
Prospects For Democracy in Iran

Ladan Boroumand

Is Islam compatible with democracy? Can a Muslim society like Iran ever become a secular democracy? For more than twenty years, Western democracies have favored an implicitly negative answer to these questions. Thus, their policy toward Iran was made up of a series of hesitant, inconsistent, and ad hoc decisions aimed at countering Iran's terrorism in the world, while manifesting a total lack of concern about the tyrannical and oppressive nature of the Islamic Republic.

Those who profess the incompatibility of Islam and democracy could rightfully refer to some theological and historical traits. Much of Islam's history reveals the continuing influence of a founding prophet who made law, waged war, dispensed justice, and ruled his people. From these observations, one might be tempted to conclude that the secularization and democratization of Iran cannot proceed without confronting the religious order. This conclusion seems all the more valid, since the leaders of the Islamic Revolution claim to have restored a "pure Islamic order."

Yet, a closer examination of the history of the Islamic Revolution raises questions about the validity of these arguments. First, the theological and historical traits that seem opposed to democracy were similarly incompatible with the rise of the modern nation-state. Yet, these traits did not hamper its advent in traditional Muslim societies, such as Iran. Second, Iran's putative return to Islam's "original purity" was

Ladan Boroumand is Director of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, which promotes human rights and democracy in Iran. She is also Visiting Fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies and is researching the Iranian Islamic Revolution.

possible only by means of a modern revolution. Lest this be thought a controversial point, it should be noted that the leaders of the Islamic Revolution themselves have openly acknowledged the modern nature of their endeavor.¹ It is precisely this revolutionary phenomenon that poses a problem, since it finds no precedent in the words and deeds of the prophet. Additionally, Iran's revolutionary regime is dismissed by high-ranking Shi'a scholars as utterly un-Islamic.²

In examining the prospects for democracy in Iran, I shall focus first on the inner nature of the Islamic regime, which is at odds both with Shi'a beliefs and Iran's own history and traditions. The transformation of a traditional society into a modern nation-state and the collapse of this nation-state due to the Islamic Revolution have resulted in the advent of a modern Islamist totalitarian regime. The relevant question, then, is not how Iran can cease being a traditional Islamic polity, but rather how it can escape its current subjection to a version of modern totalitarianism. Iranian public opinion favors democracy, a system that Iranians see not as a foreign imposition, but as a common heritage of humanity. The overwhelming praise for modernity and democratic institutions based on human rights belies the fictitious dichotomy between Western democracy and Islamic democracy.

Islamic Revolution, a Variation of Modern Totalitarianism. The Iranian Revolution is the historic implementation of Islamist revolutionary ideology. The contributions made to the ideology by the Pakistani Mawlana Mawdudi, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, and the Iranian Shari'ati, among others, to the elaboration of this ideology are well known. These men did not receive a tra-

ditional religious education but rather a modern one. They entered politics through their involvement in nationalist movements in their respective countries, and turned to political Islam as disenfranchised militants. In Iran, Shari'ati is one of the main popularizers of revolutionary Islam founded on the Marxist philosophy of history.³ He combines the Koranic concept of the "Party of God," or Hezbollah, with the Marxist definition of the Vanguard Party. Hence, throughout the 20th century, Islamic terminology has been influenced by modern totalitarian concepts and know-how.

The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the first eminent religious figure to abandon traditionalism and opt for this modern Islamist totalitarianism. It would be a mistake to interpret the Islamic Revolution as an outcome of Shi'ism, for the revolutionary Ayatollah was an innovator in religious affairs.⁴ Once in power, the one-time opponent of land reform and women's suffrage became "progressive." He launched a massive program of nationalization and expropriation. He recruited women for campaigns of revolutionary propaganda and mobilization. His policy of terror, revolutionary tribunals and militias, administrative purges, cultural revolution, and accommodating attitude toward the Soviet Union alienated the majority of his fellow clerics. But this also gained him the active support of the Moscow-aligned Iranian Communist Party, which subordinated itself to the Islamic regime from 1979 to 1983.

According to the Iranian philosopher Dariush Shayegan, "It is not the revolution that was Islamicized to become eschatology; it is Islam that has changed into an ideology and has entered the realm of history to fight the infidels. By

willing to oppose the West it has become Western.”⁵ The Islamic regime could not have drawn its dynamism from a distorted religious dogma. It owes its consistency to two potent and eminently modern myths: the myth of “the People” and the myth of “the Revolution.”

By abolishing the notion of the free individual, totalitarianism also abolishes God’s transcendence. A totalitarian regime seeks to recreate man in accordance with its own truth, whether this truth is understood to be represented by the nation, by history, or by divine prov-

The overwhelming praise for modernity and democratic institutions based on human rights belies the fictitious dichotomy between Western Democracy and Islamic democracy.

In modern representative democracies, “the People” is an abstract category made of free and equal individuals. Once victorious, the Islamic Revolution promptly confiscated this concept, emptied it of its demographic content, and imposed upon it an ideological definition. Henceforth, the idea of “the People” did not refer to individuals; rather, it alluded to the official ideology. Whoever did not adhere to the regime’s ideology became, by definition, an “enemy of the people.” The very notion of individual rights was abolished by the victory of the concept of “the People” as orthodoxy.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the self described “humble and sinful cleric” who wanted to protect the Shari’a against the assault of Western values, was transformed by this “revolutionary miracle” into an infallible authority that embodied both the Truth⁶ and the People.⁷ He ended up legislating for and on behalf of God. Khomeini did not hesitate to abrogate the Shari’a’s injunctions in the name of the regime’s overriding interests. A supreme leader whose will expresses the Truth in history is the common denominator of totalitarian regimes.

idence.⁸ Their desire to re-create man invests these regimes with a terrifying and devastating power. Their ideas of order and justice reveal the nature of this power.

The negation of the juridical and moral person of the detainee indicates the denial of the concept of the individual.⁹ Revolutionary Islamic justice is founded on this denial; thus, the courts of the Islamic Republic reject due process. Due process embodies a different worldview, in which man is defined as an autonomous yet fallible being. The denial of due process is the rejection of this understanding of the human being. When the revolutionaries order the rape of young girls before execution, because virgins might go to heaven, they impose their temporal power and seek to enact God’s will by determining His judgment. Ultimately, through this act they abolish God’s transcendence. When these revolutionaries secretly decide to murder tens of thousands of prisoners set to be released because these individuals refuse to profess the regime’s ideology, the Islamists demonstrate their ambition to possess the individual’s soul and mind. By refusing to acknowledge their deaths,

the regime negates the existence of those who resist it in the name of free will and freedom of conscience.¹⁰ In sum, the Islamic Republic rebels against God's will by denying the existence of the very individuals He created. Revolutionary Islamist justice is alien to the spirit of traditional Muslim jurisprudence. Rather, it is closer to that of the French revolutionary tribunal of 1794.

The revolutionary character of the Islamist regime enabled Khamenei, the president of the Islamic Republic, who later became its Supreme Leader, to laud the achievements of the Chinese and North Korean atheist revolutionary regimes without contradiction. The president said that the elements that bring the Islamic regime close to North Korea are their common revolutionary character and anti-Americanism. The president publicly acknowledged the long and sincere collaboration and political relationship between the Islamic Republic and North Korea.¹¹

Satan's Twofold Figure. The West that the Iranian regime identifies with Satan is not, therefore, a geographical and cultural entity, for the Islamists owe most of the concepts governing their actions to Western thought. The regime's anti-Western rhetoric is rooted in its rejection of liberal democracy in general, and human rights in particular. The Islamic Republic's anti-Americanism is best understood as a reaction against a precise definition of the body politic. This definition admits no other truth than the existence of an autonomous individual pursuing his happiness.

Not surprisingly, the failure of the revolutionary ideology and the fall of the Soviet bloc have created a major crisis of legitimacy within the Islamic regime.

This crisis has become a matter of public debate among the ideologues of the Islamic Republic. To analyze it they refer neither to Iranian history, nor to the canonical religious and political texts of the Muslim world. Instead, the regime's ideologues try to make sense of their own situation by looking to the Soviet and Chinese experiences.¹²

Indeed, the regime's cadres try to understand their own political identity by referring to the political literature of the modern West. Akbar Ganji, a middle-ranking official of the regime, is the emblematic figure of a generation of young Islamist militants. His intellectual itinerary is crucial in that it uncovers the erosion of the regime's ideology. In his study examining the writings of major Shi'a jurisconsults, Ganji first shows the discrepancy between their traditional worldview and the experience of the Islamic Republic.¹³ He eventually refers to a long citation of Benito Mussolini on fascist ideology to explain Iran's political system.¹⁴

For Ganji, the story of the Iranian Revolution is one of a faction identifying with the modern revolutionary left that allies itself with another faction inspired by European far-right revolutionary movements. A modern Islamist revolution was the outcome of this alliance.¹⁵ By reading Ganji one realizes that, in effect, the revolutionary regime was sustained for a decade by the Iranian equivalent of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.¹⁶ Only with the fall of the Soviet bloc did the pact dissolve, revealing the chronic tension between the reformist-left and the conservative-right wings of the revolutionary oligarchy.

From this perspective, one can understand the title Ganji chose for the article that made him famous in Iran, "Satan is

the First Fascist.” This title curiously echoes the official rhetoric that identifies the United States as the Great Satan. These two depictions of Satan exemplify the antagonistic dimensions of modern political culture, liberal democracy, and totalitarianism.

Neither Western nor Islamic, Democracy is Universal.

We should now consider the problem of the transition to democracy. It is not Islam per se that prevents this transition nor is it the country’s traditions, which are no more than a rhetorical illusion. Neither Islam nor traditions have been able to curb the profound mutation that Muslim societies have experienced for two centuries. It is instead the ideological and practical structure of totalitarianism that Iran must abolish to make the transition to democracy. The question is: why did the Iranian people favor a totalitarian option instead of a liberal democracy in 1979?

The very generation staging the revolution refused the democratic option when it was given the chance by Shapur Bakhtiar, the last prime minister under the Shah. A long-time social democrat who spent many years in the prisons of the Pahlavi monarchy, Bakhtiar used his platform as premier to urge his fellow citizens to organize political parties and form trade unions. He asked Khomeini to respect democratic principles and to vie for power not as a religious but a political leader. Bakhtiar argued that a legitimate leader should come to power through ballots, not through street demonstrations and riots. When Bakhtiar left office in February 1979, he challenged his fellow citizens with a poignant remark, “How strange, we offered these people freedom and democracy, they refused to be free.”¹⁷ For

the past twenty-five years, Iranian intellectuals and public opinion have been pondering the old humanist’s remark, asking themselves why they rejected the democratic option in 1979.¹⁸

The intelligentsia has begun to consider this issue seriously. The Iranian philosopher Dariush Shayegan analyzed the reasons for the elite’s failure in 1979. The obsession with Westernization, he says, completely alienated Iranian intellectuals during the sixties and seventies. He shows how anti-Occidentalism found its roots in three Western schools of thought inspired respectively by the French anti-modernist thinker Rene Guenon, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, and the Marxist revolutionary ideology.¹⁹ Shayegan argues that independent critical thought was not on the agenda of post-1945 Iranian intellectuals.²⁰

The same radical questioning can be heard among the current Iranian political elite. In recent months, two authors seemingly representing opposite ends of the political spectrum published major works in Iran and in the United States. The first, *Republican Manifesto*, was written by Akbar Ganji, a product of the Islamic Revolution; the second, *Covenant with the People*, by Reza Pahlavi, the pretender to the throne of Iran, who now lives in the United States. The former is heir to a violent totalitarian tradition, the latter to an autocratic one. Ganji criticizes revolutionary thought and pleads for a secular democracy founded on human dignity and human rights. Pahlavi deplors, perhaps too implicitly, the lack of popular participation during his father’s reign and calls for a modern and democratic form of monarchy based on the principles of inalienable individual rights and government by the consent of the governed. Human rights and secu-

larism are the common denominator of both works.

For more than twenty years, Iranians have experienced the absolute negation of the individual. Perhaps it is this very negation that has made them understand the existential relevance of modern individualism and human rights. For that reason, human rights are at the heart of today's public debate in Iran. Lawyers, students, and university professors refer to human rights as a universal heritage, and the *homo islamicus* is a rare phenomenon. This is precisely what distinguishes the pre-revolutionary era from contemporary Iran.

Students are eager to learn about democracy and to understand its premises. The following statement by the students of the University of Zanzan is one example among many:

The Students' movement should abandon sterile political strife (between reformists and conservatives). It should concentrate on theoretical questions to remedy its own weaknesses. It must focus on the study of key concepts such as democracy, republicanism, and human rights. This theoretical work must enable the student movement to take up the challenge of substituting a man defined by his duties by a man defined by his rights.²¹

For their part, the dissident Shi'a scholars advocate secular democracy in the name of Islam. The late Haeri-Yazdi rejected the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, establishing the body politic on an agreement between citizens, who collectively own the public space and their rulers.²² The citizens give mandate to their rulers. The popular mandate is

the sole legitimacy of the government.²³ Haeri-Yazdi draws a dividing line between Mohammad's function as a prophet designated by God and that of a temporal ruler elected by his people and approved by God. God's approbation of Mohammad as an elected ruler is interpreted as God's endorsement of the sovereignty of the people.²⁴ In the same vein, Mohammad Motjtahed Shabestari, a well-respected theologian, argues in favor of a "state founded on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."²⁵

In the Eyes of the West. Totalitarian regimes create and propagate fictitious versions of reality in order to hide their moral and political failures. If such propaganda remains unchallenged, totalitarian rulers can all too easily atomize their societies and isolate their citizens. Communism greatly benefited from the Western democracies' ideological naiveté. The Islamic Republic, for its part, has been able to survive for a quarter of a century by relying on the same stratagem. The West could help by challenging the official propaganda and acknowledging the demands of the Iranian people. This would be simple to do and would carry little or no risk. Yet it would probably give a huge moral and psychological boost to pro-democracy forces within Iran.

For almost two decades, Western democracies viewed Iranians as believers mystically united by a supreme political and spiritual leader. The West refused to acknowledge that this false united front was made possible by and endured because of an exclusionary dynamic that pitted "insiders" against "outsiders." The insiders were a small minority.²⁶ The outsiders were the majority of the Iranian people who were kept at bay by a ruling

elite using terror. Today, the regime promotes the idea of Islamic democracy and claims that this system embodies the will of the Iranian people. According to this regime, Islamic democracy—unlike Western democracy—is founded not on human rights but on virtue.²⁷ To truly identify the will of the Iranians, however, one need only look at the demands that are most often put forward in the public debate: freedom of speech, assembly, and association; freedom of conscience and

worship; the separation of religious authority from political power; and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention. These demands correspond to the model of a secular democracy, for which the Iranian people yearn.

Author's Note: I would like to thank Marc Platner and Philip Costopoulos for their comments. This article is drawn from a conference on *Secularisation, democratisation et monde musulman*, organized by the Association française pour l'étude de la Méditerranée orientale et du monde turco-iranien hosted by UNESCO in Paris in November 2002.

NOTES

1 M. Motahari, "Islam and revolution," *Piramount-e Jomhuri-e Eslami* (1999): 139–141.

2 S. Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 156.

3 H. Dabashi, "Ali Shari'ati: The Islamic Ideology Par Excellence," *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (1993): 102–146.

4 S. Amir Arjomand, "Traditionalism in Iran," *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam* (1984): 222–3.

5 D. Shayegan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse* (Paris: Les presses d'aujourd'hui, 1982) 202.

6 H. Dabashi, 463.

7 A. Khomeini, "Second Sermon during the Friday Prayer April 21st 1989 (1/2/1368)," *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, 21 April 1989 (2/2/1368), II.

8 R. Khomeini, *Etela'at*, 22 January 1982.

9 H. Arendt, *Totalitarianism* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1976), 153.

10 During the summer of 1988, the regime engaged in mass executions of prisoners who were previously sentenced to various prison terms. Thousands of prisoners were executed in few months; however the regime did not make these executions public. H. A. Montazeri, 355–6.

11 A. Khamenei, "Second sermon at the Friday prayer May 20, 1989 (29/2/1368)," *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, 21 May 1989 (30/2/1368): 9.

12 See "The Chinese model (olgouy-e Tchini)," *Norooz*, 27 April 2002 (27/2/1381): 2.

13 A. Ganji, *Talaqi-e fascisti az din va hokoomat* (The fascist interpretation of religion and government) (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 1999): 7–8.

14 B. Mussolini, "fascismo", in *Enciclopedia italiana* 14, 847–51 (1932).

15 A. Ganji, "Satan is the first fascist" (1999): 189–204.

16 For the admiration and ideological sympathy between Nazis and Communists, see Francois Furet "the Past of an illusion" the chapter on Nazism and communism.

17 "The comments of Shapour Bakhtiar - The story of the Iranian Revolution" *BBC World Service Persian*.

18 See the monthly *Payam-e Emrouz*, February–March 2000, 14; D. Shayegan, *Le regard mutile, Schizophrénie culturelle : pays traditionnels face à la modernité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988); M.R. Nikfar, *Khoshunat, Hoquq-e Bashar, Jame'eh Madani* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 1999); A. Ganji, *Majma'ol Jaze'r Zendan Guneh*, (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2002); S.J. Tabataba'i, *Zaval Andisheh Siassi dar Iran* (Tehran: Kavir, 1996). The most brilliant form of this introspection could be found in A. Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran, a memoir in books* (New York: Random House, 2003).

19 D. Shayegan, 1982, 129–138.

20 *Ibid.*, 139–150.

21 ISNA (Iran Students News Agency) (10 October 2002).

22 M. Haeri Yazdi, *Hekmat va Hokumat* (Shadi Publishing, 1995), 216.

23 *Ibid.*, 120–121.

24 *Ibid.*, 151–4.

25 M. Mojtahed Shabestari, "Human Rights, the True Foundation of the Social Order," *Neshat* (22 May 1999, 1/3/1378).

26 M. Rayshahri, "Discourse at Tehran University (Friday sermon), February 4, 2000," *Fatth* (5 February 2000, 16/11/1378). For the point of view of the outsiders see A. Khamei, "The Iranian Insiders and the Iranian Outsiders," *Gozarash* 97–98 (March–April 1999, farvardin 1378): 67–70.

27 M. Khatami, *Fear of Wave* (Tehran: Simaye Javan, 1997): 154–5.

AD: Seton Hill
Journal on
Diplomacy and
IR