
Iran, in Search of a Nonsecular and Nontheocratic Politics

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One does not have to be in solidarity with them [the opponents of a regime]. One does not have to maintain that these confused voices sound better than the others and express the ultimate truth. For there to be a sense in listening to them and in searching for what they want to say, it is sufficient that they exist and that they have against them so much which is set up to silence them.

—Michel Foucault, “On Revolution”

The Iranian revolution of 1978–79 was the culmination of a gradual rejection of the shah’s domestic policies—including his authoritarian secularism—and of foreign, especially American, influence in Iran. Revolutionaries of different persuasions, who might be labeled secular, religious, or neither—our categories fail us here—all opposed the shah’s state-imposed secularization and modernization. According to Martin Amis, “The 1979 revolution wasn’t an Islamic revolution until it was over.”¹ The hard-line clerics who assumed power replaced an imperial form of secular modernity with an imperial form of religious modernity. So Iran went from temporal to theocratic absolutism, in the words of Said Arjomand.²

Parts of this essay draw on “Contested Secularisms in Turkey and Iran,” chap. 4 of my book *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

1. Martin Amis, “The End of Iran’s Ayatollahs?” *Guardian*, July 17, 2009, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/17/martin-amis-iran.

2. Said Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89.

Recent events in Iran suggest that neither absolutism is sustainable. Many Iranians have clung, like Michel Foucault, to something different and hopeful for the past thirty years,³ and last summer they took to the streets in support of it. On one level, then, the protests of 2009 concern which of two revolutionary political camps that took shape in the early 1980s will prevail: the hard-liners or their rivals, with the latter represented by Mir Hussein Moussavi and the demonstrators. But on another level the unrest signals much more than that: a broad debate since the early days of the revolution over what it means to be an Islamic republic or, quite possibly, something different.

The oppositional movement led reticently by Moussavi cannot be captured in a conceptual frame of secular versus religious politics. This is not a secular opposition, which may help explain why Moussavi has been received with suspicion and even disdain in some Western circles. Moussavi and the protesters offer a glimpse of a third path that departs from the politics accompanying a rigid dichotomy between secularism and political Islam and, in doing so, leads toward alternative, and important, religiopolitical possibilities not only for Iran but for other countries as well.

Many Iranians seem to be searching for this third path, and Moussavi himself may be gesturing toward it as well. In his “Statement Number 5 to the Iranian People” of June 20, 2009, he denounces both those who believe that “Islamic government is the same as Tyranny of the Rightful” and those who “consider religion and Islam to be blockers for realization of republicanism,” that is, those who believe that democracy is incompatible with Islam.⁴ In advocating for this third space, Moussavi and his followers embody the possibility of a nonsecular (at least in the sense that the term is used in the West) and nontheocratic politics, an alternative modernity that is modern and spiritual.

Moreover, Moussavi and his followers are invoking a strand of Iranian politics that is often forgotten, swept away by the authoritarianism and violence of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s regime, combined with the regrettable tendency to write the history of the revolution from the victors’ perspective. Yet this alternative merits attention at a historical moment when it is again vying for recognition. It represents an important current in Iranian politics, a potential means of exit both from the theocratic absolutism of the present regime and from the

3. Bonnie Honig, “What Foucault Saw at the Revolution: On the Use and Abuse of Theology for Politics,” *Political Theory* 36 (2008): 309.

4. Quoted in Gary Sick, “Mousavi’s New Revolutionary Manifesto,” *The Daily Beast*, June 21, 2009, www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-06-21/mousavis-new-revolutionary-manifesto (accessed October 10, 2009).

authoritarian secularism that it replaced, as represented by the shah and by those from whom he drew inspiration, such as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

This current is well known to scholars of Iran. Hossein Bashiriyeh refers to it when he describes the two competing strands of discourse that emerged during the postrevolutionary period: the one taken up by liberals in the Provisional Government who supported the democratic ideals of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) and the one adopted by clerical fundamentalists of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP).⁵ The two camps not only disagreed over foreign policy and the nature of the constitution but also disputed the terms of the Iranian public settlement of the relationship of Islam to politics and the state. Two prominent antagonists in this standoff were Khomeini and the reformer and sociologist Ali Shariati, who represented starkly contrasting alternatives to each other as well as to the shah.

For nearly a year after the revolution various factions struggled for power, including the clergy (IRP), the liberals (Mehdi Bazargan), a group of liberal to leftist Islamic parties (Abolhassan Bani-Sadr), and the non-Islamic Left.⁶ The hard-line clerics prevailed, and in two years, beginning with the election of Ali Khamenei as president in October 1981, “the clergy associated with the IRP crushed what was left of the opposition and established the type of theocratic government and politics which has lasted to the present day.”⁷ Ali Mirsepassi attributes the political eclipse of nontheocratic rivals such as Bazargan and Bani-Sadr to three factors: the formation of an autocratic state after 1953, following the U.S.- and U.K.-sponsored overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq; social alienation due to imposed modernization in the 1960s and 1970s; and the transformation of the Shi’i hierarchy and the construction of a new political Islamic ideology. Political Islam, representing a uniquely compelling alternative to modernization, so captured the Iranian imaginary that it seemed the only desirable answer to the country’s dilemmas.⁸ The shah’s systematic repression of socialist and liberal alternatives, and the secular opposition itself, contributed to the rise of popular Shi’ism by romanticizing the Islamist movement.

5. Hossein Bashiriyeh, “The Islamic Revolution Derailed,” in “The Iranian Revolution at Thirty,” special issue, *Viewpoints*, January 29, 2009, 35, www.mei.edu.

6. Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1997), 100.

7. Roger Owen, *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 162.

8. Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65–66, 94.

Yet what often slips through the cracks in accounts of the revolution is that the nontheocratic—one may or may not label them “secular”—opponents of the shah *also* sought to overthrow his authoritarian secularist settlement. This constituency is catalyzing today’s movement. In the lead-up to 1979, revolutionaries of different religiopolitical persuasions—secular, religious, or other—all opposed the shah. Thus the revolution was not, although it is often portrayed as, simply a religious backlash against secular modernity. Rather, it was an attempt by a complex constellation of constituencies, often vehemently at odds with each other, to contest the shah’s autocratic modernism, including his approaches to religion and politics, and to reconstitute the institutions and ways of life that had made these approaches authoritative. Some of these institutions and ways of life were associated with Western politics and power, which helps make sense of Robert J. Allison’s provocative insight that “the Iranian people did not rebel against their own failed rulers but against ours” and of Mark Juergensmeyer’s observation that “the goal of the Islamic Revolution . . . was not only to free Iranians politically from the shah but also to liberate them conceptually from Western ways of thinking.”⁹

At the time of the revolution Iran had no direct historical precedent for governance by the clergy. Khomeini’s theory of Islamic governance, the guardianship of the religious jurist or *veliyet-e faqih*, rested on a deeply contested interpretation of religious canon. His theocratic settlement was consolidated in opposition to what the Iranian writer and activist Jalal Al-e-Ahmad denounced as “Westoxification,” or *gharbzadegi*, defined by its opponents as “the profound psychological dislocation produced by an internationally orchestrated economy and a bifurcated culture . . . [and often] compared to cholera infecting Iran.”¹⁰ A powerful sense of Iranian identity coalesced around opposition to the shah and to Westoxification. It could not have taken the form that it did without this oppositional discourse, which holds much less sway today among a young, increasingly globalized Iranian population.

If the Iranian revolution was a collective overturning of the state-sponsored secular-modernist settlement, widely perceived as a front for illegitimate and cul-

9. Robert J. Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776–1815*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), xiii; Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 19.

10. Suzanne Maloney, “Identity and Change in Iran’s Foreign Policy,” in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, ed. Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 98, 101.

turally distant outside interests, then after the shah's ouster many Iranians argued for a nonhegemonic alternative legitimized, at least for some and in part, by reference to spiritual traditions. This segment of the population aspired to forms of politics that were neither secular nor theocratic, as those terms are understood today. Foucault, alluding to this political spirituality, observed that "the most interior and intensely experienced element in the revolt directly touches a politically charged chessboard. But this contact is not an identity. The spirituality appealed to by those who went to die lacks a common measure with the bloody government of a reactionary clergy. Religious Iranians want to authenticate their regime with meanings that the revolt possessed."¹¹ Yet disenfranchised by the hard-liners and dismayed by Khomeini's trajectory, many such Iranians, among them many former political allies opposed to the shah, resigned or were executed. Bazargan, the Islamic Republic's first prime minister, resigned in disgust; Bani-Sadr, its first elected president, fled to exile in France; and Sadeq Ghotbzadeh, who had held a number of government posts, was executed for his participation in an alleged plot to assassinate Khomeini.¹² Today Moussavi and the protesters draw on the democratic impulse that sustained this revolutionary movement.

How the West responds to the present crisis, specifically to the democratic potential of the nonsecular and nontheocratic forms of politics represented by the protesters, is crucial. The shah's overthrow was received angrily in the West; particularly after the taking of hostages in early November 1979, *Islam* and *Islamic Republic* became synonymous with the violation of secular-modernist conceptions of neutral public space, common sense, and the public good. However, the Iranian revolutionaries, like other revolutionaries, were grasping for a space beyond the unjust conceptions and practices that had confined them.

This new space is a space in the making, a space of political imagination, a collective gesture of hope, a place free of fear. From Mahatma Gandhi to Foucault, many have been inspired by such a hope and by the promise of such a space, and many inside and outside Iran have not relinquished this hope or promise. This reaching for something new is an ambitious and ambiguous gesture: because there is no blueprint or road map to follow, the path is always profoundly contested. There are many possibilities, distinct sensibilities, and potential enactments of these various forms of spiritual politics, as we can see today not only

11. Michel Foucault, "On Revolution," trans. James Bernauer, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 8 (1981): 7.

12. John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 117.

in Iran but also in India, in Venezuela, and elsewhere. It is precisely this impetus to transcend that the Iranian revolution represented and continues to represent to many of its supporters. The revolution was not just about violence, hostage taking, and beheadings. It was always already about an alternative political imaginary. As one of today's Iranian protesters, identified only as a mother, responded to a soldier who had asked her to "go back home" on the occasion of the protests on July 30, 2009, commemorating the killings forty days earlier of the young protesters Neda Agha Soltan and Sohrab Aarabi, "I'm not going anywhere. Don't you know that we brought you guys into power by doing just this: by being out on the streets for nights on end. We brought you to where you are today, and we're going to take you out by being on the streets. I'm not going anywhere."¹³

In rejecting engagement with the revolutionaries thirty years earlier, in assuming that political spirituality could never gain traction in the modern world, the United States ruled out the possibility of standing up for the incipient nontheocratic modalities of politics that contended for power immediately after the revolution. As Edward W. Said argues, "Very little of this struggle was reported in the United States while it was taking place. So strong was the ideological commitment to the idea of a monolithic and unchanging Islam that no note was taken of the political process *within* [Iran] or any other particular Islamic country."¹⁴ Such binary thinking is still with us in coverage of today's events, as evidenced by Judith Miller and Hooshang Amirahmadi's insistence that "secular Iranians" offer the only alternative to theocracy in contemporary Iran.¹⁵ By reproducing the very categories that the Iranian protesters are challenging, Miller and Amirahmadi are inadvertently strengthening the authoritarian state by foreclosing on a range of nonsecular and nontheocratic alternatives.

In 1979 as today, things might have gone either way. As Jonathan Rée writes, "If things were indeed turning out badly in Iran, that did not invalidate [Foucault's] remarks about how they might have been different; nor did it show that events were bound to revert to a familiar pattern and lose their capacity to surprise us."¹⁶ Following an alternative path, the United States would not have supported

13. "Young Iranian Woman—Email from Tehran," Informed Comment, posted August 1, 2009, www.juancole.com/2009_08_01_juancole_archive.html (accessed October 10, 2009).

14. Said, *Covering Islam*, 100.

15. Judith Miller and Hooshang Amirahmadi, "After the Brutal Crackdown in Iran, a Ray of Light for Real Reform," June 28, 2009, www.judithmiller.com/5775/iran-brutal-crackdown-real-reform.

16. Jonathan Rée, "The Treason of the Clerics," *Nation*, August 15, 2005, www.thenation.com/doc/20050815/ree.

the shah's suppression of multiple forms of politics, both secular and religious (thereby empowering the most radical elements of the oppositional Islamist movement), but would have encouraged the shah to open space for secular and religious oppositional politics. After the revolution, and even more critically during the transitional period afterward, the United States would have distanced itself from the shah and supported Khomeini's rivals, both secular and religious, who also opposed the shah. It is likely that these dissenters would have been open to dialogue; as Mirsepassi observes, "In retrospect it is astounding that the many left-wing groups and organizations ignored the obvious fact that postrevolutionary Iranian society was being transformed into an Islamic-totalitarian state and [that they] made no effort to form a broad secular-radical united front to oppose this trend."¹⁷

The presence of democratic dissenters from Khomeini's program then—and from Khomeini's now—offers a glimpse of the potential represented by a third path. The actions of these dissenters represent the irreducible element of today's movement. In 1981 Foucault argued in favor of bringing out this element, which he described as "profoundly threatening for every despotism, today's as it was for yesterday's."¹⁸ His words are timely. Yet to discern this element in today's events requires a nuanced, imaginative approach to the interplay between religion and political authority that is too often hindered by rigid construals of the secular-religious dichotomy reflected and reproduced in conventional accounts of the revolution and of today's protests. Such an approach requires engaging dissidents and reformers working outside the oppositional discourses—"tradition" versus "modernity," "Islamic" versus (Western) "secular"—that the shah, Khomeini, and his successors effectively monopolized. It requires grappling with what Mark LeVine and Armando Salvatore describe as the politicization of a particular ethical sensibility, well represented by Shariati and Foucault, "that like Nietzsche's calls us to 'think differently,' that solicits us to join the quest for a different future."¹⁹

In supporting the shah's impositional politics, the United States contributed to the politicization of a global secular-religious divide, fostering international political dynamics that paralleled the capitalist-communist divide of the same era. This had the effect of empowering at the time of the revolution the most radi-

17. Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse*, 168.

18. Foucault, "On Revolution," 8.

19. Mark LeVine and Armando Salvatore, "Socio-religious Movements and the Transformation of 'Common Sense' into a Politics of 'Common Good,'" in *Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies*, ed. Mark LeVine and Armando Salvatore (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 45.

cal elements of the shah's Islamist opposition, the same elements that today find themselves "afloat on an ocean of illegitimacy."²⁰ Watching this crisis unfold, some have remarked that by keeping its distance, the United States has inoculated itself from accusations of meddling in Iranian affairs.²¹ Rather than emboldening the hard-liners through oppositional rhetoric, the United States is empowering the dissenters with its silence.

Yet the U.S. position is more complex than this portrait of benevolent inaction suggests. In resisting the temptation to call for and to stand materially or ideologically behind a "secular" opposition, the Obama administration is quietly indicating an appreciation for the potential of nonsecular or differently secular, nontheocratic, and democratic alternatives to the present regime. The choice in Iran is not between secular and religious politics but between authoritarianism (whether secular or religious) and democratization. It is not clear what kind of politics we can expect in a postrevolutionary period, given that a state of revolutionary openness is impossible to maintain. President Obama recognizes these pragmatic considerations, as much as he understands the power of political imagination and the call of spiritual politics. He knows well that American relations with Iran have been tainted historically by an unsustainable dynamic set in motion by the explicit delegitimizing of local culture by an invader that insisted on the universality of its own practices.²² The political climate has changed in the United States, just as, one hopes, it is changing in Iran.

20. Amis, "The End of Iran's Ayatollahs?"

21. Senator Richard G. Lugar of Indiana, for example, stated that "for us to become heavily involved in the election at this point is to give the clergy an opportunity to have an enemy and to use us, really, to retain their power" (Jeff Zeleny and Helene Cooper, "Obama Warns against Direct Involvement by U.S. in Iran," *New York Times*, June 16, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/us/politics/17prexy.html).

22. Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse*, 11.