



מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי
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Avenging the Revenge of the Iranian Clergy

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Avenging the Revenge of the Iranian Clergy

By Glen Segellⁱ

In the governance of Iran there is a battle between mosque and state but who wins what, and why? This dominates the nation's political discourse, often under the shadow of real and imagined threats from the West. It also dominates regional and global responses including from neighbouring states such as Saudi Arabia, the Sunni world and the West's policies, actions and reactions to Iran. Moreover recently the Iranian population has demonstrated its discontent with the current governance in the cost of living, high unemployment, the cost of foreign expeditions, corruption, the rule of the Ayatollah, and the dictatorial nature of the regime.ⁱⁱ

Understanding the governance of Iran through the study of Persian and Iranian cultural, literary and intellectual history and the role this has played in interpretations of political and clerical authority is not for the faint hearted. One facet is the wide diversity in the lives and works of certain key figures in modern day Iran.

This ranges from those who articulated the country's responses to European imperialism, such as Mirza Malkom Khanⁱⁱⁱ, a prominent modernist who died in 1908, to the ideologues of the Islamic revolution of 1979. These include Jalal Al-e Ahmad and the left-leaning zealots and poets^{iv} who used a mix of Marxism, Islamism, the Shia tropes of martyrdom and Frantz Fanon's third-worldism^v to give Iran's Islamic revolution its distinctive characteristics.

Another facet and maybe more important is the big themes in Iran's history dominated by it being a Shia powerhouse state. This influences the aforesaid individuals typified by the creation of the Safavid state in the early 16th century.^{vi} Another theme is the competing tensions within Persian Shiism of temporal and spiritual legitimacy, intertwined with messianic revivalism, mysticism and dissent.

Persian Shia political philosophy creates a natural separation of mosque and state, as long as the state allows freedom and safety of Shia religious practice. Until 1979 state or more over crown had the upper hand. The clergy were there to preach, educate and sit in judgment on the nation's souls. A politically active clergy was, and still is for many leading Shia thinkers, a heretical innovation.

Then in 1979 things changed and the clergy began to have the upper hand over state after the removal of the crown. One point to bear in mind about the justification of the role of the clergy by the clergy since 1979 in Iran's politico-religious make-up is the cyclical nature of divine revelation in "Twelver" Shia thought. This is through an interpretation of the 12 imams (descendants of Prophet Muhammad), and the 12th imam's "occultation" in 874.^{vii} This facet of Shia philosophy offers Persian political culture the potential for millenarian trends to appear at times of political and social crisis.

The revolutionary clergy in 1979 appear to have deemed this as such a crisis. This was exemplified when the leader of the 1979 revolution Ayatollah Khomeini came to be known as an imam^{viii} that constituted a break with the notion of a quietist, apolitical clergy. So while this was considered heretical among local Shia communities it also had precedent in Iran's modern history.

Ayatollah Khomeini's controversial doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, the "guardianship of the jurist"^{ix}, and its application as the ideological and constitutional blueprint for the Islamic revolution, was the first time in Iran's Shia history that the clergy had explicitly articulated a theory of government. Before that they always preferred to remain scholarly and juristic.

Such justifications can be short lived for in the battle between mosque and state that dominates the nation's political discourse secular leaders have also rested their case for authority based on the same divine revelation. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's conviction that the 12th imam was poised to return to daily life in Iran meant that, among other less innocent actions, he would lay an extra place for the 12th imam at his weekly cabinet briefings.^x

An explanation for the governance battle between mosque and state is that the clergy launched the 1979 Islamic revolution as an act of revenge because Shiism was derided under the Pahlavi monarchs and sidelined in the dash to achieve Western modernity after the discovery of oil. It was not a complete triumph, for the 1979 revolution and its aftermath crushed the clergy's centuries-old independence from the state. Their bid for power challenged the very soul of Shia orthodoxy.

Given that the revolutionary generation has been supplanted by the next due to mortality all may be left wondering about the ultimate place of Islam in the politics of Iran, that of mosque and state and how this might develop. Important questions may show trends that could emerge.

Will the Islamic republic of Iran be the harbinger of the destruction of the Iranian clergy, both in the minds of the Iranian people and as a political force? Have the clergy become so crippled by association with the horrors and corruption of the Islamic republic that they have lost all moral authority with the man in the street? Might there be an upsurge in orthodox clerical opposition to the Islamic republic as this uneasy experiment in Shia political activism?

Recently the Iranian population has demonstrated its discontent with governance of Iran in the cost of living, the rule of the Ayatollah and the dictatorial nature of the regime. Surely this shows that the writing might, one assumes, should be on the wall to avenge the revenge of the 1979 Iranian clergy. The clergy have seen this potential and in attempt to placate it have recently relaxed regulations in the dress code for women. But would any reforms be enough to make a difference for Iranian citizens? Would it change two apparently mutually exclusive forms of identity – *Iranianism* and *Islamism*?^{xi}

The recent massive street demonstrations show the potential for more than reforms; for a counter-revolution. Should this materialize without being detrimental to citizens or in the two apparently mutually exclusive forms of identity – *Iranianism* and *Islamism* then the field would be open for speculation on local, regional and global implications.

At the fore is the question whether governance after a counter revolution would be secular under the dictum of Persian Shia political philosophy that creates a natural separation of mosque and state, as long as the state allows freedom and safety of Shia religious practice? If so then one thing is for certain it would overturn the apple cart in relations with the Sunni world and Saudi Arabia, with supposed proxies Hamas and Hezbollah and with intervention in Syria and globally with the West for example the current Iranian nuclear and missile programs. The Ayatollahs shouldn't ignore the inevitable for the Iranian people have spoken. The time has come to avenge the revenge of the 1979 Iranian Clergy and for Iran to return to normality in 2018; for the separation of mosque and state.

Notes

ⁱ Dr. Glen Segell, Research Fellow, Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa
<http://gulfc.haifa.ac.il/index.php/publications/414-dr-glen-segell>

ⁱⁱ Iranian police disperse anti-government protests, The Guardian, 29 December 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/29/iranian-police-disperse-anti-government-protests>

ⁱⁱⁱ Algar, Hamid. *Mīrzā Malkum Khān: A Study in the History of Iranian Modernism*. University of California Press. 1973.

^{iv} Jalal Al-e Ahmad. *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West*. Mizan Press. 1984.

^v Cherki, Alice. *Frantz Fanon. Portrait*. Paris: Seuil. 2000.

^{vi} Savory, Roger. "*The Safavid state and polity*". *Iranian Studies*. 7 (1-2): 206. (2 January 2007

^{vii} Tabataba'i, Sayyid. *Mohammad Hosayn . Shi'ite Islam*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (translator). SUNY press. 1977.

^{viii} Algar, Hamid. "A short biography". In Koya, Abdar Rahman. *Imam Khomeini: Life, Thought and Legacy*. Islamic Book Trust. 2010.

^{ix} Algar, Hamid. *Islam and Revolution, Writings and Declarations Of Imam Khomeini*. Mizan. 1981.

^x UK Parliament, *The Islamic Republic of Iran: An introduction*. Research Paper 09/92. 11 December 2009.
Segell, Glen, "Islamic Republic of Iran textbooks perpetuate Pahlavi nationalism", *The Persian Gulf Observer*, No 21, Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa, 08 January 2017, ISSN 2410-5376 <http://gulfc.haifa.ac.il/images/observer%2021%20eng.pdf>