

Mehran Kamrava, The Political History of Modern Iran: From Tribalism to Theocracy (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992). Pp. 177.

The book under review traces the trajectory of "modern" Iranian political history from the inception of the Qajar dynasty in 1785 until the present. In three evenly divided chapters, the author reviews the political ups and downs of the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic eras. Kamrava's principle thesis is that political autocracy, foreign intervention, and revolutions have been the dominant features of Iran's modern political history (p. 1). In a nicely written narrative style that is neither too convoluted nor cumbersome, he proceeds to delineate the indelible marks left by these features on the Iranian polity.

Kamrava maintains that during the Qajars' 140 year reign, Persia metamorphosed from a predominantly tribal society into a nation-state ruled by patrimonial kings who never abandoned their tribal loyalties or kinship ties. Under the Pahlavis, the patrimonial nature of Iranian politics changed in style rather than substance as a new ruling elite consolidated itself through establishing a workable modern state. The 1979 revolution marked a turning point in the sense that it brought to power a new regime which opted for populism over patrimonialism. According to Kamrava, however, despite these changes the autocratic nature of Iranian politics has remained intact. As a result, the legitimation crisis of the ruling elites, which has facilitated (or has been exasperated by) foreign interventions, has paved the way for revolutionary movements. The author is not very optimistic that this vicious circle in Iranian history is going to end anytime soon.

Besides the triumvirate features mentioned above, Kamrava devotes another chapter of his book to a discussion of Iranian political culture in which he analyzes the impact of tribalism, feudalism, religion, cult of personality, illiteracy, and social and ethnic inequalities on Iranian's collective psyche.

In his preface, Kamrava acknowledges that *The Political History of Modern Iran* does not "necessarily offer new and previously undiscovered data." Instead, he promises a "new analytical framework for the study of political institutions and the broader process of state-building in Iran in particular and in other developing countries in general" (p. ix). Unfortunately, however, this reviewer did not find the book to break either fresh informative or interpretive grounds.

Kamrava's lopsided reliance on English language sources, and the somewhat substantial overlap between this book and his earlier work, *Revolution in Iran: The Roots of Turmoil* (1990), have striped it of much original data. As for his "new analytical framework," Kamrava does not situate his work within the constellation of prevalent theories of change and revolution. His analytical framework looked to me more as a "melange" of existing theories rather than a "new" approach. Furthermore, Kamrava does not elaborate nor does he present a single example of how and where his "framework" can be applied to other developing countries. Alas, to make a claim is not tantamount to proving it.

Another drawback of Kamrava's book is his occasional interjection of strong personal judgements. One example should suffice. He writes: "Iranian intellectuals suffer from an incurable ignorance of ways and means to understand and analyze their own society, and, despite what most think of themselves, often do not possess even a scant understanding of the social sciences . . . Iran is a nation full of demagogues but few intellectuals" (p. 139). Does the above statement not convey a condescending attitude and calumnious tenor? Kamrava's generalization seems further unwarranted considering that he does not devote more than a few scant sentences to analyzing the writings or deeds of these "intellectuals."

Unfortunately, the book is further marred by a number of minor errors and inexact language. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDP) is not a "communist-oriented" organization (p. 90) nor were the Fadaiyan a group of "Maoist" guerrillas (p. 83). The

supposedly hidden twelfth Shi'ite Imam, Mehdi, is not a "prophet" (p. 142) but an "Imam."

Individuals such as Bazargan and Banisadr could perhaps have been better designated as lay or non-clerical Muslim thinkers/activist rather than "secular nationalists" (p. 89), etc.

For the novice non-specialist reader looking for a succinct account of modern Iranian history this book can be of interest. The Iran specialists, however, need to look elsewhere.

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