

Secular Nationalism and Religious Orthodoxy in a Globalized Economy: An Overview of Pre and Post Revolutionary Years in Iran

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Abstract

The obvious endurance of the Iranian government, in spite of the age-long sustained western opposition to her perceptible radical religious and political posturing, regionally and globally, remains a seemingly enigmatic phenomenon requiring some insight. Against this backdrop, and keeping in view contemporary Arab agitation for reforms; agitations which have resulted in political instability in the Middle-East and North Africa sub-region, vis-à-vis the realities of Iranian influence in the entire sub-region, this paper re-assesses the Khomeini's Islamic Revolution and its government in Iran. The paper unravels the revolution and the emergent government as a model of religious orthodoxy. The West's criticism of her human rights record and the agitations of secular nationalist ideologues in the context of the rapidly changing global economy notwithstanding, the paper also underscores the government as an emerging political and military power which has provided its citizenry the much desired good governance, and a source of inspiration to many religious ideologues. Given the current realities of the government's resilience as a result of the accommodation of the two broad political fabrics – religious orthodoxy and secular nationalism – which virulent opposition hitherto informed the 1979 revolution, the paper recommends an in-depth study of the Iranian model of government for possible appreciation and possible modification as may be appropriate for similar socio-cultural settings given her achievement of relative peace and stability.

1. Introduction

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 no doubt left indelible marks in the annals of world civilization. The realization of this feat was not quite because of its uniqueness which characterized its content but the religious especially global socio-cultural and politico-religious impact on both the Muslims and non-Muslims of our contemporary world. This is against the background of the on-going Arab uprising against decade-old regimes, most of which share governmental characteristics not quite dissimilar to those of Iran prior to the revolution.

Iran, called Persia in ancient times, has its civilization predating the Arabs invasion in 637ce – since 2500 BCE with the Elamites rule (Akhavi, 1995; cf. Wikipedia, 2011). The Arab invasion was, however, a landmark as Islam, which accompanied it, replaced Zoroastrianism hitherto practiced by the people as religion. Some towns emerged prominently as centres of Islamic scholarship culminating into Iranians advance in the various fields of religious sciences, especially jurisprudence, albeit in *Shi'a*, the predominant sect doctrine.

This factor was subsequently manipulated by successive monarchical governments in attempt at consolidating their grip on power hence, the attendant crisis between secular nationalism and religious orthodoxy since the reign of Safavid dynasty (1501 – 1722 CE), to the last monarchy, Pahlavi dynasty (1925 – 1979CE), which government the revolution toppled (Akhavi, 1995).

Such religious manipulations is quite evident as history is replete with record of the Ulama (reputable Muslim clergies) in not only governance but agitation for political change during the reigns of the various monarchies especially the Afsharid and Qajar dynasties, 1736 – 1747 and 1785 – 1925 respectively (cf. Akhavi, 1995).

In spite of the seemingly firm establishment of monarchical rule with its basic reflection of secular nationalistic tendencies, a violent religious revolution led by one of the Ulama, Imam Ruhullah Khomeini, brought it to an end in January 1979, ushering in a kind of Islamic cum secular system of government which has survived till date. This paper, therefore, critically examines the entire revolution, as premised on religious orthodoxy, against the status quo ante, which was predominantly secular. The paper seeks to analyze the causes, course and consequence or effects of the revolution vis-à-vis the role played by its leader. The paper also re-examines the criticisms of the revolution given the contemporary development in the middle-east on the similar motivational premise reminiscent of the pre-Islamic revolution conditions in the Islamic revolution in Iran.

2. Analysis of the Causes of the Revolution

Divergent views have been postulated for the causes of the revolution: While Akhavi (1995) posited such political issues as incompetent leadership, immobility of the state, resentment over growing class disparity and alienation of the business class, among others, Muhajeri (1983) viewed the secular nationalistic as well as religious orthodoxy issues such as the people's quest for independence from western imperialism in all spheres

of life – culturally, economically, militarily and politically. He further strongly advanced a religious view that: “the principal motive behind the Islamic revolution in Iran was the people’s determination to form an Islamic government to establish the principles of true Islam” (pp. 24 – 38).

However, Beeman (1995) traces the causes of the revolution rather historically – since the Safavid and Qajar dynasties both of which, in their respective reigns in 18th and 19th Centuries, witnessed religious and secular crises, in addition to their military and economic subjugation by the West. He further outlined a range of specific factors which, he believes, were direct precursor to the overthrow of the Shah as head of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979.

Some other writers posited other reasons subjectively for obvious reasons. These are: Shi’a expansionism, as can be adduced from Azad’s address to the Sunni Ulama world-wide, Nadwi’s submission in “Behind the Curtain”; and the religious and political acumen of Imam Khomeini and his determination to institute an Islamic government, which is the more focal area emphasized by researchers from the Islamic Republic.

A critical examination of the foregoing provided the basis of the assessment of the causes as follows:

2.1 Secular Nationalism Tendencies of the Shah Government

2.1.1 Phase I, 1920s – 1950s: Secular Nationalism Tendencies of the Shah Government

Despite some intermittent economic growth recorded by successive monarchies, governance in Iran had not been entirely crisis-free. This is seen as a direct consequence of foreign intransigence through the influence of policy initiatives of the ruling monarchies, especially the Pahlavi dynasty which falls in the context of this discussion. Politically, the constitutional monarchy provided easy avenue for direct interference in the process of succession by foreign powers. The submissions of Akhavi and Muhajeri, which was also corroborated by Beeman, attest to this fact. Muhajeri noted, inter alia, the British involvement in the ascension of Reza Khan in 1914, and his later reinstatement with American conspiracy in 1953. The Shah, during his deposition, was said to have disclosed that the foreign powers imposed their candidates for the “Majlis” – Council for deciding the general policy of the country.

Similarly, Wikipedia (2011) specifically noted Western secret agents’ conspiracy, just as Akhavi (1995) submitted that the series of internal intrigues in the period coupled with Western conspiracy reached climax between 1951 and 1953 with the fall of the Prime Minister at that time, Muhammed Musadiq. He further noted that gross absence of political liberation due to repression and suppression of freedom of all, including the Ulama, through execution, torture, arrest and incarceration of political opponents. Consequently, resentment of people against both government and west became very rife, and much more with reforms introduced by the shah which impacted negatively on the lives of Iranians. Akhavi also submitted that, although it could be contended that the social and cultural reform recorded a measure of success, evident in the establishment of Tehran University, “his reform were whole-sale importation of European civil, criminal and commercial law codes, and administrative centralization of the French model” (p. 227).

Invariably, this drew the West closer to the government such that Iran was referred to as “Island of Stability” and the Shah as “the Gendarme of the Gulf” (Muhajeri, 1983:35), while, conversely, the people were alienated thereby from their government. All this informed Imam Khomeini’s, just qualified as a Jurisconsult, criticism of the shah, especially the publication of his book, “Kashf l-Asrar” (Disclosure of Secrets)” said to have exposed the government atrocities. Beeman (1995) opines that, Indeed, the publication of the book marked the formal launching of Khomeini’s campaign against the Pahlavi for he espoused the idea of the role of the “Mawla” ((religious leader) pronounced ‘Mullah’ by Western scholars) as not only in teaching and advising but active involvement in governance” (Akhavi, 1995:227).

2.1.2 Phase II, 1960s

The period 1961 – 1963, witnessed series of crises unprecedented in its dimension and this, according to researchers, marks the beginning of the fall of Pahlavi dynasty. An aggressive economic and social reform tagged “White Revolution” was launched by the government in 1963. The reforms, observed Beeman, inflicted hardship in all spheres of lives of the Iranians. For instance although higher economic growth was said to have been recorded in the period, about 10% annually, the overwhelming corruption of top officers and over concentration of military armament, steadily supplied by America, Europe and Israel, resulted in capital flight thus increasing the poverty rate.

The land reform, described by Akhavi as “too elitist” also marginalized not only the peasants but the professionals, intellectuals and elements of the bureaucracy. Hence, the incessant protests between 1961 and 1963, which involve people from all walks of life. Imam Khomeini’s criticism of government in 1963 was also monumental. He was therefore arrested, imprisoned and later released.

In addition, the law reform of 1964, referred to by Muhajeri as “extraterritorial contract”, endorsed by the Majlis was perceived as alienation of Iranians sovereignty. The reform was an amendment in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Immunity for United States Armed Forces personnel in Iran. The law seeks to exempt United States citizens in Iran from prosecution for any crime they might commit. It is worthy to note that

Iranian Military was said to have been disillusioned with the Military pact for it was said to have relegated them second to the Americans whom they considered as equals. In fact, an account stated that Iranian officers were under non-commissioned Americans soldiers who also received better salaries (Muhajeri, 1983). The law amendment attracted Imam Khomeini's vehement opposition, which further endeared him to the people. As observed by an analyst, in a news Magazine published in the Republic, Echo of Islam, 1980, he was "the only religious figure remaining who gave the religious leadership weight with the people and allowed it to be a determining factor in Iranian society..." (p. 16).

Khomeini was, therefore, imprisoned and almost executed but for the intervention of the Marja' at-Taqlid (Council of Ulama) hence, his exile to Turkey and later Iraq, where he spent about fourteen years before relocating to Paris.

Furthermore, whatever remained of the people's confidence in the shah was eroded in 1967 during his grandeur coronation ceremony in which he made his wife Empress and his son Crown Prince. All this laid the basis for stiffer opposition against the regime.

2.2 Religious Orthodoxy in Governance.

2.2 *1970s: Need for Religious Orthodoxy as Remote cum Immediate Cause of the Revolution*

Researchers have indicated that the events in 1970s, between 1973 and 1978 specifically, were immediate to the revolution. Heavily reliant on the West, US in particular, and the military for protection, the Shah pursued his reforms with vigour in spite of the public outcry. Support for Imam Khomeini, whose exile paradoxically made him leader of the opposition, de jure, grew rapidly. He launched, in the early 70s, what could be called his revolutionary blue print "Hukumati Islami" (Islamic Rulings or Mandate) calling for total implementation of Islamic law (Akhavi, 1995; Wikipedia, 2011).

The period witnessed serious infiltration of Western culture into Iran through a state sponsored festival, the 1977 Shiraz Art Festival, allegedly composed of obscenities, which obviously impinge/infringe on Islamic religious tenets. This allegedly resulted into women's involvement in debasing roles such as advertising foreign products in manners offensive to the religious sensibilities of the people. As observed by Hiro Dilip, in (Wikipedia, 2011), "As the foreigners reveled on drinking forbidden by Islam, Iranians were not only forbidden from the festivals, some were starving". These factors, opined Akhavi "contributed to the collective protests which began in 1977 to early 1979 but themselves, they were insufficient to over throw the Shah" (Akhavi, 1995:228).

Furthermore, the state's oil windfall of 1973, resulting from Arab-Israeli War, was said to have been misused by government such that the subsequent global glut shortly afterwards gave rise to government heavy borrowing and pursuit of stringent economic policy in 1977 – subsidies hitherto provided for clergies and the religious institutions were removed and the rising inflation reduced salary earners' purchasing power. This singular factor, according to Beeman, was adduced by the Shah to have been responsible for the downfall of his government.

However, it could be contended that a combination of all the factors adduce was the impetus to the people's disillusionment with, and strong resentment for the shah. It created an obviously charged atmosphere which exploded in January 1978. This culminated in the revolution, as massive nation-wide protests were held against the publication of alleged satirical article on imam Khomeini. With the imam's effectiveness as a leader, in spite of his being in exile, and the organizational skills of the opposition united by the common goal, the stage became set.

3. The Course of the Revolution

As could be deduced from the foregoing, the initial mode of resistance of the regime was spontaneous mass protests against perceived bad policy of government. Although the role of the students on such occasions cannot be over emphasized, basically two distinct groups could be made of the architects of the revolution: those who can be termed advocates of secular nationalism, much criticized by pro-shi'a writers as being ideology-less, can be likened to civil liberation movements across the globe, and especially in the contemporary Arab revolution, which has toppled the governments of Bin Ali and Husni Mubarak of Tunisia and Egypt respectively. Led by National Front Movement, from which later sprang other bodies like Liberation Movement, Mujahideed I-Khalq and much later Fidayeen I-Khalq organizations, this group was more political than religious in its objectives, they agitated for the retention of the system of government with the Shah as the monarch only not a constitutional ruler with sweeping powers. This view sharply contrasts with the second group – the advocates of religious orthodoxy in governance (Islamic state) to be led by the *Ulama*. They, under the unbridled spiritual leadership of Imam Khomeini, wanted complete freedom, independence and an Islamic Republic.

Thus, in the heat of the crisis, 1978, the more secular group were said to have been skeptical about the success of the mission giving what they perceive as the *Ulama* over-zealous totalitarian objective, and more so since there was absence of consolidated Islamic organization.

In spite of the glaring differences, they remained united by the common goal. Thus Imam Khomeini speeches on tapes and pamphlets, more often criticisms of government and the need for change, were widely circulated. Mosques and various Islamic centres were used as avenues for the circulation of these materials. Gradually, but quite informally, formation of organized bodies began. Initially, they were said to be neighbourhood defense units, with people of different political ideologies, but later transformed into *Komiteh* (Revolutionary Committees) with a central authority in 1978 (Parsa, 1995). Apart from these committees, training was ensured for volunteer combatants at the various units.

The event that geared the revolution proper began as a massive protest across the country against a newspaper, "*Ittila't*", article perceived as satirical of Imam Khomeini in January, 1978. The result of these was the death of thousands of students due to the state police and army brutality. Customarily, Shi'a adherents mourn their dead every fortieth day. The ceremonies of those killed, which affected virtually all parts of the country, turned to avenues for demonstrations against government. This enraged the security, which repeats its brutal clamp down on demonstrators hence the repetition of the vicious cycle of violence and general resentment to the shah regime.

It could be contended that the measures taken by the shah regime to check the crisis were counter-productive. Apart from allegedly influencing the Iraqi government hostility to their guest, Imam Khomeini, which informed his relocation to Paris, he was said to have arrested several perceived opponents, sparing not even the *Ulama*. Furthermore, he "declared Martial law, banning demonstrations, and changed the Prime Minister severally" (Beeman, 1995:234); still the cycle of violence did not abate. In consequence the wave of protest and strikes became quite unbearable, with the involvement of the oil sector which crippled the economy as the oil export was badly affected.

After several fruitless attempts to rejuvenate support for his government, allegedly with the support of the United States of America, his major ally, the Shah appointed Shapur Bakhtiyar, a National Front politician, as Prime Minister on January 16th, 1979, and proceeded on exile with his family (Beeman, 1995).

Having lost real power, the overthrow came, as encapsulated by Akhavi "not by the single-minded determination of any particular group in society but by the actions of a broad array of groups in response to a combination of factors". As a matter of fact, the Imam himself had declared publicly, in the early days of the aftermath of the revolution, that "I have done nothing. It is the masses who deserve their pictures on the television. It was the masses . . . who brought about this revolution" (p. 229)

4. The Impact of the Revolution

4.1 Resolution of Internal Political Challenges

4.1.1 Phase I

The overthrow of monarchical rule is a direct consequence of the revolution. Nevertheless, the aftermath was not quite devoid of challenges; record has it that no sooner the Shah appointed much criticized Bakhtiyar, as Prime Minister, and fled than Imam Khomeini, who returned to Iran in February, 1979, constituted his Provisional Revolutionary Council (PRC) with Mehdi Bazargan, also of the National Front, a secular nationalism group, as Prime Minister, to run the government (Beeman, 1995). However, with majority Iranians, including the military (see also Zabih in Wikipedia, 2011), in his support, real power switched to Imam Khomeini, the symbol of government of religious orthodoxy movement. Skirmishes between the shah's Imperial Guard were effectively checked and a relative calm was restored. Hence, Bakhtiyar proceeded on exile to Paris thus paving the way for total control by the Imam (Beeman, 1995).

4.1.2 Phase II

The initial leaders of the PRC, apart from Imam Khomeini himself, were mainly secular nationalism ideologues. This created suspicion, more so with their accusation of plotting to reinstate the Shah with the aid of the United States which did tried in vain to protect the Shah from being overthrown in the early days of the revolution (Zabih in Wikipedia, 2011), hence the reorganization of the Council.

Another major policy thrust worthy of mention is the right of plebiscite given to the people to determine the nature of state and constitution to be used. The referendum conducted twice recorded tremendous "Yes" vote in favour of an Islamic Republic and a suitable constitution was drafted (Muhajeri, 1983). However, the accompanying structural change, especially the recognition of a strongly empowered spiritual leader "*Valeyat-e-Faqih*" (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (Wikipedia, 2011) Chief Jurisconsult) was very much criticized particularly by the secular nationalists fearing *Ulama* dictatorship while among the *Ulama*, some perceive it as usurping the powers of the Hidden imam, in *Shi'a* ideology. It was observed that despite the differences in approach to governance, the people remained united, bound culturally, and the imam's popularity and supporters prevented any serious opposition. This gave effect to the subsequent peaceful political leadership transitions in the state.

4.2 Improvement on the General Welfare and Internal Security

The new government ensured the reintroduction of subsidies and use of ration cards by peasants at the rural areas. Various programmes and projects with direct positive impact on the lives of the people especially provision of facilities which improved energy and communication, industrial development, to mention but few, were notably embarked upon. There was a general redirection in terms of governance to meet with the yearnings and aspiration of the people (Muhajeri, 1983).

The role played by the *Komiteh* in the Revolution (Parsa, 1995) earned them government recognition and support. However, the problems inherent in such quasi-government security outfit soon became obvious; their highhandedness against perceived opposition, which by their definition, included not only the shah loyalists but secularists, led to massive protests against them. An ideological purge was, therefore, effected within the outfit and they were relocated from their various Mosques and headquarters and directed to enforce the use of veil, while also controlling smuggling and drug trafficking. Later, in 1991, the body was incorporated into the regular Police Force.

4.3 Establishment of the Islamic Republic

The ultimate achievement of the revolution was the establishment of an Islamic State, although with a strange title of *Velayat E-Faqih* as head of government. Since the purview of this paper is an over-view of the revolution as well as the government it engendered, it suffice to mention that though there were some structural reorganizations, which entrenched various Councils of *Ulama* whose roles centred mainly on ensuring checks and balances at the arms of government, much elements of the previous secular system of government; particularly such structures as the legislative, judiciary and executive were retained. Nevertheless, the *Shari'ah*, albeit interpreted in the light of Shiism (*Shi'a* doctrine), give direction to state law. By and large, given this well defined novel blend of secular nationalistic and orthodox religious model of government, the state thrives, even critics of Khomeini's novel head of government as "*Faqih*", attest to this assertion (Azad, cf. Beeman, 1995). Today, apart from the secular president with powers like those of other heads of government, the religious head also heads government, by virtue of his power to veto even the decision of the president under certain considerations. It could be contended that in this provision lies a potential danger given the possibility of clash of interest between the two revered offices in this marriage of convenience of two different ideological models of government.

4.4 Effects on the World Polity

That the Islamic republic of Iran has had a tremendous global effect since its establishment is undoubted. This has, however been viewed from various perspectives by researchers; writers such as Beeman prefer to view it ambivalently in the global context. He considers it as having emboldened the entire Muslim world towards similar path through its overthrow of a western-backed secular government by mainly Islamic reformers. Conversely, he opines, this inspirational event for Muslims is considered by the West as a disturbing development needing serious check. However, the West is not alone in such criticism of the impact of the revolution some Sunni Muslims view it as the impetus to the resurgent Islamic fanaticism. This is evident in a speech by Ali Aswad Asiri, the Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon, in Beirut, on June 4, 2014, as reported by Mahmoud Kheir in the Daily Star newspapers, Beirut.

This assertion West's perception of the revolution cannot be said to be confounded or prejudiced; as it is quite evident in the continued closure, since 1979, of the United States Embassy in Tehran and the then Bush administration's declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran as "Axis of evil in his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002" (Marxistfounder in Wikipedia (2014).

Prior to the declaration, the US was alleged, by most writers from Iran, to have instigated the Iran-Iraqi War (fought between both countries from 1980 – 1988) to destabilize Iran. Even though this allegation remain largely unrequited by the US government, one could aver that the constant pressure and criticism of the Iranian government by successive US administration and, indeed, its staunch allies and other pro-Semitic regimes across the world, attest to researchers claim on the mutually antagonistic relationship of US and Iran in world polity as a result of the success of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Akhavi describes Iran's relationship with the entire Muslim world as suspicious in some cases and cool with the Arabs, except Egypt, which accuses Tehran of sponsoring guerillas to topple its government. The need to mend the mutually suspicious relationship between Iran and Egypt may have been responsible for the warm welcome received on February 5, 2013, by the Iranian president at the time, Ahmadinejad, during a three-day state visit to Egypt while Muhammad Morsi was president, the first of such close contact in over three decades, as reported by Michael M. (2013), of the Associate Press, in National Post.

Furthermore, the Sunni Muslims who initially hailed the Revolution with euphoria later became suspicious, with some of its leaders calling for not only caution but a rejection of the development. This group sees it as a Shi'a bid for ideological subjugation of the entire Muslim world, or "Shi'a expansionism" in other

words. The disclosures made by Shaykh Muhmmmed Abdulqadir Azad, head of Pakistani *Ulama*, in his book, translated by Asbahi M.M.S. (not dated) and the assertion of Nadwi, give credence to this submission.

However, there is no gainsaying the fact that the self-confidence exuded shortly after the revolution by Muslims, especially of the Shi'a sect, by their socio-cultural identification across the globe and public activities, gained added impetus from the revolution.

5. Conclusion

The paper has been able to establish that the agitation for reforms in Iranian polity predates the Islamic revolution, and that two distinct groups; secular nationalist movements and religious orthodoxy advocates, headed by Imam Khomeini, who provided visionary leadership, championed the 1979 revolution.

The paper also unravels the fact that in spite of the declaration of the republic as an Islamic state, elements of contemporary secular state still feature prominently in the structure of state, as against a distinctly Islamic state envisioned by many advocates of religious orthodoxy model since the agitation for change. Still, one could contend that the pro-Western secular nationalist advocates have remained, to a large extent, more vibrant than ever given the constant calls for reforms in spite of government clamp down. This spirit is itself attributive to the resilience instilled by Islam in adherents irrespective of the circumstances. Nevertheless, there is no gainsaying the fact that in the mixed blend of secular nationalism ideologies and religious orthodoxy in Islamic Republic of Iran is a time-tested theoretical and practical approach to or model of governance in the rapidly changing world polity.

6. Recommendation

In the light of the above findings, there is the need for Western and pro-Western states to rather consider the Islamic Republic of Iran's government as a model requiring in-depth study for possible modification, as may be appropriate to the socio-cultural contexts, and adoption by multi-cultural states as opposed to the antagonistic posture they had consistently maintained since the successful overthrow of the Western-supported Shah government in 1979. This is premised on the obvious gains of the revolution, as evident in the relative stability in the polity which in turn engendered not only economic development but educational advancement that the Islamic Republic has attained since the enthronement of its brand of government; it suffices to state that the universally acknowledged elements of democracy as a concept lies in its principle as the practice has been proven to be quite unique in relation to socio-cultural settings.

It would not be preposterous to also highlight the tremendous expediency in further studies of contemporary politics of Iran, in the aspects of its structure and constitution especially the directive principles of state. This recommendation is predicated on the obvious resilience of the state in spite of the presence of ideologically contending forces - highly radical and conservative elements - in government, which is in contradistinction from the Khomeini era that was characterized by religious ideologues.

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