

Intellectuals and Revolution: The Case of Iran

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Abstract

C. Brinton in his book, *Anatomy of Revolutions*, believes that in revolutions, there is a common feature of intellectuals coalition, radicalization and participation beside people. Intellectuals left their far reaching Ideals and try to gain some other urgent ideals. In other word, intellectuals in those countries became more popular. As Brinton has shown, this element can be seen in their works like novels etc.

I try to show how Iranian Intellectuals entered Revolution and why they accepted the traditional leadership of Ulama. Iranian Intellectuals are divided, from one side, into modern intellectuals and "traditional" ones. From other respect, into pro- constitutionalists (Mashrootiyat) who oppose the Shah himself- groups like National front- and Anti- constitutionalists, who where more radical and were against the political system- groups like Ulama with their own organizations and subdivisions, leftist groups like Tudeh Party and Writers Association (Kanoon-e- Nevisandegan) and also some guerilla groups like Fadaiyan-e-Khalgh etc.

Because of reinterpretation of tradition (Islam) in Iranian Islamic Revolution, which is called "Islamic Ideology", we have to coin the term "traditional intellectuals" to call those Ulama who redefined Islam and developed the ideology of revolution. my proposition in this article is that failure in adopting western way of development in a half a century before revolution beside the teachings of Dependency School and its Iranian version which identified the West with capitalism and imperialism, failure of intellectuals to have access to Iranian mostly traditional people, and radical slogans from the side of political Islam paved the way for the leadership of Ulama and intellectuals followed them.

Introduction

Iranian Revolution in 1979 was under the leadership of *ulama*, specifically Ayatollah (Imam) Khomeini, and participated by different classes, specially Iranian urban middle class. This revolution succeeded in overthrowing Shah's regime and establishing a new regime, i.e. Islamic Republic. One of the main features of this revolution was its religious characteristic. Iranian people, searching for meaning in their lives, gathered around ulama and brought

about the revolution. Beside this, there was a coalition between different segments of intellectuals (socialists, liberals, and others).

In this article I will try to answer to this question: Why Iranian intellectuals accepted the leadership of ulama? To answer this question, we should consider two aspects: firstly, what were the deficits of intellectuals, and secondly, what were the abilities and advantages of ulama that forced intellectuals to accept their leadership. Then the historical situation that undermined intellectuals in Iran will be examined.

Deficits of intellectuals: Intellectuals, as the products of the Constitutional Revolution and aftermath carried the modern western ideas and helped Reza Shah's regime to bring about modernization in Iran. But with the growth of absolutism in Reza Shah's regime, and failing to bring about democracy in Iran, they gradually left their positions as supporters of Pahlavis. From three decades before the revolution, there emerged a doubt among intellectuals about the applicability of modern western theories for modernization of Iran. This doubt and uncertainty made them to try to search for some Iranian and Asian ways of development.

The Shah's repressive policy could not obliterate the roots of discontent against his regime. In fact, it radicalized the opposition to the throne and gave it a special mystique- a sense of righteousness and legitimacy- and created an environment where the intensity, not the essence, of condemnation of the Shah's policies was the barometer for measuring the revolutionary credentials of the opposition.

The response to repression in 1960s and 1970s varied from passivity to violent confrontation with the authorities. A large silent majority was mesmerized by the Shah's power and the unconditional support he was receiving from the United States. Preferring the existing order with all its evils to the chaos and unpredictable consequences of rapid change, and benefiting from the country's economic development, this majority sank into quiet apathy.¹

However, a small minority, the activists, carried the torch of the struggle against the regime. They were organized into a variety of organizations, ranging from nationalist to Marxist to Islamic.

Marxist organizations: although Social Democratic Party of Iran was formed in 1904, it was only after Russian Revolution in 1917 that Marxist ideas began to penetrate Iran. Marxism gradually attracted a growing portion of Iran's intellectuals. The Tudeh Party of Iran was chiefly responsible for popularizing Marxism in Iran. The ancestor of Tudeh Party, The 53 Marxists gathered around Taqi Arani and called 53 person circle, were arrested and jailed by

Reza Shah's government. Arani died in jail and his comrades founded Tudeh Party of Iran after their release in 1941, after the fall of Reza Shah.

The Tudeh Party was chiefly responsible for popularizing Marxism in Iran. The Party, supported by Soviet Union, attracted many intellectuals and activists and was very active during 1940s. By the rising of Azerbaijan crisis in 1945-6, Tudeh Party's branch in Azerbaijan joined Pishvari's Democratic party of Azerbaijan. This act shook some of patriot and nationalist members of the Party and caused some doubts about its activity. From those who left the Party were Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, Khalil Maleki and Anvar Khomeini, three cadre members of the Party. They founded a party called *Nirooye Sevvom* (The Third Power) and began acting as independent socialists.²

The Tudeh's fortune began to reverse more when Mosaddeq nationalized the oil industry. The Tudeh leadership's treacherous policy toward Mosaddeq and its unconditional support of the Soviet Union irrevocably tarnished its image. Many Iranians began to perceive the Tudeh as no more than the Moscow's Fifth Column. After the coup d' etat, many tudeh members were either killed or jailed by the Shah's regime and the Party's secret network within the armed forces were discovered and dismantled. Some top leaders, however, escaped and moved the Party's headquarters to Eastern Europe.

Inside Iran, the leftist movement in 1960s and 1970s was dominated by those who were critical of the Tudeh Party. After the coup of 1953, leftist activists began questioning the wisdom of peaceful coexistence with the Shah. The spread of the guerrilla movement in Latin America inspired them to experiment with guerrilla warfare.

In the mid-1960s, two groups of Marxists began building and expanding underground organizations. The Jazani group was created in 1963 by Bijan Jazani, a former member of Tudeh party Youth organization, and a few others. While they were in the preparatory stage of building a secret network, SAVAK (Shah's intelligence organization) infiltrated the group and arrested most of its members, including Jazani. The few who escaped arrest later formed the Jangal group. The second group, the Ahmadzadeh, was created in 1967 by Mas'ud Ahmadzadeh, a former member of the National Front, and a few university students. This group believed from the start that armed struggle was the road to political salvation. Amir Parviz Pooyan, one of its founders, contended that the only way to shatter the existing "myth of the regime invincibility" and the only way to overthrow the incumbent regime was to violently inflict heavy casualties upon it. They began their activity in the forests of Mazandaran and established a training camp to train guerrillas. They attacked a gendarmerie post in Siyahkal, precipitating a violent reaction by the government during which the police killed most members of the group. The Siyahkal episode marks the beginning of the urban guerrilla war against the Pahlavis. With the unification of remainder of Jangal and Ahmadzadeh groups a month after this incident, the Fada'iyan-e Khalq organization was born. The assassination of the chief of the military tribunal in charge of

trials of political dissidents was the Fada'iyans first military operation. From 1971 to 1978 many prominent officials of the regime and a few American fell victim to the Fada'iyans terror.

This method for combating regime was limited to some attacks, not useful for mobilization of people for revolution. Therefore by 1977 the Fada'iyans was in crisis. Its leadership was divided; most, if not all, of its members had been killed or jailed; and its constituency was limited to only a small percentage of the young.³

"Kanoon-e- Nevisandegan-e- Iran (Iranian Writers Association) was another leftist group in Iran, composed of middle class leftist writers. Its membership was overlapping with some other groups and organizations such as Tudeh party. This organization also accepted the leadership of Imam Khomeini during the revolution. Nemat Mirzazadeh (M. Azarm), one of Iranian contemporary poets and a member of Iranian Writers association has a poem in which he calls Ayatollah Khomeini as "Imam" for the first time. Imam in Shia tradition is mostly used for twelve infallible leaders (Imam Ali and his sons and grandsons ending with Imam Mahdi). Mirzazadeh as a secular intellectual used this title for Ayatollah Khomeini in 1964 (13 years before the revolution when Imam Khomeini was in exile in Turkey).⁴

The National Front: the National Front was the major secular nationalist organization. After the coup of 1953, it was substantially weakened when Mosaddeq was placed under house arrest and some of its leaders were either jailed or killed. With the limited liberalization of the early 1960s, the National Front resurfaced. With Mosaddeq still under house arrest, the National Front leadership was divided, confused, indecisive, and devoid of political creativity.

From 1960s onward, National Front and other nationalist intellectuals in Iran had no creativity to bring about changes. They were adherents of the constitution and could not believe in a social revolution. They were devotees of monarchy and could not believe in other arrangements such as republican system of government. Even some of them were absorbed into some governments after 1953 coup.

All secular intellectuals in comparison with religious leaders (Ulama) had great difficulty in communication with people. They were talking in a way that people could not understand. Their ideas were not indigenous. They were borrowed from western philosophy. Religious ideas were more understandable than theirs.

The specific difficulty of leftist intellectuals was that they were regarded by people as dependants to countries like Soviet Union and China. Therefore they could not mobilize people. Some of younger groups among them did not believe in mass mobilization and shifted toward guerrilla activities.

The Abilities and Advantages of Ulama

The Islamic ideology was the quintessential prerequisite of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Although this ideology was not the cause of the Revolution, the Islamic Revolution could not have occurred without the Islamic Ideology.⁵

Two Prominent motifs of legitimate authority, one Iranian and the other Islamic, have historically constituted the dual basis of justified rulership in the Iranian political culture. The Iranian element that bestows divine grace (*Farreh*), upon the king predates Islam. According to this notion, the earthly king, endowed with the divine grace, shall lead all the forces of good, in alliance with the supreme Good of the Lord Wisdom (Ahura Mazda), against all the forces of evil, mobilized by the Destructive Spirit (Angra Mainyu), the Islamic element extends from the supreme figure of political authority: first Muhammad and then the archetypical caliph or any number of his historical substitute.⁶

Perhaps the most significant ideological antecedent of the Islamic revolution in Iran in an ideal- typically religious context was the doctrinal propagation of *Velayat-e-Faqih*, or "the authority of the jurist" as formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini. Although Imam Khomeini occasionally referred to such non-Islamic political ideas as the division of power, the doctrinal formulation of *Velayat-e-faqih* is based on innate Islamic (Shi'i) references. Consequently the formulation of this revolutionary doctrine, as perhaps the most significant example of Imam Khomeini's political ideas, represents the typically and quintessentially "religious" alternative to the status que.⁷

Ayatollah Khomeini and his achievements are the culmination of the tradition of the shi'i *ulama* in Iran, not merely in exercising an unusually comprehensive, wide, and profound influence in political and social affairs, but also with respect to the purely learned dimensions of the tradition. Here, too, he is an unparalleled figure.

As a specifically Shite doctrine, *velayet-e faqih* derives its force from its close association with a number of other crucial tenets in Shi'ism, equally congenial to Mahdistic outbursts and utopian movements. Although the historical and symbolic sources of this doctrine go back to the very origin of Shite Islam, its recent developments are of particular significance. The most important characteristic of this doctrine is its appropriation of certain political authority for the figure of the shi'i jurist (*faqih*), the specifics of this authority, as articulated by Imam Khomeini, transcend the institutionalized organization of command and obedience in the context of the shi'ite hierocracy. Although of immediate significance for the Islamic revolution, the political boundaries of this doctrine extend outside Iran.⁸

The most prominent proponent of a political reading of *velayat-e-faqih* in nineteenth century Iran was Mollah Ahmad naraqi (1771-1829) whose *Awa'id al-ayyam* offers the most elaborate treatment of the subject, Among the traditions that Mollah Ahmad quotes is the

following: "The kings have authority over people and the religious scholars have authority over kings" (al- muluk hukkam ala-al-nas wa al-ulama' hukkam ala' al-muluk).⁹

Ayatollah Khomeini's further elaboration of this doctrine mobilized perhaps the most important ideological challenges to the established political order. The predominance of a political overtone is the chief characteristic of his emendation of the faqih's juridical authority to the point of attributing a political connection to every ritualistic aspect of Shi'ism. On the basis of the *velayat-e-faqih* doctrine, Imam Khomeini mobilized the most crucial and consequential segment of the anti-Shah movement. In his reading, *velayat-e-faqih* constituted that legitimizing apparatus that would grant the jurisconsult every right to challenge the validity of Muslim rules.¹⁰

Shi'ism claims to possess a store of knowledge largely unknown to ordinary men and women yet vital to comprehension and ordering of human affairs. By this knowledge, they justify the authority of a small elite, whose task is to act on the basis of their superior understanding and to propagate it in the society at large.

Shi'ism from its very emergence as a separate tendency within Islam, defined itself in opposition to the corrupted status quo. It stood for the authentic suppressed values of Islam, counterposing its idealism to the compromise made by the established authorities.¹¹

The opposition between the world of the believers and the corruption of the outside forces found its justification in the claim to superior knowledge. This claim, in turn, can be broken down into two cardinal assumptions: first, that the truth about human nature, history, and society is knowable; and second, that the intellectual hierarchy of the movement possesses this truth.

Shia Ulama believe in a historical mission to bring peace and justice for the world and end any corruption and injustice. In Shia belief, the most important figure the brings about peace and justice for the whole world is Imam Mahdi. He will rise as an Armageddon and it is shia duty to pave the way for his uprising.

Beside these characteristics, religious leaders were well rooted in Iranian society. Through the networks of mosques, they could contact and communicate with all Iranian people in urban and rural regions. Ulama have had a hierarchy that begins with the great jurist (Marjae Taghlid) at the top and reaches to petit ulama at bottom. This arrangement enables them to have an oral communication with the society.

During some rituals such as Ashura (martyrdom anniversary of Imam Husain, son of Imam Ali and the third Imam of Shia Muslims), they give speeches in mosques about the historical oppressions against shia muslims and usurpation of the right of Imams to govern. Audiences listening to these speeches can use their imagination and rebuild the situation in

the present time. They can compare their own ruler (Shah) with yazid ibn Moawiyah, Umawid caliph that ordered for Imam Husain Martyrdom.

Historical Situation

Intellectuals in Iran are the products of the Constitutional Revolution. As members of new middle class, they were formed after entrance and introduction of western ideas into Iranian society. They were the main supporters of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran and helped Reza Shah Pahlavi to become the head of state (Shah). After qajar era, when Reza Shah ruled as an absolute Monarch, they were disappointed with the outcome of the western modernization they had supported. The 1953 coup against Mosaddeq and continuation of absolutist regime in Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's era deepened the disappointment of Iranian intellectuals. This disappointment is evident in writings and poems of them at that period. Mehdi Akhavan- sales, one of Iranian poets, in one of his poems, Zemestan (winter) describes the situation. Winter was published in 1957, four years after the coup. Akhavan in this poem says:

Vision is limited,
The road's dark and slick.
Your extended friendly hand is refused,
Not because they are confused;
They rather keep their hands where they are warmed.
It is frightfully cold. Do not be alarmed.

After some verses, he resorts to his "Messiah":

My manly Messiah,
Uncompromising man of faith!
Winter is cowardly and cold,
You keep the words warm,
Sustain that stance bold.

Accept my greetings.
Let me in.
Your nightly guest:
The pedestrian rock,
The curse of creation,
The uneven melody.¹²

These verses show the disappointment of the poet from the situation and an expectation from a religious leader (messiah) to come and change the situation.

After the coup, some of Iranian intellectuals shifted from western way of thought to Asian and Iranian, and some, like Jalal ale Ahmad, to Islamic ones. Ale Ahmad in his book *Gharbzadegi (Westoxication)* criticizes the intellectuals attitude toward western ideas and calls for a indigenous way of thought.¹³ In his another book *Dar Khedmat va khianate roshanfekran (On Intellectuals)*, he again criticizes Iranian intellectuals as ones who betrayed their country.¹⁴ He believes that the only force that can bring about real changes in Iran is Ulama. In his memoire about his trip to Mecca in 1966, titled *Khasi dar Mighat, (A Straw Meets Allah)*, when he saw the crowd of people worshipping Allah in Mecca during Hajj period, he was convinced that if someone mobilize these people for political purposes can change the situation in Iran and other Islamic countries.¹⁵

This kind of shift is more or less evident about other intellectuals in Ira prior to Islamic Revolution, the shift that caused intellectuals to accept the leadership of Imam Khomeini during the revolution.

¹ Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994) p. 75.

² For more information see: Ali Morshedizad, *Roshanfekrane Azari va Hoviyate Melli va Ghomi (Azeri Intellectuals and the National and Ethnic Identity)* (Tehran: Nashre Markaz, 1385 (2006)).

³ Miliani, *op cit.* pp. 76-7.

⁴ See: Mojtaba Feiz, *Tousife Khakian az Aftab (Worldly Description of the Sun)*, Tehran, Markaze Asnade Enghelabe Eslami, 1378.

⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993) p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 7-8.

⁷ For more information about "Velayet-e – Faqih" see: Mohsen Kadivar, *Nazariye-ye- Dowlat dar Feqhe Shia (The Theory of State in Shia Jurisprudence)*, Tehran: Nei Publication, 1378.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 11-12; see also: Naraqi, *Awaid al-Ayyam*, p. 186.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 12.

¹¹ Tim McDaniel, *Autocracy, Modernization, and Revolution in Russia and Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 192

¹² A Brief Note on the Life of Mehdi Akhavan Sales in: <http://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/Poets/Saless.html>
This poem was translated into English by Iraj Bashiri.

¹³ See Jalal Ale Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi (Westoxication)*, Tehran: Ravaq Publication, 1357 (1979).

¹⁴ See: Jalal Ale Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat va Khianate Roshanfekran*, Tehran: Ravaq Publication, 1359.

¹⁵ See: Jalal Ale Ahmad, *Khasi dar Mighat (A Straw Meets Allah)*, Tehran: Ravaq Publication, 1345