

# Modernist Unilateralism and the Urban Development Policies of Contemporary Iran\*

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**Abstract** | Historical cities have generally been the product of a kind of partnership between the general public and the government. In the historical era, due to the alignment of the public sector's worldview and the powerful class of the community, there has not been a significant difference between the taste and view, and as a result, the decisions and measures of these two groups about the city have resulted in some sort of sustainable coordination. However, with the emergence of modernity in the Iranian community, a gap in approaches has been emerged between the authority and the public class, leading to the formation of unilateralist approaches regarding urbanism policies. In the Qajar era, these policies are mainly limited to governmental spaces, but from the Pahlavi era, these policies lead to changes in the urban residential contexts without paying attention to the role of people in this process. This paper seeks to investigate the relationship between the emergence of modernity and unilateralism in the Iranian community and its impact on urbanism policies in the country's developmental and civil plans. This descriptive-explanatory research by analyzing the obtained data through library method attempts to investigate the relationship of government as an elite part of the community in connection with the general public, before and after the emergence of modernity, and in this way discusses the reason of the formation of unilateralist approaches towards urban development policies. This paper is aimed at investigating the policies adopted in the field of residential contexts development in historical periods after the emergence of modernity. In fact, it seeks to approve the hypothesis that the policies pursued in the urban development topic in various eras due to the lack of democratic structures and institutions in some way have relied on a unilateralist view and without the people's participation.

**Keywords** | Modernity, Unilateralism, World of Tradition, Urban Development Policies.

**Introduction** | The historic cities of Iran are mainly known for their naturally developed organic landscapes. Until the Safavid era and before that, the general public based on their living needs, geographical location and climatic conditions played a key role in shaping the residential contexts of cities. In this regard, the role of government as the authority in the emergence of cities was usually such that they constructed the important

urban spaces and also the basic urban infrastructures that depicted the whole image of the city relying on the natural features and historical signs, and then it was the people themselves who were performing the development and expansion of urban residential context. Therefore, a city can rarely be found to impose on people and has been able to maintain its structure and stability throughout history. For example, during the reign of the Ilkhanids, Al Jaito, the Ilkhanid ruler, regardless of the people's role unilaterally established Soltanieh, which was abandoned after a while and resulted in the

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decline and destruction (Pirnia, 2013, 1). Therefore, a kind of bilateral relationship can be imagined between the people and the government, in the emergence of traditional cities, their development, and sustainability. This relationship between the people and the government in urbanism, from the Qajar era onwards, is along with a kind of gap and discontinuance. In this period, with the advent of modernity into the Iranian community, we witness that the government takes actions in the field of urbanism independently of the people. In the Qajar era, these actions were mainly focused on special spaces and under the control of the government, but from the Pahlavi era onwards, regarding the conditions and needs governing the country, the elite class with a futuristic approach illustrates urban development policies that specifically consider urban residential contexts. During the Pahlavi era, and especially after 1956, we witness the trend of migration to the cities and the creation of urban margin contexts that are later accepted as a part of the city. To deal with this trend, policies based on the creation of new cities or the construction of residential units on a large scale for the urban population management are considered by the government and independently of the people. With the Islamic Revolution, for reasons such as the country's population growth, continuation of migration to the cities, as well as the imposed war and the need for reconstruction, urban development policies are still applied in the country. As a result of these policies, the gradual trend of urban development by the people is damaged and the role of people in the development of the city is gradually faded. The elite class as a more powerful part of the community plays a more highlighted role in this regard.

### Problem Statement and Research Hypothesis

As it was stated, before the Qajar era, people had a special position in the formation of cities and the development and growth of residential context. That is, the people had the right to express ideas and participate in city-related affairs. Nevertheless, since the Qajar era, with the emergence of modernity, the presence of people in the urbanization process has gradually diminished, and on the contrary, the governments and elite class that independently and unilaterally present policies about the city in various historical periods. Therefore, this research seeks to find the reasons for the prevalence of unilateralism since the Qajar era onward by the elite class of the community and disregarding the general public's role in policy-making. Moreover, how the impact of this unilateralism on adopted policies about urbanism can be interpreted?

The most important hypothesis is that since the Qajar era and with the emergence of modernity and its effects

on the elite class, our community has witnessed a kind of undemocratic relationship between the authorities. And the public class and this relationship results in the formation of unilateralist policy-makings towards the city and urbanism in various historical periods and as a result, the role of people in the development of the residential contexts is ignored.

### Research Method

The research method in this study has been considered as descriptive-explanatory. Data was collected through the library method. At first, the relationship between government as an elite part of the community and the public in the world of tradition was explained. In the next step, this research, based on its hypothesis, attempted to investigate the impacts of modernity on the elite strata of the community since its emergence during the Qajar era and in the periods afterward. It sought also to prove that the effects of modernity on the elite part of the community result in weakening the right of citizens to participate in large-scale policymaking of the community and a kind of unilateralism. In the following, this paper investigates the policies adopted in various periods in the field of urban context development to prove its hypothesis. Since the Qajar era, the first impacts of modernity on Iranian urbanization were emerged which were largely confined to governmental spaces; while, the first policy-makings related to urban context development have been presented since the Pahlavi era and in the form of developmental plans. These policies are also pursued in the post-revolutionary period in the framework of development plans. Therefore, this research focuses on the policies adopted in these two eras to reveal the effect of unilateralism, disregarding the right of expression and public participation towards these policies.

### Research Literature

Modernity and its impacts on Iranian architecture and urbanism have always been one of the topics of interest to Iranian scholars. Among the most prominent works in this field, one can mention the paper: "Modernity and its Influence on Iranian Architecture and Urbanism" by Saremi (1995), which addresses the impact of modernism on Iranian architecture and urbanism processes. In this regard, Bahraini (2015) in the book "Modernity, beyond Modernity and Afterward in Urbanism" investigates and analyzes the introductions of the theoretical foundations of modernity and then by investigating its impact in subsequent periods specifies its result for urbanism. In addition, Bani Masoud (2015) in the book "Iranian Contemporary Architecture in the Struggle between Tradition and Modernity" deals with Iranians'

confrontation with the new world and its impact on Iranian architecture from the Qajar era until three decades after the Islamic Revolution. Despite valuable studies about modernity and its effects on Iranian architecture and urbanism, the relationship between modernity and unilateralism and its impact on major policymaking in the field of city and urbanism has never been considered. Therefore, this paper by addressing this issue tries to present new achievements in this regard to draw the attention of authorities and experts in the field of urbanism to the concept of participation and its position in policy-making and major decision-making in this field.

### Modernity and Unilateralism in the Iranian Community

Modernity as a historical period is referred to the era that rationalism and individualism emerge in the philosophical sense of the word (Aghajeri, 2001, 3). With its beginning, the valuing and ethical systems that resulted in a kind of convergence between the elite class and the public class of the community in the traditional world underwent basic changes. The traditional community of Iran during the Qajar era was influenced by the flow of modernity in the Western countries, whereby experienced many changes. During this period, the growth and development resulted from modernity in European countries was very significant for the elite class of the community, thus they tried to enter the flow of modernity into the traditional community of those days of Iran (Ghobadian, 2004, 43). In the Qajar era, the Iranian community relied heavily on the structures of the world of tradition, so the changes due to modernity were often incompatible with the culture and thought of public; hence a large part of the community continued to live according to their traditions and mentalities. For example, in spite of all the efforts of the elites of community to incorporate the manifestations of modernity such as new covering, street, car, and café and to change lifestyle, a large part of the public in this period lived in their clay and mud houses (Ibid, 44). In other words, it should be said in this way that in this era, the elite class based on this thought that it has superiority over the public and what is considered appropriate can be valuable to all people in the community, tried to enter the concept of modernity to the traditional community of Iran on the basis of a unilateral decision. This contradiction between the policy adopted by the elite class to change the traditional community and the general behavior of the people can be considered as the first signs of unilateralism in major decision-makings after the emergence of modernity and ignoring the will of the people and their selection and expression right.

For this reason, it should be acknowledged that the root of modernity in Iranian community was originated from the outset by the dictatorship of the elites of the community and created a kind of dogma among the elites of the community. During the Pahlavi era, a part of political and military developments such as the Allied occupation, the overthrow of Reza Khan and the fall of Mossadegh's government, as well as economic developments such as oil with goods exchange or cultural developments led to convincing the Pahlavi government and its rulers that the Western modernity was superior and by implementing modernization programs in governing the country strived to expand the modernization of modernity to the body of community. This effort was continued in the Pahlavi era from two perspectives; one from the perspective of the new role that the government assumes for itself and the other one the perspective that considers for the development and future of the country (Talebian, Hojjat & Farzian, 2014). In this period, the government appeared with the aim of forming a centralized and strong government (Alavipour, 2016, 142) in the role of provider, and at the same time decision-maker of all affairs, that this role has gradually been highlighted by beginning the government's economic and social development programs since 1948 (Habibi, 2004, 153). Regarding this situation, the elite class of community in this period considered itself as the guardian of the people who must decide about all dimensions of their lives. The view that affected all cultural, social, economic and political major policy makings of the country must somehow be perceived as continuing the same unilateralism that had begun from the Qajar era and because of it, the participation of the people and their selection and expression right at the community level was ignored. With the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in 1978, we witnessed that many manifestations of modernity and modernization that had been formed in Iran about one hundred years ago were severely invaded (Vahdat, 2013). Modernity in this period has been recognized as one of the elements of Western civilization and thus has been heavily criticized. However, considering this point can be very valuable that these criticisms mainly targeted the manifestations of modernity in the community. The idea of the Islamic Revolution was, in fact, a direct and indirect reaction to the discourse of modernity and the results of its policies that had been implemented during the Pahlavi era. It should be mentioned that the Islamic Revolution while opposing and assisting modernity, its manifestations in the Iranian community was strongly influenced by the same discourse that opposed heavily (Vahdat, 2002, 199-200). It is in fact in this period that modernity evolved from Islamic thoughts, or in other

words, Islamic modernity emerged, that one of the most important features of it was a concept entitled mediated mentality. In this sense, the human mentality depends on the mentality of God, so he needs a human mentality that based on the attributes of the Almighty makes policy and makes decision for various parts of his life. As a result of this thought in this period, another type of unilateralism with another form emerged among the elite class of community which resulted in the general people's inactivity in the policymaking fields.

### Discussion: Policies Adopted in the Field of Urbanism

Our traditional cities were the product of a group of humans living together and the evolution of fundamental concepts in their minds (Mansouri, 2010, 31). It can be considered as a mirror indicating the social, economic, political, and religious relationships of people within a specific time-space limitation. In these cities, the traditional architect and urban planner, as a person who had the skill of creating and making space, with shared mental backgrounds with other people, tried to intervene in the city based on pluralism and attention to the values of the community and the principles of their life. Therefore, architecture and urbanism in the past has been considered as an excellent moral activity. This activity was dealing with personal responsibility and conscience, attention to God, knowledge of the truth, respecting people's right, fairness, beauty, scale and proportions, and must resist against desires, avarice, and the dictatorship of a specific group governing the community (Krier, 1998, 30). Its actions toward the city over time, in accordance with social and regional patterns, provided conditions that the residential context of the city was naturally coordinated and based on the need and demand of the people of the city grew and developed. However, the emergence of modernity was affecting the above relationship and as a result, the development of cities became different from the past. For this period onward, for the first time we witness those futuristic policies and plans being adopted by the elite class and without public participation in connection to the residential context, that this paper investigates examples of these policies in the following:

#### Third Development Plan (1963-1967)

With the country's population growth and concentration on the urban centers and urbanization growth, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, the elite class presents the first policies in the field of residential context development based on the conditions and needs existing in the country. Thus, in the Third Development Plan, the first step in the field of urban policymaking is taken.

Before the revolution, these policies were pursued in the two forms of the fourth and fifth development plans and also continued after the revolution in the framework of development plans.

The first development plan in the country that considers the issue of urban development is the third development plan before the revolution. During this period due to the urbanization population increase resulted from the migration trend, the construction of organizational houses and the settlement of nomads and hut dwellers were being considered in the form of constructing cheap houses (Hosseinzadeh Dalir, 1996, 55), on the other hand, to accelerate these policies, the payment of facilities for the purchase or construction of house was offered to various classes through the banking system (Shahrokhifar, 2016, 76). The implementation of these urban development policies in the third plan increased one-story residential contexts in the cities, followed by increasing the costs of urban facilities needed for them to the same ratio, and the cities were disproportionately expanded. On the other hand, the lack of a specific standard for housing caused commotion in the cities (Alavi, Samad & Banari, 2018, 871) as a result of which the traditional residential context of the cities was gradually exited from organic state and every part of the city developed in a different way.

#### Fourth Development Plan (1968-1972)

The policies of this period can almost be evaluated along with the policies of the Third Development Plan. What is considered more in the fourth plan are the developmental aspects which includes: creation of urban residential contexts by the private sector, creation of favorable conditions for equipping private capitals in this area and supplying of housing need of the low-income part of the community. Therefore, these policies mainly focus on two different axes. The first aim is to increase the area of residential units in order to make it economical for the private sector, and the other is to build minimum and cheap houses for the low-income classes like workers, employees, and suburb settlers. As a result of these policies and actions taken during the Fourth Development Plan, construction and building activities were faced with an unprecedented boom. It led to the renovation of old neighborhoods of the cities in the framework of urban comprehensive plans, encouraging apartment building, constructing residential complexes, and building inexpensive houses for slum settlers and hut dwellers scattered in the suburbs of big cities (Ibid, 871).

#### Fifth Development Plan (1973-1977)

In terms of policymaking, this plan should be categorized in the field of urbanism in line with the two previous

plans, with this difference that we are witnessing a rise in world oil price in the 1970s and an increase in revenues resulted from it in the country. During this period, two distinct policies in the Fourth Development Plan were pursued more intensively. The first one regards increasing area in residential units. And the second one regards encouraging the private sector to build small and cheap houses in the form of condominiums and organizational houses for workers and employees through credit assistance programs by the government to supply housing. Among the most important results of these policies, the development of residential contexts in the form of an apartment complex, the creation of surrounding towns and worker residential alleys near big cities can be mentioned (Pourmohammadi & Asadi, 2014, 175). On the other hand, due to the injection of oil revenues into the cities and despite effort to strengthen the private sector in urban development issue, during this period we are facing with the domination of speculators and capitalists due to the profit increase resulting from construction activities and the boom in the intermediation and land and house conversion into commodity, that causes the migration of villagers to the city, because the benefits obtained from construction activities versus the inefficiency of the agricultural sector during this period are very significant (Alavi et al., 2018, 873).

#### First Development Plan (1989-1993)

With the occurrence of the revolution, Pahlavi-era urbanism policies continued with the same structure and policies until 1980. But, the need for reconstructions due to the war in the war-torn cities and also the population growth of the country that had begun its ascending trend in the pre-revolution era, made the need for determining new policies in this period. In this plan, the first post-revolutionary policies in the field of urban development are presented. By investigating the policies of this plan, it should be acknowledged that this plan still seeks to meet the needs that had emerged from the pre-revolutionary era in the field of urbanism and housing, and for this reason, offers policies similar to the previous periods. Among these policies, encouraging private-cooperatives sector and financial organizations for mass-production of residential units and offering special facilities to the builders of leased houses can be mentioned. On the other hand, as the war was ended, prioritizing the war-torn regions and reconstructing them are converted to another policy of this plan. Unfortunately, no specific policy is determined and targeted in this plan to prevent the growth of informal housing. This period in respect of time is almost coincident with the formation of an informal settlement phenomenon in the cities, especially large cities, which were rapidly forming and expanding

during this period. Problems related to worn-out urban contexts are also ignored in this plan and no rules or regulations are provided for organizing them (Ibid, 874).

#### Second Development Plan (1995-1999)

The most important axes of the second urban development plan are mass production and attention to the internal development of the cities. In 1994 and with regard to the policies mentioned, a plan was prepared as determinant of suitable areas for residential context development, the main objectives of which were to guide and support the private sector and consumer to invest in the existing urban context, to construct organizational houses in the worn-out contexts by using private-sector credits, to create an appropriate model of economic housing in the cities, and to clean up the surroundings of valuable historical works in the old context in accordance with the rules of the Cultural Heritage Organization, to construct additional lands to fund the cleaning-up and revitalization cost of such contexts and to encourage citizens to reside in them (Ibid, 875).

#### Third Development Plan (2000-2004)

The policies of this plan mainly focused on supportive goals for urban development. And measures are taken in this respect including supplying housing for low-income groups; counter with the marginalization, pay banking facilities gradually for building houses for the low-income groups of the community; creating a secondary market and the possibility of buying and selling bonds of housing sector in the stock market to boom up construction activities, modifying the regulations related to subsidy payment to the housing sector for promoting housing consumption pattern and the law of leasing housing to gradually reduce government intervention; and increasing private sector presence in local institutions to support small housing units manufacturers with emphasis on complex building and mass production.

#### Fourth Development Plan (2005-2009)

In this plan to inhibit the crisis of housing price increase trend that had begun since the past decade, a policy was pursued that sought to create the purchase ability for the low-income groups of the community by reducing the major part of the housing price. This policy, known as zero ground, led to the Mehr Housing Plan. In the form of this plan, the 99-year land exploitation right and five-year leasehold of Mehr housing was given to low-income groups so that in this way they became homeowners. The most important feature of the 99-year lease land plan was to eliminate land price from the costing price. In this plan, the government in addition to eliminating the land price

by paying facilities tried to pay a percentage of the costs of preparation and construction to eligible individuals to keep the costing price of housing unit down. In the overall goals of the Mehr Housing Plan, helping the provision of the housing of low-income groups, reducing inequality in having appropriate housing, improving and promoting environmental criteria, preventing irregular increase of land and housing price, preventing marginalization development, and promoting social justice were considered (Khalili, Nourollahi, Rashidi & Rahmani, 2014). The main idea in this plan was to create the conditions for people to participate and respect their selection right in the planning process, thus it was tried to provide this opportunity by defining housing cooperatives, which consisted mainly of the general class of the community.

### Summary and Conclusion

With the advent of modernity in Iran, we are witnessing changes as a result of which a gap is created between the elite class and the public of the community, forcing the traditional Iranian community move from convergence in thoughts to divergence in worldview. The important point about this confrontation is the intensive attention of the elites of the community in various periods to the manifestations of modernity such as modernization technology and its industrial developments and so on. Although in some periods, such as the Qajar and Pahlavi ears, this attention emerged in line with it and in the post-revolutionary period in opposition with it (Fig. 1), this point should also be stated that other manifestations of modernity such as its socio-political aspects, and especially democratic institutions, are unfortunately less considered by the elites of the community. It is worth mentioning that modernity in Western countries, in addition to making progress in various fields, tries to create new structures and institutions whereby the people have the right to participate in the management of the affairs of the country. However, these modern structures have not been considered for some reason since the advent of modernity in Iran, and they have not been developed as much. Even the Islamic Revolution, that essentially criticizes modernity, only turns its attention to confronting its manifestations in the past eras. As a result of not paying attention to this characteristic since the arrival of modernity into the traditional community of Iran, the elite class was affected by modernity. With regard to the economic, social and political conditions governing each era, this class recognized itself as the guardian, provider, and decision-maker of all affairs. Accordingly, it adopted unilateralism and neglecting democratic structures that this approach affected all of their policy makings, including the development of

urban residential contexts.

Traditional urbanism before modernity was an affair resulted from a partnership between governments and the people. The governments as the elite class only constructed the urban infrastructure and prominent points such as market, gate, bridge, etc. Then, the people of the city built and developed residential contexts around and along with these bodies of prominent points in accordance with natural, cultural and environmental conditions. Therefore, the governments have never independently decided on the urban residential contexts until the Qajar era. This lack of intervention in residential contexts was well evident in the structure of our traditional cities, in a way that the parts of the city that had been built by the governments always followed a formal geometry, but the parts that had been built by the people themselves formed an organic geometry. On the other hand, as stated earlier, architecture and urbanism in the past were recognized as an ethical practice in which people's rights and pluralistic must be considered, and they should confront the dictatorship of a particular group and their excessive demand in urbanism. The same point certifies the fact that most traditional architects and urban planners, in addition to having construction and architecture skills, had philosophical views that rejected any unilateralism in urbanism.

This view is gradually being eliminated by the emergence of modernity, like other intellectual structures and traditional worldview, and instead of it, modernist unilateralist views became prevalent. With the population increase and the need to develop residential contexts, the gradual process of residential context development that was usually performed by the people was put away by the elite class, and the need for policy-making regarding urban residential contexts was considered by the elite class. By investigating urban development policies from the beginning to the last decade, presented in the framework of the country's development and civil plans by the governments and the elite class, it should be acknowledged that urbanization growth and the urban population's need for housing, providing the housing for vulnerable groups such as those living in suburbs and low-income groups such as workers and employees have been considered in almost all of these plans as the target of urban development and urbanism. Therefore, it can be said that these needs have always been considered as one of the important concerns of the elite class of the community. But in the policy makings of this area to address these needs, mass housing, investment by governments and private sector in the field of urban development, and giving facilities for the development and renovation of residential contexts, have usually been mentioned as the most important measures in

these plans. These urban development policies, which are influenced by the effects of modernity on the elite class and the trends of modernists towards urbanism, is originated from the view that looks at the city as an economic enterprise in which land and housing are considered as a valuable commodity. Therefore, rather than dealing with the sequence of participation and pluralism in traditional urbanism, these policies in a way promoted capitalist and unilateralist approaches in urban development, that due to the limited economic power compared with the elite and capitalist class, they excluded people from the policymaking trend. Specifically no role can be observed for the people and NGOs' participation in policy makings in all plans

studied, even in the Fourth Development Plan, which the people's role in the residential contexts development trend and creating cooperative structures is somehow considered, only its focus is on the people's participation in economic issues, and basically in issues such as project locating, design, and so on. The role of people and their right to develop urban residential contexts is not considered. This can be interpreted due to the weakness and the lack of development of democratic institutions and structures after the emergence of modernity. It has led to driving people out of the process of urban policymaking. It also ruins the gradual process of urban development by the public class that was established in traditional cities until before modernity emergence.

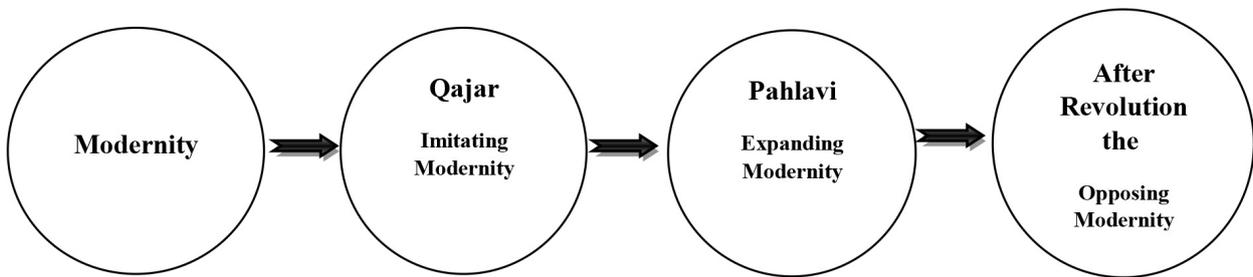


Fig. 1: How the Elites of the Community Deal with Modernity in Various Historical Eras. Source: Author.

**Endnote**

\* This article is based on the author's master's dissertation entitled "Redesigning the urban landscape of new shushtar town", which was defended under Supervisor Dr. "Seyed Amir Mansouri" at the University of Tehran on February, 2019.

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