

Polarized Lexicons and Political Future of Iran

Hamid Elyassi

By the time this paper is published, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) will have held another Majlis election that, barring some unforeseen development, is unlikely to result in any significant response to the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. But the outcomes of this election, and the presidential election in two years, can provide a further insight into the working of the IRI political system and, analyzed in a general theoretical context, shed light on the future course of Iranian politics.

In this article, I introduce such a context to define the political economy of underdeveloped countries (UDC) and apply it to the Iranian case. I will show that the ideology and actions of the IRI regime have estranged the people and even polarized the political lexicons of the rulers and the ruled. This raises serious questions about the legitimacy of the IRI state and the potency of its favorite options to avert pressure for fundamental change.

Politics of Underdevelopment

Underdeveloped countries are recognized by endemic poverty, economic stagnation and political instability, which reflect their internal structural characteristics. Of these characteristics, economic duality is particularly helpful in examining the causes of economic backwardness and, in a systematic context, in explaining the social and political corollaries of underdevelopment.¹

Economic duality defines the juxtaposition of a modern and a traditional sector within the UDC economy. Each sector has its own economic relations and mode of production. While production units and economic agents in the modern sector function according to the rationales prevalent in advanced economies, the traditional sector is governed by conventions and customs.

The dual structure is essentially correlated with a dichotomous class configuration. This, in turn, determines the nature of the political process to which usually only the elite layers of the traditional and modern sectors gain admission. In the traditional sector, submission to parochial values prevents the masses—common members of rural and tribal communities—from acquiring the class awareness necessary for the pursuit of their collective interests at the national level. Instead, they tend to side and comply with the wishes of the traditional elite—the feudal landlords, tribal chiefs, traditional merchants and their cultural allies. In the modern sector, the existence of a pool of unemployed labor inhibits effective political organization by workers, leaving the political stage to the vocal elements of this sector—the capitalists; the urban middle classes; and members of modern institutions, such as the armed forces; and the bureaucracy.

The modern and traditional elites engage in the political process to forge the policies of the state in support of their fundamentally inconsistent ideas and objectives. While the modern elite expect the state to transform the nation into an image of advanced countries², the interests of the traditional elite are served by the persistence of the traditional mode of life.

This discrepancy of objectives has grave implications for the stability of the UDC state. In any community, the rulers derive their legitimate authority from identifying with and assuming the fundamental aspirations and expectations of, at least, the politically vocal sections of their people. Confronted with two incompatible

sets of expectations, the UDC state is unable to attain broadly accepted legitimacy and thus has to grapple with partial authority.

Ruptured authority inevitably entails a set of destabilizing policy options. The rulers may align solely with the traditional elite to the exclusion of modern interests. If so, the state has to assert its authority by appeal to customs and traditions, perhaps even claiming some supernatural right to rule. Conversely, they can adopt the ideals of the modern elite and disregard traditional values and inclinations. Now, the state has to rationalize its claim to govern by submitting to a logically ascertainable source of authority such as the will of the people expressed in a democratic setting.

The Pendulum Syndrome

Adoption of any of these alternatives can be compared to pulling a pendulum to one extreme or the other, and resisting the pressure to draw it in the opposite direction. In UDC politics, the pressure takes the form of subversion by the excluded elite, using their economic, political and social leverage to unseat the government and even incite total revolution.

To avoid such pressures, the UDC government typically takes on the role of the mediator in the conflict of interests between the modern and traditional forces. In other words, it tries to balance the political pendulum in some middle position and continually adjust it in response to changes in the relative influence of the competing sectors. Though such a stance may placate pressures for total or revolutionary change in the whole structure of the state and its supportive social and economic foundations, it can hardly ensure overall stability.

The divergence of the political attitudes of the traditional and modern forces is not confined to their irreconcilable conceptions of authority. It also extends to the way in which authority is seen to be asserted. Assertion of authority on the basis of customs and conventions requires cultivating habits and traditions. This contradicts the modern belief that persuasion is the only legitimate way to acquire authority through public consent.

Faced with the conflict of concepts and approaches, the mediating UDC state tends to rely on an anomalous combination of coercion and manipulation that hardly endears the ruling circle to anyone. And in a system beset by economic and social stagnation and the chronic failure of the state to meet the social and economic expectations of all aspirant members of the elite, let alone public demand for material improvement, the rulers face no shortage of pretenders to power, including those entrusted with the instruments of oppression³.

Yet, the middle position of the pendulum is not the only conceivable option open to the UDC state. The impasse of underdeveloped politics may be resolved by expunging the duality of the social system. One way to achieve this outcome is to eliminate the modern sector and its objectives, which, I shall argue, has formed the ideological backbone of the IRI. This solution, however, is hardly tenable in a world where all nations are exposed to external sources of change. Alternatively, the state may try to modernize the entire social system. But this solution succeeds only if the prerequisites of modernity are met. Though it may be conceptually possible for the modernizing state to eliminate the power base of the traditional elite by force, modernization through coercion is a contradiction in terms. As the recent history of Iran demonstrates, such an approach not only antagonizes the traditionalists, but also alienates the modern classes as the natural allies of the modernizing state. Only through democratic rule are the masses, and not just the modern elite, persuaded to enter the fight against backwardness.

Pendulum Syndrome and the Islamic Revolution

The history of Iran between the victory of the Constitutional Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic contains several instances of the swing of the political pendulum. The Constitutional Revolution, as a victory for modernist ideals, was followed by the return of traditional autocracy, which in turn gave way to the rule of largely traditional interests behind a democratic veneer. This state of compromise ended with Reza Shah's dictatorial modernization, itself followed by yet another period of compromise before a new round of modernizing efforts, again without meeting its necessary political prerequisites, was attempted by his son.

Mohammad Reza Shah's development efforts, like those of his father, succeeded in expanding the social and economic bases of modernity without opening up the political process to modern forces. Thus, it was inevitable that his policies should end in a disastrous finale that he had unwittingly helped to stage.

In particular, during the final decade and a half of his reign, when the Shah's dictatorial rule was driving the disaffected modern classes into opposition, his traditional adversaries, represented by the clergy and their Bazaar allies, were gaining sympathy by claiming objectives that appealed to a wider spectrum of the Iranian society⁴. As a result, despite the diversity of the political and social forces that participated in the uprisings of 1978-79, the traditional interests came to dictate the following course of events and establish the Islamic Republic as the epitome of traditionalism.

It is interesting that even the title of the new regime emphasized the ascendancy of traditionalism. As a predominantly Muslim country, the Iranians had never denied their attachment to Islam. However, for decades, nationalism had embodied the ideals of modernity against the defenders of traditionalism who pursued their interests under the emotive banner of the religion.

The revolutionary swing to traditionalism was translated into the policies of the new regime. With the creation of an antiquated form of government, the Islamic Republic embarked on a series of economic, social, and cultural policies to abnegate modernist ideals and abolish modernist gains made since the Constitutional Revolution. The ruling elite, exploiting people's revolutionary fervor, was trying to turn the clock back at a stroke.

Factionalism for Political Manipulation

As might have been expected, the regime's efforts to counter modernist ideals and dismantle modern institutions soon came up against the imperatives of the present age. In particular, the war with Iraq compelled the Islamic Republic to reinstate such modern institutions as the armed forces, government bureaucracy, and educational institutions. Thus, a state devoted to traditional views and values was forced to make concessions to modern ideas and social forces it intended to obliterate.

The war also gave the IRI leader the opportunity to assume absolute power. During the Shah's rule, the clergy had taken on a leading role in opposition with the backing of the Bazaar as the economic arm of traditionalism. With the Revolution, the Bazaaris monopolized the economic and political scenes, no doubt expecting to retain their supremacy. But once in control of state resources, Ayatollah Khomeini no longer needed handouts of potentially recalcitrant Bazaaris who could always promote rival sources of religious authority. The economic exigencies of the war gave the Ayatollah all he needed to do away with the need to share power.

With the argument that the government had to control every aspect of the wartime economy, the notion of the absolute rule of the faqih was proclaimed. Now, the old Bazaar was obliged to go to the state for a share in the national wealth, while the government exploited its right of granting trade and distribution concessions to foster a new class of nouveau riche merchants from among those with undivided loyalty to the leadership. Thwarting the ambitions of the old Bazaar and its cleric allies accompanied the Ayatollah's decision to lead a group of relatively minor, but completely obedient, clergymen into a new political formation⁵.

Dependent on state favoritism for survival, the new alliance of economic and political upstarts was dubbed the "the left," which also conveyed the modern notions of the left and the right. They were then encouraged to compete with the old bazaar and its clerical allies who, not unexpectedly, accepted the title of "the right," perhaps to remind the devout of their longstanding opposition to the secular left.

Notwithstanding their different appellations and disputes over division of economic and political privilege concentrated in the hands of the state, both factions of the ruling oligarchy were united in defense of the fundamentally traditional values of the Islamic regime against the resurgence of modern forces. Yet, their rivalry justified and bolstered the position of Ayatollah Khomeini as the indispensable arbiter in factional disputes while conveying an impression of political choice for the people.

Thanks to its undivided loyalty, the left remained in control of many of the crucial organs of the state until Ayatollah Khomeini's death. But his successor, lacking sufficient religious stature and moral authority, had to rely on the established religious figures and, inevitably, their old Bazaari allies to consolidate his position. In a dramatic reversal of fortunes, the left was pushed to the margin and the ascendance of the right continued until the new leader, having utilized the immense prerogatives of his office to create a sufficiently strong power base, felt confident enough to bring back some of the old factional rivalries.

Manipulation and "Reforms"

Meanwhile, the regime's static traditionalism was coming into conflict with Iranian society's inherent dynamism. Over the years, IRI's failure to isolate the nation from the external sources of moral and ideological influence, alongside changes in the demographic composition of the population, generated a widening cleavage between the ideology and actions of the state and the aspirations of the people. Despite claiming continued mass support for the "original ideals" of the Islamic Republic, the regime did not remain indifferent to this deep-seated crisis.

In response to the flawed source of its political authority, the state increasingly turned to systematic coercion, targeting the vocal sections of the population, and political manipulation, hoping to convince the masses of its legitimacy. Organized mass demonstrations, extensive propaganda, and regular elections in a highly controlled environment have been tried to conceal the deepening schism within the Iranian body politic.

By holding regular elections, the in-groups have not only referred some of their unsettled disputes to the electorates' arbitration, but have also tried to demonstrate the existence of a popular basis of authority to forestall emergence of solidarity among the masses and opposition forces. Instruments of coercion and manipulation, however, tend to become routine and lose potency. To avoid this, the Iranian rulers, like many undemocratic regimes, have tried to convince the people of the state's capacity to embrace all conflicting views current in society. In the IRI, this

solution has been applied by including modernist sentiments in the slogans of the in-groups under the banner of reforms.

The first attempt at reforms, pointedly avoiding the notion of political change, was Mr. Rafsanjani's reconstruction program. But without transforming the rigid structure of power monopolized by the ruling oligarchy, his policies simply gave a free hand to the most brutal members of the in-groups to serve their economic interests with impunity and dismiss any hint of public supervision. Indeed, by the conclusion of Mr. Rafsanjani's second term, influential voices within the regime were openly calling for political absolutism to dispense with all pretenses of check and balance.

Not unexpectedly, the reconstruction program failed dismally. Without democracy, economic liberalism does not entail progress through free competitions; it fosters corruption and oppression. For the IRI, Rafsanjani's "reforms" intensified internal antipathy and international alienation.

With the following presidential election, the regime attempted to rein in public disaffection. Recognizing that the Iranians attributed their dire economic and social conditions to the politics of the Islamic Republic, Mr. Khatami won a landslide victory with promises of political change.

Challenge of the Future

No doubt many of those who voted for Mr. Khatami expected radical reforms in the political life of the nation. But in time, it emerged that the President's notion of reforms⁶ went no further than the reinstatement of the "original ideals of the revolution" which hardly coincided with the people's understanding of the term. In fact, it was soon evident that while the voters had expected an overhaul of the political structure as the prerequisite of economic and social improvement, Mr. Khatami's intention evolved around preserving the existing political set-up while consolidating its authority through public acquiescence. In the terminology of our pendulum model, while the voters had expected a shift to modern values of liberal democracy and development, the President's promotion of "Islamic democracy" aimed at bolstering the authority of the clerical rule and its traditional values.

Yet, the tragedy of Mr. Khatami's presidency, and the hopes it raised and dashed, has helped further clarify the modernist aspirations of the people against the traditional objectives of their rulers. Today, one can hardly find any common grounds between the expectations of the people and the intentions of the state.

Mr. Khatami's term has also served as an important catalyst in revealing the inner core of the political structure of the IRI. The question is whether it has made the Iranian rulers aware of the consequences of their failure to resolve the chronic political crisis they have created. If not, perhaps the forthcoming elections will do so.

At present, the in-groups are united in their concerted effort to ensure a large turnout at the polling stations. But even if they succeed, this should not be construed as the proof of the authority and stability of the political system. At best, it may suggest people's willingness to give the state a breathing space to respond to their unswerving demand for change. And a small turnout will not merely indicate "voter apathy". It will show the failure of the tried methods of the Islamic Republic to preserve the status quo.

In either case, the IRI rulers would do well to recognize the nature of the conflict between their ideology and interests and those of the people which, if neglected, may find its own revolutionary resolution.

Endnotes

- ¹- The first source below explains the duality of UDC economy and the following two sources (in Persian) extend it to the UDC society and politics: W. Arthur Lewis, "Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labor" (Manchester School, 1954) accessible at: <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/3681/3681lewistable.pdf>
Hamid Elyassi, vabestegiye 'jahan e sevvom' (Dependency of the Third World) (Tehran: Ettellaat Publishers, 1364) Part II. Hamid Elyassi, vaqeyiate tosee nayaftegi (Realities of underdevelopment) (Tehran: Sherkat Sahami Enteshar, 1368, 1377)
- ²- Even though modernists may differ over the ways to achieve this.
- ³- And not just the military staging coups. In the course of investigating the serial murders, it emerged that the IRI Intelligence Ministry, as an arm of oppression, not only controlled the in-groups and dictated to the Majlis, but even formulated some of the main policies of the supreme leader.
- ⁴- For this, they even endorsed the ideas of "modern Islamists."
- ⁵- Formation of the leftist "majmma'a rohanyun mobarez" was a result of Ayatollah Khomeini's decision to dismantle the Islamic Republican Party, which, as a political formation, might appeal to the masses over his head. I was told by a member of this group that Ayatollah Khomeini's explanation was that with two clerical groups, power would be retained by the devout —an idea later formalized in the notion of the "in-groups."
- ⁶- Mr. Khatami did not use the term "reforms" to describe his program; the term would have implied the existence of wrongs to be righted.

Discussion

Mahmood Monshipouri

This is a good historical review and balanced account of the quarter-century ups and downs in the relationships between the two countries of Iran and the United States. I found the concluding section of the paper more refreshing. However, there are questions about the content of some of the issues discussed in the paper.

The author claims that "the Iranian hostage crisis played a major role in President Carter's loss in his re-election campaign in 1980." I am not quite so sure about this. The U.S. economy was in bad shape, with inflation running wild and unemployment figures quite high. Two anti-American revolutions —in Iran and Nicaragua —didn't help either. Mind you, Carter lost a close election in 1980. In fact, in times of crisis and turmoil, Americans have a tendency to rally behind their leaders. Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for instance, led to the expression of the Carter Doctrine, which won wider public appeal at the time. The economy proved to be the key in defeating Carter. The author claims that Candidate George W. Bush during his election campaign in 2000 vowed he would lift the sanctions on Iran. Unless the author substantiates this bold statement with evidence, I am not convinced that Candidate Bush could have typically taken such a controversial position given the group of neocons surrounding him. Unless the author links his concluding remarks with the rehashing of this historical account, I am not satisfied with the title of the paper, which is in many ways "less appealing and catchy." In fact, the concluding remarks could have touched upon "lessons learned" after a quarter-century or "what

lies ahead" so that the reader would have found something to grasp to after reading the essay. Prof. Torbat's account, please don't get me wrong, is educational and logically consistent in terms of explaining U.S. foreign policy toward Iran. It requires a novel ending that can tie all these loose ends, while arriving at a policy position worth pursuing. In this basic sense, the essay falls short. Overall, a fine paper that deserved to be read by those who are interested in a systematic understanding of the foreign relations between the two countries under discussion.

Misagh Parsa

The concepts of traditional and modern are not very useful tools for the analysis because they are imprecise and not mutually exclusive. For example, Reza Shah and his son were modernizers in some ways but also traditional in other respects. You can say the same about Khomeini, particularly, while in Paris.

The lack of usefulness of the concepts can be seen in the paper (in the section under Factionalism and Political Manipulation) where it argues that even the Islamic Republic had to introduce modern institutions.

Later, the paper abandons these concepts in favor of left and right. Instead of using the concepts of traditional vs. modern, it might be better to use terms that focus on democratic and anti-democratic forces. The term oppression is not very precise and not very objective either.

Ali Akbar Mahdi

1. This article utilizes the dichotomy of tradition-modern in a very restricted manner in order to explain the political instability in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It succeeds in explaining the polarized nature of the system and its legitimation crisis. Much of its inspiration comes out of the classical modernization theory without adequate qualifiers for the nuances within the Iranian context. Had Dr. Elyassi used these same yardsticks with more flexibility and nuance, he could have better explained the nature of political crises in both the Pahlavi and the IR regimes. The rigidity with which Dr. Elyassi uses these concepts leads him to some inaccurate applications. Example: "In the modern sector, the existence of a pool of unemployed labor inhibits effective political organization by workers, leaving the political stage to the vocal elements of this sector —the capitalists, the urban middle classes, and members of institutions, such as the armed forces and the bureaucracy." In the early 1970s, who organized these workers? Not the capitalists and the urban middle classes! It was the traditional elite, or clerics, who were able to mobilize and politicize this class. In fact, it was the repressive structure imposed on the modern labor sector that left these workers susceptible to a clerical call for change!
2. Surely, many of the problems associated with underdevelopment in Iran are due to the nature of existing traditions, and those whose interests are tied to them. However, the nature of modernity is not as unproblematic as Dr. Elyassi treats it. The problem of modernization in Iran, as developed by the Pahlavis, was less due to modernization itself than to the kind of modernization adopted for the country. It was the authoritarian nature of this modernization and the dependent structure of the adopted development model that led to a polarized society, which found revolution as the only way out of its political crises. The "modern" during the Pahlavi era came with suppression of democratic institutions (parliament) and political pluralism (political parties). The emphasis was on the bureaucracy,

political order, social discipline, and the hierarchy, not to mention fear and selective repression. That kind of modern itself was the source of polarization that led to revolution.

3. Neither the upper class nor middle class in Iran has ever come to intimately be the sole bearer of modernity or tradition. Both classes demonstrate features of modern and traditional. These features are not as neatly distributed as the author utilizes them in his analysis. While the pendulum syndrome has some utilization in the Iranian context, it does not relate well to intricacies of the Iranian state. The modern state in Iran has never been a mediating force. It has often been a party to the conflict, and that is why the country has not been able to break out of its gridlocks. Sources of political change in 20th century Iran remain diverse. There are more layers of the Iranian society involved in demanding change than Elyassi implies.
4. The author states, "For the IRI, Rafsanjani's 'reforms' intensified internal antipathy and international alienation." The fact is that Rafsanjani initiated the process of breaking out of international isolation. Surely, the real success in this regard emerges during Khatami's Presidency. But, Rafsanjani's presidency did not add to "international alienation," experienced by Iran during the 1980s.
5. In the last note the author states: "Mr. Khatami did not use the term 'reforms' to describe his program; the term would have implied the existence of wrongs to be righted." This was true during his presidential campaign in 1996. By late 1997, the term was so commonplace that the conservative had to accept that "Islam is a reformist religion"! Even Ayatollah Khamenei adopted the term and proposed his own type of reform.