IRAN'S INTELLECTUAL PANORAMA

Since their ascendancy to political power sixteen years ago, the victorious Shi`ite clerics who rule Iran have acted like cultural revanchists by questioning the historical continuity and cultural heritage of Iranian secular consciousness. By utilizing the ideological state apparatuses at their disposal, they have tried to convince Iranians that Islam was not just a cultural marker but rather the *raison d'etre* of their nation-state. Ironically, numerous Western policymakers, academics, and journalists have accepted the Islamicist's historical revisionism at face value. These observers often reduce the multidimensional and tangled reality of Iranian polity into a one-dimensional and monophonic Islamic community ruled by puritanical Shi`ite clerics. Other misconceptions seem to underlie this concocted imagery: Islam is antithetical to secularism and democracy; the Islamic Republic is a bona-fide Orwellian nightmare; the coming to power of Khomeini's theocratic state forced Iran's embryonic civil society into a state of moribundity and impotence; secular forces (both leftists and liberals) have no future in Iran, etc.

A closer look at the contemporary Iranian intellectual scene, however, reveals the distorted nature of the aforementioned vista. Today one can argue, in a counter-intuitive fashion, that none of the above assertions is necessarily true. The Iranian intellectual reality is no longer one of meekness, unanimity and monological discourse, but is instead one of unfolding assertiveness, resistance, defiance, and discord.

The Shi`ite clerics in Tehran are increasingly realizing that preserving a durable theocracy in the age of modernity and secularism is tantamount to fighting an uphill battle. This is more the case in a country with an extremely rich and diverse artistic, literary, and scholarly history. The ayatollahs are reconciling themselves with the fact that their attempt to properly "Islamicize" the cultural reference point of many Iranians, by piercing their attachment to their

notions of pre-Islamic values and ideals, has been a rather futile exercise. Today, Iranians' adoration for the glorious annals of ancient Persia, with its gifted craftsmen, gnostic and hedonist poets as well as learned men and women of science, politics and letters continues unabated. Recognizing this reality, many Islamic ideologue have somewhat relented their campaign against Iran's pre-Islamic traditions and icons.

At the same time, the future-looking champions of modernity in Iran are taking heart in the fact that the clerical leadership seems to have been beset by epistemological and political vicissitudes over which they have no control. According to these Iranians, the process of the globalization of capitalism and modernity as well as contemporary realities of international politics have taken a heavy toll on a government whose leaders' rhetoric demanded nothing short of absolute religious piety. As one example, the secular modernists refer to the fact that the initial protestations against capitalism (with its "devious" practices such as interest earning on deposits) and working with such international financial institutions as the World Bank and IMF have long been forgotten. The anti-capitalist rhetoric of the early days of the revolution has now been replaced by a Keynesian-like economic discourse.

Iran's intellectual barometer clearly indicates that despite its propaganda and bravado, the regime has failed to inundate its socio-political opponents. This is in part due to the fact that the state does not enjoy a monopoly over all means of cultural production. The 28 local and national newspapers and the more than 525 periodicals, which are presently published, have secured a space for debate and a margin for dissent within the Iranian polity. Compared to other countries in the Middle East, Iranians enjoy a rather lively and interesting print media. While no criticism of the rule of the late Ayatollah Khomeini and the cult of personality which was formed around

him is permissible, exposing the government's managerial ineptitude, economic blunders and foreign policy flip-flops are considered to be legitimate journalistic practices. Considering that almost half of the active periodicals deal with technical and vocational subject matters (economic planning, industrial development, management policy, transportation, tourism, cinema, health care, fine arts), a non-political yet subtle criticism of the government is being transmitted from the technical/cultural elite to the average citizens. Meanwhile, as any cursory look at the more than 130 journals being published by Iranian expatriates demonstrates, there is no shortage of candid criticisms of the Shi`ite clerics and their Islamic ideology.

The increasingly alarming social ills plaguing the Iranian polity has even prompted the largely secular community of intellectuals and literati inside Iran to become more audacious. Their calls for the relaxation of artistic and cultural restraints, abandonment of cultural xenophobia toward the West, reversal of the government's precarious foreign policies as well as the necessity of pursuing legal moderation to safeguard citizens' privacy and dignity are now being eloquently articulated. In 1994, one hundred thirty four prominent writers issued a declaration demanding the right to free expression and association. Reminiscent of the days of the late Shah, a host of *samizdat* literature and open letters by leading dissidents has begun to circulate. Even the death of one such dissident, Ali-Akbar Saidi Sirjani (1931-1994), who died under suspicious circumstances while in government custody, has not cowed an increasingly vocal intellectual community. The passing away of Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995), Iran's first post-revolutionary Prime Minister and the longtime leader of the Iran Freedom Movement, provided an opportunity for many Iranians to positively reminisce about his more tender and moderate interpretation of Islam.

Meanwhile, many Iranian intellectuals continue to redeem themselves by utilizing such forms of ideological contestation as fictitious novels, metaphoric poetry, and symbolic paintings. The language of allusions, ambivalence, allegory, concealment, satire, and double-speak embedded within these practices allows the literati community to bypass pernicious state censorship. Today, in the pages of such avowedly modernist magazines as *Adineh*, *Donya-ye Sokhan*, *Gardoon*, *Goft-o-gu*, and *Iran-e Farda*, ideological, political, and religious cliches are challenged and rendered ineffective through rather sophisticated theoretical and scientific critiques.

It may long remain an enigma how Iranians have came to enjoy an era of intellectual prosperity while living under a politically repressive regime. Yet the signs of intellectually effervescent activity in literature, cinema, and the arts are there for everyone to see. Largely deprived of other forms of leisure and entertainment, many Iranians have become voracious readers. In the 1980s close to 4000 books were published annually. Book circulation has increased ten fold, from 6 million in 1978 to 60 million in 1990. This quantitative leap has cultivated a flourishing business for printers, publishing houses (over 1,000), and bookstores (over 1,800 in Tehran alone). While this increase should be put in perspective considering Iran's exponential population growth (from 36 million in 1979 to over 60 million in 1995), it is still a testimony to Iranians' quest to grapple with a watershed event in their modern history.

Encouraged by the above developments, many of Iran's literary types have turned to writing novels. It seems as if novels are providing a more germane arena for social, political, and philosophic critique than the concise, abstract, and aesthetically-oriented world of poetry so historically central to Iranians' consciousness. In the pages of over 200 novels they have penned

since 1979, the Iranian literary community has entertained a host of socio-political topics dealing with such issues as the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the conditions of Iranians living in diaspora, and life in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran (many of which tend to be rather unflattering accounts). It is safe to say that in post-revolutionary Iran, novels have seen a discernible growth quantitatively, and are improving qualitatively as well.

The Iranian literary community is also becoming more cognizant of Western literature. The works of writers and literary critics such as Gaston Bachelard, Bertolt Brecht, Albert Camus, Charles Dickens, Hermann Hesse, Henry James, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Nikos Kazantzakes, Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Andre Malraux, Arthur Miller, and Romain Rolland are being translated into Persian. In addition, such traditionally popular writers as Balzac, Anton Chekhov, Fedor Dostoevski, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Yashar Kamal, Aziz Nasin, Lev Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Emile Zola continue to captivate Iranian readers. Meanwhile, the works of such Western philosophers as Hannah Arendt, Rene Descartes, Lucien Goldmann, Antonio Gramsci, Immanuel Kant, Karl Popper, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Hegel, and even Karl Marx are becoming increasingly accessible.

Similarly, one sees a discernable improvement in the quality of the films (some 50 to 60 a year), which are produced in Iran today. Many of these films have set new standards for artistic, professional and technical sophistication as attested to by the fact that they have received numerous awards and much critical acclaim at international film festivals. The level of plot, theme, narrative, and characterization most often surpasses those of the largely melodramatic films of the pre-revolutionary era. The works of Mohsen Makhmalbaf (b. 1957), the leading Islamic revolutionary director who has turned increasingly critical of the reign of the clerics, has

attracted the most attention. In a number of popular films he has dealt with such themes as social inequality, the plight of the poor urban dwellers of contemporary Tehran, and the depression of a shell-shocked idealist veteran of the Iran-Iraq war. In his most controversial film, "The Nights of Zayandehroud," he depicts the love affair of a war veteran with an upper-class girl and the moral laxity of a martyr's wife. This film so irritated the government sensor that it has been banned inside Iran.

One of the other interesting features of the post-revolutionary film industry is the emergence of successful female directors and cinematographers. Besides the ones presently active, many others await their turn behind the cameras. For example, in 1990, some 800 female volunteers participated in a film making entrance examination. Far from being an anomaly, this seems to be indicative of a developing, across the board trend, as women now comprise a notable constituency of avid book readers, buyers, translators, and authors, as well as poets, painters, photographers and art critics.

But perhaps the most potentially consequential development in the contemporary Iranian intellectual scene is the coming of age of an articulate generation of Shi`ite modernists. Due to their intellectual stamina and popular support, these modernists have been able to propel themselves into the forefront of intellectual deliberations in contemporary Iran.

Led by Abdolkarim Soroush, 50, a philosopher of science educated at the University of London, Iran's Shi`ite modernists have began to articulate a formidable alternative to the clerical establishment. As a prolific scholar and former member of the High Council of Cultural Revolution, Soroush is now trying to chip away at the monumental traditions left in place by the conservative Islamic theologians and jurists. What has put him at odds with this latter group is

his increasingly popular epistemological assertion that while the *Qur`an* is divine and immutable, its comprehension is not. Indeed, Soroush has maintained that the interpretation of the holy text is changeable since human cognition constantly becomes anew and modern. As a human science, then, Islamic jurisprudence is, by its very nature hermeneutical and speculative. Since science and philosophy are continuously evolving, our comprehension of the holy text should inevitably follow suit. In other words, since philosophy and the natural sciences are always unfinished and in quest of perfection, jurisprudential theory is also imperfect, mortal, and transitory. Needless to say, as the traditional guardians of faith, the Shi`a clerics do not look too kindly upon Soroush's Lutheran-like attempt to humanize the reading of the *Qur`an* as it inevitably enlarges the community of interpreters. In addition to the challenge they pose to the legitimacy of clerics' traditional exegesis, Soroush's arguments are also politically unsettling to many of Iran's ruling theocrats, particularly since Soroush has condemned the mutation of religion into ideology and has referred to Islamic "Ideocracy" as a metaphysical juggernaut.

Soroush's crusade to reformulate Islamic jurisprudential is far from being a one man show. He has been joined by a diverse array of lay scholars, thinkers, activists, and even clerics who are systematically advancing their ideas in such fields as philosophy, theology, hermeneutics, and epistemology. One venue available to them is the bi-monthly journal *Kiyan* (essence, soul), which, since its commencement in 1991, has emerged as the leading intellectual forum for Iranian Shi`ite modernists. In the pages of this journal, they have set in motion a wide range of lively debates on such sensitive themes as the relationship between Islam and democracy; religion and ideology; the encounter between tradition and (post)modernity; the

merits of religious pluralism; and the need to harmonize Islamic jurisprudence with recent scientific knowledge.

Similar sentiments are being echoed in the pages of the magazine *Zanan* (Women), where a potent brand of modern Islamic feminism is taking shape. Here, jurisprudential texts, Islamic legal doctrines, patriarchal social practices, and sexist cultural norms are being subjected to a rigorous feminist critique at the hands of a qualified cadre of writers. In short, what makes the works of these Shi`ite modernists so challenging to the clerical establishment is that they have found a growing constituency among the younger generation. More importantly, these Shi`ite modernists have developed equivocal language-modalities that enables them to address both the seminary students and the secular university students, lower-class males and middle-class females.

Judging by all the above indicators, one can argue that the post-revolutionary Iranian polity can no longer be divided along the conventional lines of an omnipotent state and an impotent society. Notwithstanding the stifling policies of the state to subdue its dissidents, it seems as if Iran's intellectual community has so far weathered the storm. Shackled for years by fear and apathy, this intellectual community is slowly but surely regaining its composure.

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