

INTELLECTUAL CHANGE AND THE NEW GENERATION OF IRANIAN INTELLECTUALS



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Continuities and Discontinuities in Modern Iranian Intellectual Thought

MEHRZAD BOROUJERDI

I have been entrusted with the task of providing the introductory remarks for this conference. As I sat down to work, I realized that even presenting a bird's eye view of the present intellectual scene in Iran is a daunting task, considering the topic's historical enormity and theoretical complexity. With this caveat in mind, allow me to offer a set of abbreviated remarks on a subject worthy of further exploration.

For a good part of the last two decades, much of the scholarship on post-revolutionary Iran neglected intellectual history in favor of more pressing issues such as the human rights record and the economic and foreign policy choices of the new revolutionary elites in Tehran. Perhaps this oversight may be attributed to the postulation that the ascendancy of Islamic clerics to positions of state power was tantamount to intellectual suffocation of the Iranian polity. However, in due time, the emergence of a world-class cinema, a lively and interesting print media, and sophisticated intellectual works and philosophical debates convinced many Iranian as well as Western analysts that the Iranian intellectual scene is an enigma worthy of in-depth analysis.¹ Plausible arguments advanced to explain this puzzle include: the paradoxical

relations among state, social, and international factors; elite factionalism; the coming of age of a new generation of thinkers; the perseverance and resourcefulness of various political and ethnic identities; the rising tide of globalization; and the ideological disposition of the post-revolutionary regime.

The question that I wish to entertain is: What types of continuities and ruptures characterize the trajectory of intellectual thought in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran? To answer this question, we must examine developments within the ranks of religious intellectuals, clerics, and secular intellectuals.

Religious Intellectuals

In an article that appeared in 1965, Leonard Binder wrote that there was "no outstanding and articulate Shi'ite modernist in Iran."² More than three decades later, however, we cannot deny the arrival of a new generation of Shi'ite

¹ For some theoretical works on intellectuals see: Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West* (Syracuse University Press, 1996), Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent* (New York University Press, 1993), Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (University of Texas Press, 1998), and Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² Leonard Binder, "The Proofs of Islam: Religion and Politics in Iran," in George Makdisi (ed.), *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb* (E.J. Brill, 1965), p. 128.

modernist thinkers on to the Iranian intellectual scene. The coming of age of this generation is perhaps the most consequential development for Iran's contemporary intellectual arena. As I have written elsewhere: "[D]ue to their intellectual stamina and popular support, this diverse array of scholars, thinkers and activists have been able to propel themselves into the forefront of intellectual deliberations in contemporary Iran."³ As the linchpin of this new era, they have articulated a formidable alternative to both the clerical establishment and the secularist intellectuals.

What makes the works of these Shi'ite modernists so challenging to the clerical establishment is that their temperate vision of Islam resonates with a growing constituency among the younger generation of Iranians. For example, they maintain that any discussion of "religious democracy" should incorporate such issues as human rights, justice, and limitation of the power of the state. Moreover, having keenly recognized that the clerical praxis of the last two decades is giving Islam a bad name, an increasing number of these thinkers are becoming receptive to the idea of a de facto secularization of politics.⁴ They maintain that when a

religion becomes tied up with the material interest and political considerations of a particular group – and thus becomes an ideology – its opportunity to develop and progress is gradually diminished.

This latter point is of immense importance since it marks a radical turnaround in the theoretical orientation of religious intellectuals. Pre-revolutionary religious intellectuals like Ali Shariati (1933-1977) had argued passionately that ideology is superior to both science and philosophy, aspiring to transform Shi'ism into a belligerent and integrative ideology.⁵ The post-revolutionary generation led by Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) emphatically resists any calls for transforming Islam into an ideology. They maintain that religion cannot and should not be turned into an ideology because such a transmutation is not only impossible but also undesirable since religion is much broader and richer than ideology.

Soroush even contends that Shariati unintentionally helped to strengthen an official class of interpreters who laid the groundwork for the worst form of

profane will be separated." See Nilüfer Göle, "Authoritarian Secularism and Islamist Politics: The Case of Turkey," in Augustus Richard Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East* (E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 39.

³ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Iran's Intellectual Panorama," *Bulletin of the Center for Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1996): 22-24.

⁴ A more sociological explanation for this phenomena has been provided by Nilüfer Göle who, commenting on the case of Turkish Islamists, has argued that "to the extent that rationality, individualism, and critical thinking emerge as autonomous value references for the Islamist elite formed through modern education, a process of secularization has set in ... the more they acquire a professional identity as engineers, intellectuals, or individual consciousness as women, the more the realms of the sacred and

⁵ Shariati believed that Shi'ism had to undergo a transformation process from a culture into an ideology, from a collection of assorted learning into an organized body of social thought. He maintained that Islam was neither a scientific specialization nor a culture but instead an idea, a belief system, and a feeling about how human societies must be governed. According to Shariati, it was only the latter conception of Islam that could lead to such social properties as awareness, commitment and responsibility. Shariati advocated that the torch of leadership be transferred from the clerical establishment to the religious intellectuals.

dictatorship – religious dictatorship. According to Soroush, the only way to escape this form of dictatorship is to seek shelter in democratic rationality. Hence, religious intellectuals advocate a shift away from an ideological interpretation of Islam and toward a hermeneutical understanding. They consistently argue that such issues as justice, pluralism, human rights, and nationalism are extra-religious in nature and that Islam is nothing more than a series of interpretations.

We should bear in mind that by criticizing Shariati, these religious intellectuals are really engaging in criticizing their own past since by and large they were alumni of this tradition of thought.

The Clergy

If this new generation of religious intellectuals rejects such lay predecessors as Shariati, they are even more dismissive of the clerical class whom they charge with intellectual stagnation and political repression. Indeed, one major difference between pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary religious intellectuals is the surprisingly candid way in which the latter criticize the clerics. We should remember that before the revolution, not only such liberal Muslims as members of the *Nehzat-e Azadi* (Freedom Movement) but even the Marxist Left were not willing to confront directly the clerical fiefdom. Even when they dared to do so, they used all sorts of verbal courtesies to soften their opposing views. Yet nowadays, belligerent students, iconoclastic journalists, and reform-minded scholars irritate the elders of the theological seminaries on a daily basis while ostensibly oblivious to the wisdom of the Persian proverb: "Do not step on a

Persian carpet or a mullah because it increases their value."

In another major break with standard protocol, members of their own caste are also criticizing the ruling clerics. With the deaths of Ayatollah Khomeini and a number of other prominent ayatollahs (i.e., Beheshti, Dastghayb, Golpayegani, Madani, Mahallati, Marashi, Mottahari, Pasandideh, Qoddusi, Rabbani Shirazi, Saduqqi, and Shariatmadari) all the remaining dominant personalities of the ruling clerical establishment are rather mediocre in terms of theological pedigree and social standing. Thus, their theological and political pronouncements are not beyond reproach. These politically *engagé* clerics have to face *both* the private admonishments of their conservative apolitical colleagues who decry the fact that religion has become the handmaiden of politics and the clerics have transformed into civil servants *and* the increasingly brazen, public interpretations of faith advanced by such liberal-minded clerics as Mehdi Haeri-Yazdi, Mohsen Kadivar, Mohammad Mojtabeh-Shabestari, Abdollah Nouri, and Yusefi-Eshkevari.

The widening rifts within the clerical establishment are partially due to the end of the rupture between the religious ambiance of the seminary schools and Iranian intellectual life during the post-revolutionary period. Being in charge of the vast machinery of the state has meant that the clerics are now more cognizant of the arguments formulated outside their own narrow boundaries. In the meantime, the perennial jockeying for power between the conservative leaning *Jame'eh Rowhaniyat-e Mobarez* (Society of Combatant Clergy), and the leftist leaning *Majmaeh Ruhaniun-e Mobarez* (Assembly of Combatant

Clerics) have made ordinary Iranians more aware of the ruminations of the clerical class. While each clerical faction worries about being overshadowed by its nemesis, the clerical class as a whole is losing its previous popularity.⁶

Secular Intellectuals

No serious discussion of the theoretical metamorphosis of post-revolutionary secular intellectuals can ignore their political plight. Both leftists and nationalist intellectuals had to confront a regime that has sought to silence their voice under the pretexts of fighting atheism, heresy, irreverence or contempt for Islam. They experienced censorship, expulsions, imprisonment, indoctrinations, purges, slanders, and various other violations of their civil liberties.⁷ In the meantime, they had to wrestle intellectually with such issues as the outcome of the 1979 revolution, the war with Iraq, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the changing face of radical politics, and the demands of globalization. To render their political discourses more congruous with present realities, they each had to engage in serious and prolonged intellectual house cleaning.

⁶ One proof for this assertion is how they have fared in parliamentary elections. While in 1980 clerics constituted 49 percent of Majlis deputies, in 2000 they accounted for a mere 13 percent.

⁷ Gholam-Hosayn Saedi (1935-1985), Iran's most renowned playwright, compared censorship before and after the revolution in the following manner: "They [the Shah's regime] would of course arrest us, send us to jail and beat us up, but we were able to cope with all that and still manage to say what we had to say. But under the Islamic Republic, things are different, because they tell you how to think, how to write, and how to act." Gholam-Hosayn Saedi, "Interview: Whose Theater?" *Index on Censorship* (August 1985), p. 32.

The leftists had to tackle the shortcomings of orthodox Marxism, the disintegration of Communist states, the relevance of new-left and post-modernist approaches, and the desirability of incremental reformism. The nationalist intellectuals had their own fair share of debates. They had to re-evaluate the merits of monarchy, republicanism, and Islamic government as alternative political models; revisit the issue of minorities' rights; and re-examine the merits of past alliances with religious forces.

These taxing predicaments provoked such reactions as bewilderment, resignation, and denial, but also led to serious soul-searching and thriving debates. Nowadays, secular intellectuals both in and outside Iran are engaged in theoretical discussions about modernity, post-modernity, nonviolence, pluralism, human rights, the legacy of the Enlightenment, and criticism of instrumental reason.

During the pre-revolutionary period, these secularists had lent to the Islamic forces such concepts as base and superstructure, class struggle, dialectics, ideology, imperialism, revolution, and social justice. Today, the religious intellectuals are *again* adopting some of the core beliefs of secular forces—the separation of religion and state, the individual nature of faith, and the indispensability of political pluralism. Meanwhile, except the most militant fringe groups, an incremental policy of reformism is becoming popular among the Iranian left. Leftist groups that once used to reject unambiguously any notion of siding with one faction of the ruling elite against the other now see the practical wisdom of this strategy.⁸

⁸ One can even say that the Iranian socialists now more resemble the Fabian Society — a society of

Furthermore, the views of both camps on such issues as government accountability, democracy, human rights, liberty, women's rights, normalization of relations with the outside world, rule of law, social justice, tolerance, and transparency are converging.⁹ In short, the political gap between liberal-secular intellectuals and their Islamic interlocutors is narrowing rather than growing.¹⁰ To use the terminology of Richard Rorty, one can say that both sides are questioning the meaning and spirit of *thin words* (truth, dialogue, justice) as well as *thick words* (revolution, reason, democracy, socialism).¹¹

Conclusion

In the early years after the revolution, the Islamic Republic's

leadership emphasized national independence, security, reconstruction, and development, but not "reforms." The reason being that the ruling elites aimed to consolidate the revolution, repel Iraq's invasion, and then reconstruct a country devastated by eight years of war. The leadership perceived the Iran-Iraq war as a continuation of their Islamic revolution, and their radical discourse reflected that perception. By the war's end, however, radical and revolutionary discourses had lost their appeal both among the intelligentsia and the exhausted populace.

If national independence and anti-imperialism were the dominant discursive formation during the pre-revolutionary era and the first few years after the revolution, the dominant discourse now is one of freedom, democracy, and civil society. The present reformist movement is focused on fighting domestic despotism. Its members are more concerned with individual freedoms than with national independence. Today, the intellectual classes consider domestic despotism as the primary social ill of their country as well as the major culprit responsible for an extremist misunderstanding of religion. This is not to say that they are willing to sacrifice once again Iran's national independence.

I believe that without Islamic liberalism, democratization will not succeed in Iran. As such, I consider religious intellectuals as more beneficial than harmful for the eventual formation of a vibrant civil society in Iran. The fact that these intellectuals have embraced such notions as civil rights, democracy, human rights, social justice, and women's rights, or that they have stimulated a wide range of consequential debates on such sensitive themes as the

socialists organized in England in 1884 who believed in spreading socialist ideas gradually – or the Mensheviks rather than the Bolsheviks.

⁹ Even their nomenclature is getting closer to one another. Contrary to what they did in the course of their struggle against the Shah's regime, the religious intellectuals today do not make much use of religious concepts or symbolism. This is partly due to the fact that historically these concepts and symbols have been monopolized by the clerics and utilizing such a discourse can distort the lines between the clerics and the religious intellectuals. Secondly, the instrumentalist use of these concepts and symbols over the last two decades has voided them of their previous potency.

¹⁰ A word of caution is in order here. I do not wish to suggest that the secularists are promoting the very same values as the Islamic intellectuals or that there should not or will not be an ideological showdown between the two in the future. My point is simply that each side now subscribes to a less rigid view of the other and reacts more compassionately to the plight of the other side.

¹¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73.

relationship between Islam and democracy, religion and ideology, the encounter between tradition and modernity, the need to harmonize

Islamic jurisprudence with scientific knowledge, and the merits of religious pluralism, indicates that they are following a rather promising track.

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