

Voices of Modernity; Contextualizing the 1999 Students' Protest in Iran

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In Summer of 1999 the students of Tehran University, residing at the main complex of the students' residence, demonstrated against the closure of the newspaper *Salam*, which had become the voice of civil society, and that of the debate on democratic processes. Indeed, this newspaper had become the podium of political development in Iran from early 1990s, particularly after its editor in chief Abbas Abdi was arrested and jailed for eight months. The demonstration clashed with a group of other "students" or bystanders who are referred to in Iran as "the helpers of the *Hezbollah*," "pressure groups," "new left," but it seems that a more accurate term is to call them "the radical right".² As a result, people got killed, injured, and the students' rooms were put on fire. The official forces played an ambiguous role and the debate still continues as to who was truly behind the event. What was remarkable was that an event, which many thought would snow ball into a new revolutionary uprising ended in a few days. What does it mean? How does it relate to broader historical evolution of Iranian socio-historical development? Where does it fit in a revolution, which is still unfolding?

Students as voice of modernity

The students' protest in Iran has been explained as a reaction to radicalism and radical conservatism in the recent politics of factionalism of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A broader historical role of the modern university system in Iran, however, tells not a reactive but a proactive account of the role of students and their intellectual mentor within the broader modernization process of Iran. The thesis put forwards here is that the student event represents another aspect the encounter between modernity and tradition in Iran that began almost two centuries ago. The encounter gradually took the form a struggle between the traditional and the modern state in Iran. Here is the pivotal question: who has been the voice of modernity in Iran? If this question is properly understood the student protests will be contextualized and understood. Moreover, it becomes even clearer as to why it ended so quickly and why life returned to normalcy within days after the event. I content that the question can be addressed through structural explanation of Iranian socio-political evolution.

The Iranian polity used to be an agrarian based kingship with its own elaborate structure and social stratification. Upon encountering the modernity project, which came to its peak during the Russo-Iranian wars of 1813-1828, during the reign of the Qajar dynasty, Iran lost its internal confidence. The 1828 treaty of Turkmanchai ended the long wars and separated important territories from the empire (Today's Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan). More importantly and also explicitly positioned the Iranian merchants in a disadvantaged position as compared to their foreign counterparts,³ and formally compromised the political stature of the country. The wars proved absolutely detrimental for the future course of events

in Iran. This loss of confidence sets the pace for general direction of life in the country. It signified to the members of the Iranian elite that the survival of their society depended on serious rethinking of their polity. They accepted that no longer the agrarian based traditional Irano-Islamic State would perform the paradoxical task of satisfying the demands of their people

The response was an interesting modernization program, which included all segments of the society, the court, aristocracy, land owning class, the *Bazar* and the traditional intelligentsia, the *Ulama*. Note that I have not included the army and the bureaucracy. I have elaborated on my reasons for excluding them elsewhere.⁴ Suffice it here to state the unlike the cases of Turkey or Pakistan, the army in Iran has ever been a political force. The exceptions are twice in the twentieth century for bringing the two Pahlavi kings into power, but in both cases it was foreign interest that interfered and encouraged the army.

Modernization in Iran began when the contemporary king's oldest son and vice regent, Abbas Mirza, who saw the solution in the updating and modernization of the state, initiated it.⁵ First, he dispatched a group of to study new sciences abroad. Gradually, the number increased, and the importing of other modern institutions followed.⁶ The dispatched Iranian students abroad returned, the imported institutions bore fruit, but with a paradoxical result. While these developments created a sophisticated view of the West for a small group, which tried to learn from it while preserving cultural authenticity, there emerged a powerful trend, which contributed greatly to the acceleration of the influence of Western modernity. Whereas the early encounter between modernity and Iran produced a sober response of studying, selection and borrowing, soon a group of assimilators emerged who had no time for slow and gradual change. They wanted to become like the West as fast as possible. Let us call the first the modernizers and the second pseudo-modernizers or Westernizers.

Soon the modernizers realized that there is a need for a new state as a whole that would incorporate the old state as well. But it would need new elite. The new state they thought would comprise of a reigning but not ruling monarch, the parliamentary constitution, a new intelligentsia trained by modern institutions of learning and a new type of economic class such as Hajj Amin al-Zarb who help fund the working of the new state. The Westernizer on the other hand wanted a savior who quickly takes Iran to the path of advancement. Both modernizers and the Westernizers participated in the long and the uneasy journey of modernization of Iran. At least four waves of modernization can be identified: The first began with Abbas Mirza and ended with the assassination of the modernizing chief minister, Amir Kabir (1846). The elimination of the latter did not put an end to the process; *Dar al-Funun*, the first modern institute of higher learning was established after Amir Kabir's death. The second occurred in the 1870s and ended with the assassination of the Naser ed-din Shah in 1896. As I have argued elsewhere, the bullet that killed the king made a big hole in the traditional cosmological worldview in Iran⁷. The third culminated in the constitutional revolution of 1905-911 and the fourth in the nationalization of oil industry by Dr. Muhammad Mosaddeq in 1949-1953. All have contributed to the coming of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and rightly have been considered as the precursors of that revolution⁸. In these genuine attempts for modernization, the leadership was comprised of the prominent members of the *Ulama*, the landlords, and the merchants, that is the traditional political elite,⁹ as well as the

emerging elite for the new state. Politically the new parliamentarians, economically the bourgeoisie and intellectually the university people (including the Ulama who joined them) and the media compromised the matter.

Indeed, as the classic historian of the constitutional movement, Ahmad Kasravi rightly puts it, the constitutional revolution began when the prominent *Ulama* in Tehran declared their joint support for the movement, their date of cooperation “should be taken as the beginning of the constitutional movement”.¹⁰ To put it differently, the genuine process of modernization was done by the traditional Iranian elite, for the sake of the Iranian cultural milieu and utilized proper adoption of the fruits of modernity. The same Kasravi reports of, the prominent leader of the Ulama, Muhammad Tabatabaei saying I do not know what constitutionalism mean but I have heard wherever it exist it limits despotism, helps people and enhance their welfare. The new changes ranged from modern trade all the way to translation of many prominent works on the know-how as well as the intellectual achievements of the modern West.¹¹ The Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905-1911) was the peak of this genuine effort. The king signed the constitution and the motion was set for the emergence of the new state. A series internal and external event disabled the new regime for producing a balanced polity. A double process ended the event in a disaster which postponed the genuine unfolding of modernization in Iran for fifty years. First, a clash between the forces of the traditional state and the forces of the modern state that is the “progressive, educated individuals committed to the (Western) type of democracy”¹² created schism in the rank of the revolutionaries. The hanging of Shaykh Fazl al-Allah Nuri (1909) indeed marked the absolute rift between the two states. Second unfortunate unfolding of events of post World War One joined the interest of the British Empire with that of the Westernizers who backed the coup of 1921 by Reza Khan Pahlavi. The latter established his dynasty at the top of a despotic rule. The new dynasty initiated a program of state building through wholesale adaptation of the Western ways, a program rightly referred to as “pseudo modernization.”¹³ The final attempt at genuine modernization came after Reza Shah was deposed during World War Two, as a result of which the national populist leader Dr. Mohammad Mossaddeq spearheaded the nationalization process of the oil industry. It is interesting to note that even here, the forces of modernization in Iran could gain power only because the forces of traditional and modern state cooperated, Mosaddeq representing the modern state and Abolghasem Kashani representing the traditional state. This new phase of modernization experienced the same faith as the constitutional one. The schism between Kashani and Mosaddeq weakened the forces of modernization. And the unfolding of events in post World War Two brought, this time, America to Iran and the August 1953 coup inaugurated the rule of a police state in Iran until the 1979 revolution.¹⁴ To me the most important contribution of the Mosaddeq’s era relates to the democratization of politics in Iran. While the crowd has been brought into the political realm during the constitutional revolution,¹⁵ it was Mosaddeq who explicitly declared that “wherever there are people, that is the assembly.” And while an active media operated during the previous movements, it was in Mosaddeq’s era that there was an explosion of print media. The effect of these would only come later because Mosaddeq’s era ended with the absolute domination of the Westernizers and a complete separation of state and society.

Emergence of a new intelligentsia

Internally though, the significant event was the emergence of a new Westernizing intelligentsia. Unlike the modernizing and traditional intelligentsia, however, whose members were both indigenous and universal, i.e., had respect for their local culture while appreciated what the world had to offer, the new ones were alien with their own culture. More so, they had contempt for religiosity and traditionalism of the Persian masses.¹⁶ These new pseudo modernist intellectuals first helped the consolidation of the power of the Pahlavi autocracy, and second acted as agents of wholesale Westernization. The latter performed the role of prism in Iranian societal context. To use Riggs' notion of "the prismatic model,"¹⁷ just as the ray of light shatters after it passes through the prism, the relative cohesion of Iran was disrupted. Its forces went to various and, at times, opposing directions, with a devastating effect on the life of Iranians. It paved the way for the complete destruction of Iranian self-confidence. Gradually the main question became adaptation of foreign way: Production and creativity gave ways to emulation and imitation. How to become like the West became the dominant paradigm. The process is epitomized in the following words from Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh, a sophisticated Iranian intellectual, revolutionary activist, statesman, historian, philologist, an essayist, and a pseudo-modernist type. For him the solution to the Iranian crisis was:

"Unconditional acceptance and emanation of European civilization, and absolute submission to Europe and the adaptation of its mores and custom.... [In short,] Iran has to become Europeanized in appearance, essence, physical features and spiritual aspects. There is no other way."¹⁸

None of the nineteenth century modernizing Iranian intellectuals had expressed such a bold subordination to Western ways. As a result, the Pahlavi era disrupted any genuine attempt at modernization of Iran when the two Pahlavi kings followed this motto, which later became the central bone of contention between the forces of genuine modernization and those of Westernization. Here again a reminder that the forces of modernization in Iran, whenever, it was successful was an alliance of the two elite, those of the traditional and modern state. It is important to note that the uprising of 1963 did not get very far because the forces of the new state did not join the uprising led by Ayatollah Khomeini and suppressed very quickly. However an intellectual joining of the forces of modernity soon termed the Westernization program of the pseudo-modernizers as Weststruckness.¹⁹ It is not surprising that the Islamic revolution was the result of an alliance between the traditional state, still represented by the *Ulama*, *Bazar* and the traditional men of power in Iran, and the forces of modernity which are now represented by the university system and the youth, the new national bourgeoisie and the modern intelligentsia (comprised of secular and religious intellectuals). Also not strange that the early demands of the revolutionaries included a reigning monarch with an efficient parliamentary system. The revolution forced the Westernizers out and branded the Pahlavi dynasty as the agent of foreign influence. Although in the aftermath of the revolution the traditional state gained control of the new polity, but the modernizing forces had their own

victory. Indeed the two states exist side by side in Iran and even within the constitution. The Jurisconsult or the leader, the Council of Guardian, the Assembly of Expert, and the traditional Ulama and segment of the parliament comprise the traditional state, while the president, many members of the parliament, the new intelligentsia and reformer member of the Ulama, Women, the university people, the student, and most of the media represent the new state. The stage was set for serious debate between the two.

At least two factors, however, postponed the serious encounter of the modernizing forces and the traditional state. One was the towering figure of Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, who obviously favored the traditional state, although he helped the survival of the modernizing forces by his continued attempt at creating a balance between them. His death in 1989 opened the debate. The second factor was the continuation of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989), which indeed postponed the post-revolutionary state building in Iran. The end of the war and the death of Khomeini brought the opening of Iran to foreign capital, ideas, and inaugurated what the then President Rafsanjani called economic development. The assumption was that it was possible to have development with the persistence of the traditional state, a mistake that the Shah had done in 1970s. Soon, it was proven that the traditional state has lost its relevance and it had to be replaced with a new one namely that of the modern state. In the modern state, the final arbiter is "the rule of law," and not a religiously sanctioned office, and the ruling class is comprised of the modern intellectual class and the university people (*Roushanfekran*), the established social class (*Kargozaran*) and the new economic class (*Bourgeoisie*). The victory of Khatami in May 1997, was in reality the victory of the forces of genuine modernity in Iran, who declared the irrelevancy of the traditional state. Since then the two states have been competing and the students' demonstration was a reaction to one aspect of this competition.

Civil discourse over violent confrontation

This is all the more true now that the spokespeople of the modernity project in Iran now are comprised of students, the youth, women, media people and in general civil society institutions and groups. They demand the rule of law, transparency, open debate, normalization of relations with other country. This may explain why no particular person has emerged as the leader. It is because of the sophistication of the process this time, that in contrast to the 1870s, 1900s, and the 1950s, the encounter between the forces of change and new states and that of the old immediately turned into a civil dispute to be handled by a commission of inquiry appointed by the National Security Council. What is important is that the two states have to learn to live together otherwise the unfolding of Iranian soci-political history may fall into the same unfortunate fate of the two centuries of civil strife. What is a hopeful sign this time, relates to the sophisticated process of globalization.²⁰ Unlike the two cases of the constitutional movement and the nationalization one, there is no imperialistic rivalry affecting the fate of Iran. More importantly the new information civilization with its post-modernity has discredited the Western narrative of modernity. This plus its enabling effect would help the voices of genuine modernization to work out a genuine, but inclusive solution.

Endnotes

- ¹ I would like to thank Professors Ali Akbar Mahdi and Mahmood Monshipouri for their insightful comments on this paper. I particularly want to thank professor Mahdi for his questions.
- ² Rajaei 1999
- ³ Isawi 1971
- ⁴ Rajaei 1994
- ⁵ I am not suggesting that the relations of Iran and Europe started with Abbas Mirza. It had already begun during the Safavid, when the relation between Iran and Europe was relatively extensive. The Safavid invited military advisors and freely borrowed from this newly emerging modern civilization.
- ⁶ Mahbubi Ardakani, 3 volumes 1354-70 / 1975-91
- ⁷ Rajaei 2nd printing 1998: 99
- ⁸ e.g. Keddie 1981
- ⁹ Rajaei 1994
- ¹⁰ Ahmad Kasravi, 14th printing, 1363/1985: 49
- ¹¹ Nategh 1990: 208-251
- ¹² Adamiyat 1355/1977: 228
- ¹³ Katouzian 1981
- ¹⁴ Bill and Roger Louis 1988
- ¹⁵ Abrahamian 1982
- ¹⁶ Ashraf 1996
- ¹⁷ Riggs, 1964: part two
- ¹⁸ *Kaveh* 1: January 22, 1920
- ¹⁹ Al-Ahmad, 1982
- ²⁰ Rajaei, 2000

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DISCUSSION

Ali Akbar Mahdi:

Professor Rajaei's article outlines the historical trajectory of Iran's encounter with the Western modernity. Using the distinction between modern and pseudo-modern, he identifies forces representing each of these in the Iranian modernity project. I believe that the fundamental element of his argument, that the true forces of modernity in Iran have relied on university system, is very important and valid. He identifies students, belonging to this system, as a major force of modernity in Iran. He also identifies the "ulama" during the constitutional period as a force of modernity, without making any distinction among them. While I agree with his general point about the connection between modernity and the modern educational system, I am confused about his classification of forces affiliated with modernity and traditionalism. To be brief and constructive, I pose my concerns in a question format:

1. Who is traditional intelligentsia in Iran, being both "indigenous and universal"? If Taqizadeh was a pseudo-modernist, what was Seyed Fakhroddin Shadman? A traditionalist or modernist? Where does Al Ahmad stand relative to the latter? How does Motahhari compare with Shari'ati in this regard? In today's Iran, Mesbah Yazdi with Shabestari? Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi with Ayatollah Sanei? Can we really treat the *ulama* as a monolithic category?
2. Yes, Kasravi was right that the Constitutional Revolution would have not been possible without the support by Ayatollahs Tabatabaee and Behbahani in Tehran (and Naini and Khorasani too). But, does Kasravi's acknowledgment mean "the genuine process of modernization [in Iran] was done by the traditional Iranian elite"? Who is this traditional elite? I know it is difficult to classify Abbas Mirza, Amir Kabir, Aminoddoleh, Sepahsalar, Soleiman Mirza Eskandari, Haj Zeinolabedin Maraghehee, Abdolrahim Talebof, Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, and Akhundzadeh all as modernists but did their beliefs and deeds contribute to traditionalism or modernity? Where did they stand relative to different individual members of the ulama or relative to constitutional issues?
3. Who were Iranian intellectuals who opposed "genuine" modernity? Professor Rajaei

names “pseudo modernists” like Taqizadeh and the “new intelligentsia” who were “alien with their own culture,” “unlike the traditional intelligentsia... whose members were both indigenous and universal.” I wonder how would Professor Rajaei characterize Sheikh Fazollah Nouri in this debate? How about Ayatollah Khomeini who, according to Rajaei, favored “the traditional state”? What are the elements of “universalism” in the works of most religious intellectuals supporting the Islamic state in Iran? Granted, the 2nd Khordad Front is more open to cultural exchange and modernism than its intellectual and political opponents, but how universal is their attitude toward people of other religions, especially Baha’is, and ideologies, especially Marxists?

4. Following previous question, what about the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, as the strongest and largest student organization in the past two decades in Iran which was basically aiding the “traditional state” to purge universities from “secular, leftist, and *Gharbzadeh* professors and students”? Were these students acting as a force of modernity, pseudo modernity, or traditionalism?

5. In short, can we be so categorical about all these social strata and ideological groupings, whether students, intellectuals, or clerics?

Mahmood Monshipouri:

Dr. Rajaei: A stimulating essay. A natural progression of your logic and thoughts may lead one to ask a question on the influence of post-modernist school of thought in Iran. Increasingly, both Islamic and secular thinkers in Iran refer to the plurality of views and tolerance, as well as the shifting nature of public discourses. University students regard post-modernists as legitimate shapers of ideas. My question: How would you interpret post-modernity and its impact in Iran given that the new state and its proponents tend to be among the globalizers?

Farhang Rajaei

After reading the questions and comments that Professors Mahdi and Monshipouri raised, I felt I should incorporate the main thrust of their points in the body of the essay rather than treat them separately. It occurred to me that making the central thesis of the paper more clearly would automatically answer some of the questions raised, and making the final remarks more succinct would address the concerns that professor Monshipouri has raised.

Still, as a way of direct response, some comments are in order. I am quite aware of the danger of the reduction of sophisticated socio-historical events to generalized categories, particularly in the case of Iran where layers of cultural, ethnic, religious, class and economic stratification make it hard to state any general rule. Ten years of being both a participant, an observer, and a field researcher during the unfolding of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, however, made it abundantly clear to me that one can talk about general

trends or paradigms that have regulated and directed events in the past two centuries in Iran.

Three general paradigms of modernization, traditionism (distinct from traditionalism which Jaroslav Pelikan rightly calls “the dead faith of the living”) and pseudo-modernization, or “modernism,” as Marshal Breman refers to it have been powerful paradigms or tendencies at work in recent Iranian history. (In my text I have utilized the notion of Westernization, which accurately depicts the blind imitation of the Western narrative of modernity). Interestingly enough though, the issue as to who belongs to which tendency is the most difficult task to decide, and here is where many of professor Mahdi’s warnings are important reminders. There is such an enormous crossing, moving and mutation among the adherent of these three groups, that it is hard to make any generalization about the individual person or even a group. For example, we are faced with three personalities of Jalal Al-Ahamd, the leftist, the nationalist and the religionist. Who would have thought that he would defend Shaykh Fazdullah Nuri, and pave the way for legitimization of the worse kind of traditionalism.

Yet the shifting of allegiance or grouping has had little influence on the impact of these three paradigms. For better or worse, in terms of shaking, transforming and reshaping of the fabric, the structure and even the symbols of present Iranian society, the most important event has been the “white revolution.” It was the big plan of the pseudo-modernist forces. Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi correctly claim the Iranian Pepsi generation is one of the consequences of these changes. Then comes the nativism or the traditionism of Al-Ahmad whose essay *Gharbzadegi* is possibly the most read piece of work in Iran. An of course the modernity project from Amir-Kabir to Mosaddeq has its own mark on Iranian society. It is in this sense that I became daring and made some generalization.

Haleh Vaziri:

Dear Dr. Rajae: At the risk of being redundant, I have the same concern that Akbar raises in his last question: Can analysts afford to be so categorical when examining key constituencies — clerics, intellectuals, and students — in present-day Iran?

Moreover, I am a bit perplexed by a comment you offer in your conclusion. Do I understand you correctly as remarking that the lack or absence of leadership from within those forces challenging the traditional state is evidence of the opposition’s “sophistication”? Could you please elaborate on this remark?