

**Book Reviews**

**Abbas Milani, *The Persian Sphinx*, Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution, Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2000, Pp400, \$29.95.**

Kamran M. Dadkhah,  
Economics Department  
Northeastern University  
Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

Reading a biography is like traveling in time, reliving another age in the company of a stranger who gradually becomes an intimate acquaintance. It may be Vienna in the second half of the nineteenth century with Sigmund Freud or it could be the early twentieth century with Harry S. Truman in Missouri and Washington, DC. The time and place of *The Persian Sphinx*, however, was much closer to home. A good part of the story unfolds during my lifetime in the city, in which I resided. Excepting a year or two, during the years that I worked for the Iranian government, the protagonist of the book was the Prime Minister. This may be one, though by no means the only, reason why I could not detach myself from this book till I finished it.

Amir Abbas Hoveyda was born in 1919 to a father from a Bahai family and a mother who could boast royal (Qajar) lineage. He studied in Beirut and Brussels earning a degree in political science while becoming fluent in several languages. His facility with foreign tongues and his father's career in diplomatic service opened for him the door to Iran's coveted foreign ministry postings. After serving in the Iranian army he went to France and Germany as a diplomat. It was in these assignments that he met and became a close friend of Abdollah Entezam and Hassanali Mansur who played crucial roles in Hoveyda's life. When Mansur started his political rise by founding the Progressive Circle, then the Iran Novin party, and finally forming a government, Hoveyda as the second in command was at his side. Between the dynamic duo, Hoveyda who apparently had read widely on many subjects was the brain and Mansur the front man. Fate had it that an Islamic fundamentalist assassin's bullet fired from a pistol provided by a future president of Iran —Ali Akbar Rafsanjani—ended Mansur's life. Upon receiving the news of Mansur's death the shah appointed Hoveyda Prime Minister, a post many thought he would hold for only a few months. Instead, Hoveyda served longer than any other premier during Iran's constitutional history.

It seems that Hoveyda had made a pact with the devil of authoritarianism in the hope that through economic development and personal contact with opposition leaders, writers, and others, he would help catapult Iran into the modern age. For a time it seemed that the gamble had paid off. There definitely was economic progress; schools, roads, factories, dams, and power stations were built, and the per capita income of Iran rose

dramatically. Oil revenues were the main engine of this process. But as the economy grew so did the distance between the shah, premier, and the government on the one side and the Iranian people on the other. A prerequisite of modernity is political participation of people. Instead, more and more decisions were concentrated in one man's hands and no dissension was tolerated. Authoritarianism has a twin—corruption—which was rampant in Iran during Hoveyda's tenure. It is true that Hoveyda was not after money and he could not be charged with graft, but he closed his eyes to all the corruption surrounding him. Furthermore, he did not exactly treat the government funds as the church money, rather more like the treasure of a medieval king to be used for buying friends and silencing foes, thus securing his own throne. It was not an exalted throne, however. A condition or reason for his longevity in the office was that Hoveyda denigrated the office of the Prime Minister to the level of a staff member of the shah.

Oil price increases in the early 1970s created a hyper-boom that stretched the fabric of Iranian society to the seams. The squandering of the petrodollars led to an economic crisis which, combined with President Carter's emphasis on human rights, created the avalanche of the Islamic revolution that no one could stop. At the end the devil betrayed his partner and left him in prison at the mercy of the "hanging judge." It is platitude to say that we will all die one day and what difference does it make where and how. But somehow the words Hoveyda uttered in the last moments of his life are poignant. He reportedly said: "It wasn't supposed to end like this." (p.339)

Milani tells the story of Hoveyda with brilliance and a prose that mesmerizes the reader like roman policiers that Hoveyda used to read. Biographies are a new addition to the study of Iran. What still passes as biography in Iran are either hagiographies, slander sheets, or cut and paste jobs. Recently, however, outside Iran, a few biographies of note have been written and, among those that I have read, Milani's work is the best.

To be sure writing the biography of an Iranian is fraught with insurmountable obstacles, which turn the enterprise into a mission impossible. These roadblocks include lack of accessible archives and public records so essential to historical research and so easily available in the western world; prevalence of rumors and innuendoes, at times vicious; and finally the Iranian habit of seeing a person either as the embodiment of goodness or the devil incarnate. Milani has worked hard and has used a variety of sources including both American and French archives as well as JFK and LBJ presidential libraries and published material in Iran. He has also taken the trouble of interviewing close to 130 people who were friends or foes of Hoveyda or had information about him. He does not dismiss rumors but investigates and discusses them. Most important, while he seems to be sympathetic toward Hoveyda, he provides a balanced view of a complex man who played at the center stage of Iranian politics for a long time.

Among the most vicious rumors Milani convincingly puts to rest are charges that Hoveyda was impotent, a homosexual, and even a pederast. We learn from the woman whom he loved and to whom he was married for a short period that all of these are untrue. Using French official documents he also shows that Hoveyda had no hands in the

smuggling scandal of 1945 in Paris. Rather the smuggler was the Iranian envoy Zein al-Abedin Rahnema. Milani notes that Hoveyda was irreligious and, unlike many Iranian politicians, did not pretend piety. In particular, he contends that no document exists to connect Hoveyda to Bahai organizations. Nevertheless, Hoveyda's alleged Bahai association may have helped his standing with the shah, who was not afraid that a Bahai could muster strong popular support, nor would it have been difficult for him to dismiss such a person. It is noteworthy that during the last years of the shah's reign many Bahais attained high positions in the government.

The main question raised in the book, however, is the responsibility of the individual in a despotic society. Was the pact with the devil worth it? By now it should be clear that sustained economic growth and democracy are intertwined, and one cannot be attained without the other. Therefore, Hoveyda was wrong to think that democracy will follow economic growth. The moral of the story seems to be that he who makes a deal with the devil of authoritarianism will lose in the end. Hoveyda was disingenuous to say that he was a cog in the system and cannot be held responsible. He was the Prime Minister and with the higher power comes more responsibility. As his friends and even the "hanging judge" pointed out, he could have resigned; instead he succumbed to the lure of power. But does less power absolve one from responsibility? Is it true that those at lower echelons of government, those who left the country, and those who chose to work in the private sector or engage in purely academic research bear no responsibility for all the corruption and evil doings they knew were happening around them? Shouldn't those who opposed the regime and helped to bring about not the dawn of a brighter morning but a more macabre nightmare be held responsible too? It seems to me that an undemocratic society in which the dignity of the individual is trampled upon and human rights are not respected is the country of the damned whether you are a prime minister or not, and the question posed by this book should haunt every Iranian.

The book is not without minor inaccuracies that irritate a nitpicker like me. For instance, "Reza Khan, ... who by 1921 had become Iran's prime minister" (p.29) which should be 1923; or "at the time of the Allied invasion of Iran in 1942" (p.106) which again should be 1941; the title of Anvar Khomeini's book is not *Panja-o Se Nafar* [The Group of Fifty Three] (p. 356) rather it is *Panjah Nafar va Seh Nafar* [The Fifty and the Three]; and reference is made to the sixteen-volume book *Iran dar Asr Pahlavi* (pp.365-6) without noting the volume. Finally, I did not understand if the "High Ranking Security Official" is a different person than Parviz Sabeti or if Milani is trying to be cute. One also can criticize Milani for trying to show his erudition too often which at times imparts a self-conscience quality to his prose.

But these are minor. *The Persian Sphinx* is a great book, and I hope Milani and others enrich the study of Iran by many more such gems.