

Two Sides of the Same Coin of Populism? Islamic Marxism and Socialist Islamism during the Iranian 1979 Revolution

Mahmoud Arghavan
Independent Scholar

Abstract: *The 1979 Revolution in Iran succeeded due to a unique cross-class coalition of social forces and an interparty alliance of opposition groups with heterogeneous backgrounds and diverging interests such as the anti-imperialist National Front, anti-west traditionalist clerics and the anti-Capitalist Tudeh Party, bound together by a common enemy: ‘The Shah’ and his Pahlavi regime. This essay attempts to illuminate the ideological grounds and socio-economic context which gave impetus to the formation of this unprecedented alliance in defeating the enemy but also to the irreversible historical failure in establishing a democratic political system in Iran. Considering the longstanding civic resistance of the nationalist parties and armed struggles of the leftist organisations against the Pahlavi regime, many opponents of Khomeini have argued that he took over the Revolution in the name of Islamist supporters. Taking into account the co-presence of leftist ideology and Islamic worldview among the active political forces on the ground of the Revolution, this essay proposes that Khomeini’s pragmatic populism enabled him to appropriate a large part of leftist discourse into his theory of political Islam to articulate a socialist Islamism which would mobilise the lower middle class of the Iranian Muslim society. Simultaneously, some leftist organisations and Iran’s intelligentsia incorporated Islamic values and Shi’a mythology into their Marxist ideology to introduce an Islamic Marxism which would speak to more educated Muslim revolutionary forces. The essay suggests that Islamic Marxism and socialist Islamism – as two sides of the same coin of populism – were driving forces of the pervasive protests which ultimately amounted to the 1979 Revolution in Iran.*

Keywords: Islamic Marxism, populism, Iranian Revolution, Khomeinism

Introduction

The 1979 Revolution in Iran succeeded due to a unique cross-class coalition of social forces and interparty alliance of the opposition groups. This coalition reflected heterogeneity and diverging interests, bound together by three

following revolutionary convictions. First, the general opinion was that the Pahlavi regime was a corrupt dictatorship and its monarch, the Shah, merely a puppet of the west. Second, the national interests and the country's independence were undermined by foreign powers such as the United States. Third, and more importantly, the unifying populist leadership suggested an Islamic Republic as the best alternative for the monarchy.

These general beliefs were rightly stimulated by the fact that the Pahlavi regime and the Shah were restored to power by the 1953 military coup d'état – engineered by the CIA – which overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh who was democratically elected as Prime Minister on 28 April 1951. Mossadegh nationalised Iranian oil in 1951 by establishing the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) to replace the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The Shah, after the 1953 coup, gradually established an industrial economic system, a secular modernist state, an authoritarian single-party system, and a stable west-friendly power during the Cold War which operated as a bulwark against communism and rising anti-American sentiments in the region. Yet, despite all his efforts, the Shah could never undo the damage that coup had caused to his legitimacy. Ever since the coup, the Shah was identified with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and the imperial powers which was no longer only Britain but Britain in accord with the United States. The Shah managed to gradually persuade both the US and western media to endorse his authoritarian rule as the only viable choice for Iran as well as for the Americans' strategic concerns such as a safe energy path through the Persian Gulf (Amanat 2017, 710-13). Almost a year prior to the completion of the Revolution, Jimmy Carter, during his speech on New Year's Eve of 1978 endorsed the Shah by stating: "Iran is an island of stability in one of the most troubled area of the world" (Amanat 2017, 713).

In *The Left in Contemporary Iran* (1986), Sepehr Zabih suggests that the domestic and foreign policies of the Shah provoked at least four different groups in opposition to the regime including: "1- The Constitutionals and the Liberals, 2- The Traditional Muslim Groups [and Modernist anti-cleric Islamic revivalists], 3- The Independent Left,¹ 4- The Marxist-Leninist Group" (70). Zabih explains that "[t]he first three political groups constituted the major political forces within the National Front and the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist movement up to the late 1950s was monopolised by the Tudeh Party [Party of the Masses]" (70). The anti-imperialist agenda of the National Front, the anti-west worldviews of the traditionalist clerics and the anti-capitalist rhetoric of the Tudeh Party formed a revolutionary heterogeneous coalition with diverging grievances and sometimes opposing positions but were united by the common enemy – the Shah. This coalition was unprecedented because the Tudeh Party had been critical of the National Front as representing the comprador bourgeoisie and the National Front was accusing the Tudeh Party of overdependence on the Soviet Union. Considering the longstanding civic resistance of the nationalist parties and armed struggles of the leftist organisations against the Pahlavi regime, the crucial question is why struggles of those different

opposition parties did not amount to a revolutionary movement until 1978 when the charismatic religious figure Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) took over the leadership of the anti-Shah movement.

Given the co-presence of leftist ideology and Islamic worldview among the active political forces on the ground of the Revolution, I contend that Khomeini's pragmatic populism enabled him to appropriate a large part of leftist discourse into his theory of political Islam to articulate a socialist Islamism which would mobilise the poor and the lower-middle class of the Iranian Muslim-majority society. At the same time, some leftist organisations and the intelligentsia incorporated Islamic values and Shi'a mythology into their Marxist ideology to introduce an Islamic Marxism that would speak to more educated Muslim revolutionary forces. The essay takes into account both the socio-economic context and ideological grounds of the dissident parties' resistance starting overtly from 1953 through to 1979 due to the Pahlavi regime's monopolisation of power for the "conservative right" (Zabih 1986, 70) and its persistent repression of the opposition. Accordingly, I read Islamic Marxism and socialist Islamism as two sides of the same coin of populism that were driving forces of the pervasive protests, which ultimately amounted to the 1979 Revolution in Iran. This historical alliance had nevertheless failed irreversibly to establish a democratic political system in Iran. In other words, the Shah's right-wing populism lost the game against the populisms of both the leftists and the Islamists. The Shah's nationalist populism was mainly premised on hallowing his royal power as "heir to the ancient Persian Empire and a potent alternative to what he conceitedly viewed as the waning of western democratic institutions" (Amanat 2017, 575) and Iran's progress toward 'Great Civilization' under "his resolve, his vision, and his people's loyalty and compliance" (649).

Islamic Marxism and Socialist Islamism

Although Islamic Marxism and socialist Islamism may sound *almost* identical, I use these terms to refer to two different intellectual trends and political perspectives at the culmination of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Islamic Marxism represents a trend of eclectic intellectual endeavors among Iranian public speakers, anti-colonial activists and Islamic revivalists who had adopted a critical view of Marxism, which would not contradict their Islamic principles but incorporate the egalitarian dynamism and revolutionary strategies of the Marxist ideology. These Islamic thinkers combined the anti-capitalist rhetoric of Marxism and its battle against class inequality with their critique of the authoritarian modernisation to propagate a 'return' to the Iranian roots and Islamic culture as the key for cultural authenticity and economic independence from the world's super powers such as the US and the Soviet Union. Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969), a writer of fiction, social critic and translator of French literature, and Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977), a Sorbonne graduate in historical

sociology and philosophy and a Shi'a oppositional intellectual, are prime examples for this group of thinkers.

Ali Mirsepassi in *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (2000) describes Al-e Ahmad as representative of a generation of Iranian intellectuals between the 1940s and 1960s who were seeking to articulate a 'local' and 'authentic' alternative to the universalist modernity through questioning the extensive acceptance of western values. On the one hand, Al-e Ahmad's works, as Mirsepassi writes,

embodied the tensions between traditional Shi'i Iran and the secular modernizing programs of the Pahlavi regime. [...] His work produced the basic vocabulary of the Islamic ideology, and his concept of *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication) represented a 'secular' contribution to the prominence of Islamic populism in the Revolution of 1978-79 and in later years. (2000, 98)

This attempt to reconfigure modernity from a discourse of critiquing "the evils of Westernizing", as Abbas Amanat explains, "gradually shifted the intellectual horizons from a typical wariness toward anything Islamic – calling it superstitious – to an idealized interpretation of Islam as remedy against Westernism and a means of resisting the Pahlavi regime" (2017, 603), on the other hand. This intellectual trend was prominent in the political Islam of Ali Shari'ati who, despite his premature death in June 1977 from a massive heart attack in London, remained perhaps one of the principal ideologues of the 1979 Revolution in Iran.

Shari'ati's intellectual project was to reconcile Shi'a Islam with modernisation by offering a positive theory of Islamic ideology. For him, a nation must regain its cultural and religious traditions as a precursor to modernising in its own terms (Mirsepassi 2000, 114-15). On this matter Shari'ati disagreed with his anti-colonial role model and source of inspiration, Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), over the necessity of abandoning religion before the revolutionary campaigns against their governments or the imperialist powers. Shari'ati translated Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la Terre*) in 1961 into Persian and absorbed his message but "refashioned it to fit his own mytho-historical reading of Shi'ism" (Amanat 2017, 696). For Shari'ati, "[r]eligion is the strongest practical force for bonding masses and directing them toward progressive goals" (Mirsepassi 2000, 121). In contrast to Fanon, as Hamid Dabashi in *Theology of Discontent* (2006) writes,

He sought to use an already-established 'ideology' in the Islamic world in order to create the necessary political apparatus-party, slogan, banner, and popular force-to achieve the same revolutionary ends through the same ancient tradition that other secular ideologies considered as the opium of the masses. (2017 [2006], 110)

Observing the failed projects of transplanting 'western' ideologies such as state-sanctioned liberal capitalism or the Tudeh Party's communism into the political

consciousness of the Iranian masses, Shari'ati draws liberally from Marxism to construct a populist and activist Islam which would urge 'good' Muslims to overthrow the corrupt social order. His revolutionary interpretation of Islam with Marxist components bridged the once unfillable gap between the communist opposition, liberal nationalists and the Islamists who were involved in one way or another in mobilising the Iranian Muslim masses against the authoritarian regime of a secular Shah. I will elaborate more on Shari'ati's Islamic Marxism in the following.

What sets the Islamic Marxist thinkers apart from what I refer to as socialist Islamists is the fact that the former had primarily critiqued the authoritarian modernity and advocated social justice from an Islamic perspective. The latter, however, was represented by the then Islamist populist leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) who instrumentally incorporated, if not appropriated, a leftist terminology in order to mobilise the underprivileged masses in the last year of the Revolution with the aim of founding an Islamist state. Ervand Abrahamian points out that

Khomeini broke sharply with Shi'i traditions, borrowed radical rhetoric from foreign sources, including Marxism, and presented a bold appeal to the public based not on theological themes but on real economic, social, and political grievances. In short, he transformed Shi'ism from a conservative quietist faith into a militant political ideology that challenged both the imperial powers and the country's upper class. (Abrahamian 1993, 3)

Yet, I suggest that these two alignments – Islamic Marxism and socialist Islamism – in many ways represented populist adaptations of Islam and socialism to mobilise ordinary religious people from the lower and middle classes. Seymour Lipset in *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (1960) describes the common features of 'extremist movements' as "[t]hey appeal to the disgruntled and the psychologically homeless, to the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian persons at every level of the society" (175). I shall explain in the subsequent sections how the Shah's 'uneven development' exacerbated economic inequality and the gap between the social classes, leaving major parts of the society illiterate or deprived of education and thus vulnerable to extremist ideologies of Islamists and leftist revolutionary groups. What Khomeini did was to capitalise on this social-class gap and to present his mainly uneducated followers with a dichotomised image of the world and an oversimplified critique of the status quo in attempt to radicalise them against Pahlavi's political establishment, singling the latter out as the main cause of the plight of every and all Iranians. In his populism, Khomeini redefined Iranian society holistically and homogeneously as a Muslim community with love for Islam and hatred for the Shah and his corrupted ruling elites. According to Abbas Amanat,

In a mix of hyperbole and combativeness, heightened after his release from detention, Khomeini then leveled a litany of charges against the shah and his government, including selling off Iran's sovereignty, being subservient to the Americans, facilitating Israel's economic influence, pandering to the Americans for a huge loan with a scandalously high interest rate, convening a fraudulent Majles [parliament], guarding animosity toward religious authorities, attempting in vain to create divisions among the ayatollahs, causing the decline of agriculture, and forwarding the White Revolution as a mere propaganda scheme. (2017, 599)

Moreover, in order to unite and mobilise the 'common people' behind his charismatic figure, he claimed that only could represent the true people of Iran because

the religious judges ... [had] the 'same authority' as the Prophet and the imams; and the term *velayat-e faqih* meant jurisdiction over believers, all of whom are in dire need of the sacred law. In other words, disobedience to the religious judges was disobedience to God. (Abrahamian 1993, 25)

His humble lifestyle made it even easier for his Islamist revolutionaries to believe in his visions and introduce him as 'just like us' or 'a little of all of us' where 'us' referred to the poor and disadvantaged people. Khomeini also reinterpreted the history of the early Islam to reintroduce the prophet Mohammed and Imam Ali not as successful businessmen but as penniless workers from the oppressed lower class. Accordingly, in *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, Abrahamian concludes that Khomeini should be seen, at least up until the completion of the Revolution, more as a pragmatic – if not opportunistic – populist than a fundamentalist cleric "obsessed with scriptural texts, spiritual purity, and theological dogma" (1993, 3-4).

In *What Is Populism?* (2017), Jan-Werner Müller suggests that "populism is a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but [...] ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior" (Müller 2017, 20). Abrahamian maintains that in contrast to many 'fundamentalist' leaders,

Khomeini, despite his own denials, was highly flexible, remarkably innovative, and cavalier toward hallowed traditions. He is important precisely because he discarded many Shi'i concepts and borrowed ideas, words, and slogans from the non-Muslim world. In doing so, he formulated a brand-new Shi'i interpretation of state and society. The final product has less in common with conventional fundamentalism than with Third World populism, especially in Latin America. (1993, 17)

Khomeini's populism can be traced to his incorporation of socialist jargon and social class struggles in his sermons and writings. According to Abrahamian,

In his post-1970 writings, however, Khomeini depicted society as sharply divided into two warring classes (*tabaqat*): the *mostazafin* (oppressed) against the *mostakberin* (oppressors); [...] the *mellat-e mostazaf* (oppressed nation) against the *hokum at-e shaytan* (Satan's government); the *zagheh-neshinha* (slum dwellers) against the *kakh-neshinha* (palace dwellers). (1993, 26)

Furthermore, the 'radical and populist catchphrases' of Khomeini in denouncing the Shah's monarchy shall demonstrate how remarkably vague his populist ideas and promises had been:

Islam belongs to the oppressed, not to the oppressors.
Islam is for equality and social justice.
Islam represents the slum-dwellers, not the palace-dwellers.
Islam will eliminate class differences.
We are for Islam, not for capitalism and feudalism.
The duty of the clergy is to liberate the hungry from the clutches of the rich.
Islam is not the opiate of the masses.
The poor were for the Prophet; the rich were against him.
The martyrs of the Islamic Revolution were all members of lower classes: peasants, industrial workers, and bazaar merchants and tradesmen.
Oppressed of the world, unite.
The problems of the East come from the West – especially from American imperialism.
Neither West nor East, but Islam. (cited in Abrahamian 1993, 31)

The Shah's political war against the Left, the nationalists and the liberals resulted in a political vacuum that empowered Islamist figures such as Khomeini to claim the leadership of the opposition. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, while the Left and liberal/social democratic forces and their institutions were systematically oppressed by the Pahlavi state, the religious establishments expanded considerably and its institutions proliferated. Networks of mosques, seminaries and lecture halls, and the publication of religious journals and books provided the leaders of a political Islam with an important social base, organisation and resources. Sharing a political language with secular leftist organisations helped Khomeini win the support of the educated leftist youth who mediated between the opposition leadership and the uneducated mass.

During his few months in exile in Paris – thanks to his correspondence with the young expatriate Iranian activists of the Confederation of Iranian Students² –, he strategically integrated democratic principles such as freedom of speech, women's rights and minority rights into his agenda of an Islamic state that would introduce the Islamic Republic as an ideal political system for the future Iran. The ensuing systematic oppression of all dissident political parties, and the violation of human rights and misogynist policies of the Islamic Republic under Khomeini's rule proved the fact that Khomeini had shrewdly deceived other revolutionary actors. Nevertheless, his strategic deception had the potential

to unite the liberal nationalists, democratic communists, and the Islamic leftists besides mobilising the Muslim mass. Although Ayatollah Khomeini and the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) shared an anti-Pahlavi propaganda, an anti-imperialist stance and a populist rhetoric, it is important to mention here that Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism and his gravitation toward the Soviet Union have led him on a different political path compared to Khomeini's Islamism. Moreover, the activities of Nasser's opposition group of the Society of the Muslim Brothers, better known as the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt and its radical theoretician Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) in the 1930s and 1940s provided an influential model for Islamic militants in Iran such as Fada'iyan-e Islam (Amanat 2017, 785-86). As a matter of fact, the Muslim Brotherhood failed to assassinate Nasser in 1954. Therefore, I differentiate between Khomeini's socialist Islamism and Nasser's Islamic socialism at least in three dimensions. First, Khomeini's goal has been to establish an Islamic state which would implement the Sharia law under the leadership of a Shi'a ayatollah who is the representative of the twelfth Imam. Nasser, however, advocated and founded a secular Republic based on the separation of church and state with a socialist agenda. Second, Khomeini denounced the Shah's secular modernisation agenda – no matter whether authoritarian or democratic – as a threat to Islamic values and ideals, and more importantly, to the socio-political position of the clerics. By contrast, Nasser was a modernist who promoted an authentic modernity with respect to the local reservations to reform Egypt. Third, Khomeini's international ambition was to unite all the Muslim communities under the Quranic term of *ummat al-Islamiyah* (the Islamic Community), while Nasser had called for an anti-imperialist pan-Arab unity under his leadership. Nonetheless, the above mentioned differences of Khomeinism to the Islamic socialism of Nasser became more pronounced after the Revolution.

Khomeini's absolute legitimacy as a religious authority could mobilise the popular cross-class force of a Muslim mass who were told that policies of the pre-revolutionary state had imposed a heavy cost on large sections of the peasantry, the urban poor and the urban working class as well as the traditional middle class of the *bazaar* and sectors of the modern middle class. In the following, I will elaborate more on the socio-economic context of the 1979 Revolution in Iran.

Historical Context

A closer look at the Shah's developmentalist discourse of an authoritative and rapid modernisation of Iran and the socio-economic situation of pre-revolutionary Iran will help explore the main causes of the revolution and the emergence of this unprecedented coalition between rival political groups and, with it, an eclectic combination of Islam and Marxism. Some critics, such as Abrahamian in *Iran between Two Revolutions* (1982), argue that "the revolution took place neither because of overdevelopment nor because of underdevelopment but because of uneven socioeconomic development" (447). This means the Shah

invested only in modernising Iran on a socioeconomic level while repressing freedom of speech and subordinating agents of civil society to his authoritarian political system. The socioeconomic development was made possible largely by the increasing oil revenues starting from \$555 million in 1963-1964 and topping \$38 billion in 1974 and 1977. Nonetheless, instead of modernising the political system, the Shah, like his father, defined his power according to the three Pahlavi pillars: the armed forces, the court patronage network and the vast state bureaucracy (Abrahamian 1982, 435). He did not even shy away from declaring publicly that “in Iran democracy could generate only discord and chaos” (Amanat 2017, 799).

Relying on this oil boom, the Shah launched a top-down six-point modernising programme, largely implemented between 1961 and 1965, known as the ‘White Revolution’ (*Inqilab-e Sefid*) and different from the revolutions claimed by the ‘red leftist traitors’ and the ‘black religious reactionaries’. The White Revolution was geared to transform Iran ‘peacefully and bloodlessly’ from a feudal traditional society into a capitalist modern system. By the 1960s, agriculture still constituted the largest sector of Iranian economy outside the oil industry, which employed and engaged the largest number of Iranians. Thus, the 1962 Land Reform Act became the first step of the Shah’s authoritarian programme which he also named the ‘Revolution of the Shah and the People’ (*enqilab-e shah va mardom*). From his perspective, the principal winners of those transformations were supposed to be ‘the Shah’ and ‘the people’, and the landowning elite and their associates were to be the chief losers. Besides land distribution, the six points called for the nationalisation of forests, the sale of state factories to private entrepreneurs, profit-sharing for industrial workers, extending the right to vote to women and the establishment of a rural literacy corps. Almost six million voters took part in a ‘stage-managed nationwide referendum’ in January 1963 to approve the Shah’s White Revolution. According to the government, 99 per cent of the voters endorsed the six-point reform programme.

Despite all the propaganda around the Land Reform Act, the regime’s economic and social programmes rather increased regional inequalities between major cities and rural areas, and the local inequalities within the cities. On the one hand, the so-called ‘liberated farmers’ had neither sufficient experience with modern farming methods nor enough capital to own farming machinery to make a profitable living out of the distributed small pieces of land. Under these circumstances, the old landlords transformed into new ruling capitalists who were running agri-business companies in the rural areas, while the old peasants formed a rural proletariat that worked for the former in poor living and working conditions³. Against this, increasing rural unemployment and poverty among the villagers led to an ever-increasing flow of migrants to the cities in search of employment and better living conditions. Migrants streaming to the main urban centres rather than forming an organised working class were referred to as either a ‘marginal population’, the ‘sub-proletariat’ or a ‘surplus rural labor force’

which largely joined the increasing mass of poor urban unemployed living in poor conditions at the outskirts of cities. Maryam Panah in *The Islamic Republic and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution* (2007) states that “[t]he significant numbers of ‘underclass youth’, the rural and urban working class, an increasing population of urban migrants were to become the Revolution’s critical ‘mass on the stage’ (*mardum-i dar sahneh*)” (29).

Although the land reform did not achieve its goals immediately, the White Revolution’s major achievements were the rise in literacy rate – which reached nearly 75 per cent by the end of the Pahlavi era –, growing urbanization and improving living standards. Nevertheless, neither of these achievements stopped the downfall of the Shah; instead, in one way or another, they contributed to it. A greater access to medical care, lower infant mortality and longer life expectancy increased the country’s population from 24 million in 1965 to more than 34 million in 1975, while Tehran’s population reached four million by 1975 due to mass migration. The new generation benefited from state-sponsored free education which, from the state’s perspective, was counterproductive, as it opened their eyes to class and ethnic inequalities and drew attention to alternative ideologies to the Shah’s nationalist populism. Large proportions of the middle class and petty bourgeoisie were increasingly educated at university level, able to travel abroad and had developed greater political and economic expectations from the state. Despite its relative prosperity, the modern middle class joined the leftist political activism and formed a hotbed of a political opposition to the state. Therefore, a closer look at the story of the Iranian Left will present us with a comprehensive understanding of the Revolution.

The Story of the Left in Iran

Ali Mirsepassi (2000) summarises the history of the Left in Iran ever since its genesis up until the 1979 Revolution into four phases. The first period begins in 1906 with the emergence and growth of a communist movement with strong ties to the working class trade unions. The rise of the autocrat Reza Shah (the Shah’s father, ruled 1926-1941), who could not tolerate leftist criticism, ended this phase in 1937 by imprisoning 53 leading members of leftist circles. Reza Shah sentenced Taqi Arani (1902-1940), known as the father of Marxism in Iran, to ten years imprisonment for charges such as advocating ‘socialism’ and ‘atheism’, and allegedly killed him in prison. The second period was from 1941 to 1953 and marked the interregnum between the two dictatorships, as allied occupation forced Reza Shah to abdicate his throne and hand over the power to his twenty-two year-old son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980). Due to the transfer of power to the young Shah, political repression eased up. Within a month of Reza Shah’s abdication, leftist activists from the 1920s reemerged from prison, exile and underground existence to form the Tudeh Party (Party of the Masses) in 1941 under the leadership of Iraj Iskandari (1908-1985) who remained at head of the party until 1979 (Mirsepassi 2000). With close ties to the Soviet Union, the

Tudeh Party remained the most effective political organisation in modern Iranian history. According to Mirsepassi, “[i]t offered an ideology of ‘universal struggle’ which appealed to many young Iranians. The other major force during this period was the National Front, a grouping of liberal and nationalist parties, which favored constitutional rule and a strong parliament” (2000, 162).⁴ In this period, in addition to Marx’s *Capital*, translated by Iskandari into Farsi, some other short works such as *The Communist Manifesto* and a selection of Lenin’s works became available in Farsi. Ehsan Tabari (1917-1989), a theorist of Marxism, and Fatemeh Sayyah, the first Iranian PhD in Russian literature and a lecturer at the University of Tehran, began to publish on leftist literary theory. These publications dominated the sphere of Iranian intellectualism to such an extent that Al-e Ahmad and Ebrahim Golestan (1922-), two influential figures in contemporary Persian literature, joined the Tudeh Party in 1930. This period ended with the CIA-sponsored coup d’état against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in August 1953 and the resumption of autocracy. The third period, 1954-1970, is the time of the Cold War, US hegemony and the rise of anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist sentiments internationally. The Tudeh Party was outlawed and the labour unions were suppressed in 1960 while the Shah intensified his capitalist modernisation project. In this political climate, it was largely university students who took over the underground leftist activities. Around the same time, a number of Marxist-Leninist groups resumed their activities through the National Front, which was banned in the summer 1963 after the religious uprising. Although the Tudeh Party survived and played a role in the 1979 revolution, its strength declined drastically after the 1953 coup, and by the late 1950s, the party was a mere shadow of its former self.

The fourth phase, 1970-1978, is the phase of Revolution where tensions between state and society reached a critical point and gave birth to the ‘anti-Pahlavi and anti-secular Islamic militants’ and ‘leftist guerrilla organisations’ as two alternatives in the absence of civil political organisations such as the National Front and the Tudeh Party (Mirsepassi 2000). The dissidents became more outspoken and the regime’s intelligent service SAVAK retaliated with more oppression, arrests and torture. After two decades of staging a two-party system consisting of the Iran-e Novin Party (The New Iran Party) and the Mardom Party (The People Party) – the latter being the royal opposition –, the Shah could not tolerate an unexpected series of victories of the Mardom Party in local elections in 1974-1975. In March 1975, the unsettled Shah dissolved both parties and established the brand new Hezb-e Rastakhiz (Resurgence Party)⁵. The Shah, in an announcement that was received as a declaration of war by the opposition, declared that

in future Iran would be a one-party state; that all facets of political life would come under the supervision of the party; that all citizens had the duty both to vote in national elections and to join the party; that those reluctant to join must be ‘secret communists’; and that such ‘traitors’ would have the choice of either

going to prison or leaving the country – preferably for the Soviet Union. (cited in Abrahamian 2008, 149)

Informed by the successful Marxist-inspired movements and revolutionary armed struggles against ‘western imperialism’ such as Vietcong in Vietnam, Mao Zedong in China, Fidel Castro and the charismatic Che Guevara in the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the Algerian independence movement and liberating movements in Latin America assured these revolutionary forces more than before about their goals. The Guerrilla Organisation of the Fada’iyan-e Khalq⁶ (or Fada’iyan) and the Mojahedin-e Khalq⁷ Guerrilla Organisation (or Mojahedin) as “two political military organizations, emerged [in 1966 and 1965, respectively] within an anti-imperialist paradigm which espoused armed struggle against the Pahlavi regime as the regional pillar of US imperialism” (Mirsepassi 2000, 163). A comparative analysis between the strategies of the two rival armed groups, the Mojahedin and the Fada’iyan, will be helpful here.

Although the Mojahedin and Fada’iyan shared a culture of armed struggle, they differed in their departure points. While the Fada’iyan were former secular youth members of the National Front, the Mojahedin “was a movement with firmer grass roots bridging Marxism and political [egalitarian] Islam. Rooted in [...] the [Shi’a] revolutionary romanticism of Ali Shari’ati [and his Islamic Marxism] and solidarity with the ‘third world’ ” (Amanat 2017, 810). Both the Mojahedin and Fada’iyan believed that US imperialistic policies were responsible for the poverty, backwardness, dependence, and repression in Iran. Their positions, however, on the two rival communist poles – the Soviet Union and China differed. The Fada’iyan was highly critical of the past Soviet policy towards Iran and developed a rather strong pro-Chinese inclination in some members. At the same time, the organisation did not view the Soviet Union as an imperialistic power. The Mojahedin, however, never showed hostility towards either communist states (Zabih 1986). Moreover, in response to the Shah’s White Revolution, the Mojahedin reached the conclusion that the Shah’s regime had succeeded to cover up its weaknesses and erode the potentials for revolution in the rural areas under the guise of land reform. Therefore, the Mojahedin opted for urban guerrilla warfare. The Fada’iyan, however, rather relied on Marxist-Leninist principles with the aim of surrounding the cities from villages based on the models of China and Cuba (Zabih 1986, 81-83).

The ideology and worldview of the Mojahedin manifested itself more clearly in the course of trials of the Mojahedin’s leaders. The Shah’s propaganda system had for a long time demonised communism as the number one enemy of Iran and its nation, which would justify SAVAK’s constant struggle to associate any opposition group to communism and legitimise their indictments. The Shah’s regime pursued a twofold goal as its political strategy. On the one hand, an important part of the Shah’s populism was to present himself as a devoted Muslim who was chosen by the Muslim majority as their leader. His antagonists, then, could be no one but the non-believing communists. On the other hand, in

the guise of fighting communism in a Muslim society, the Shah justified repressing his dissidents and, more importantly, legitimised his government as a powerful force against communism. From an international perspective, particularly during the Cold War, he could sell himself as the leader of an anti-communist war right next to the Soviet Union. To contradict the Shah's propaganda, opposition groups such as Mojahedin and Fada'iyan refuted allegations of their espousal of Marxism for three reasons. First, in any trial conducted by the Shah's judicial system indictment of propagating and practicing Marxist ideology meant death penalty or life imprisonment. Second, accepting the allegations would prove the Shah's point that his only enemies, that is the enemies of the nation's Muslim majority, are the communists. Third, any official affiliation with a Marxist ideology would weaken the public support for those organisations that deterred the young generations to join and strengthen their cause.

According to Zabih, the Mojahedin published a booklet entitled *Pasokh be Etehamate Akhire Regime* (Reply to the Regime's Latest Accusations) in 1975 to refute the government's allegation that the Mojahedin had disguised their Marxism under the cover of Islam:

The Shah is terrified of revolutionary Islam. The regime is trying to place a wedge between Muslims and Marxists. In our view, however, there is only one major enemy – imperialism and its local collaborators. When SAVAK shoots, it kills both Muslims and Marxists. [...] Marxism and Islam are not identical. Nevertheless, Islam is definitely closer to Marxism than to Pahlavism. Islam and Marxism teach the same lessons for they fight against injustice. Islam and Marxism contain the same message, for they inspire martyrdom, struggle, and self-sacrifice. [...] Since Islam fights oppression, it will work with Marxism, which also fights oppression. They have a common enemy, i.e., the reactionary imperialist. (*Pasokh be Etehamate Akhire Regime* 1975; cited in Zabih 1986, 87)

Islamic Movement

Studying the history of the Iranian Revolution confirms the unquestionable role of religious figures in general, and Ayatollah Khomeini in particular, in mobilising a wide-ranging protest against the Shah's regime. Khomeini in his early works such as his first political tract, *Kashf al-Asrar* (1943), denounced the recently deposed Reza Shah, the Shah's father, for his modernisation and westernisation of Iran. But he, like other clerics who believed that a deficient order was better than no order at all, neither went further than criticising the monarchy nor claimed the right to rule for the clergy. Khomeini played a central role in two decisive incidents, which provoked a storm of protest. The first incident occurred in June 1963 after Ayatollah Khomeini openly denounced the Shah's White Revolution and his anti-Islamic modernisation agenda in a series of fiery speeches in his seminary in Qom.⁸ In his speeches, he first and foremost criticised the Iranian women's enfranchisement, the Shah's recognition of the

state of Israel and the capitulation law. He was arrested on the night of 4 June 1963 and sent to a prison in Tehran. Khomeini's arrest stimulated widespread protests in Tehran and Qom with protesters appealing for his release. The police cracked down the protests after two days and SAVAK arrested many political leaders. With this incident Khomeini embarked on his anti-Shah political journey which eventually overthrew the monarchy in 1979.

Following the legislative approval in October 1964 of the Status of Forces Agreement that granted diplomatic immunity to US military personnel and members of their households, Khomeini delivered a speech against the granting of the so-called 'capitulatory rights to the United States':

They have sold us, they have sold our independence. [...] They have reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog. [...] The government has sold our independence, reduced us to the level of a colony, and made the Muslim nation of Iran appear more backward than savages in the eyes of the world. [...] Are we to be trampled underfoot by the boots of America simply because we are a weak nation and have no dollars? America is worse than Britain; Britain is worse than America. The Soviet Union is worse than both of them. They are all worse and more unclean than each other! But today it is America that we are concerned with (Khomeini 2000,336).

After this speech Khomeini was arrested again and deported to Turkey from where he went to exile in Iraq.

The second event occurred in January 1978 when an editorial of the government-controlled paper *Ettela'at* unexpectedly and, in many respects unnecessarily, denounced Ayatollah Khomeini and the clergy as 'black reactionaries' associated with feudalism, imperialism and, of course, communism. However, what enraged the public and ignited the flames of the Revolution was the editorial's offensive claims that Khomeini "had led a licentious life in his youth, indulging in wine and mystical poetry, and that he was not really an Iranian – his grandfather had lived in Kashmir and his relatives used the surname Hendi (Indian)" (cited in Abrahamian 2008, 158). The following days saw Islamic seminary students demonstrating on the streets of Qom and Tehran and inviting others to join the protest. The regime's police, however, was quick to crack down on the protesters, leaving behind many casualties. These protests signalled the beginning of the end of the regime and not only demonstrated the power of Islamists but also the importance of political Islam as one potent alternative for the future of Iran.

While Khomeini was forced into exile in November 1964, Ali Shari'ati returned to Iran from France and gradually took on a leading role among the revolutionary forces. Shari'ati articulated a brand of Islamic humanism based on individual preferences and performances with an anti-clerical stance which was most appealing to the Iranian educated middle class and lower class students because it granted them a sense of self-respect, collective and national identity, and cultural authenticity. Hamid Dabashi explains that Shari'ti's 'true Islam'

“was not that of individuals standing vis-a-vis their God, striving for or seeking salvation through the established institutions of religious authorities. His was collective salvation through collective political expression” (2017 [2006], 114). Therefore, political activity to overthrow the existing unjust social order was urgent and a necessity for ‘true’ Muslims (and the Third World in general), as any clerical compromises with the ruling power were considered unacceptable. Shari’ati encouraged the exploited to world revolution, for which he justified the seizure of power by intellectuals through organisation and propaganda. Dabashi explains that “[t]he demographic composition of the Iranian society increasingly in favor of young and underprivileged students, massively migrating from remote rural areas of the country to poor urban settings, had created a particularly receptive constituency for Shari’ati’s revolutionary message” (2017 [2006], 113). In his *Red Shi’ism*, Shari’ati presented the ‘true Islam’ as a modern construction of the faith designed to bring out the “inevitable revolution of the future which [will culminate in] the triumph of justice, equity, and truth” in “advancing and moving toward their common goal (of Islamic classless [ideal] society)” (Mirsepassi 2000, 119). Furthermore, Shari’ati’s ‘true Islam’ proclaimed that “it is the responsibility of every individual in every age to determine his stance in the constant struggle for justice and equality, and not to remain a spectator” (119).

Shariati’s theory of revolution – driven from indigenous roots and religious grounds beside Marxist-influenced Third Worldist discourse of the period – resolved the contradictions of a generation of Muslim youth who felt compelled to fight for social change, if not a revolution. But their religious and cultural background made such a commitment to Marxist or nationalist ideologies increasingly problematic, paving their ways to join the revolutionary army. In his ideology, revolutionary consciousness must be defined along different axes than merely class-conscious classes which are formed by “religious beliefs, symbols, mores, customs, traditions, cultures, and popular notions of justice” (Mirsepassi 2000, 120) as well as economic rank. Thus, as Mirsepassi points out, he employed the axis of class differently in a global scope:

He insists that the essence of class struggle for our time is the conflict between developed and underdeveloped nations. The positing of the ‘Third World revolutionary subject’ in place of the ‘Western proletariat’ as the class of historical liberation is one of his chief disputes with Marxism. Western regimes, he contends, have eliminated the revolutionary potential in their countries by letting the workers ‘buy into’ the bourgeois lifestyle at the expense of the Third World. This new global class dynamic calls for a redefinition of the ‘revolutionary class’. (120)

Therefore, progressive potential of religion is a crucial ingredient for successful class revolution in this context. In *Return to Self*, Shari’ati contradicts the Shah’s identity politics by introducing his theory of Iranian ‘roots’. Within this, Shari’ati asserts that

When we say ‘return to one’s roots’ we are really saying one’s cultural roots [...] some of you may conclude that we Iranians must return to our racial [Aryan] roots. I categorically reject this conclusion. I oppose racism, fascism, and reactionary returns [... Our people] do not find their roots in [pre-Islamic] civilizations. They are left unmoved by the heroes, myths, and monuments of these ancient empires. Consequently, for us to return to our roots [means rediscovery of] our Islamic roots. (cited in Mirsepassi 2000, 122)

While advocating a return to Islam, Shari’ati frequently criticised traditional clerics in order to differentiate himself from conservative clerical Islam. His assertion that the modernist intelligentsia will be leading the revolution particularly appealed to the young intelligentsia. Ironically, his activist interpretation of Islam found its parallel in the views of Ayatollah Khomeini, the future leader of the Iranian Revolution. Although Khomeini’s political Islam tentatively proven to be a socialist Islamism.

Khomeini, who was a moderate critic of the monarchy before the 1960s, formerly indicated a more traditional attitude requiring only that the monarch respect religion and the state law conform to religious law. However, a radical transformation took place in his views on these matters while he was in exile in Iraq since 1964 toward the 1979 Revolution. Khomeini was brought into contact with currents of thought among the Iranian younger activists and intellectuals such as Shari’ati during his exile through his followers who visited him in Iraq. In Najaf, Khomeini gradually developed his own version of Shia Islam, which Abrahamian (2008) describe it as “a form of clerical populism”. Khomeini articulated his theory of an Islamist state in his book *Velayat-e Fageh: Hokumat-e Islami* (The Jurist’s Guardianship: Islamic Government) which was published anonymously in 1970 and narrowly circulated beyond theology students. As a result, his political view was not clearly known, neither to other leading revolutionary groups nor to his followers. Thus, it is not surprising that under the mystery of an Islamic system, he could deceive the western media in Paris about the future Islamic Republic of Iran, which he depicted as democratic as French democracy.

Moreover, the Iraqi Shia leaders, with whom Khomeini was in close contact, were highly susceptible to the ideas of the Iraqi Communist Party and appropriated many of the concepts used by the secular Left in Iraq. Concurrently, “he began to use more radical language in his depiction of society. While he had previously alluded to ‘mutually dependent strata (*qeshr*)’, he now adopted the terminology of the Left to speak of warring classes (*tabaq’è*)” (Panah 2007, 38). He attacked the quietism of ‘collaborating mullahs’ by insisting on the inseparability of politics and religion, while the ‘west’ and ‘western’ corruption continued to be identified as the target for the unity of Muslims which was to be forged under the leadership of the *ulema*. His emerging ideology and version of ‘political Islam’ was a synthesis of traditional (albeit evolving) Shi’i thought on the role of the state and *ulema* and more modernist language and concepts prevailing at the global conjuncture of the 1970s.

The themes incorporated into his discourse of socialist Islamism included national independence and anti-imperialism, and a commitment to the deprived and downtrodden and the banner of universalism and unity with the oppressed of the world. A popular will to establish an Islamic state, which would favor the poor over the rich, is the main point of difference between socialist Islamism and communism. In a message that Khomeini sent to Muslim students in North America in 1972, he manifested his main concerns, as he wrote:

Imperialism of the left and imperialism of the right have joined hands in their efforts to annihilate the Muslim peoples and their countries; they have come together in order to enslave the Muslim peoples and plunder their abundant capital and natural resources. [...] It is your duty, respected youths of Islam [...] to awaken people, to expose the sinister and destructive designs of imperialism. (cited in Panah 2007, 40)

Eventually, the Revolution succeeded in February 1979 as a result of the participation of a broad coalition of social classes and a variety of anti-Shah activities such as worker's strikes – most effectively by oil workers –, the closing of the *bazaar*, widespread demonstrations, and the eventual collapse of the military and security apparatus of the Shah's regime. Many of the leftist political organisations aligned themselves with Khomeini's leadership and his socialist Islamism as a means justified by the end of the rule of the masses. The liberal nationalists were consulting him to reassure the world about the future democratic political system of Iran by giving media interviews during his short residence in Paris prior to his return to Iran. They were seeking to share the power with the Islamists in the new political order, which they optimistically hoped would be a democracy with a light Islamic accent. However, it turned out that both the Left and the Liberals had underestimated Khomeini's shrewd Islamist populism.

Conclusion

Ayatollah Khomeini assumed the leadership of the 1979 Revolution thanks to his populism, which allowed him to combine socialism and Islamism in an appealing fashion to the majority of the Iranian public and the revolutionary forces. What is perhaps most interesting and most contrary to prevalent views of Islamic radicalism is the fact that the Islamists in Iran proved themselves to be far more pragmatic in political thinking than the Left. As my discussion demonstrated, it was the Islamists who were most willing to infuse divergent ideological streams with the sheer force of their so-called fundamentalist imaginations. They appropriated large portions of leftist discourse for their own purposes to articulate a political Islam as the Revolution's driving force (Mirsepassi 2000). Shari'ati's discourse of 'true Islam' was exactly what the young intelligentsia craved for a long time to link up their religious faith with political activism. Shari'ati disassociated religion from the traditional clergy and

associated it with the secular trinity of social Revolution, technological innovation and cultural self-assertion. Nevertheless, Shari'ati, as an Islamic Marxist, never posed the major controversial questions about the post-Revolution era. If the 'true Islam' was a revolutionary ideology, the Islamists must be leading the Revolution. Abrahamian, however, seriously questioned whether one "could initiate a rebellion under the banner of religion and yet keep the leadership of that rebellion out of the hands of the traditional-minded religious authorities" (1982, 473). Khomeini, however, responded to this inquiry through his theory of Vilayat-e Faqih or the Governance of the Jurist in Shia Islam, which holds that Islam gives a Faqih custodianship over people. In combining this theory with an opportunistic populism, he indeed succeeded to direct the Revolution according to his Islamist ideology and sail the revolutionary mass movement toward the coast of an Islamic Republic.

Notes

- ¹ These groups belonged to the left of the National Front and the Toilers party was the main representative of this movement which declared independence from both internal militarism and international Communism besides respecting Islam as the religion of the majority of Iranians.
- ² An international non-governmental organisation used as the students' union of Iranians studying abroad active during the 1960s and 1970s.
- ³ "Even by 1966 [four years after the enacting the Land Reform] fewer than 4 percent of rural households had electricity, and less than 1 percent benefited from piped water. By 1966 still some 85 percent of the rural population was illiterate. In terms of income, the rural population, which accounted for more than 60 percent of the total population, earned only 30 percent of the national income" (Amanat 2017, 721).
- ⁴ The Tudeh Party's very first programme declared: "Our primary aim is to mobilize the workers, peasants, progressive intellectuals, traders, and craftsmen of Iran. [...] When we say that our aim is to fight despotism and dictatorship we are not referring to specific personalities but to class structures that produce despots and dictators" (Tudeh Party 1944, n.p.; cited in Abrahamian 2008, 107).
- ⁵ Abrahamian argues that Samuel Huntington's thesis in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, inspired the Shah's regime to establish a one-party state. Abrahamian explains that: "According to Huntington, rapid 'modernization' in the economic and social realms generates new demands, new pressures, and new tensions in the political realm. [...] To prevent revolution, Huntington argued that governments had to create one-party states in which the sole party would serve as an organic link with the country, mobilizing the population, transmitting orders from above to below, and, at the same time, channeling upward interests from below" (Abrahamian 2008, 149).
- ⁶ *Sazman-e Cheriki-e Fada'iyān-e Khalq*; literally, "the organization of the devotees who sacrifice themselves for the people" – not to be confused with the religious fundamentalist group of *Fedayān-e Islam*.
- ⁷ Literally: Organisation of People's Crusaders.
- ⁸ The capital of Shi'a seminaries in Iran.

Works Cited

- Amanat, Abbas. 2017. *Iran, A Modern History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Abrahamian, Ervand. 1993. *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- _____. 2008. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dabashi, Hamid. 2017 [2006]. *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: Routledge.
- Khomeini, Ruhullah. 2000. "Granting Capitulatory Rights to the U.S." In *Contemporary Debates in Islam: An Anthology of Modernist and Fundamentalist Thought*, edited by Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof, 333-339. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1960. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.
- Mirsepasi, Ali. 2000. *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2017. *What Is Populism?* London: Penguin Books.
- Panah, Maryam. 2007. *The Islamic Republic and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution*. London: Pluto Press.
- Pasokh be Etehamate Akhire Regime* (Reply to the Regime's Latest Accusations). 1975. Mojahedin Tehran, 10-13.
- Tudeh Party. 1944. "Party Program." Rahbar, n.p.
- Zabih, Sepehr. 1986. *The Left in Contemporary Iran*. Stanford: Hoover Press Publication.

About the Author:

Mahmoud Arghavan is an independent scholar from Iran residing in Munich. He completed his PhD in American Studies at Free University of Berlin in 2013 with a dissertation entitled "Iranian American Literature: from Collective Memory to Cultural Identity". He has authored the article "Postcolonial Orientalism: A Study of the Anti-Imperialist Rhetoric of Middle Eastern Intellectuals in Diaspora" in the edited collection *Postcolonial Justice* (Brill, 2017), and co-written the article "Writing against Neocolonial Necropolitics: Literary Responses by Iraqi/Arab Writers to the US 'War on Terror'", which appeared in a Special Issue on "Global Responses to the 'War on Terror'" in the *European Journal of English Studies* (2018). He has also co-edited the volume *Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt?: Facing Problems of Race, Racism, and Ethnic Diversity in the Humanities in Germany* (transcript, 2019).