CHAPTER FOUR

FACTIONAL RIVALRIES AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

4.1 Introduction

When Ayatollah Khomeini had become supreme leader after the Islamic revolution, all social areas such as the school system, universities, and public law were changed according to the Islamic ideology he had developed. After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, and when Hashemi Rafsanjani became President, a discourse emerged among clerical and (religious) lay intelligentsia on the role of Islam and the role of the clergy in politics. Also, the women’s movement in Iran and the critical press has had a decisive influence on the political discourse in Iran. Large parts of the population urged socio-cultural reforms, which intensified further with the election of Mohammad Khatami as president in 1997 and again when Ahmadinejad became president in 2005. This development is what Adib-Moghaddam (2006: 668–670) calls the “pluralistic momentum” in Iran and what I call “pluralism from below.” It is the driving force of the reformist movement in Iran. It cannot be controlled by a political faction. It has no leader, no institution, and no center. It goes beyond the state and manifests itself in various discourses among intellectuals and the public.

Among the Iranian political elite three main positions on socio-cultural issues can be distinguished: (1) The first position is mainly represented by the Conservative faction, aiming at the preservation of Islamic culture and lifestyle. The Conservatives fear that Western influences could lead to cultural and moral corruption of the Iranians, in particular of the youth, resulting in a return to the pre-revolutionary culture of the Iranian society under Mohammad Reza Shah, whom they accused of having been corrupted by the West and, above all, by the US. To prevent the influence of Western culture, according to this faction, Iranians must seek refuge in the Islamicity of the political regime of the IRI. This faction supports the veiling of women and advocates freedom of the press only to the extent that it does not undermine the Islamic principles of the IRI. It considers the concept of
civil society as contrary to the ideals of an Islamic state and its society. Its supporters come mainly from the traditional middle class and the bazaar economic sector; (2) The second group is mainly represented by the Reformist faction, with much more moderate views, concerning socio-cultural issues, than the Conservative faction, putting tolerance, moderation, and diversity of culture at the centre of its socio-cultural outlook. The Reformists object to the policies for segregating men and women, promoted by the Conservative faction. This faction believes in governmental support of intellectual and artistic freedom and promotes freedom of action and thought for university students. It objects to censorship in arts and media. Civil society for this group means “pluralism,” “tolerance,” and “democracy.” This entails among other things the protection of the relative autonomy and freedom of citizens, and the right to organize them. The (secular) middle class and lower middle class mainly support this faction; (3) The third position is represented by the Pragmatist faction. The Pragmatist faction is mainly supported by techno-bureaucrats: modern professional associations, employer organizations, as well as the modern business-oriented urban-middle class and industrial groups. Their views on the socio-cultural sphere are similar to those of the Reformists. The Pragmatist faction objects to the segregation of men and women, and instead proclaims partnership of the sexes. Above this, it defends the freedom of the press, with the argument that censorship is un-Islamic. In contrast to parts of the Reformists, however, the Pragmatists aim to make the idea of civil society compatible with the existing political order. Thus, there are great differences in the socio-cultural outlook of the different political factions and consequently in the policies they pursue. The post-revolutionary clerical and (religious) lay intelligentsia such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar, Abbas Abdi, Akbar Ganji, and Saeed Hajjarian, who, among others, actually prepared the ground for the Reformist movement to flourish, go even further than the Reformist faction. They have a fundamental critique on the velayat-e faqih system, the basic principle of the IRI, and advocate—from different perspectives—a secularization of the political system in Iran.

This chapter analyzes the various positions of the political factions of the Iranian political elite on socio-cultural issues and the impact of the rivalry for power between the different political factions on socio-cultural developments in Iran between 1979 and 2008. It focuses on the role and position of women in the IRI, the situation of the public