

Secularization of Iran A Doomed Failure? The New Middle Class and the Making of Modern Iran, by Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut. Paris: Institut d'études iraniennes and Diffusion Peeters, 1998. 258 pages. Resume en Francais to p. 269. Bibliography to 285. Index to 296.

In *Secularization of Iran A Doomed Failure?*, Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut aims "...not to write the history of twentieth century Iran. As a sociologist, I only highlight significant historical moments to show the contribution of the new middle class in the making of modern Iran" (p. 7). Elucidating the aspirations and capacities of the oft-neglected middle class, the author offers a relatively new and praiseworthy approach to the study of Iranian politics. Yet her book is not without shortcomings. Most significantly, she does not present a compelling or holistic account of the middle class's saga and, thus, has difficulty substantiating her claims about the failures, successes, or prospects for secularization in Iran.

Recognizing the nebulous and non-cohesive character of the middle class, Kian-Thiebaut's introductory chapter dissects this group horizontally and vertically, differentiating between the new and traditional, the urban and rural, as well as the upper and lower middle class constituencies. She defines the members of the new middle class as those who are "graduates of secular institutions of higher education, do not own means of production, and are composed of two groups: the salaried of public and private sector, and the liberal professionals" (p. 7). Kian-Thiebaut traces the formation of the first generation of the new middle class (bureaucrats, doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, teachers, university students, etc.) to "...the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1930s" (p. 18). The rise of this class was one outcome of state-led modernization efforts (p. 20) and the expansion of educational opportunities (p. 73). The author goes as far as to say that "the new middle class has been a political creation" (p. 255).

Examining the reasons for the middle class's potential to shape the form and content of Iranian politics during the last century, Kian-Thiebaut contends that a democratic system of government would rest on the shoulders of the new middle class that has adopted a modernist sub-culture and a largely secularist, liberal-nationalist discourse. Considering the social, political, and economic weight of the new middle class, the author Kian-Thiebaut concludes, "the failure of secularism was the outcome of temporary circumstances" (p. 10) and that secularist forces still have a promising future in Iran. Elaborating on these "temporary" circumstances, she maintains that "authoritarian modernization was detrimental to secular culture and politics, thus paving the way for the triumph of political Islam" (p. 255).

While the author's attention to the saga of the new middle class is a contribution to Iranian studies, Kian-Thiebaut's understanding of this group and its role in democratic development and secularization is flawed. For example, she often reduces the praxis of the middle class to the mere positions of political parties and activists. Moreover, she provides no serious appraisal of the distinctive value structure, economic predicament, or the attitudes of the new middle class toward other social classes. Finally, because she relies excessively on secondary sources, Kian-Thiebaut can not substantiate the following controversial propositions: (a) "the secular new middle class opposition to the Pahlavis was mainly organized by the sons and daughters of the upper class" (p. 16); (b) "the secular new middle class intellectuals played the leading political role in challenging the Pahlavi state" (p. 211); (c) before the revolution of 1978-79, lower middle and lower class youths "could not think of enrolling in universities" (p. 236); and (d) "the new

middle class has been the most influential social group in twentieth century Iran” (p. 255).

Sloppy transliteration and historiography further mar this book. For instance: The second Iranian defeat at the hands of Russia took place in 1828 not 1825 (p. 28); Mirzada `Ishqi was assassinated not killed in prison (p. 71); the Center for the Propagation of the Islamic Truth in Mashhad was founded in 1941 not 1943 (p. 92); and the newspaper *Ittila'at* was founded in July 1926 and not 1925 (p. 154).

Despite these shortcomings, however, Kian-Thiebaut's study could usher in a new focus on the middle class in particular and on class analysis in general – a welcome development in Iranian studies if combined with clear conceptualizations of democracy and secularism, and with solid empirical research. For the time being, her work enhances our knowledge of how the new middle class became integrated into Iranian bodypolitik during the twentieth century.

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