

## Political Field in Islamic Republic of Iran: Application of Bourdieu's Field Theory

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### Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to apply Bourdieu's field theory to the political field of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The concept of field, as explained by Bourdieu, provides a suitable theoretical framework to identify and explain the complexities and intricacies of different behaviors of this system and analyze its absolutely different practices in domestic and international arenas. The main question of this paper is: What is the relationship between political field and other fields in Iranian political landscape? The hypothesis formulated to answer this question is: the political field in the Islamic Republic of Iran has turned into the most preponderant field and this very field in order to survive has dominated other fields, taking away the possibility of their independence. The findings of this paper show that the growth of political field not only has created limitations for other fields, but also has politicized other fields including the field of religion.

**Keywords:** Iran, political field, Bourdieu, cultural field, field theory

## 1. Introduction

Logic of political struggle is one of the most important features of the political structure of Iran. Many political sociologists have tried to explain this logic from different viewpoints. Today, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory is used in many areas, while specialists of different disciplines have tried to use this theory and other theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu in the analysis of their problems. Attempts have been made in the present paper to analyze the political field of Iran on the basis of Bourdieu's field theory. The concept of field, as explained by Bourdieu, provides a suitable theoretical framework to identify and explain the complexities and intricacies of different behaviors of this system and analyze its absolutely different practices in domestic and international arenas. The main hypothesis of the present paper is that the political field in the Islamic Republic of Iran has turned into the most preponderant field and this very field in order to survive has dominated other fields, taking away the possibility of their independence. Bourdieu's definition of field and its features and the characteristics of field in the Islamic Republic of Iran facilitate the application of his theory to the current situation in Iran. The sources used for this paper include the Persian and English translations of some of Bourdieu's work.

## 2. Theoretical framework

One of the key concepts in Bourdieu's thought is the concept of field. Instead of analyzing societies in terms of classes and ideologies, Bourdieu uses the concept of field: Field is a structured social space with its own rules, schemes of domination, legitimate opinions and so on. Fields are relatively autonomous from the wider social structure (or space, in his terminology), in which people relate and struggle through a complex of connected social relations (both direct and indirect). Among the main fields in modern societies, Bourdieu cited the arts, education, politics, law and economy. A field is a setting in which agents and their social positions are located. The position of each particular agent in the field is a result of interaction between the specific rules of the field, agent's habitus and agent's capital (social, economic and cultural). Fields interact with each other, and are hierarchical (most are subordinate of the larger field of power and class relations) (Bourdieu, 1984). In fact, Bourdieu's concept of field refers to relative autonomous sector of social activity. In other words, a field is a social arena in which people maneuver and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources (Jenkins, and Bourdieu, 1992: 136).

Another concept frequently used by Bourdieu is capital. By capital, Bourdieu means social resource. Each field has its specific capital. Political capital is what agents accumulate, and fight for, in the political field. It involves specific social skills, the capacity to mobilize individuals around a common goal or to formulate collective policies. Each field has its dominant habitus, a culture or an internalized set of principles of actions and of evaluations. [for discussion of skills, see Fligstein, 2001: 105-125.]

The habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices (Swartz, 2002: 547).

Bourdieu also tries to enumerate and define the most important structural features of the fields. He also speaks of unalterable laws or mechanisms, which are the general

features of all fields. Some of the most important of these features are discussed below.

Fields are the areas of struggle for controlling valuable resources. Field struggle evolves around specific kinds of capital: economic, cultural, scientific or religious. Fields are areas of struggle for legitimacy, that is, legitimacy for application of symbolic violence. This struggle is also found in the early stages of the formation of a field. A field tries to achieve autonomy in its realm to distinguish itself from other field (For the concept of autonomy, see Scot Lash, 2004: 349). In other words, fields are the areas of production, circulation and allocation of goods, services, knowledge, statuses or competitive positions. Agents engage in struggle in order to accumulate or monopolize different kinds of capital. Even knowledge itself is produced within the framework of a field (Bourdieu, 1975: 19-47).

Fields are structured social spaces of dominant and subordinate positions based on different kinds and levels of capital. Struggle in the field causes some people to find a dominant position and others subordinate one. The established agents are inclined to follow conservative strategies, while the challengers follow subversive strategies. Inspired by Weber's explanation of conflict between the priests and prophets, Bourdieu explains this conflict in terms of those who support orthodoxy and those who defend innovation. The field is organized around two opposite poles: the protagonists of change and the apostles of law and order, the progressives and the conservatives, the heterodox and the orthodox, or the challengers and the incumbents (See: Gamson, 1975). In Bourdieu's viewpoint, this is the main structure of struggle not only in the religious field but also in all cultural fields. The conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is a struggle for monopoly of cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1971: 178). In his study of Paris University, Bourdieu finds the fundamental confrontation between teachers and researchers and professors and intellectuals as an independent one (Swartz, 2002: 124).

In the political field, this binary logic not only structures political parties and ideologies; it permeates the political field as a whole, from political parties and other political organizations between the progressive and conservative wings, all the way down to the habitus of an individual who might have evolved from a radical youth into a conservative party officials.

Bourdieu mentions three field strategies: preservation, replacement and subversion.

The preservation strategy is often followed by those who are in a dominant position and enjoy a seniority status in the field. The replacement strategy is followed by those who try to gain a dominant position in the field; they are mainly the newcomer agents. And finally the subversive strategy is followed by those who have lost their hopes of gaining a dominant position. Bourdieu argues that the structure of the field is like poker game, that is, the unequal distribution of capitals which determines the result of the previous struggle and selection of suitable strategies for the future (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98-99).

1. Fields impose certain forms of struggle on the agents. Both the dominant and the subordinate groups, both the orthodox and dissident approaches share the primary belief that the field of struggle is worthy of follow-up. In elucidation

of this profound structure of the fields, Bourdieu refers to the concept of doxa which means a fundamental agreement on the frameworks of struggle between those who defend orthodoxy and those who advocate dissidence. Doxa refers to the learned, fundamental, deep-founded, unconscious beliefs, and values, taken as self-evident universals, that inform an agent's actions and thoughts within a particular field. Doxa tends to favor the particular social arrangement of the field, thus privileging the dominant and taking their position of dominance as self-evident and universally favorable. Therefore, the categories of understanding and perception that constitute a habitus, being congruous with the objective organization of the field, tend to reproduce the very structures of the field. A doxic situation may be thought of as a situation characterized by a harmony between the objective, external structures and the 'subjective', internal structures of the habitus. In the doxic state, the social world is perceived as natural, taken-for-granted and even common sensical.

2. To a great extent, fields have developed in accordance with their internal mechanisms and hence they enjoy a certain level of autonomy or independence from outside environment.
- 3 - There are few noteworthy points about the relative autonomy of the fields: on the basis of the autonomy of the fields, Bourdieu considers the scientific field as the most autonomous one. Due to its ability to control employment, socialization, expertise of the agents, and imposition of its specific ideology, this field enjoys a considerable autonomy (Deer, 2003: 195-207). Next to the scientific field, is the field of art with the highest level of autonomy. Autonomy of the field is mainly autonomy vis-à-vis the consumers in the social field, while the autonomy of the scientific field is basically autonomy vis-à-vis the field of power (On sociology of art and sociology of aesthetics and art field, see: Dumn, 1998).

According to Bourdieu, the legal field enjoys a lesser autonomy while the political field enjoys the least autonomy, for the political field has the longest distance to the correct/incorrect logic of the scientific field and predominantly has to speak in the language of friend/foe. The political field enjoys the least autonomy because in Bourdieu's viewpoint the value of the political products is mainly determined outside the political field. Nevertheless, the political field too tries to increase its own autonomy and its distance with the social field in the process of modernization (Lash, 1990: 352). The political field is in charge of production and distribution of power through production of symbolic violence.

### 3. Political Field in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Although Bourdieu emphasizes that the economic, art, scientific... fields enjoy a kind of relative autonomy and practically there are different practices on the basis of different capitals that exist in these fields, it is pertinent here to mention a few points about the political field in the Islamic Republic of Iran:

1. The Islamic Republic of Iran, contrary to many other states, is a religious state. In other words, it considers the basis of its legitimacy a divine one;

defines its functions in line with divine goals and hence maintains that only a few people are eligible (legitimate) to rule. Although the roots of this fusion of politics and religion can be traced back to long time back, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 this synthesis was legalized through the Constitution. This system is called theocracy by some thinkers, while others may call it an ideological or authoritarian state (Bashiriyeh, 2002: 48). The main feature of this ideological state is domination or hegemony of Islamic tradition in which the political field of the Islamic Republic of Iran calls it religious government. Hence the distinction between the political and religious fields becomes obscure and ambiguous and the capital of religious knowledge in the form of jurisprudence is transformed to political capital and hence, the jurists enjoy political legitimacy. The only amendment to the Constitution laid emphasis on this aspect.

In the first decade after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, one would witness a kind of dialectical relationship between religion and politics as well as the domination of religious fields over the political fields, but it seems that over the past few years politics has imposed its hegemony over religion. The extreme politicization of religion has been on the agenda of government while the government through a specific reading of religion has been trying to proximate the religious logic to the political logic. This very issue has been turned into one of the most important political struggles between the political discourses. As Bourdieu states, political field, due to monopoly of its special capital, is one of the most important fields in the area of social actions and therefore makes other fields subordinate to itself. In nutshell, one may conclude that with the passage of time, through stabilization and accumulation of political capital and domination of the government over production, reproduction, distribution and redistribution of religious capital, the political field has dominated the religious field, imposing its pragmatic political logic on the idealistic religious logic. There are many evidences supporting the independence of political field from religious field. The most vivid evidence is open interpretations of the religious principles which have been the focus of jurists for centuries. These principles include the manipulation of private property to daylight saving time schemes, to permitting such games as chess, certain music, etc. These religious decrees (fatwas) are so serious to some thinkers that they claim that the Islamic Republic of Iran is planting the sapling of secularism. Hence, one may argue that the attempts of the government, as the important political capital, to gain practical independence from religious field, whose most important institutional capital is Qum Seminary, has been one of the most important political conflicts in the Islamic Republic of Iran since the formation of religious government. However, this conflict is not over yet and the volatility of political conflict to a great extent stems from the continuation of the said conflict.

2. Another important feature of political field in Iran is the intertwinement of this field with other significant fields such as economic, cultural, social and even academic fields. Some political sociologists in Iran maintain that the

government is ideological and authoritarian, that is, the entire society, social inclinations and private areas of life enjoy a conditional life and naturally the government and its forces due to any reason and at any time enjoy the right to intervene in those areas (Bashiriyeh, 2002: 48).

Apparently the political field has dominated the economic field which is one of the specific features of the political field in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Oil as the most important economic capital and wealth has caused the formation of a rentier economy or state – this concept was used by Sckocpol (Keshavarz, 2003). As the most significant economic commodity, whose production, distribution and income are controlled by the government, oil dominates all economic currents and activities in Iran. The regulation of economic, industrial, commercial, and financial policies has been the most important leverage for the government intervention in the economic field. The privatization move, which aims to transfer state-controlled enterprises to the private sector, is a government affair and therefore despite the emphasis of the political system on privatization, it has not been fully accomplished (Kordzadeh Kermani, 2001).

The very domination of the political field over the economic field and the ideological aspect of the political system have prepared the grounds for the intervention of political field in other fields and indeed the political field through its control and monitoring directs other fields such as the academic and educational fields. The Council of Cultural Revolution, the policy of cultural revolution and cultural engineering are among the mechanisms ensuring the domination of political field over the university and educational field (National Conference of Cultural Engineering, 2006). Hence, one of the significant features of government and political field in the Islamic Republic of Iran is its ability to exercise control and dominate other fields. The cultural and social fields are also controlled and the government tries to direct them towards its desired form through specific policies.

It is to be borne in mind that the political field has intervened in other fields mainly to strengthen and stabilize its political capital. As a result, the exigency policy, for instance, has imposed itself on many other fields and areas. For instance, with regard to family planning, in certain periods due to political reasons it has encouraged increase in the population while in other periods advocated family planning. Likewise, in cultural fields, through reward and punishment schemes it has promoted certain cultural discourses but prevented the formation or promotion of other cultural discourses. This is why some political sociologists argue that the system has certain patrimonial aspects in the political field, considering the political field in Iran within the realm of patrimonial formation (See: Chehabi and Linz 1998; Hajjarian, 1995).

3. Another feature of Iran's political field is its volatility. The political field in Iran is based on several faultlines, which provide an opportunity for the emergence of political discourses; hence it is not static. Among these fault lines one may mention the hiatus between tradition and modernity as well as that between religion and state. These two gaps, in their political conflicts have led to the emergence and decline of political discourses and affiliated political forces. Hence it is not appropriate to define the political field in Iran with a certain label without paying attention to the volatility of conflicts. This very volatility has caused the production and reproduction

as well as confrontation of political discourses while each political discourse in order to gain the highest political capital reconstructs its own discursive articulation in a distinct form. The conflict between these discourses is carried out by political groups and factions that try to turn their discursive principles into the dominant currency in the lingual market of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Likewise, the power field, where struggle over capital is formed, enjoys a high level of volatility and oscillation as a result of which the political capital changes hand between political groups and factions. Hence, political capital turnover in Iran not only has not been small but has been a considerable one.

4. Although the political field in Iran is volatile, it does not mean that any capital is produced or is completely freely circulated. This field is based on gaps habituses, doxas and illusions which block the possibility of a discursive outlet and hence the entire field is based on a perception of insider and outsider. The insider groups are the ones that have accepted the Islamic Republic based on the Guardianship of Jurisprudent (Velayat-e Faqih) and are committed to the Constitution. Commenting on the most important creedal and political value for all political groups, a political activist states: the first issue to which all political groups should pay attention is the Islamic aspect of the system which should be precisely taken into consideration in legislation, planning, policymaking and execution (Taraqi, 2001: 62). On the basis of this distinction between insider and outsider, the political field in the Islamic Republic of Iran has certain red lines which permit the production and circulation of some political discourses while restricts some others. This repulsive and exclusivist aspect has been expanding. The emergence and ramification of some political contradictions and rival sub-discourses are the offshoot of this repulsive feature. The political developments and events of mid-1990s termed as reformist movement was a reaction to the expansion of red lines. However, commitment to the principle of Guardianship of Jurisprudent has functioned as the doxa of political field. Under the circumstances, the conservative and rightist factions, through employing such educational instruments as the schools and media means such as the Islamic Propagation Organization and Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance have tried to turn it into the habitus of the entire political field. They have succeeded to a great extent in this regard so much so that the reformist groups in their political campaign for political capitals accepted this principle. In fact, the groups, currents and individuals that did not accept this doxa were labeled as opposition and hence were ousted from the current of political capital and were practically kept out of the current of production and consumption of the prevailing political goods. As mentioned earlier, the prevailing currency in the lingual market of Iran is loyalty to the principle of Guardianship of Jurisprudence and commitment to the Constitution. But it should be borne in mind that the value and scope of this currency has been a matter of controversy. As one of the most crucial controversies, it has caused cleavage between political discourses. Political legitimacy for acquiring capitals such as positions is gained through lingual and verbal conflicts and the very red lines that control the production and

distribution of political lingual goods have become a matter of controversy. Some political groups, in order to enter the political arena, call for the delusion of such delimitations. On the other hand, the dominant discourses and groups that possess the highest political capital in the political and verbal market of the Islamic Republic of Iran evade this demand and call for stricter control and monitoring of the supply of political speech. Hence, as Bourdieu mentions time and again, one would always come across two groups in the political field: the dominant and the subordinate. The dominant groups often follow an orthodox while the subordinate groups prefer the policy of dissidence. It goes without saying that both the policies exist in the verbal market of the Islamic Republic of Iran and political conflicts evolve around them. This logic of conflict is one of the most important features of political structure from political sociological point of view.

### 5. Conclusion

Bourdieu speaks of independence and autonomy of fields in the political field. The findings of the present study indicate that the political field in Iran has become so dominant and hegemonic that has created limitations for other fields. By penetrating the religious, scientific, cultural and economic fields, the political field has undermined the autonomy of these fields. Hence one may conclude that the situation of different fields in Iran does not follow the general rule set by Bourdieu mainly because of the predominance of political field. The growth of this field not only has practically created limitations for other fields but has also politicized other fields including the field of religion, while the *raison d'être* of the Islamic system, which was set up in Iran in 1979, was quite to the contrary, that is, divination of politics. The Islamic Republic of Iran was supposed to introduce a religious state not a politicized religion.



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