URBANIZATION and REGIONAL DISPARITIES in POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN



AHMAD SHARBATOGHLIE



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To the memory of martyr Ali Sharbatoghlie

Preface

There are several reasons why I decided to pursue this study. First and foremost is the issue of the ability of national and regional leadership to harness and control the forces responsible for creating massive inequality and imbalance between various sectors of the economy and in the rural-urban systems. State intervention in the economy has become almost a conventional norm in the Third World. After the failure of unrestricted market mechanisms to overcome the pressing problems of income inequality, poverty, and rural underdevelopment, many concerned policy-makers have taken active initiatives to overcome these problems. A study of regional disparities in Iran will help to shed some light on the demographic as well as the socioeconomic consequences of the state intervention in the economy.

Second, the paucity of empirical research on post-revolutionary Iran has hampered a thorough understanding and analysis of the effects of political transformation on regional and national development. This study employs a number of socioeconomic indicators to measure regional disparities in Iran in the pre- and post-revolutionary periods. An attempt has been made to use, as much as possible, the actual statistics and not to rely on merely projected figures or qualitative assessments of the revolutionary aftermath. Third, in many ways this study was aimed at expanding the horizons of earlier studies done on the subject. The critical issue of spatial disparities in Iran is addressed in three dimensions: rural-urban, interprovincial, and intercity. Earlier studies have primarily focused on interprovincial disparities. A comparison between levels of development in rural and urban areas as well as between the various cities will advance the understanding of the manifold dimensions of spatial disparities in Iran. Fourth, with a few exceptions, Western sources have largely presented a distorted and ideologically negative account of the revolution. This study will attempt to uncover the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the Islamic government in addressing regional inequality. Finally, it has always been easier to describe, critique, and explain than

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to propose viable alternatives. In other words, knowing the factors contributing to regional inequality is a necessary but insufficient condition for reducing interregional socioeconomic disparities. My last objective for completing this work was to delineate the tentative components of a national settlement strategy aimed at reducing regional disparities in Iran and in other developing countries confronted with similar challenges.

However, to achieve the aforementioned objectives a number of methodological issues must be addressed. These issues are embedded in the methodology of any research dealing with national development policies in the Less Developed Countries (LDCs), but deserve special attention in the case of Iranian society as it undergoes rapid changes in the political, social, cultural, and economic spheres. There seem to be three fundamental methodological constraints in the social sciences which pose certain problems in dealing with issues such as urbanization and national development in Iran. The first may be termed disciplinary constraint. which confines the researcher to the narrow boundaries of a particular discipline. One of my primary contentions from the inception of this research was that any meaningful study of urbanization and its effects on national development has to be interdisciplinary in nature. The reason for this is fairly simple: Urbanization and national development are multidimensional phenomena. Indeed, sociological theories of innovationdiffusion; economic explanations of distribution of natural resources, the location of transport routes, and economies of scale and agglomeration; the political scientist's approach to distribution and exchange of power; the demographer's emphasis on fertility, mortality, and migration trends; and the historian's approach to the significance of historical events for shaping the future course of national development all contribute to our understanding of the patterns of formations of cities and their effects on national development. Unfortunately, few studies have attempted a synthesis in order to provide a holistic view of urbanization and national development.

The second methodological constraint is what may be called a "quantitative constraint," wherein a researcher looks at two or more narrowly defined variables to explain a phenomenon while ignoring a more fundamental qualitative cause. Traditionally, studies of regional inequality in Iran and elsewhere in the LDCs have been predominantly quantitative, employing such variables as regional per capita income, family consumption expenditures, and levels of service (i.e., number of hospital beds, percentage of dwelling units with piped water and electricity, and the number of people in primary and secondary employ-

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ment, etc.). While the present study will rely heavily on quantitative data obtained from various sources, many significant issues concerning urbanization and national development in Iran are qualitative in nature and thus, require attention to ideologies, thoughts, prevailing consensus in the legislative and executive branches, and declarations and writings of key leaders vested with substantial authority in the country. While sections of the research dealing with these issues will lack quantitative precision, they are indispensable for an in-depth analysis of the rapidly changing conditions in Iran. In sum, an attempt has been made to combine key statistics which will reveal the past and present trends with an understanding of the predominant ideologies in order to indicate the direction of change into the future.

The third methodological issue of concern to this work may be termed the time-period constraint, whereby the researcher gathers primary data during a specific time, while ignoring or underemphasizing the historical trends and the relevance of historical events in shaping the present and future social outcomes. Examples of significant events which have played important roles in the formation of spatial structures in Iran are: the discovery of oil; the rise of Reza Shah (1925-1939) and subsequent centralization of state apparatus; the 1978-1979 revolution; and the Iran-Iraq war, which resulted in millions of war refugees and the destruction and damage of many cities, towns, and villages. In a crosssectional study, the researcher selects a specific time and place to carry out the research. However, without other means of comparison, an inference is based on a one-time observation. Generalizations derived from research carried out to measure a specific phenomenon at a given time and in a given place may be refuted by another study in a different time and in a different place. When a society is relatively stable, one may be successful in using a cross-sectional approach to draw inferences from a carefully selected sample. The problem becomes more acute in rapidly changing environments, exemplified by the Iranian society, where there is substantial discontinuity between the past, present, and future.

In spite of several limitations and shortcomings, throughout the book I have attempted to incorporate significant historical events with cross-sectional data obtained from various statistical sources in order to explain the changing patterns of urbanization in Iran.

Ahmad Sharbatoghlie

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Knowledge is cumulative and the interchange of ideas is essential in social science research. In the course of data collection and analysis, I have benefitted tremendously from the ideas, thoughts, and critiques of many colleagues and friends both in the United States and Iran. I am particularly grateful to Professors Paul S. Gray, Severyn T. Bruyn, and Eve Spangler of Boston College for their kind assistance in reading the entire manuscript and for their valuable comments and suggestions; Professor Alan Strout of MIT for helping me to clarify the concepts, themes, and methodological issues so crucial to the study; and Professor Hooshang Amirahmadi, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Rutgers University, for his timely review of the study and for his many other indispensable contributions.

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Introduction: Urban Agglomeration and Regional Disparities

The limitations of the models that have molded the development efforts of most developing countries and shaped the growth of human settlements within them have become apparent in the past decade. It has become increasingly clear, for example, that, in a highly integrated world economy, a nation's development prospects are as much conditioned by the terms of participation in the international economic system as by internal processes of accumulation and distribution (United Nations Center for Human Settlements, Habitat, 1987. Global Report on Human Settlements, p.7).

... the process of national development and spatial integration is an eminently political one, involving fundamental relations of power and exchange and the resolution of resulting conflicts. Planning which fails to recognize this basic truth and proceeds as though the spatial allocation of resources were merely an exercise in applied rationality is bound to be disappointing in its results (John Friedmann, 1974. The Spatial Organization of Power in the Development of Urban Systems, p. 271).

One of the most fundamental national challenges confronted by the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) is urban agglomeration. The urban population of these countries has increased from less than 300 million in 1950 to 1.1 billion in 1985. According to U.N. estimates, the urban population of the LDCs is expected to grow, reaching nearly 4 billion around the year 2025, a figure equivalent to the total world population in 1975. Presently, urban settlements in these countries are expanding three times faster than those in the More Developed Countries (MDCs). In 1960, only one out of five people were living in urban areas. By the turn of the century, the urban residents will comprise close to 40% of the total populations of the developing countries (Table 1.1).

A parallel trend to the growth of urban populations in the LDCs is the growth of large metropolitan conglomerates loosely defined as primate cities. A century ago, the population of only one city (London) in the world exceeded 4 million. The number of such cities reached 19 by 1960 with 9 in the LDCs. By 1980, these cities almost doubled in number to 35, with over 60 percent of the growth (22 cities) taking place in the LDCs. According to U.N. estimates, while developed countries will experience a decline in the number of people living in cities with more than 4 million people, populations of these cities will increase significantly in the LDCs, reaching more than 1.2 billion people by the year 2025 (Table 1.2). By the year 2000, the populations of the capitals of the majority of the LDCs included in Table 1.3 will surpass the 10 million mark.

What is alarming about these demographic trends is not the sheer percentage of urban populations of the LDCs, but rather: (1) the capability

Table 1.1: Urban Population in the Developed and Developing Countries 1950 – 2025

	Developed Countries		Developing Countrie	
	Urban	Percent	Urban	Percent
Year	Population (millions)	of Total	Population (millions)	of Total
1950	447	53.8	287	17.0
1960	571	60.5	460	22.2
1970	698	66.6	673	25.4
1980	798	70.2	966	29.2
1990	877	72.5	1357	33.6
2000	950	74.4	1904	39.3
2010	1011	76.0	2612	46.2
2020	1063	77.2	3425	53.1
2025	1087	77.8	3845	56.5

Source: United Nations, 1987, p. 29.