

Revolutionary Iran: Civil Society and State in the Modernization Process, by Masoud Kamali. xx + 311 pages, index. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1998. (Cloth) ISBN 1-84014-449-1.

Written in the tradition of historical sociology, the core question entertained by this book is: "Why the clergy did not take the political power in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-09) when Iran was a traditional society, but succeeded in a modern Iran (1977-79)?" (p. 1) To answer this question, Kamali attempts to analyze the social roots of the two aforementioned revolutions and the socio-cultural changes that occurred in between these two watershed events. His main hypothesis is that "while the ulama participated in the Constitutional Revolution in order to influence the political system and reinforce their position in civil society of Iran, in the Islamic Revolution they participated in order to gain total political power and to reconstruct Iranian society as to conflate the political and civil spheres of the society." (p. 8).

As one may deduce from the above paragraph, the author uses "civil society" as his main conceptual tool. He claims that Iran has had both a "modern" as well as a "traditional" civil society, with the latter dating back to the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in 1501. Kamali insists that this type of civil society consists of "communities and institutions rather than individual citizens and their associations." (p. 11). He identifies the ulama and the bazaris as the two main influential groups in this peculiar type of civil society and maintains that as sources of authority and bases for social mobilization they played a major role in the 1979 revolution. Kamali further maintains that the urban "dispossessed" constituted the backbone and the foot soldiers of the Islamic revolution.

Walking on the empirical and theoretical ground already traveled by Shahroug Akhavi and Said Amir Arjomand, the author endorses their thesis that the secularization drive undertaken by the Pahlavi kings both seriously undermined and eventually provoked the opposition of Shiite clerics. However, Kamali's footing is much less solid when he argues that the clergy had a powerful vision of an alternative society *that enabled them to emerge as leaders of the civil society*. Kamali's account of the 1979 revolution flies in the face of the fact that this was a revolution without either a clear theory or a blueprint whose substance, pace, and outcome caught almost everyone -- including clerics -- by surprise. The author provides hardly any proof that average Iranians were aware of the ruminations of clerics, let alone accept them as undisputed leaders of the civil society in a fragmented and heterogeneous polity such as Iran. The reader may be baffled as to why the author, who according to his introduction was a leftist political prisoner at the time of the 1979 revolution, refrains from engaging in any critical evaluation of the clergy even when he acknowledges their sometimes reactionary and non-democratic positions. Would it have done irreparable harm to his theory if Kamali had acknowledged the fact that the Shah's state and the clerics also had common interests - i.e., countering the Left?

At one point, Kamali quotes Napoleon: "history is a myth men agree to believe." Is it not the task of scholars, however, to unravel those myths and "histories" rather than add to them?

This book would have benefited from more disciplined and diligent editing, for there are instances in which the same identical phrases appear more than once (see pages 1 and 62; 31 and 45; 145 and 156; 160).

Mehrzaad Boroujerdi
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