the media coverage was short-lived. The role of social media, even Twitter, was the subject of some attention. Iran was declared, maybe prematurely, to have attempted the first Twitter Revolution. The prominent role played by women in both the education system and in political

protests also caught the eye of some journalists, photographers, and scholars. The shocking images of Neda Aghasoltan, a young woman killed by a bullet while she was peacefully protesting in the aftermath of the 2009 election, became iconic of the Green Movement: a peaceful social movement that came to support the presidential candidacy of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and eventually to protest what people believed were rigged results.

Neda and the Green Movement, no less than the nuclear negotiations, have figured prominently in English-language reporting and analysis. However, when the struggle for democracy or individual freedoms has taken more subtle or subaltern forms, when acts of dissent and even defiance of regime authority have become more politically metaphorical and less literal, media attention and scholarly scrutiny have been scant. In the language of literature, as Jorge Luis Borges reminded us, censorship is the mother of metaphors; in the language of social action, too, oppression and censorship, brutality and limits on freedom, and finally clumsy attempts at cultural engineering—all hallmarks of the Islamic Republic's behavior in most of its thirty-four-year tenure—beget social metaphors, and more specifically, attempts to resist and dissent in symbolic domains. Unless we listen to these voices and deconstruct the political meaning of their acts, we will, in our view, fail to grasp the real complexities of Iran today—and thus we will fail to anticipate its future.

For far too long, the motto that if it can't be measured then it does not exist (or is of no significance) has blinded many scholars to the immeasurable shifts in Iranian cultural values and social practices. In the long run, these deep transformations of culture and social relations taking place in Iran today may prove to have a bigger impact on its democratic prospects than the overt cleavages and conflicts in the current political system.

A veritable renaissance and reformation are under way in virtually every aspect of the cultural, social, aesthetic, sexual, and even religious canvas of Iran. Many of these developments are being forged (often at great risk) from within Iran's borders, and in different discursive forms. Thus, only those intimately familiar with the nuances of these cultural, aesthetic, and social theoretical domains can document the dimensions of these changes. The Iranian diaspora—some 5 to 6 million exiles—is even more reflective of this change. Their increasing financial, managerial, scholarly, and political power has allowed them to become an important agent of transformation. Because of the possibilities of the information age and social media, the diaspora is now a virtual part of

Iranian civil society—the cauldron of transformation with which we are most concerned in this book. Unless we understand these changes, we cannot effectively appraise the prospects for a democratic transition in Iran. Nor can we realistically assess the fragility of the regime’s cultural and social hegemony, despite its seemingly stable political domination. What makes the erosion of the regime’s cultural hegemony even more perilous is that, according to some economists inside Iran (not a few sympathetic to or working with the regime), it is accompanied by a serious economic crisis.

Arguably the most alarming report on the economy coming from within the country was delivered by Mohsen Ranani in March 2014 at a think tank led by Iran’s past reformist president Mohammad Khatami. Not just the ex-president himself, but many top policymakers were in attendance. Many websites inside and outside the country published the text of the talk.<sup>1</sup> Ranani said that the Iranian economy had entered a stage of what he calls “singularity”—in effect, a point of no return. Both the national economy and the morphology of the city of Tehran—the economic and political epicenter of the country, with about 20 percent of Iran’s population—had, in his words, become “black holes.” The regime has for years tried to reduce the population of Tehran with all manner of inducements; it has even passed laws to move the capital, but so far only about six thousand people (out of some 14 million in metropolitan Tehran) have been convinced to leave the city. In the same period, thousands more have arrived. In such moments of singularity, Ranani believes, economic black holes can only be changed by major outside forces. As structures move to singularity they become less controllable and less predictable. What would happen in Tehran, he asks, if there were a serious water shortage or an earthquake (Tehran is on a major fault line)? No one, according to Ranani, knows.

In a healthy economy, a 1 or 2 percent reduction in currency value usually brings an increase in exports. A decrease in interest rates begets more investment. Not in Iran. An almost eighty percent reduction in the value of the currency over the last year of the Ahmadinejad presidency did nothing to increase exports;<sup>2</sup> it simply depleted people’s net worth. Corruption has, according to Ranani, become so systemic that any effort to correct it will fail or crash the system. In fact, Transparency International ranks Iran 144th out of 177 countries in its 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index, tied with such stellar exemplars of good governance as Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic.<sup>3</sup>

It is no secret that the broad bulk of Iranian society is clearly frustrated and dissatisfied with the current situation. On June 14, 2013, they

gave a first-round victory to presidential candidate Hassan Rouhani, identified (however moderately) with the language and agenda of reform. Rouhani's decisive victory was, in Ranani's view, what system theory would call an anomaly. As people experienced the impending crisis, they could have reacted in one of two ways: revolted in anger or bet on the possibility of a way out through Rouhani. They chose the latter alternative, but this period of tentative hope wouldn't last long. People have already entered the phase of watching. The next phase will be reaction: if promises are not fulfilled they will react, and how they will react is unpredictable.

Ranani's argument fits with the underlying assumption of our volume: it is as facile to posit a structurally stable Islamic regime in Iran as it is to overlook the regime's continuing ability to maneuver and act to contain, co-opt, or suppress potentially perilous forces of dissent. The regime has shown that it can avert catastrophic crisis, yet it has proved still unable to structurally reform itself and find a way out of the impasse. Tactical political elasticity is at best a sign of the Machiavelian guile of a fragile regime. The structural elasticity of a rational system responding to grievances and adapting to change are signs of strategic stability. As the chapters of this book show from a variety of perspectives, the Iranian people clearly demand strategic stability, which requires genuine reform to reestablish the bases of regime legitimacy. To date, however, the clerical conservatives have only shown a willingness to make tactical concessions.

As Ranani makes clear in his economic analysis, the tactical retreat by conservatives in accepting President Rouhani's election victory does not mean that the economic crisis has ended. As an example of the economic perils that continue to threaten stability, Ranani refers to the issue of the liquidity crisis: Iran's currency saw a 650 percent increase in liquidity during Ahmadinejad's tenure. With stagnant production and an average increase in commodity prices of 420 percent, Ranani concludes that inflation has grown 230 percent less than liquidity. The large sums of money represented by that overblown liquidity are still out there in society, not in productive circulation but in limbo. Those who control this capital are waiting to see what the markets and the regime will do. If they lose hope in political stability and economic development, they will search for a profitable solution—in buying foreign currency, for example, or investing in gold—once again decreasing the currency's value and fueling inflation.

Today Iran suffers from the most serious stagflation in its history. For forty consecutive years, with the possible exception of one, Iran has

experienced double-digit inflation. It is, according to Ranani, the only country in the world with such a record. In other words, the Rouhani government finds itself virtually checkmated when it comes to its economic policies. It can't limit liquidity, it can't get investors interested in investing because of ambiguities and insecurities, and it is facing a massive fiscal deficit while lacking the political courage or capital to end debilitating cash subsidies. Its effort to convince rich and middle-class Iranians to voluntarily give up the cash subsidies each Iranian now receives—around thirty dollars per person per month—was an embarrassing failure. The Rouhani government's decision to continue to pay cash subsidies and try to balance the budget by increasing fuel prices will have unpredictable economic and political consequences. The fact that factions in the regime are already gunning for Rouhani will only add to the perils that he and ultimately the regime might face in solving the economic crisis.

Adding complexity to the difficulties of finding the right strategy to ameliorate the economic malaise is a threefold ambiguity. First, some in the regime (including many in the IRGC and maybe even Ayatollah Khamenei) have not yet decided whether Rouhani is a threat or an opportunity. Second, Rouhani himself has not made it clear where he stands. Is he willing to challenge the status quo, particularly the economic interests of the IRGC? His threat to release the names of all who have large outstanding debts to the virtually bankrupt Iranian banks has created considerable consternation, with some commanders of the IRGC using surprisingly threatening language. Moreover, though Rouhani is more used to dealing in back rooms, increasing threats from conservatives led him to threaten to invite people back onto the streets if the conservatives continue their war of attrition. One critical consequence of these ambiguities and tensions has been that markets have remained unsure. The dangerous economic slide of Ahmadinejad's final months as president has slowed down, but stability still eludes the regime.

The third source of continuous ambiguity and instability in the system, according to Ranani, is the mood of the people themselves. If they lose hope that Rouhani can solve the impasse, then they might become unpredictable. The liquidity crisis will then rear its head again and prices will skyrocket even more. Only political stability and wise policy can help the regime out of its perilous singularity phase, and neither appears to be on the horizon.

Indeed, the prognosis of economists like Ranani, elements of which are often repeated by members of the Rouhani government, only confirms our view of the regime's vulnerability. Because of the oppressive



nature of the government; the general public's frustration with what they judge to be its utter corruption, hypocrisy, and incompetence; and the regime's often abrasive attempt to dominate and reshape virtually every element of people's daily lives—from sartorial and sexual demeanor to preferences for rituals and names of newborn babies—dissent has by necessity or design often found alternative sites of resistance. In these spaces, ordinary Iranians seek to replace regime values with alternative—often democratic, sometimes defiant, occasionally reckless—substitutes. In today's Iran, these domains of culture are critical sites of quotidian resistance and more often than not an indomitable force in rejecting theocratic soul-craft. Tehran and many other Iranian cities, big and small, today can be compared to Prague before the fall of communism, where a small jazz club was no less a vibrant site of resistance to ruling dogmas than the writings of lapsed Stalinists searching for a “socialism with a human face.” In spite of the regime's bravura and brutality, we see Iranian society today as a seething volcano waiting for a democratic refashioning of politics, culture, aesthetics, and even the economy.

In our view, then, it is essential to look beneath the surface of high politics to grasp the deeper layers of action, innovation, struggle, and rebirth in culture, society, and politics. The purpose of this volume is to attempt to fill part of the lacuna in the analytical literature about Iran.

\* \* \*

Ayatollahs Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei, the two supreme leaders of the clerical regime since 1979, have often declared that the primary purpose of the Revolution was to move the Iranian people onto a pious and Islamic path. Their model fits squarely with what Sheldon Wolin, in his classic study of political philosophy, calls “soul-craft”—a remolding of a society's values and ways—rather than the “statecraft” that merely attempts to create the best workable political system.<sup>4</sup> Understanding this link, we can see how far the social, cultural, and moral reality in today's Iran is different from the stated goals of the regime. In fact, the regime has utterly failed to achieve what it set out as its primary strategic goal. But this failure of the regime's social engineering is not just the result of the anachronism of the model or incompetence in its execution. It is even more the product of a relentless process of resistance and defiance, a process predicated on society's clear aversion to violent change and its desire to negotiate the least costly path of transition out of the current singularity.

An old adage of politics is that when a society's ways and values—the norms, expectations, beliefs, and behavior of civil society—become incongruent with the structure of power in that society, change can't be far away. Cultural dissonance in society, no less than cognitive dissonance in individuals, can't endure indefinitely. Our goal here is to lay bare the nature of the incongruence that defines contemporary Iran; at the same time we hope to shed some light on the burgeoning new cultural, aesthetic, and political discourse. In charting the complexities of this landscape, we have not only selected some often ignored areas of scrutiny but also solicited chapters from contributors who are, in their scholarship, writing about their own lives. We have tried to follow as much as possible the notion of “thick description” offered by Clifford Geertz—namely, instead of speaking for a movement or a culture, allow members of that culture to speak for themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Forty years ago, scholarly works on Iran were no more than a handful. The politics of oil, Iran's strategic posture, its alliance with the West against Soviet Union, and occasionally its pre-Islamic era were the primary focus of the meager attention the country received from the academic community. Even among scholars of Islam, scant attention was paid to Twelver Shiism (Esna A'shari), the brand of Islam dominant in Iran for at least the last five centuries. Islam was upon the death of the Prophet split into two enduring factions. In fact, in “covering” Islam, as Clifford Geertz and Marshall Hodgson have argued, imagining one Islam, instead of many Islams, was the most common misperception of Western views of the Islamic world.<sup>6</sup>

The 1979 Revolution that toppled the shah not only shifted the region's tectonic political plates but led to a virtual new cottage industry of Iranian and Shiite studies. A plethora of memoirs and magazine articles combined facts and fiction to unravel the mysteries of the Revolution in Iran. These memoirs were often self-serving, and sometimes the inevitable consequence of the ravages of time on fallible memory. Nearly all of the Western journalists who wrote in the aftermath of the Revolution spoke no Persian and were at the mercy of their translators. Polish journalist Rzyyard Kapuscinski's much-acclaimed *Shah of Shahs*, considered something of a classic, and Michael Foucault's interjections on the Revolution in Iran are arguably the most egregious examples of this genre. Both writers spent a few weeks in Iran and then wrote books on not just the roots of the Revolution but also the character and life of the shah, the traits of the Iranian nation, and the “refreshing” paradigmatic changes brought about by Ayatollah Khomeini. Recent scholarly

books on these ill-informed but much-hyped interventions have underscored the dangers of such overly ambitious projects.<sup>7</sup>

If popular books suffered from too many questionable generalizations, academic books and articles on Iran invariably focused, often deeply and rigorously, on a specific aspect of the Revolution. Like the academy itself, scholarly work often reflected Balkanized knowledge of Iran. Valuable as each and every one of these studies are to the scholarly study of aspects of Iranian society, they invariably shine light on a tree but forget the forest.

Societies and political and cultural movements are a complicated web of interlaced, dynamically and organically interdependent factors—from the economic and aesthetic to the sociological and sexual. They never partition themselves neatly into the strict disciplines academia has demarcated for itself—and by extension for the subject matters of their studies. To understand Iran in all of its interrelated complexity, we must thus transcend the disciplinary boundaries that beget partial, albeit informed, slices of an imagined compartmentalized reality. Music and poetry; the intricate web of the IRGC and its foot soldiers, the Basij; the contours of Ayatollah Khomeini's changing theory of power; the power and presence of social networks; and the role of women in all of these spheres are all in our view indispensable to understanding Iran and its quest for democracy and modernity. In attempting to address these many facets in one volume, we hope that we have taken a necessary step in this much-needed approach.

Another distinctive feature of our collection is that, instead of bringing together only the work of scholars, we have included authors who are not just acute observers of their subjects but who embody the very changes about which they write. Instead of having others write about the movement, we have allowed actors in the movement to offer their own thick description of their reality. The result is a remarkable group of activists, poets, scholars, and artists coming together under the common roof of a single book to offer a glimpse into the vibrancy of Iranian society, and the obstacles to cultural, political, and social efforts to create a democratic Iran.

\* \* \*

Following this introductory chapter, our book begins with a discussion of some of the critical aspects of the political domain. The foundational political idea underpinning the existing political structure in Islamic

Iran is the notion of *velayat-e faqih*. Arash Naraghi, one of the most erudite observers of Iran's political scene and himself an influential voice in shaping a kind of revisionism in the ranks of religious forces in Iran, offers a brilliant answer to the question of identifying the theory of governance in Iran. Although Iran's religious revisionists are now widely divided among different strains and levels of rethinking, debunking, or revising old ideas and beliefs, they are nevertheless an important force, particularly inside Iran and today even within the Rouhani government. In a way the election of Rouhani as president—made at least partially possible by the alliance he formed with the reformists—has both shown the continued relevance of this force and strengthened their voice in Iran. Naraghi, then, is one of the most refreshing voices to emerge from among the onetime supporters of the regime, and an important agent in shaping the reformist theological and political discourse of Shiite Islam.

Moving on from the contested philosophical foundations of the regime's political theory of power, Hossein Bashiriyeh in Chapter 2 discusses the cleavages in current Iranian politics and demonstrates the fallacy of assuming that a political monolith dominates the undemocratic landscape. Bashiriyeh is often referred to by conservative forces inside Iran as one of the key political theorists for the reformist and democratic movement in the country. Through his analytical books and essays—most of them in Persian—and through his effort to translate into Persian some of the seminal texts in political development theory, he has played an important role in shaping today's democratic discourse inside Iran. For many years he taught at Tehran University's Faculty of Law and Political Science, where many of the future leaders of Iran's reform and democratic movements were his students. In the aftermath of mass demonstrations in 2009, as attacks against him and other independent scholars and professors increased, he felt he had no choice but to leave Iran, and he now lives in forced exile. His intimate knowledge of the dynamics of decisionmaking in Iran, and of the nature of its factions, richly informs his chapter, in which he argues that today's obvious political cleavages are the embryos of tomorrow's political parties and the gradual institutionalization of democracy in Iran.

The fate of the democratic movement and discourse after the suppression of the Green Movement is the subject of Mehrangiz Kar in Chapter 3. Kar, one of Iran's leading lawyers and human rights activists, was forced into exile after her participation in a human rights conference in Berlin. In her chapter she explores from an insider's perspective the dynamics of Iranian politics after the contested presidential elections of 2009 and argues that, despite the successful repression of the Green

Movement protests, the regime has suffered a substantial loss of legitimacy. Through an analysis of the emergence of the Principalists (Osulgarayan) hard-liners in reaction to the Reformist (Eslahgaran) efforts of Khatami's time, she also shows that the postelection protests provoked serious divisions among the supporters of the regime.

For the conservatives, one of the main tools for controlling, containing, and suppressing the democratic movement has been the judiciary, whose head is appointed by Khamenei. The Guardian Council—a twelve-man body of jurists whose job was initially to ensure that all laws passed in the country conform with sharia, but which has now taken up the role of vetting all candidates for elective offices in the country—has been another critical tool of containment and control. In Chapter 4, Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, a onetime member of the Reformist parliament in Iran and the first representative to resign in protest when the Guardian Council arbitrarily disqualified a large number of her elected peers from running in the next parliamentary election, describes in detail and with clarity the nature of the legal system—how power is at once diffused and centralized—and the “legal” methods that ruling circles used to not only maintain power but also afford their hegemony a veneer of legality.

On occasions when this legal structure has failed in its containment strategies, conservative forces have in the last two decades increasingly relied on the brutal force of their paramilitary units. The most powerful are militia-cum-gang organizations commonly known as the Basij. Membership in the Basij holds many advantages: jobs, easy admission to the university, no-bid contracts, immunity from legal harassments, and neighborhood power. Although the number of its members has been hard to estimate, it is one of the regime's most important tools for popular control, as there are Basij units in virtually every institution of the country. Saeid Golkar's analysis of the Basij in Chapter 5 is easily the most comprehensive English-language study of this group's genealogy, ideological morphology, and social functions. The fact that much of the research for his chapter was conducted while he lived and taught in Iran affords its insights particular clarity and cogency.

One of the Basij's new chief functions is to engage in cyberjihad. According to regime officials, thousands of Basij forces are hired to monitor, shape, hack into, and influence social networks inside and outside Iran. During the Ahmadinejad presidency, not only did the regime tighten the screws on every facet of cultural censorship—from cinema and theater to poetry and painting—but in the critical field of social networks, it placed the IRGC in financial, technological, and political control of all

forms of communication by allowing the IRGC and its allies to “buy” in a no-bid contract the entire company that controlled the information infrastructure. Following the 2013 presidential election, although the new president has advocated for more freedom in social media, conservatives have been fighting to tighten controls—among other things, declaring Facebook a tool of sin. The regime has created an army of what it calls cyberjihadists to control and influence social networks. Yet the democratic spirit of revolt and resistance has been burgeoning in this arena, and in Chapter 6 John Kelly and Bruce Etling map out the political, ideological, and aesthetic persuasions of those active in Iran’s blogosphere. While much has been conjectured about what actually transpires in this domain, Kelly and Etling use quantitative measures and actual blogs to give the reader a veritable sense of the political geography of this online world.

One of the favorite targets of cyberjihadists is a site called Balatarin. Arguably no one has been as successful as Mehdi Yahyanejad in introducing Iran’s social network to a new form of dialogue through this remarkably successful site. As reflected in Chapter 7, Yahyanejad’s experience and expertise in launching the site, and his subsequent research, afford him a rare vista to discuss the role of the social media in Iran’s democratic movement.

One of the other most dynamic and defiant forms of resistance in Iran has been the evolution of a new underground culture of music—one that synthesizes classical Iranian and Western modes, modern jazz and blues, hip-hop and rap styles to create a mixture that is both local and universal and consistently critical of the status quo. (Feature films including *No One Knows About Persian Cats* have been produced about this thriving underground scene.) In Chapter 8, Mohsen Namjoo—who was the first young musician of this tradition to become an international star—recounts his personal odyssey from a small town to some of the most renowned music halls in the world. He also describes how he and others have been innovating, indeed revolutionizing, traditional Iranian music, using every genre and every instrument of world music that suits their artistic needs. The government has made every effort to ban music altogether, particularly among women, but today a new kind of hybrid music is one of the most thriving aspects of the aesthetic revolution in Iran. Regardless of objections from religious conservatives, music by men and women has become a fascinating focal point of resistance and change, and a powerful reflection of the self-assertive individualism that is blossoming in Iran.

In Chapter 9 Abbas Milani places in historical and social context the Iranian people’s century-plus-long struggle for democracy. Tracing the rise of the coalition of forces that first brought the idea of democ-

racy to Iran in the 1905–1907 period, Milani notes that much the same coalition—with the exception of some elements of the clerical class that defended democracy in 1905 but became its enemies in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution—has continued to provide the backbone of Iran’s democratic movement. Milani concludes with an analysis of where the larger democratic movement might be heading in the years to come.

As a kind of postscript to this unusual collection, we have chosen a prose poem by Simin Behbahani. Behbahani has come to embody the defiant spirit of Iranian women in their indomitable struggle for their rights over the more than three decades of the Islamic Republic. In the field of poetry, too, she is regarded as a vanguard in reviving, and infusing with a new lexicon and imagery, one of the more traditional forms of Persian poetry: Ghazal. In her contribution to this volume, she uses a combination of pithy sentences and poetry—often her own but sometimes those of others—to give a sense of artists’ aborted dreams of a country where they could create free from the fetters of censorship, and also a sense of how the machinery of control was gradually put into place. In the years before her death, Behbahani’s output diminished due to her failing eyesight, but her stature as a poet and as a defender of freedom of expression has grown. Her prose poem, translated here with the help of Farzaneh Milani, is an apt ending to the story of a 125-year-old struggle for democracy in Iran—a land as old as civilization itself, and yet today filled with the youthful spirit of a savvy new society, trying to join the march to its own unique but unmistakably democratic modernity.

## Notes

1. For example, see Ranani, “Egtesad Iran asir adam Etminan” [Iranian Economy in the Throes of Insecurity].

2. Steven Plaut, “The Collapse of Iran’s Rial,” Gatestone Institute, February 21, 2013, [www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3597/iran-rial-collapse](http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3597/iran-rial-collapse).

3. “Corruption Perceptions Index 2013—Results,” <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2013/results/#myAnchor1>.

4. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*.

5. *Thick description* is a key methodological concept in Geertz’s theory of cultural analysis. For example, see his “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.”

6. For Hodgson’s magisterial three-volume history of Islam, and the many varieties of Islams, see Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*.

7. While a Polish journalist has taken Kapuscinski to task for the many liberties he took with facts in virtually everything he ever wrote, Foucault has also had his reckoning with facts in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*.