

## **Democratization in Iran: Analyzing Electoral Competition and Participation (1906 – 2013)**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on the democratization in Iran from 1909 to 2013. I show that Iranian society experienced four waves of democratization. I argue that although Iran has experienced long-run processes of democratic change, the country has not yet been able to establish a democratic system. Meanwhile, these long-run processes of democratic change have led to long-lasting institutional change, realizing some of the minimum criteria of the transition process, including periodic elections. I set out a theory by which democratization increases parallel to the degree of socio-economic development. Importantly, I argue that successful democratization hinges on political elites strategically choosing to refrain from repression. The strategic choices made by the élites determine the main process of the transition stage. I use a novel dataset collected from 33 parliamentary and 11 presidential elections. Using multiple linear regression model, I find that socio-economic development and elite agency explain 0.42 percent of the variation in electoral participation and 0.62 percent of the variation in electoral competition. When elites decide to repress oppositional forces, the democratic transition index decreases by an average of 13.93 units.

**Keywords:** Democratization, Democratic Transition, Electoral Participation and Competition, Modernization, Socio- Economic Development, Political Elite Strategy.

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### **1. Research Problem**

This research discusses democratization in Iran. I define democratization as the long-term process of political change towards democratizing an authoritarian regime. Theoretically, democratization consists of three phases: 1. the breakdown of an authoritarian regime, 2. democratic transition, and 3. democratic consolidation. The first stage entails the collapse of authoritarian political structures; the second stage includes the shift from authoritarian structures and processes to new ones, and in the final stage the democratic political system is established (Diamond, 1999; Gill, 2000; Huntington, 1995; Saei, 2007; 2017; 2018). I argue that the second phase, i.e. the democratic transition stage, consists of two distinct stages: “establishment” and “realization”. The first is to eliminate the residues of a previous system that are incompatible with the workings of a democratic system and to install democratic processes and institutions. This phase starts with the collapse of an authoritarian regime and ends with the establishment of democratic institutions, such as constitutional law and parliament. The second phase is to realize new structures and processes, such as holding regular elections. The continuation of the democratic transition is consolidation. Consolidation can be achieved when the newly installed structures and processes have been institutionalized. It should be noted that the democratic transition is a gray period that does not always lead to the consolidation of democracy. This theoretical approach to democratization can be utilized as a conceptual framework to empirically analyze some historical changes in Iran.

The historical evidence demonstrates that Iran experienced four waves of democratization over the course of the 20th century: the first wave of democratization, called constitutional revolution, took place on 13 August, 1906, when Mozaffar-ad-din shah issued the Constitutional Royal Declaration (Farmān), the second wave, called oil nationalization movement, occurred, when the Majlis ratified the nationalization of the Iran oil industry on March 15, 1951, the third wave of democratization, called the 1979 revolution, took place on 11 February, 1979, which led to the extinction of the Pahlavi dynasty, and finally the reformist movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Saei, 2007). I argue that the democratization process in Iran, in the transition stage, has often resulted in the creation of a new authoritarian regime. For instance, although the first wave of

democratization led to the creation of a constitutional monarchy,<sup>1</sup> the transition process was not completed and returned to authoritarianism. The constitutional monarchy was quickly transformed into a military monarchy led by Rezā Shah. Between December 11, 1925 and September 10, 1941, Iran once again experienced despotism. On 19 August 1953, the cycle of authoritarianism was repeated again when the Muṣaddiq's government collapsed through a military coup (Kātouzīān,1981;Saei,2007). On 28 July 1989, the 1979 constitution was amended and according to Article 57, the word of absolute was added to the guardianship of the jurist (Velāyat-e Motlagehe Faghīh). This amendment paved the path of the centralization of political power, which in turn granted absolute power to the Supreme Leader. My main argument is that although Iran has experienced long-run processes of democratic change, the country has not yet been able to establish a fully democratic system. These long run processes of democratic change have led to long-lasting institutional change, installing some of the minimum criteria of the transition process, such as periodic elections.

Because Iran appears stuck in a long-term democratic transition, I focus on the second phase of democratization, i.e. the democratic transition. I study its two minimum criteria: electoral participation and competition (Huntington,1995; Vanhanen,2003). I claim that, although regular elections have been held in Iran, the rate of electoral participation and competition in Iran varies widely over time. Their distribution is problematic and mostly different according to the electoral period in Iran (diagram 1). In order to make this argument, I have presented the descriptive statistics of the democratic transition measures in Iran over the period 1906 to 2013 in Table1.

**Table1. Index of democratic transition (1909 to 2013)<sup>2</sup>**

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation
democratic transition	19.45	64.63	45.1	40.8	13.119
Electoral Participation	7.51	79.92	72.4	49.1	17.710
Electoral Competition	5.48	67.30	61.8	31.5	18.281

(Source: Saei,1918)

1.The monarch's role was restricted to ceremonial matters.

2.This data excludes the 10th presidential election. In the 10th presidential election the rate of electoral participation was 84.83, which was incompatible with other elections.

The findings indicate that the mean value of democratic transition in Iran during 1909 to 2013 is 40.82 and its minimum, which is 19.45, refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> parliament of the Muhammad Rezā shah period. The maximum of democratic transition occurred in the 6<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections in 2000. The maximum of electoral participation, which is 79.92, took place in the 7<sup>th</sup> presidential elections in 1997. The mean value of electoral participation is 49.1 with a Std. Dev of 17.71. The maximum of electoral competition took place in the 1<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections in 1909. The mean value of electoral competition is 31.55 with a Std. Dev of 18.28 and its minimum, which is 5.48, refers to the 5<sup>th</sup> presidential elections in 1989 (Table 2). Std. Deviation measures the dispersion of the electoral competition and participation to their mean.

The value of Std. Deviation indicates that there is a high standard deviation within the data set.

This empirical evidence shows that the rate of the democratic transition and its distribution is problematic in Iran, exhibiting major fluctuations.

On the basis of the above discussion, the following research question is developed: “How can the variation of the democratic transition be explained in Iran”?

The main purpose of this research is to evaluate some critical aspects of democratization in Iran and to recommend some suitable solutions.

## **2. Democratization literature**

The democratization literature can be divided into two strands, empirical and theoretical literature. In what follows, the empirical and theoretical literature of democratization is reviewed, respectively. After that, I will construct a suitable theoretical apparatus to explain the problem of democratization in Iran.

There are many empirical studies on democratization in Iran. Here, I review some of them, particularly Vanhanen (1990,1993;1997;2003) and Sāei (2007;2016). Vanhanen explains democratization by the distribution of power resource. According to Vanhanen, democratization depends on the distribution of power resources. The result of Vanhanen’s study indicates that the correlation between the index of power resources and the index of democratization is 0.77 in the comparison group of 172 countries in 1993. In Iran, the regression democratization on index of power resources is  $Y = 4.60 + 0.66(\text{power resources}) = 4.60 + 0.66 (7.7) = 5.148$ . The result of Saei’s

study indicates that there is a positive relation between modernization and democratization.  $Y$  (democratization) = 37.36+ 9.60 (modernization). His findings show that the intercept value is equal to 37.36. The regression coefficient of modernization is 9.60. It means that if the change in the proportion of modernization increases by one unit, then the change in the proportion of democratization is expected a 9.60unit increase.

As a result, the reviewed studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between socioeconomic development and democratization. For this reason, I use the socioeconomic development theory to explore some causal variables of democratization in Iran.

The theoretical approaches on democratization (Lipset,1959;1994; Putnam, 1993; Huntington,1995; Pother et al.1997; Gill,2000; Inglehart et al.2005) fall under two general categories: the modernization approach and the elite-oriented approach. The modernization approach focuses on changing social and economic structures favorable to democratization, and the elite-oriented approach accentuates historical political processes, such as the elite's choices, negotiations, democratic compromises, social conflicts and suppressive strategies that account for transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system. Theoretically, the basic premise of the modernization approach is that socio-economic development is a necessary condition for democratization.

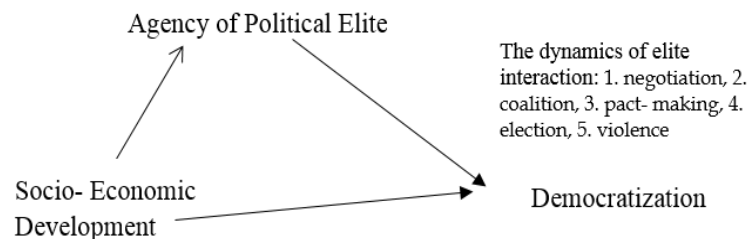
Socio-economic development changes not only social structures, but also social values. Changing values (e.g. moderation, conciliatory, secularization and tolerance) in turn facilitates democratization (Diamond,1999). Socio-economic development is conducive to cultural change that helps stabilizing democracy. Although the degree of socio-economic development is correlated with democratization (Huntington,1995;Diamond,1999,1999), I argue that economic development only generates social changes that can potentially facilitate the process of democratization, but this is dependent on how political elites respond to it.

The agency of political elites is the core element in the elite-oriented approach. The success of democracy, based on this approach, depends on the strategies of political elites. According to the elite-oriented approach, democracy is determined by elites' initiatives and strategies, not by changing structures. The strategies of political leaders can be classified as follows: negotiation, democratic compromise, concession, election,

harshness (suppression), and pact-making (Huntington,1995;Pother et al, 1997;Gill,2000). So, in this theory, rational actions of political elites are more important in comparison to structural factors. There are four major actors in the transition game: standpatters and democratic reformers within government, and democratic moderates and radicals within opposition (Huntington,1995). These political actors can have different relationships. To move towards democracy, it would be more favorable if softliners and moderates form a political coalition.

I argue that although socioeconomic development helps us to explain the degree of democratization, a higher per capita income and wealth level cannot automatically create a democratic regime; if it did, the petroleum exporting countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran would be democratized (Inglehart,2005). Theoretically, socio-economic development facilitates democratization by changing social structure, but the question remains: how the changing of social structure leads to democratization. It might be reasonable to assume that socioeconomic development is only conducive to democratization if it is connected to the agency of political power. The elite-based approach can help us to understand the role of elites in the democratic transition process. It should be noted that although the elite- based approach focuses on political processes, it neglects their structural contexts. In this study, I have attempted to present a configurational explanation through combining the two theoretical approaches: the modernization and elite-based approaches. On the basis of this argument, I constructed the following theoretical apparatus in which both structural conditions and elite choices are used simultaneously to explain democratization in Iran. The logical structure of this proposition is as follows:

**Figure1: Theoretical Model**



As already discussed, this paper focuses on the democratic transition stage, one of the three- phases of the democratization process, in Iran. Theoretically, the socioeconomic development is connected with democratization through political elites. The crucial point in my theoretical argumentation is that political elites determine the fate of democratization. The principal focus is on the dynamics of élite interaction in the transition stage. In this model, the agency of political elite refers to strategic choices of elites in the democratic transition stage. The strategic choices made by the élites determine the main process of the transition stage. The dynamics of the transition revolve around strategic interactions between political actors. In this study, the strategic choices of elite are conceptualized as suppressive and non-suppressive strategy. Hence, on the basis of the theoretical Model, it can be hypothesized that the variation of democratic transition is explained by a linear combination of socioeconomic development and the agency of political elite. If the degree of socio-economic development increases and the strategic choice of political elites is non-suppressive, the degree of democratic transition will increase, more than it does when political elite strategy is suppressive. When political elite strategy is suppressive, an authoritarian cycle will take place in the transition stage.

### **3. Methodology**

To test the above hypothesis, the following operational indicators for the concepts of democratization, socioeconomic development and political elite strategy are defined.

**Democratization:** As previously mentioned, the democratization process requires three phases: the breakdown of authoritarian regime, transition and consolidation. My focus is on democratic transition, particularly the phase of realization. As suggested by Vanhanen (1997,2003), I use the following two dimensions to measure the concept of transition: electoral participation and competition. These indicators are the minimum criteria to measure the transition process. The rate of participation is obtained through calculating the proportion of participants in each election to the population having the necessary qualification, multiplied by 100. The value of competition is calculated by subtracting the percentage of the votes of the elected person in presidential election and the arithmetic mean of the percentage of the votes of the elected persons in parliamentary election from 100; the higher this rate, the higher the competition. In this paper, competition and participation are combined into an index of transition, which is calculated by computing

the arithmetic mean of the two variables: electoral participation (EP) and electoral competition (EC).

**Socioeconomic development:** To measure socioeconomic development, the following three dimensions have been defined: economic development, educational development, and urbanization. Four operational indicators have been used to measure the level of economic development:

- Gross National Product (GNP);
- Investment in all economic sectors;
- Investment in industrial sector;
- Per capita income.

The index of economic development has been developed by calculating the arithmetic mean of the above variables. For educational development, the indicators are the rate of literacy, the percentage of intellectuals (professors, teachers, and students in universities) and the percentage of students in schools. The index of educational development has been constructed by calculating the arithmetic mean of three variables: the rate of literacy, the percentage of intellectuals, and the percentage of students in schools. The rate of urbanization is measured by calculating the proportion of the total urban population to the total population multiplied by 100. Finally, the index of socioeconomic development is calculated as follows:

**Index of Socioeconomic development= (Zscore of Economic Development Index + Zscore of Educational Development Index+ Zscore of urbanization Index)/3.**

**The agency of political elite:** In this study, political elites have been categorized into two groups: elites in power and opposition. Agency refer to the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference ‘to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of event. Agency involves power in the sense of transformative capacity (Ritzer, 1888:488; Giddens,1991:15). The agency of political elite refers to strategic choices of elites. Political elite strategy is operationally defined by suppression and non-suppression. Suppression is evaluated by violent suppression and structural suppression. Violent suppression is measured through the killing and imprisonment of opposition forces and the dissolution of opposition parties. By structural suppression, I mean putting limitation on political forces through ratifying restrictive laws or restrictive interpretation of the existing laws. Disqualifying candidates in elections and restricting political actors are considered the indicators of structural



suppression. I have studied non-suppressive strategy using the indicators of holding competitive elections, forming coalition for democratization and allowing opposition parties to legally compete for executive power and parliamentary elections.

**Units of Analysis:** This study contains two analysis units: parliamentary and presidential elections. The number of parliamentary elections is 32 and of presidential elections is 10. Data for a total of 42 elections are presented in this paper.

**Data Sources:** Election data was collected from the electoral documents in the Official Documents Centre of Iranian Parliament and the Official Documents Centre of Ministry of Interior. The data for analyzing economic development was gathered from documents available on the website of the Central Bank of Islamic Republic of Iran. The data of urbanization, literacy rate, and the number of professors, teachers and students (in school and university) were obtained from the documents available in Statistical Centre of Iran, Centre of Iranian Parliament, Ministry of Education (Iran) and Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (Statistical Year Book, 1925; 1932 to 1948 ; 1956; 1966; 1979; 1983; 1986; 1991; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1996; 1999; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2006; 2011; 2013 ; Iran in Statistical Mirror, 1981; National Accounts of Iran in Central Bank of Iran; Statistics of Iran's Higher Education in 50 years of Pahlavi period, 1976; Statistics of Iranian Education, 1964; 1967; 1969; 1994; 2003; 2004; Statistics of Higher Education, 1975; 1978, 1991; 1996; 1998; 2003; 2004). The data for political elite strategies are gathered from major text books such as Abrahamian, 1982; Bahar, 1984; Ettādieh, 1982; Ettādieh, 1992; Foran, 1993; Huntington, 1995; Maqṣūdī, 2001; Mudīr Shānechi, 1996; Nuwdharī, 2007; Şāremī, 1991; Saei, 2007.

**Analysis method:** To test the hypothesis, the three basic explanatory variables, economic development, urbanization and educational development, were combined into an index of socioeconomic development by calculating their arithmetic mean. The political elite strategy has been categorized into suppressive and non-suppressive strategy. In order to create dummy variable, I recoded the data of political elite strategy into a binary form: 1=Suppressive and 0= Non-suppressive strategy. Finally, the research hypothesis has been evaluated using multiple linear regression technique.

#### 4. Empirical Analysis

In this section, the index of democratic transition in Iran is empirically discussed through descriptive and explanatory. The results of descriptive statistics can provide a basis to understand the problem of transition in Iran in terms of elections periods. Additionally, it would be very useful for other researchers to access longitudinal data of transition in Iran. The descriptive statistics of democratic transition for 1909 to 2013 are presented in Table 1.

**Table 2: Empirical data of relationship between political elite's strategies and democratization over the period 1909 to 2013 in Iran**

Elections	Before 1979 revolution				Elections	After 1979 revolution			
	Year	EP	EC	Idt		Year	EP	EC	Idt
1 <sup>st</sup> parliament	1906	0	0	0	1 <sup>st</sup> parliament	1980	52.14	43.37	47.76
2 <sup>nd</sup> parliament	1909	7.51	67.3	37.4	1 <sup>st</sup> presidential	1980	67.86	24.02	45.94
3 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1914	9.404	54.3	31.85	2 <sup>nd</sup> presidential	1981	64.95	12.38	38.66
4 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1921	20.47	36.5	28.49	3 <sup>th</sup> presidential	1981	75.08	5.59	40.33
5 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1923	38.87	48.9	43.89	2 <sup>nd</sup> parliament	1984	64.64	42.2	53.42
6 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1926	58.53	38	48.26	4 <sup>th</sup> presidential	1985	54.9	14.28	34.59
7 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1928	40.71	22.3	31.51	3 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1988	59.72	50.66	55.19
8 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1930	45.55	13.5	29.52	5 <sup>th</sup> presidential	1989	54.59	5.48	30.03
9 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1932	47.29	13	30.14	4 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1992	57.81	53.57	55.69
10 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1935	38.04	11.5	24.77	6 <sup>th</sup> presidential	1993	50.66	37.09	43.87
11 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1937	42.1	11.1	26.6	5 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1996	71.1	53.84	62.47
12 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1939	44.67	12.9	28.79	7 <sup>th</sup> presidential	1997	79.92	30.9	55.41
13 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1941	37.16	16	26.58	6 <sup>th</sup> parliament	2000	67.35	61.91	64.63
14 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1943	35.14	32	33.57	8 <sup>th</sup> presidential	2001	66.78	23.09	44.93
15 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1947	51.46	25.7	38.58	7 <sup>th</sup> parliament	2004	51.21	59.14	55.17
16 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1949	34.34	23	28.67	9 <sup>th</sup> presidential	2005	62.84	59.44	61.14
17 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1952	62.09	36.9	49.5	8 <sup>th</sup> parliament	2008	55.4	58.98	57.19
18 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1953	40.87	18.3	29.59	10 <sup>th</sup> presidential	2009	84.83	37.54	61.19
19 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1956	41.4	16	28.7	9 <sup>th</sup> parliament	2012	64	39.38	51.69
20 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1960	25.9	13	19.45	11 <sup>th</sup> presidential	2013	72.7	49.29	61
21 <sup>st</sup> parliament	1963	54.28	16	35.14	The index of democratic transition in Iran (1909 to 2013) <sup>1</sup>				
22 <sup>nd</sup> parliament					Variables		Mean		
	1967	23.57	18.4	20.98	Democratic Transition		40.3		
23 <sup>rd</sup> parliament	1971	34.57	6	20.28	Electoral Participation		49.13		
24 <sup>th</sup> parliament	1975	35.94	50	42.97	Electoral Competition		31.55		

EP =Electoral Participation; EC =Electoral Competition; Idt =Index of Democratic Transition

**Note:** There is no data about the first legislative assembly. The 1st parliament included members of royal family, nobles, Landowners, Ulema (religious men), guilds and merchants (Abrahamian, 1982)

1.This data excludes the 10th presidential election. In the 10th presidential election, the rate of electoral participation was 84.83, which was incompatible with other elections.

Table 2 depicts changes in electoral participation and competition between 1906 and 2013. I find that the mean value of democratic transition in Iran for the 1909 to 2013 period is 40.3 and its minimum, which is 19.45, refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> parliament in 1960. The maximum of democratic transition occurred during the 6<sup>th</sup> parliament election in 1979. The mean value of electoral participation is 49.13; the highest of which occurred in 1997, i.e. the 7<sup>th</sup> presidential election. The mean value of electoral competition is 31.55, varying from 5.48 in 1989 to 67.30 in 1909. As I have already mentioned, the findings imply that the variation of democratic transition rate in Iran is problematic. The diagram 1 also depicts such variation of democratic transition on the basis of electoral participation and competition.

**Diagram 1: The rate of electoral participation and competition over the time 1906 to 2013.<sup>1</sup>**

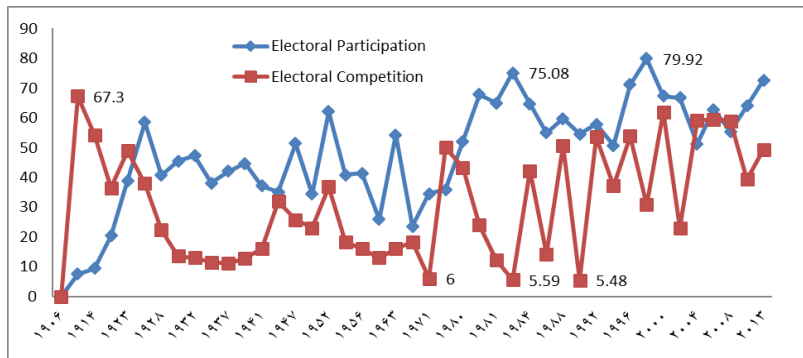


Diagram1 illustrates how the rates of electoral participation and competition vary between 1909 and 2013. To explain this variation, this study concentrates on two causal variables: socioeconomic development and political elite strategy. Here, the hypothesis “If the degree of socio-economic development increases and the strategic choice of political elites is non-suppressive, the degree of democratic transition will increase” has been empirically evaluated through regression analysis technique.

1.This data excludes the 10th presidential election.

**Table 3: Regression of democratic transition and its components on socioeconomic development and political elite strategy**

		Democratic Transition	Electoral Participation	Electoral Competition
R2		0.79	0.42	0.62
Prob(F-statistic)		.00	.02	.00
Durbin-Watson1		1.5	2	1.85
C		44.66	53.95	29.5
Socio-economic Development	B	14.92	11.25	19.8
	Std. Error	1.94	5.3	3.6
	Prob.	0.00	0.04	0.00
Political Elite Strategy	B	-13.93	-7.12	-11.94
	Std. Error	2.41	4.8	5.02
	Prob.	0.000	0.15	0.02

The findings indicate that the proportion of the total variance of democratic transition which is explained by a combination of socioeconomic development and political elite strategy is 0.79. The explained part of variation in democratic transition can be regarded as a high degree of explanation, which is statistically significant at the .05 level. Only 21 percent of the variation in democratic transition remains statistically unexplained. The unexplained part of variation seems to be due to other explanatory variables, including historical and institutional setting and also measurement errors. Socioeconomic development and political elite strategy explain 0.42 percent of the variation in electoral participation and 0.62 percent of the variation in electoral competition.

**Y (democratic transition) = 44.66+ 14.92 (socioeconomic development) -13.93 (elite strategy)**

The intercept value is equal to 44.66, i.e., the value of democratic transition is 46.50, in a hypothetical situation, when the change in the proportion of socioeconomic development index is zero and political elite strategy is non-

1.Treating time series data as independent may lead to problem of autocorrelation. The autocorrelation problem was tested using Durbin-Watson statistic. Its value ranges from 0 to 4. A value near to 2 indicates non-autocorrelation. A value close to 0 indicates positive autocorrelation, while a value of 4 indicates negative autocorrelation. Statistic values in the range of 1.7 to 2.3 are relatively normal.

suppressive. The regression coefficient of socioeconomic development is 14.92. It means that if the change in the proportion of socioeconomic development increases by one unit, then the change in the proportion of democratic transition is expected a 14.92-unit increase, holding the political elite strategy constant. The regression coefficient of political elite strategy is equal to -13.93. It means if the proportion of non-suppressive strategy increases by one unit (i.e., going from the political suppressive strategy to the non-suppressive strategy), then the change in the proportion of democratic transition is expected a -13.93 increase, while the other variables in the model are held constant. The existing data indicates that when the hardliners suppress opposition forces, the democratic transition index decreases by an average of -13.93 units.

The proportion of the variance in the electoral participation and competition which is explained by a linear combination of socioeconomic development and political elite strategy is 0.42 and 0.62 respectively.

**Y (electoral participation) = 53.95+ 11.25 (socioeconomic development) -7.12 (elite strategy)**

**Y (electoral competition) = 29.5+ 19.8 (socioeconomic development) -11.94 (elite strategy)**

The coefficients for predicting the electoral participation and electoral competition from the variable of socioeconomic development are 11.25 and 19.8 respectively. It means that for a one-unit increase in socioeconomic development, we would expect a 11.25 increase in the electoral participation and a 19.8 in the electoral competition, when the political elite strategy is held constant. On the other hand, the existing data indicates that holding the other variable constant, when the political elite strategy is suppressive, the democratic transition index decreases by an average of -7.12 and -11.94 units in the electoral participation and competition respectively. As a result, the findings of this research empirically confirm that democratic transition is positively correlated with socioeconomic development, so that the greater the degree of socioeconomic development, the greater the degree of democratic transition. In another word, the evidence indicates that if the rate of socioeconomic development increases, the degree of democratic transition also increases. Additionally, it can be said that whenever the conservatives (hardliners) inside the government are stronger than the opposition groups, they constrain the democratization by suppressing the opposition (moderates and reformists), which leads to a decrease in

democratic transition; 13th parliament, the case of Rezā Shāh, is a case in point (Table 2).

Generally, the empirical evidence indicates that there is a relation between the political elite strategy and variations of democratic transition in repeated instances, where political elite strategy is suppressive, the rate of democratic transition is low.

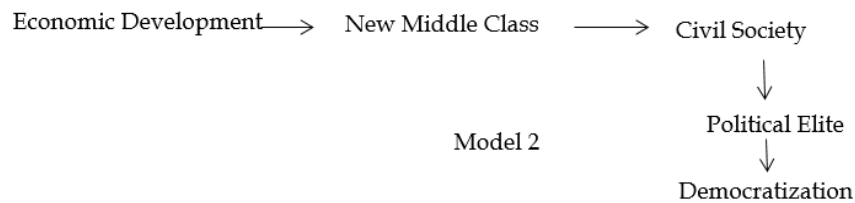
### **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

As already mentioned, theoretically, socio-economic development facilitates the process of democratization by changing social structure, but it does not automatically make a democratic country; successful democratization depends on the initiatives of political elites such as negotiation, compromise, coalition and suppression. In Iran, the prospect of democratic transition is determined by the relative power of reformists and conservatives. The empirical findings indicate that whenever the reformists were stronger than the standpatters within the governing coalition, i. e. the conservatives, the rate of democratic transition tended to increase, as exemplified in the 17th parliament under the rule of Muşaddiq and the 7th presidential election at the Islamic Republic period (Saei,2016). The rate of democratic transition in the 7th presidential election increased by 25.38 percent in comparison with the 5th presidential, in which the average of democratic transition index was 30.03(Table 2). In 5th presidential election, all candidates were from the Islamic Right Groups and the rate of competition was 5.48 percent, while in 7th presidential election, the reformists overcame the undemocratic actors by forming a coalition with moderates and the rate of competition increased to 30.9 (Saei, 2016; Table 1). Thus, it can be said that as long as the relation between conservatives and reformists is asymmetric, there exists a possibility of rupture in democratization as well as re-establishment of authoritarianism. It seems that the solution is to strengthen civil society in Iran. According to the empirical data, whenever the parties and associations are active, the society is more likely to proceed to democratization, as exemplified in the 17<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election before the 1979 Revolution, the 6<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election, and the 7<sup>th</sup> presidential elections after the 1979 Revolution (Saei, 2016). My argument is that if the civil society<sup>1</sup> is institutionalized, there will

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1. Civil society is the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, autonomous

be a balance of power between political forces. When a civil society develops, the ability of its political actors to affect the political processes (challenge the authoritarian regimes) will intensify. As such, the relationship between political actors becomes more symmetrical and makes the democratic transition easier. Theoretically, I argue that a developed civil society can institutionalize a democratic relationship pattern among political actors, which is necessary for democratization. Thus, the institutionalization of civil society is an important structural element for democratic transition. As for the theoretical implication of this research, the observational statements about democratization are compatible with the theory utilized in this research. However, the following theoretical explanation is reformulated as a hypothetical model<sup>1</sup>



According to Model 2, economic development explains democratization through causal mechanism of the new middle class and civil society. The factor of political elite strategy plays an important role in democratizing the regime and the political elites determine the fate of transition. There are three types of transitions: transformation, replacement, and transplacement (Huntington, 1995)<sup>2</sup> In the Iranian case, it seems that the most suitable transition would be transformation, in which the reformists within the authoritarian regime play a major role in the transition game.

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from state, and bound by set of shared rules. Civil society exists when there is a sphere of activity outside direct state control, in which the citizens enable to pursue their interest independent of and even against the regime. Their activity is recognized as being legitimate by the regime. (Diamond, 1999: 221; Gill, 2000: 59 - 120)

<sup>1</sup> In this model, the middle class is important in the historical political processes. My argument is that the process of socioeconomic development generates middle class that can potentially facilitate the process of democratization.

<sup>2</sup> The replacement occurs when opposition takes the lead in bringing about democracy, and the authoritarian regime collapses. The major actors in transplacement are the democratic reformers in the authoritarian regime and the democratic moderates in the opposition group (Huntington, 1995).

Finally, it must be considered that scientific research is based on trial and error. Hopefully, other scholars will continue studying democratization in Iran in the light of the criticisms raised in this paper.

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