A 21-year-old Reform Movement on the Brink of Success

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PATRICIA SOHN, JAN 26 2018

It has been widely noted now in the Western media that Iran has experienced at least two major reformist movements with groundswells of grassroots support from the street up. One of these protests is very current, happening in recent weeks just before and after the new year. Before that, major national reformist protests emerged in a disputed election in 2009. The 2009 protests came on the heels of the ultra-conservative backlash against the first reformist movement of recent decades, which gets less attention in our press – that of the landslide victory of moderate cleric, Mohammad Khatami in 1997. That election experienced an unprecedented 80% voter turnout (ok, precisely 79.92%, but that is close enough for me to round up). And moderate Khatami won 69.1% of the vote. It was a landslide, and it inaugurated eight years of some degree of reformist power in Iran, albeit curbed by more conservative clerics within the political system. We in the West largely ignored it.

Iran's history of reformist mobilization, then, can be dated at least to the 1997 election upset of moderate and reformist, Mohammad Khatami. Some would date it to the 1979 Iranian Revolution's political and spiritual inspiration and leader, the moderate and modernist Islamic thinker, Ali Shariati. Shariati died in mysterious circumstances not long before the Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from over a decade of exile. Some believe that Khomeini had little to do with the revolution itself and simply took it over after Shariati's death. That is to say, the ideological direction of the post-Iranian revolution period, from 1979 to present, has *always* been *contested*. Shariati adopted the term popularized by Jalal Al-e Ahmad , "*westoxication*" (the actual term in Persian is *gharbzadegi*, literally, struck or bedazzled by the West). Shariati used *gharbzadegi* to describe too-much internalizing of colonial cultural, spiritual, and social norms under Western influence. Shariati was, above all, a post-colonial theorist. He was a moderate who advocated working with modern institutions. He advocated equal status for women within an Islamic (rather than a Western) cultural framework. He especially elevated the exalted figure of Fatima, one of the Prophet's daughters. Fatima was a social, political, and religious leader as well as a committed mother and wife; in the West, Shariati specifically preferred Catholic models of ideal femininity rather than secular Western models. That is, at root, his issue appears to have been less with Western values, *per* se, than with *secular* Western values. He seems less apt to display argument with Western *religious* values. Moreover, far from advocating isolationism, he suggested a sort of pragmatic approach to working with the West – and even drawing upon Western notions of modernity without devolving into a blind materialism – while holding onto Iran's Eastern cultural, spiritual, and social values.

Perhaps because of the nuance required to understand his post-colonial analysis, which Shariati wrote in some ways many years before his time, Shariati was seen as a threat by some (West and East). Nonetheless, he was moderate and in favor of engagement. By contrast, Khomeini, who emerged to replace him, as we know, was extremely anti-West to the point of refusing meaningful political engagement on most levels – sufficient that we have considered Iran an enemy nation since the end of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. What is important about this picture is the disputed nature of the Iranian ideological landscape when considering the level of analysis that should be most important when we ask questions democratic: the people (or, the grassroots).

Iran's recent political history, then, can broadly be outlined in these major periods (which include an additional period of protest sometimes mentioned in press accounts and sometimes not, 2011-2012):

1997-2005: Reformists thwarted by conservative opposition and other factors

2005-2013: Ultra-conservative backlash to the prior period with major electoral protests in 2009 dubbed the "Green Movement," *and* major social protests from 2011-12 over such issues as currency collapse

2013-present: In which, in the 2013 election moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani won 50.71% of the vote, a landslide by most Western standards, albeit modest by contrast to the 1997 Iranian electoral upset; and civil rights oriented clashes in Iran in recent weeks

In our more traditionally valued dualistic terms (with all the appropriate anti-dualist caveats), there are certainly good guys and bad guys in Iran. If local knowledge means anything, which it does, it is important to note that Iranians know best who those good guys and bad guys are. That notwithstanding, democracy movements deserve our support, particularly when they are not simply providing cover for either Bolshevik (e.g., Stalinist totalitarianism) or fascist (e.g., Mussolini- or Franco-styled totalitarianism) autocracy. That is, context and local knowledge matter *greatly*. Nonetheless, without devolving into a rhetorical debate over isolationism versus the West acting as Big Brother to the World (or, as imperialist – colonialist – self-appointed good guys), I would like to suggest that it is about time to support the democratic movement in Iran in any way that we feasibly can.

I understand that doing so risks us losing one of our only last really big "bad guy" enemies. The benefits in the Middle East could be pretty outstanding, however. And I am confident that the brilliant minds at Lockheed Martin, et al., would be delighted (and well-equipped) to contribute to our respective gross national products through waging peace rather than war. Who knows, maybe they would even be willing to contribute to the building of a Buddhist monastery in North Florida, so that I will have somewhere reasonable to pray. Korea is so far away….

Besides, I have been assured by local merchants in East Jerusalem *and* Tel Aviv that many of the minor (and major) textiles that I love best in Israel came into the country, in fact, contemporarily, by road and by truck across the Green Line, across the Allenby Bridge, across Jordan, across Iraq, and directly from Tabriz, or elsewhere in Iran. So much for *that* clash of civilizations. What I would not give to be one of those loads of textiles packed from truck to truck and border to border from Iran to Israel. The world of merchants is so much more interesting than that of a political ethnographer….

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