

GOD'S WILL: THE ISLAM/DEMOCRACY DILEMMA IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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“All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development (...) but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts”.
(Carl Schmitt)

Abstract. In the summer of 2009, the world was watching Iran. Not because of the unresolved question of its nuclear program, nor Iran's troubled relationship with the United States, nor (at least not primarily) because of human rights abuses. The world and its media were watching Iran because, thirty years after the Islamic revolution of 1979 (and a hundred years after the Constitutional revolution of 1906–11), Iranians were again on the streets of Tehran in hundreds of thousands, demanding free, democratic government and an end to tyranny. Iranians sometimes have an exaggerated sense of their country's importance in the world. But for once it appeared justified. Would the Islamic republic fall? Or might it shift to a more open, freer version of itself that permitted elections to run their course – in contrast to the manipulated process enforced by repression many believed they had suffered after 12 June 2009? If there is a spirit of movement and change in world events, which moves from place to place over time according to crises in human affairs, then that spirit was alive in Tehran in the summer of 2009. Ten years later, the streets of Teheran were filled, once again, with millions of Iranians, protesting not only against the increase in petrol prices, but the desperate economic and political conditions in the country. Yet, those watching the course of events in Iran have underestimated, once again, the role of religion. This essay provides a brief context for the latest outbreaks of these tensions and offers a perspective on the struggle between Islam and democracy in the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran.

Keywords: *Iran; Islam; Religion; Democracy; Revolution; Modernization; Ulama*

Introduction: The God Factor

The themes of this essay – religion and democracy, as a subchapter of religion and world politics – embody a paradox. Even though there are authors who discuss the emergence or resurgence of religion in international or internal

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affairs, in reality, religion has never been absent from them. Rooted in the deepest dimension of human personality and societal life, religion has been entwined with the basic dynamics of men and women, states and nations for millennia. Religious beliefs and convictions have moved societies to cooperate and to collide, to seek understanding of each other and to plan domination of others. The role of religion has never been one-dimensional: it has fostered the search for peace, and it has intensified the motives for war; it has united some at the price of dividing others¹. But the study and the practice of world politics have treated religion as inconsequential, a reality that can be ignored by both scholars and diplomats without any diminishment of their understanding of the world². Religion doesn't even make it into the index of Kissinger's 900-page "Diplomacy" and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, "Diplomats trained in my era were taught not to invite trouble. And no subject seemed more inherently treacherous than religion"³. This concept has effectively been treated as a black box and the impact of religion has been ignored, despite the fact that "world-shaking political movements have so often fuelled by religious fervour"⁴. Yet, when dealing with very basic issues of human existence where everybody comes with a certain amount of their history – thousands of years of culture and history – and when one tries to answer very complicated questions with black and white answers, there is no surprise that the answers and, therefore the solutions are not the most suitable. Keeping religion out of discussion has good arguments because it does complicate things. On the other hand, by not considering the role that religion plays, we are being oblivious to the whole dimension of the problems and hence the situation in which we cannot find an answer to our questions, and no solution to the problem in question.

Studies of religion and politics have begun to force their way into the mainstream of the discipline thanks to their increasing methodological sophistication and theoretical ambition in addition to the push of real-world events. In comparative politics, puzzle-driven structured comparison has yielded new insights into the rationality of religious behaviour, the weight of path dependence in shaping religious values, and the play of socioeconomic factors in shaping religion's vitality. In international relations, recognition of the importance of religious identities and values in the play of international affairs has spelled an advance over realist caricatures that long discounted ideas as epiphenomenal and focused on the quest for wealth and power as the sole driver of international

¹ T. Shah, A. Stepan, M. D. Toft, *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 15.

² E. Bellin, "Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics", *World Politics*, Volume 60, Issue 2, January 2008, p. 315. Available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/faith-in-politics-new-trends-in-the-study-of-religion-and-politics/8200A07722CC07ED91D700519823F2C7>. [Accessed at September 20, 2020].

³ M. Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2007, p. 8.

⁴ R. O. Keohane, "The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics and the 'Liberalism of Fear'", *International Organization*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Spring 2002, pp. 39. Available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/dialogue-io/article/globalization-of-informal-violence-theories-of-world-politics-and-the-liberalism-of-fear/57D3155A1121BA2C24C4E406E5ED556E>. [Accessed at September 20, 2020].

politics. But notable lacunae remain. The comparative subfield still needs to reckon with the non-instrumental aspect of religious behaviour, the power of religion as an independent variable, and the differential appeal, persuasiveness, and political salience of religious ideas over time. The International Relations subfield must move beyond “paradigm wars”⁵ focused on whether religion matters in international politics in favour of more empirically grounded, structured comparison to illuminate when and why religion matters in international affairs. Religion has become and, in all likelihood, will continue to be a vital – and sometimes furious – shaper of war, peace, terrorism, democracy, theocracy, authoritarianism, national identities, economic growth and development, productivity, the fate of human rights, the United Nations, the rise and contraction of populations, and cultural mores regarding sexuality, marriage, the family, the role of women, loyalty to nation and regime, and the character of education⁶.

Western scholars have long assumed that if democracy were going to come to the Middle East, it would have to be ushered in by either modernizing technocrats or reforming army officers. The clerics and religion were seen as obstacles to overcome. Thus, many analysts have neglected the role of religion, even if from a historical perspective it would seem that of all the non-Western civilizations in the world, Islam offers the best prospects for Western-style democracy. Historically, culturally, religiously, it is the closest to the West, sharing much – though by no means all – of the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman heritage that helped to form our modern civilization. From a political perspective, however, Islam seems to offer the worst prospects for liberal democracy. Of the forty-six sovereign states that make up the international Islamic Conference, only one, the Turkish Republic, can be described as a democracy in Western terms (with the necessary asterisk regarding its evolution in recent years). Of the remainder, some have never tried democracy; others have tried it and failed; a few have experimented with the idea of sharing, though not of relinquishing, power⁷. Also, despite its reputation as having one of the world’s most despotic regimes, the state leading the Middle East experiments regarding the democratic process is, ironically, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran has been a focus of world attention since the 1978-79 revolution, both because of its continued strategic importance in regional and world politics and because of the impact of the revolution on other Muslim countries. Moreover, the revolution was the latest eruption of two universal tensions: between religiosity and secularism, and between despotism and democracy. Arguably, no country in recent times has escaped these tensions, which are probably inevitable concomitants of *modernization*, and there is every indication that they will continue to be important factors in local and world politics during the twenty-first century. The first battleground between the religious and secular forces of Iran in the 20th

⁵ E. Bellin, *art. cit.*

⁶ M. D. Toft, D. Philpott, T. S. Shah, *God’s Century. Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011, p. 33.

⁷ B. Lewis, *Faith and Power. Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 54.

century occurred during the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911). The clergy's support for the Constitutional Revolution and their consent to parliament was conditional. They insisted on preserving the religious composition of both, the judiciary and the educational system, restrictions on freedom of the press, and the supervisory veto power of the country's religious leaders. The secular forces that led the revolution spearheaded a system of parliamentary rule based on constitutionalism, a move that proved a major victory for secularism. The Constitutional Revolution failed to satisfy the clerics' demands, leaving the religious forces to regret their participation in the revolution⁸. Nowadays, Islam regained its force and relevance in the Islamic Republic. In the fierce clash between conservatives and reformers, both sides seek the mantle of Islam. In the battle to control Iran's population, both the government and the opposition are deploying religious symbols and parables to portray themselves as pursuing the ideal of a just Islamic state. Such rhetoric is not mere expediency. Instead, Islam remains a fundamental touchstone of legitimacy in Iran. "If either the reformists or the conservatives can make reference to Islamic values in a way that the majority of citizens understand, they will win"⁹. In the current context, no one questions *whether* Iran will be a religious state as in the 1979 revolution, but *how*. On the other hand, the current debates on democracy in Iran are critical not only to Iran but also to developments across the Muslim world. For Iran is where Islamism succeeded in changing the tenor of politics¹⁰, a trend that soon spread across the Muslim world. In Iran the democracy debate is neither a Western import nor a concession to the West, nor is it a project of the state or the elite foisted on the masses. Here the debate is now a popular idea that has developed from within the society. Debate over Islam's place in the Iranian political structure is as old as the Iranian revolutions themselves; religion's influence on politics has oscillated over time.

Today, there is a broad public movement committed to democracy in Iran. Historically, Iranians have tended to assert their political presence in public when they come to believe that their rights are being openly violated and their voices silenced by existing authority. Recent events in the Islamic Republic of Iran – young Iranians demonstrating peacefully en masse and risking their lives in the streets – reveal the continuity of this Iranian tradition of appearing in "public"¹¹ and "shaming"¹² the authorities. This tradition of democracy in the streets has been a consistent and powerful aspect of Iranian protest movements throughout modern times, and it constitutes an extended narrative of direct popular action in the Iranian public consciousness.

⁸ S. A. Arjomand, *The Turban for the crown: The Islamic revolution in Iran*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 52–54.

⁹ M. D. Toft *et al.*, 2011, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁰ A. Gheissari, V. Nasr, "Iran's Democracy Debate", *Middle East Policy Council*, Volume XI, Summer 2004. Available at <https://mepc.org/journal/irans-democracy-debate>. [Accessed at September 25, 2020].

¹¹ A. Mirsepassi, *Democracy in Modern Iran. Islam, Culture, and Political Change*, New York: New York University Press, p. ix.

¹² *Ibid.*

This essay intends to tackle the complicated dilemma Islam/democracy in the Islamic Republic and to discuss the specific relationship between these two concepts. The topic has been the subject of numerous academic inquiries for about the last 40 years but the recent events in Iran raised a new question: is Iran on the verge of a new revolution of the magnitude of the 1979 one? And if so, what will be the contribution of the religious factor in the unfolding of the hypothetical events.

“Ma Chegoneh Ma Shodim?”¹³
– A Short History of Protests in Post-revolutionary Iran

On 1 February 1979, just after 9.30 a.m., an Air France 747 airliner landed at Mehrabad airport on the western outskirts of Tehran, and a member of the crew, with others in attendance, helped an elderly, bearded man down the steps to the ground. This was no ordinary flight. As the aircraft had entered Iranian airspace, many on board had feared it might be shot down. As it landed, several million Iranians were waiting on the streets to welcome the bearded man in clerical robes, and crowds of minders, reporters, photographers and hangers-on of all kinds shadowed every move he made. The special passenger for whom the aircraft had been chartered was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, returning from exile, and the photographs and film of his descent from the aircraft became some of the defining images of the Iranian revolution¹⁴.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 is sometimes spoken of as the third great revolution of modern times, after the French and the Russian¹⁵. The interpretation of all three of these revolutions will always be controversial, but many people still broadly think of the first two in terms set out by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. According to that analysis, the French revolution was a bourgeois revolution, in which the perennially rising middle class pushed aside the old forms of feudalism and asserted its growing economic power in political terms, setting up the forms of representative government and establishing the bourgeois class and capitalist economics as dominant for the period that followed. The Russian revolution, following on from the French, was the proletarian revolution predicted by Marx, bringing in an era of socialist government in the interest of the working class, at least according to the theory. The Iranian revolution was an Islamic revolution – that much is clear¹⁶. But beyond that label, despite some resemblances to those earlier revolutions, it remains an enigma, and many non-specialists in the West (and not just in the West), despite so much writing and comment on the subject since, have no conceptual moorings for it – no clear sense of why it happened or what it signified. We are still living through the

¹³ “*Ma Chegoneh Ma Shodim*”? (“How Did We Become What We Are?”) – The title of Sadegh Zibakalam’s book of 1999, which made an impact in Iran for its iconoclastic message that the country’s past traumas and present problems had at least as much to do with internal politics and the actions of Iranians as with interference by foreigners.

¹⁴ M. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran. A History of the Islamic Republic*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 60-63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

consequences of the Iranian revolution of 1979, and the longer-term outcomes remain hard to assess. In just one hundred days, protests would bring down the Iranian monarchy. Demonstrations would multiply into the millions. Strikes would spread and shut down the economy, including the oil industry that propped up the regime. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, on the throne for thirty-seven years, would flee Iran, only to be replaced by a caretaker government that would last just thirty-seven days before it, too, was chased into exile. A revolutionary regime would come to power, headed by Imam – known in the West by his earlier title, Ayatollah – Ruhollah Khomeini¹⁷.

In the second decade after the Islamic Revolution, the regime had to deal with a series of urban riots in a few cities from 1992 to 1995, as well with the well-known student protests in the summer of 1999. The first was caused by anger over economic grievances among marginalized and poverty-stricken masses. The latter arose as one of the many political crises during president Mohammad Khatami's "reform era"¹⁸. Both of these events were suppressed in a short time-span with a relatively low loss of life and did not pose any genuine existential threat to the regime.

The Green Movement of 2009 – 2010 was the greatest challenge to the Islamic Republic's authority since the 1980s. What was deemed an 'electoral coup' which was orchestrated by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's faction, sanctioned by the Supreme Leader and executed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the security apparatus to ensure the re-election of Ahmadinejad, was met with unexpected and stubborn resistance in many major cities¹⁹. The resistance was particularly fierce in the capital Tehran, where more than one million protesters showed their defiance in the greatest mass demonstration against the regime since 1981²⁰. After months of demonstrations and street fighting in Tehran and other large cities, the security forces broke up the movement through brutality, some killings, and mass arrests²¹. The Green Movement's ability to challenge the state effectively came to an end in February 2011, when its leaders Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi were put under house arrest.

Five years later, the Islamic Republic was taken by surprise, when sporadic demonstrations erupted and spread like wildfire through about 150 large and small cities in late 2017. The social unrests began in Mashhad, lasting for two weeks²². The protesters had no organization and no clear political aim, but their

¹⁷ C. Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, London: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁸ A. Bayat, *Street Politics, Poor People's Movements in Iran*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 106-108; see also D. Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran, Religion, Society and Power*, London: Frank Cass, 2001, pp. 120-122.

¹⁹ J. Borger, I. Black, "World leaders urged by Iran's opposition party to reject Ahmadinejad's alleged victory", *The Guardian*, June 14, 2009. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/14/iran-ahmadinejad-mousavi-elections-result>. [Accessed at September 25, 2020].

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ S. A. Arjomand, *After Khomeini, Iran After His Successors*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 169-171.

²² A. Shahi, E. Abdoh-Tabrizi, "Iran's 2019-2020 Demonstrations: The Changing Dynamics of Political Protests in Iran", *Asian Affairs*, Volume 1, Issue 51, February 14, 2020, pp. 3-5. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03068374.2020.1712889?journalCode=raaf20>. [Accessed at October 1, 2020].

loathing for the Islamic Republic was crystal clear: the regime's ideological institutions – local branches of the Supreme Leader's office, religious schools, and bases of Basij militia – were vandalized and destroyed, while 'Death to Khamenei' was frequently heard²³. Despite their geographically extensive nature and lengthy timespan, the protests gradually died down under the pressure of the security forces who, despite their determination to face down the protesters, exercised restraint (by Iranian standards,) and the two-week-long protests caused fewer than 30 fatalities, a few of whom were members of the police and Basij militia²⁴. However, this restraint was not a feature of November 2019. Although in the December 2017 protests the regime resorted to violent measures, 2019 represents the most extreme use of lethal force by the Islamic Republic against protesters. This may prove to be an exception, but more likely it is a manifestation of a new period of an increasing radicalization of relations between Iran's state and its society. To understand this stark transformation, one must understand the multifaceted factors and developments that have pushed Iran's state and its society into opposite corners.

In January 2020 the Islamic Republic entered a new decade facing a full-scale crisis stemming from an internal political gridlock, international isolation, and paralyzing economic conditions. The regime holds foreign powers and their fifth columns inside Iran responsible for this situation, as it has during the past 40 years. The Islamic Republic has external enemies, most notably Saudi Arabia, that has been in a proxy war of attrition with Iran since the beginning of the civil war in Syria. Apart from Saudi Arabia and its regional allies, the Islamic Republic has held Israel as its ideological enemy, an enmity that has extended to Israel's main international ally, the United States of America²⁵. One cannot deny that these enemies have played a considerable role in Iran's current precarious situation. However, most of Iran's ailments are the direct result of the Islamic Republic's policies and actions. Chief among them are those pursued by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the IRGC high command, which form the bulk of the Islamic Republic's 'deep state'²⁶ and which *de facto* rule the country. Their agenda and tactics have created new challenges and intensified the difficulties the regime has had to tackle since its foundation.

While the 2017 and 2019 protests were caused and triggered by economic factors, they soon became political and existential threats to the Islamic Republic and targeted agencies and structures with symbolic and ideological importance to the regime. A great many, if not the majority, of Iranians have lost hope in a meaningful political transition through reform.

²³ *** "Pānzdah Mosala va Daftar Aemeh-i Jomeh dar Eghteshāshāt-I Akhir Mored Hamleh Gharār Gereft/Nahād-i Namāz Jomeh Jenāhā Nist", *Student News Network (SNN)*, 2018. Available at <https://snn.ir/fa/news/>. [Accessed at October 1, 2020].

²⁴ A. Shahi, E. Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The Islam/Democracy Nexus in Iran

The manifestation of Iranian protest movements and their criticism of the West cannot be seen as a rejection of Western democratic ideals. The Western politicians' unease about the resurgence of religion has led them to ignore the fact that Islamic political theory is resistant to despotism. While in post Reformation Europe the concept of the "people"²⁷ emerged as countering an arbitrary concentration of power, in the Middle East, Islam developed its own claims against the legitimacy of tyranny. Both Islamic law and traditions insist on consultation and dialogue between the ruler and the ruled. As guardians of the scriptures, the clergy have the obligation to counter the absolutism of the ruling authorities. The modern Middle Eastern governments, including our study case, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with their brutal internal security services and sham elections are actually antithetical to Islamic political thought. In the aftermath of Ayatollah Khomeini's death, Iranian intellectuals began to coalesce in a variety of political and cultural groups to debate ideas of reform and the means of broadening political participation. Among the prominent members were future stars of Khatami's cabinet and many members of the newly elected parliament such as Ata'ollah Mohajerani, Abdollah Nuri, Saeed Hajarian, Abdolvahed Musavi-lari and Abdol Karim Soroush²⁸. The reformers faced two inescapable mandates. On one side is Islam with its holistic pretensions, maintaining how the society and individual lives should be organized. On the other side is the irreversible movement of political modernity with its democratic claims. The task of the reformers was to demonstrate that these two realms were incompatible in neither principle nor practice. The basis of the reformers' ideas is that the interpretation of the scriptures cannot remain immutable and must adjust to the changing human condition. For religion to remain vital, it has to address the demands of the modern social order. Islam is not lacking in traditions that can address this challenge, as the well-established practice of *ijtihad*²⁹ (interpretation) offers the reformers a path toward an evolved understanding of the sacred texts. As one of Iran's leading philosopher, Abdol Karim Soroush contends: "There is nothing heretical about new interpretations of Islam that differ from interpretations of the past. An ideal religious society cannot have anything but a democratic government. As interpretations or understanding of Islam evolves, Islamic law can even be the basis of modern legislation"³⁰.

In the hands of reformers, Islam is not merely a system for connecting man to his divine creator but a force for progressive change. The scripture's call for freedom from tyranny and human equality and Islamic civilization's historical

²⁷ R. Takeyh, "God's Will: Iranian Democracy and the Islamic Context", *Middle East Policy Council*, Volume VII, Winter 2000, Number 4. Available at <https://mepc.org/journal/gods-will-iranian-democracy-and-islamic-context>. [Accessed at October 2, 2020].

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ For details on *ijtihad* see Y. Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism in Iran. An Intellectual History*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; N. R. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution*, London: Macmillan Press LTD., 1995.

³⁰ R. Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran*, New York: Knopf, 2000, p. 36.

legacy of intellectual inquiry are seen as the basis for reconstructing society along pluralistic lines. Moreover, the Quran's mandate that the community is consulted and rulers be held accountable establishes the platform for collective action and democratic participation. It was such ideas and thinkers that established the guideposts for an Iranian society that has been fully immersed in a dynamic internal debate. The leading figure to emerge from Iran's reform movement was the former minister of culture and a widely read intellectual cleric, Muhammad Khatami. The starting point of Khatami's formulations was that the Islamic Republic has stagnated and is no longer sufficiently responsive to its constituents' political and social demands. As an intellectual versed in Western political thought, Khatami accepted Western civilization's economic progress and pluralistic achievements³¹. Khatami was articulating a path that incorporates the best of Western political heritage into Islam's concerns for values and human dignity. Before he became president, he emphasized that "our revolution can give rise to a new civilization if we have the ability to absorb the positive aspects of Western civilization"³². In his speeches and writings, Khatami has called for a new "Islamic political society"³³ that is religious in its values, rational in its thought and dynamic in its debate. Khatami's new society was indeed a fresh page in the annals of Iran's long history. However, social movements troubled his terms in office. The failure of the Khatami presidency to satisfy demands for change pushed the demand for democracy beyond taming theocracy. It has become increasingly accepted wisdom that, first, theocracy is impervious to change; much of the discussion on that topic by Khatami and reformist *ulama*³⁴ (Muslim scholars) now appears arcane and of merely marginal value. Second, Islamic reform does not necessarily produce democracy; in fact, it is arguable that the two cannot easily co-exist. Here, too, abstract debates on Islamic reform are being increasingly viewed as redundant sophistry.

Against this background, debate over democracy moved from inside the ruling regime – with the presidency and the parliament acting as its chief advocates – to the streets, where, for instance, student demonstrations, and not only, became a leading element in demanding fundamental changes to the structure of the Islamic Republic. Popular demand for change has further mobilized secular intellectuals and activists associated with civil-society institutions and universities. Intellectuals as well as a number of writers outside Iran, who have in the past questioned the promise of Islamic reform for democracy, have gained in influence³⁵. The discourse of the secular voices breaks with that of lay Islamist intellectuals, Khatami and the reformist *ulama* over two key issues. First, the secular thinkers do not see protection of Islamic identity as a primary political objective. Second,

³¹ R. Takeyh, 2000, *op. cit.*

³² M. Khatami, *Hope and Challenge*, Binghamton, NY: University of New York, 1998, p. 19.

³³ R. Takeyh, 2000, *op. cit.*

³⁴ For details on *ulama* see E. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontent. Political Thought and Reform in Iran*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019; J. De Groot, *Religion, Culture & Politics in Iran. From Qajars to Khomeini*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007; O. Goldberg, *Shi'i Theology in Iran. The Challenge of Religious Experience*, London: Routledge, 2012.

³⁵ M. Viorst, "The Limits of the Revolution: Changing Iran", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 6, November/December 1995, pp. 63-76. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/1995-11-01/limits-revolution-changing-iran>. [Accessed at October 5, 2020].

and by extension, the secular thinkers are not concerned with defining an ideal form of government that is inclusive of Islam³⁶. The secular voices rather seek to identify and protect the rights of civil society and the citizenry. Their ideal is not Islamic democracy but popular sovereignty. This involves placing limits on the exercise of state power and creating legal institutions and a system of checks and balances that guarantee individual and social rights. The secular voices also argue for vesting sovereignty in the people in lieu of vesting it in God or divine law. Almost a century ago, a constitutional movement transformed Iranians from “subjects”³⁷ to “citizens”³⁸. The constitution of the Islamic Republic, by placing the notion of “guardianship”³⁹ over civil society, has in effect reversed those gains. The democracy debate now aims to restore sovereignty to the people and hold government accountable to them as citizens. This is a very different paradigm, which breaks with the reform initiatives that have had their roots in and have remained conceptually bound to the Islamic Republic. It is also a demand for replacing rather than reforming the Islamic Republic by changing its founding constitutional assumptions.

Conclusions

As the Islamic Republic prepares for presidential election in 2021, the debate about democracy is likely to intensify and the tension of recent social movements has the potential to put pressure on the ruling elite. The scale of this mobilization has underscored the depth and breadth of the breach between the ruling regime and its critics. The mobilization has also created broad-based socio-political networks that are likely to provide the reform movement with greater influence in the political process. The coming year could be of critical importance in shaping Iranian politics. Although the democracy debate has yet to produce a broad-based social movement, it has nevertheless sufficiently developed in complexity and has come to influence popular political culture to such a degree that it cannot be easily contained by limited concessions from above. This debate will play an important role in determining how the Islamic Republic balances regime interests with the mounting pressures for change from below while also grappling with economic and political challenges in a changing global environment.

Iran’s Islamic democracy will be different from the democratic order that developed in post-Reformation Europe. The Western democracies dedicated themselves to protecting individual rights from all impositions, including the church. Over the course of centuries, religion and politics came to occupy distinct realms of society and the state, though constitution sought to limit the temporal influence of the ecclesiastical institutions. From its inception, Islam has had a deep connection to politics and viewed the state as a means of effecting religious precepts. An Islamic state’s emphasis on collective values makes a clear distinction between church and state improbable. The clerics who view public

³⁶ A. Gheissari, V. Nasr, 2004, *op. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

affairs as one of their mandates will not be circumspect in imposing limits on individual choices. Even Khatami has cautioned that “a system like ours, based as it is on Islamic ideology, is bound to restrict some individual liberties”⁴⁰.

The critical question is what role would the clerical estate have in such a society? The one area that is likely to remain under the auspices of religious authorities is the legal system. Given that law is the cornerstone of a viable Islamic order, family and penal law will be confined to *Sharia*⁴¹ (Islamic jurisprudence). In the realm of politics, religion will at times similarly circumscribe the popular will. Despite their declining numbers in the parliament, the clerics will sustain their general supervisory role of society and ensure that elected legislatures do not pass laws that contravene Islamic injunctions⁴². For example, the clerical estate will not countenance parliamentary nationalization measures, as they would violate Quran’s well-delineated property rights. In the meantime, Iran will never grant legal status to political parties espousing secularism or elevate members of religious minorities to positions of national leadership. In essence, on a range of issues, the public’s determinations will still be restricted by edicts of the religious figures. The ayatollahs may concede power to non-clerics, but they will insist on their right to regulate the political arena and ensure that the society’s social mores conform to Islamic standards.

Iran’s Islamic polity largely reflects fundamental features of democracy: free elections, separation of powers, freedom of assembly and a vibrant press. The struggle in Iran is about *how*, not *whether*, to limit the scope of government interference. Iran’s political system is attempting to balance Islam’s emphasis on reverence with the population’s desire for self-expression. Such a paradigm is not without contradictions and conflicts. Given the primacy of religion, most such conflicts are likely to be resolved in favour of religion and the maintenance of the Islamic character of society. The Islamic Republic is seeking to transform itself into a democracy while resisting features of classical liberalism.

The question to ask is that of reconciliation among the three distinctive ontological, anthropological and political layers of Iranian identity, meaning the pre-Islamic, Islamic and modern historical experiences in Iran. As Abdolkarim Soroush points out, “The three cultures that form our common heritage era are of national, religious and Western origins. While steeped in an ancient national culture, we are also immersed in our religious culture, and we are at the same time awash in successive waves coming from the Western shores. Whatever solutions that we divine for our problems must come from this mixed heritage to which our contemporary social thinkers, reformers and modernizers have been heirs, often seeking the salvation of our people in the hegemony of one of these cultures over the other two”⁴³.

⁴⁰ M. Khatami, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁴¹ For details on *Sharia* see N. Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; P. Rivetti, *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*, Gewerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

⁴² N. Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 167-168.

⁴³ A. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 156.

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