

11 February 2010

Iran at the Crossroad. The role of the Clergy

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Why the title: *Iran at the Crossroad*? Because the Iranian establishment has to decide between the current form of government and a more democratic one. How can we define the current form of government? A theocracy? No, we can't. Because it is not upon the word of God – in this case the Koran and the Shia tradition – that rules are made.

Some three years ago I wrote that Iran was ruled by a mullahcracy. Now, I am not really sure Iran is the reign of the mullahs but rather the reign of the pasdaran. So, the Iranian establishment has to decide between the current form of government (whatever definition we use) and a more democratic form.

However, the Iranian establishment has also to decide about how to react to the opposition (inside and outside the country), about the nuclear programme and about opening to the US. In January the US Senate was going to approve more sanctions punishing those international companies selling gasoline to Iran. In fact, Iran is rich in oil and gas but lacks the capacity to refine oil and thus buys 40% of the gasoline it needs. As a consequence, international sanctions might hit the import of gasoline. The Iranian authorities are well aware of their Achill's heel and since December they have increased their imports (and stocks) of 23%. However, since such sanctions would have hurt the population and not the leadership, the US president Barack Obama preferred not to sign the bill approved by the Senate.

The Political Role of the Shia Clergy

Given such a framework, what can change the current situation? I believe that analysts do not give enough importance to the Shia clergy. Possibly because most analysts live in secular countries, or because they know the Sunni-Arab world better than they do with Shia-Iran. And here I would like to underline a major difference between Shia and Sunni Islam, one of the differences remarkable only if you analyse the two communities outside the Middle East.

As written by the scholar Takim (a Shia leader born in Zanzibar, who teaches at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Denver and has recently written *Shiism in America* for New York University Press) the two communities are organised differently. In the US (as well as in Europe) the Sunnis organise themselves with *fiqh* councils, a sort of committee composed of scholars using jurisprudence to make decisions and solve today's problems. However, this solution cannot be followed by Shia Muslims. In fact, according to Shia rules, people are religiously obliged to follow the teachings of their religious leaders in the Middle East. That's why many ayatollahs have sent their emissaries to the West, have opened offices in Europe and North America, publish their *fatwas* on their websites and answer questions by email.

Leaving the US and going back to Iran, the Shia clergy has always played a major role. This is different from what happened in neighbouring Iraq, where the Shia bazaaris (merchants) did not support their own clergy and – as a consequence – the mullahs never had enough economic and political power to oppose dictatorship and, as a consequence, the Shia population did not emerge as a real local power.

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The Tobacco Boycott

The Shia clergy has played a major role in Iran at least since 1892, on the occasion of the tobacco boycott which led to the withdrawal of the concession given by the shah to a British citizen. The concession led to protests in several cities. In Najaf the *marja' e taqlid* (source of emulation, the highest rank in the Shia hierarchy) Shirazi wrote a letter to the shah lamenting the concession. The shah did not react and Shirazi wrote a fatwa forbidding the use of tobacco. In December 1891 the popular resentment transformed itself into a boycott of tobacco. This action was led by the ulema headed by Shirazi and allied to the merchants. Non-Muslims were involved, as well as the women inside the royal harem who stopped smoking the water pipe. How did the shah react? First he tried to limit the tobacco concession to exports and liberalised again the production and internal market. However, protests became so violent that he had no choice but to withdraw the concession and pay compensation to the UK.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906

Again, the role of the clergy was crucial in Iran in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The causes of this event are several: besides the economic crisis, the devaluation of the local currency, inefficiencies, corruption and weakness on the part of the authorities. The merchants were unhappy of the fiscal reforms and the ulema were hostile to the consequences of the new taxes on their privileges. In 1904 and 1905 some secret societies (*anjoman*) were created. Its members were not all Muslims. Some were secular, some belonged to religious minorities such as the Bahais. However, the general impression was that the help of the Muslim clergy was needed. Several ayatollahs embraced the movement for different reasons: the tax increase in the wholesale market which also scared the bazaaris; the land tax which threatened the waqf (religious foundations); the presence of foreign consultants; the delay of three years in the payment of salaries to the mullahs, the imposition of a 10% tax on documents produced by the mullahs.

31 Years After the Revolution

The clergy's opposition to the Shah's policies was crucial also to the Revolution of 1979 but 31 years after the people of Iran are disenchanted with the clergy. The Persian word *akhund* has a negative connotation. Moreover, in the rest of the Shia world, the Iranian clergy is not considered authoritative as it used to be, mainly because the ayatollahs of Iran spent more time doing politics rather than studying theology. And that's the case, for instance, of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who received the degree of ayatollah only in 1989, when he succeeded to Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, part of the Iranian clergy still has some importance and its *fatwas* can influence public opinion and somehow help the opposition movement. Due to their importance to the reformist-green movement, two cases will be examined: Grand Ayatollah Montazeri and Ayatollah Sanei.

Ayatollah Montazeri

Passed away on 20 December 2009, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri was born in 1922 in a provincial family and educated at a seminary, he was arrested and tortured for leading protests against Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. After the revolution of 1979 Montazeri was designated successor to Khomeini but in 1989 he fell out with the Rahbar (Supreme leader) over Iran's human rights record and became an increasingly vocal critic of the regime, accusing it of imposing dictatorship in the name of Islam. In 1997 he went under house arrest for criticising the current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and its poor scholarly records.

On 10 July 2009 Montazeri wrote a fatwa against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad asking the clergy to take position: *It is in the tradition of infallible Imams to always fight for social justice. If the Imam had oc-*

cupied himself only with religious matters he would have been subject to ever-greater oppression and martyrdom. God asked the wise, particularly religious scholars, not to remain silent in the face of injustice.

I personally had the occasion to interview Grand Ayatollah Montazeri in his house, in Qum, some years ago. He was open regarding human rights, he was happy that Ms. Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel peace prize in October 2003. However, Montazeri was not so radical about gender equality: when I asked him about women's rights to divorce, he replied that «Iranian women are too strong, too independent, too moody. If given the right to divorce, Iranian women would leave their husbands as soon as they (the men) misbehaved, without thinking of the consequences. Iranian men – declared the old ayatollah – were more careful in their decisions. For a man, divorcing means finding himself alone, with a house and kids, and the need to find another wife as soon as possible». Thus, according to Montazeri women should not be granted the right to divorce. Regarding the possibility to be elected as MP, Montazeri declared that some women might have the intellectual skills, but most do not. Thus, politics is rather a man's job.

Ayatollah Sanei

Rather more open on women's rights is ayatollah Sanei, who is seen by many as Montazeri's successor and as the spiritual leader of the green movement. Sanei is a senior reformist cleric and a marja'e taqlid. Born in Isfahan in 1937, Sanei retired from the Council of Guardians in 1983 and has not held any political office since. On the status of women he has declared that women have equal status in Islam, and they qualify for being a judge, head of State, and even a marja'e taqlid, meaning getting to top of the Shia religious hierarchy.

On non-Muslims, Ayatollah Sanei said that if they obey a holy religion they are not *najès* and they equally deserve to go to paradise if they follow their religion sincerely. During the last presidential elections Sanei issued a *fatwa* proclaiming that Ahmadinejad «was not the president and that it is forbidden to cooperate with his government». On forced confessions, during a August 12 speech at Gorgan he said that «Confession in prison and detention has not been and is not valid ... all persons who have somehow been involved in issuing these confessions are sharing the same sin ... they will receive the retribution of their perfidious acts in this world and in a fair, righteous court».

Radicals in Iran are well aware of Ayatollah Sanei's importance. A day after the funeral procession of Montazeri members of Iran's *bassij* militia and "plainclothes men" attacked his offices in Qom and on 2 January 2010 a top clerical body in the holy city of Qom declared that Sanei no longer qualifies to be a *marja'e taqlid*. Conservatives and Traditionalist condemned this move to disqualify Ayatollah Sanei as a Marja and pointed out that even a renowned Marja such as Ay. Sistani is not listed by them as such.

I met Ayatollah Sanei in his office in the holy city of Qum some nine-ten years ago. Towards the end of my interview I asked his opinion about *sigheh* (temporary marriage allowed by the Shia version of Islam established in Iran). Sanei smiled and replied that temporary marriages were not something exotic. They are rather – he said – like relationships, like dating in the West. But the people of Iran gave some sort of religious framework to this.

The Religiousness of a Traditional Society

This to say that the Iranian society is still traditional and takes the clergy into some consideration. And this is not the case only for Shia Muslims. In Iran some 9% of the population is Sunni Muslims who are fighting in order to have their own mosques in cities like Tehran and Mashhad. And, as a consequence of the revolution of 1979 and of the creation of the Islamic republic also the local Jewish community is now more religious than at the time of the last Shah.

The green opposition movement is not rejecting religion. The protesters first asked "Where is my vote?" and criticized the outcome of the elections of 12 June. Then the green opposition movement questioned the legitimacy of those in power, in particular Ayatollah Khamenei. But, still, by night people belonging

to the green opposition movement went (and are still going) on top of their roofs and chanted "Allah-u Akbar" (God is great).

Also the leaders of the green movement are not rejecting religion. Hojatoleslam Mehdi Karrubi is a member of the Shia clergy, and Moussavi himself belongs to a famous religious family (Ruhollah Khomeini's family name was indeed Moussavi and Moussavi is also Khamenei's family name, according to some sources these last two are cousins). Thus, the problem is not perceived within religion but within the leadership, oppressive and corrupt. For this reason I believe that the clergy can be a key factor of success.

However, as examined before, in the past the Shia clergy has had success only when the bazaar has supported it (from a financial point of view). That happened on the occasion of the tobacco boycott in 1892, of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the Revolution of 1979. Without the support of the bazaar, the clergy hardly has some power. Thus, is the bazaar willing to support a new revolution? I am not so sure. Bazaaris based in Teheran told me they ARE with the green opposition movement BUT they are afraid.

Moreover, a big portion of the economy is now in the hands of the pasdaran. And the regime still enjoys the support of part of the population, as shown by two documentaries shot last year: *Bassidji* by the French-Iranian architect and filmmaker Mehran Tamadon who left Iran when he was twelve and whose father was a member of the Tudeh (Communist Party); and *Letter to the president* by Petr Lom who followed President Ahmadinejad in rural areas of Iran and recorded the support as well as the millions of letters sent to his office.

These documentaries were shot last year, before the presidential elections which took place on 12 June 2009. Probably some support has faded away, due to the repression by the authorities. Such repression is still going on. Two men were hanged at the end of January because members of the opposition based abroad (monarchists as well as *mujaheddin-e khalq*). People are afraid.

The Possible Withdrawal of Economic Subsidies

In the next few weeks one more factor is going to complicate the current situation with the removal of subsidies approved on 13 January by the Council of Guardians, a move which would quadruple the price of gasoline (now it costs some 10 US cents a liter) and could result in similar increases for basic goods, creating an inflation rate of 60% or more.

Through the cuts, president Ahmadinejad hopes to save some \$100 billion now spent to control the prices of petroleum products, electricity, water, wheat, milk, rice, and fertilizer, to name just some of the goods.

Funding those subsidies currently eats up 30 percent of the country's annual state budget. It's not clear when the bill will be implemented but the announcement came a few weeks before the 31st anniversary of the Revolution of 1979. The population of Iran relies on subsidies and the cut might cause further discontent and give new life to the opposition protests. Previous governments have tried to reduce subsidies but all of them have had to reverse their efforts for fear of unrest.

In conclusion, analysts should not underestimate the role of the clergy (and the role of the bazaar) and should focus their attention on the withdrawal of subsidies. As shown by the recent history Iran certainly is an unpredictable country. However, we should bear in mind that revolutions are successful only if the authorities lose their repressive power or their will to repress their own people. And this is not, unfortunately, the case yet.