


Iranian urban experience. To be fair, Ghanoonparvar usefully references more detailed works of literary criticism in the footnotes, but these mainly refer to discussions of Persian literature and relegating them to notes negates the possibility of fuller engagement; at any rate, broader comparative and theoretical dimensions are not reflected in the main text.

Indeed, several motifs with the possibility to inspire future studies of the multiple dimensions of modern urban culture in Iran recur throughout the volume, including other forms of artistic expression and other themes. Perhaps the theme with the most significant implications for the future of Iranian society is the assessment of the commercial culture of modern liberal capitalism as the key shaper of city life. The *raison d'être* of modern cities is the innovation and economic growth generated by the cross-pollination of ideas resulting from individuals and firms living in close proximity. To ignore this spontaneously emergent order of the city is to ultimately refuse the creativity and innovation arising from the healthy competition of “sweet commerce,” which is the necessary (if not sufficient) condition for the best of modernity: the combination of prosperity and freedom. By contrast, Sadeq Chubak calls the modern city the “unhappy gathering place” (p. 10) of different types of people. Not a single story included by Ghanoonparvar extols the creativity and progress that modern urbanism can bring. Perhaps works not covered in this book embrace these possibilities? Or is this anti-urbanism a clue to the anti-modernism of Iranian culture? (In this regard, I note the omission of Ja’far Shahri, who celebrated all aspects of city life in numerous works on Tehran.)

As far as this reviewer is aware, *Iranian Cities and Persian Fiction* is the first book in English to illuminate such a question based on Iranian cultural products. It is clearly written and illustrates aspects of city life and urban culture, offering a fresh perspective on well-known works and attention to more obscure ones. The book will interest undergraduate and graduate students of Persian literature as well as comparative studies of the culture of cities. It is thus a welcome addition to a neglected aspect of Persian literature produced in Iran and to the study of urban life and the culture of cities in Iran in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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Kian Tajbakhsh, *Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022). x + 303 pp. (GBP)75. ISBN 9781009160919.

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Creating Local Democracy in Iran by Kian Tajbakhsh is one of the few books in English that examines the formation of city councils in Iran in the late 1990s. While the rise of the reform movement and its democratization agenda is a popular topic in Iranian studies around the world, its decentralization plan, manifested in the establishment of local councils, remains understudied. The same applies to the extensive literature on state building in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As such, *Creating Local Democracy* is a rare and admirable attempt to spark debate, and one can hope that its analytical questions and empirical data encourages other researchers to join the field.

From Launching to Blocking Local Democracy

Tajbakhsh divides his book into three parts, “Launching Local Democracy,” “Arguing for Local Democracy,” and “Blocking Local Democracy,” and begins with a preface describing his personal and analytical journey. The first section, “Launching Local Democracy,” examines the process of drafting the Council Law in the Fourth Parliament (1992–1996) and establishment of the first councils by the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). Tajbakhsh points out that the urban riots of 1991 and 1994, which erupted from people’s frustration with the lack of city services, encouraged Hashemi Rafsanjani’s moderate, pro-privatization government to set up such councils as an institution to mediate the city’s crisis and respond more effectively to residents’ demands (p. 10–11). The conservatives, led by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, also mobilized in the Fourth Parliament, where they had a majority, to pass the Council Law; this claim, however, can be challenged, as discussed below. This section ends with an examination of the weakness of these first councils, suggesting their members were inexperienced and used their power merely to change mayors or engaged in factional and political disputes often not directly related to their cities’ problems (p. 64–66).

The second part of the book, “Arguing for Local Democracy,” discusses how the Islamic Republic’s three major political factions (conservative, moderate or pragmatist, and reformist) played their role in launching the decentralization project. The author examines the differences between the conservative and moderate technocratic discourse on the topic of local councils and the democratic discourse of reformists. He uses occasional quotes from both Khomeini and Khamenei’s speeches on *shuras* (councils) to justify his argument that local councils were a component of the conservative Islamization project dating back to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. No doubt conservatives transformed the councils and used them, along with their own local bases (e.g., neighborhood mosques and *basij* militia bases), to consolidate their power after winning local elections. However, Tajbakhsh argues that conservatives supported local councils from the outset, because “they had the majority at the Fourth Parliament, where the Council Law was ratified.” He ignores the heated debates that shaped the local council law before the Fourth Parliament’s amendment. Existing literature on the topic suggests that local councils were initiated by the Islamic left led by Taleghani, at the time of the 1979 Constitution, while conservatives voted to limit councils’ decision-making and supervisory powers. This process encompassed the composition and approval of the Council Law in the First Parliament in 1982, as well as the accompanying five amendments, including those ratified by the Fourth Parliament.

In the third section, “Blocking Local Democracy,” Tajbakhsh analyzes the data—including interviews with officials in the Ministry of Interior and provincial government, district governors, candidates for local council elections, and ordinary citizens—in four different veins. The first concerns council members’ political affiliation in the six election rounds in related cities. In this regard, Tajbakhsh concludes that conservatives used legal tools and political pressure to prevent the democratic election of council members. While reformist efforts to get representatives elected culminated in minorities in the third and fourth councils, they attained a majority in the fifth and launched a reform plan to restrain mayoral powers. Tajbakhsh, however, views their efforts as in vain. The second line of analysis examines municipalities’ limited power in urban planning, especially in land use plans, which remained relatively unchanged by council elections. Elsewhere, I have discussed the councils’ essential role in supporting municipal changes in land use and construction density in different parts of the cities, through contravening approved urban plans. As I elaborated, conservatives’ violation of Tehran’s urban planning was regarded as illegal and ignited a fight with reformist councilors in the fourth and fifth councils.¹ The third area, where Tajbakhsh explores municipalities’ limited power to generate new revenue, is abstract and does not examine procedures on the ground. Tajbakhsh does not explain why, instead of increasing

¹ Khatam, “Shoray-e shar va syasat-e Esllahat dar Iran.”

property and other urban-based taxes paid by residents, mayors and councilors relied on the hefty fees large real estate investors paid for additional density or land use rights. Tajbakhsh concludes by emphasizing that the reformist camp failed to promote its democratization project, while the conservatives used the new institution to consolidate power.

Authoritarianism in Iran: Majoritarian or Minority Oriented?

Tajbakhsh invites us to reflect on why an authoritarian regime like the IRI would cling to elections, and even expand its elected institutions, while simultaneously enjoying all the benefits of an undemocratic centralized regime. He relates this question to the problem of the “tyranny of the majority” in contexts “where the commitment to the establishment and preservation of the so-called primary political and civil rights” is not an essential element of the political culture (p. 77–78). He examines some studies of the Arab world that suggest “people in Islamic societies embrace democracy without liberal rights,” concluding this could be the case for Iran as well:

while the IRI holds elections on the surface resembling those in democratic regimes, its rejection of liberal democratic assumptions implies that we should keep open the possibility that the purpose of elections is to manage populist participation in ways that preclude alternatives to the current system of rule, not to enhance the democratic legitimacy. (p. 82)

Tajbakhsh argues that “people’s participation in national and local elections in the conditions that the country lacks an independent judiciary and press that can protect political freedom in Iran has no other purpose than maintaining the popular support of the regime” (p. 77 & 83). He adds that elections in Iran are fundamentally different from those in democratic regimes, where opposition is tolerated and independent media and judiciary support the rights of minorities.

While this theory holds in many cases, the changeable popularity of elections in Iran makes it an exception. Post-Khomeini political shifts gained popular support both through the 1995 parliamentary and 1997 presidential elections. People essentially voted for change and political opening, not necessarily to express their support for a particular faction. The change in voter turnout also addresses the question arising from the illiberal democracy theory: why would people bother to vote in a non-democratic election, knowing that doing so only ensures the stability of the regime? In Iran, only elections promising change have seen considerable voter turnout. The constant pace of social protests and urban unrest in the 2010s and the dramatic decrease in voter turnout since 2016 challenge both Tajbakhsh’s claim that the country “did not face many protests or riots during most of its 43-year rule” and his assertion that the Islamic Republic is a majoritarian authoritarian regime (p. 67). Many scholars have studied how the conservative camp redirected its electoral politics from popular elections with limited competition to elections with limited turnout, attempting to marginalize, in effect, elected bodies like the parliament in key decision-making processes.

Political Factions and Conflicts of Irregulated Decentralization

Tajbakhsh suggests that all three political factions contributed to the formation of local councils while simultaneously promoting their own macro political project. I argue that the history of local councils does not present evidence of conservative or moderate support for local elections, beyond formal announcements. For instance, Tehran’s conservative council banned neighborhood councils in 2022, even though, over the previous two decades, they had only played an advisory role for city districts. Gholamhossin Karbaschi, a moderate politician and the last mayor appointed by the Ministry of Interior in Tehran, described himself

as the actual initiator of the decentralization project of the 1990s, when debates around the topic grew heated. He argued that replacing the central budget with local revenues was the basis of decentralization, not the launching of local councils. Tajbakhsh disregards Karbaschi's model of deregulated financial decentralization, which worked as a model for large and mid-size cities and built an authoritarian municipal system run by powerful mayors across the country. Siddiqe Vasmaghi, the representative and speaker of Tehran's first council, describes how Tehran Municipality's unregulated financial system and the mayor's authoritarian rule hampered the first council's ability to make the municipality responsive to the people.² On the first page of his book, Tajbakhsh touches on the topic in a short paragraph, describing his dialogue with a taxi driver on the streets of Tehran in the summer of 1998 and the driver's conflicting views on Karbaschi's urban reform and trial for embezzlement on charges of wasting public property and mismanagement. The driver accuses Karbaschi of "lining his pocket just like all others" and, at the same time, admires him for building new highways and changing the face of the city. This paragraph is promising, but unfortunately the author does not return to this instance of debate among citizens about the unregulated financial decentralization of large municipalities, like Tehran, and its connection with the rise and fall of city councils in Iran.

That said, *Creating Local Democracy in Iran* engages its reader with many concrete aspects of city governance in Iran, with the formation of local councils as one of the main projects of democratization under Mohammad Khatami's reformist government. A critical reading of Tajbakhsh's book could help build a better analytical framework for examining local governments, finding balance between the majoritarian authoritarianism frame and the "local trap" inscribed in social capital theory, which suggests that the localization of decision-making power leads to a greater tolerance of others and democracy.

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Zād-e ākerat. Abū Ḥāmed Moḥammad Ġazālī, ed. Salmān Sāket and Maliheh Ġāzi Mārešk (Qom: Našr-e adabiyāt, 1398/2020). CV+183 pp.

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Zād-e ākerat is a treatise on everyday religious practices, with some extra sections on theological issues. At the request of a group of religious people, Ghazali wrote *Bedāyat al-hedāya* (in Arabic) for followers (‘awāmm) who lacked the intellectual wherewithal to

² Vasmaghi, *There must be a way, notes of the first spokesperson of Tehran City Council (1999–2003)*.