

The Far Right in the US and the Religious Right in Iran

Written by Alison Assiter

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ALISON ASSITER, FEB 7 2017

20 January 2017 appeared to institute a new world order. Trump's inauguration has seen a flurry of Executive Orders: to roll back Obama care, build a border wall, introduce protectionism, tackle undocumented migrants, deal with 'sanctuary cities', the 'muslim' travel ban – with more to come. Across Europe, Trump is the most unpopular US president in modern times. On Sunday 29 January *The Observer* proclaimed the following on its front page: 'Theresa May's Washington triumph, if that is what it was, will be short-lived. On issues that matter to Britain, Trump cannot be trusted. The US President's first week has proved that he is like nothing that has gone before. Trump is ignorant, prejudiced and vicious in ways that no other American leader has been'.[1]

The levels of sexism, homophobia and, in particular, racism towards Muslims are, some claim, unprecedented in a US president and particularly horrific. But, it is important to set these developments in context. On a historical note, we might remember Hannah Arendt's words, written in 1950 in the first Preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She wrote; 'Never has our future been more unpredictable' and 'On the level of historical insight and political thought, there prevails an ill-defined general agreement that the essential structure of all civilisations is at breaking point.'[2] But secondly, in our proper zeal to challenge the particular horrors pertaining to the new President of the USA, we must not overlook parallels between the far right as described above and forms of right-wing religious thinking. Specifically, I would like to consider the case of Iran – one of the countries singled out by Trump as a nation whose citizens were not to be allowed, under his ban, to enter the USA.

Iran is a regime that attacks women and controls opposition. Amnesty International has reported significant human rights violations there going back decades. According to one writer: 'In 1982, the government in Tehran led an expansive effort to curtail women's rights, attacking their essentialized worth and dignity through the Law of Retribution, which set the official juridical "value of a woman's life [and testimony] [at] only half that of a man's.'"[3] In other words, gender apartheid was and is a fundamental principle of the regime. At the heart of the regime lies the principle of *Velayat-el faqih*. In the words of Khomeini, Iran's first Supreme Leader, 'the role of a vali is like that of a child's guardian. There is no difference between the guardian of a nation and the guardian of a minor. Their duties are the same'.[4] According to another writer, who is herself Iranian: 'I use the terms fundamentalism and fundamentalist specifically for the Islamic state in Iran and those who share the same beliefs and values'. Fundamentalism 'is about absolute control over the female body and mind'.[5]

Perhaps surprisingly, there are parallels between Trump's USA and Iran. At the root of both lies a deep and significant form of misogyny. Trump's personal views of women have been expressed in many places. His racism specifically towards Muslims and Mexicans seems apparent, even if it is dressed up as protecting Americans from potential terror incidents. In Iran, sexism and homophobia are both rampant and political opposition is frowned upon, with very serious consequences for those who attempt to engage in such activity. Indeed, it is important to mention that, according to Amnesty International, there are Iranians living in the USA who now feel victimised by Trump's policies, who are also exiled from Iran. In the light of events like Trump's claim to have had a larger crowd at his inauguration than Obama did at his, despite evidence to the contrary, some have described the present period, as the 'post truth' period.

However, firstly, those living under dictatorships will be very familiar with the 'construction' of the truth; secondly, the creation of fictions in the USA about what is 'really' going on, as Adam Curtis[6] has documented, is nothing new.

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Moreover, thirdly and perhaps most importantly of all, the present period is unique in its ability to provide instant counter-narratives to those created by people in power. Nowadays, there are instant sources providing evidence of what actually happened – for example, comparative photographs of Trump's inauguration crowd versus that of Obama. These sources circulate around the world and provide a counter-narrative. Furthermore, as the women's marches illustrated, it is possible, at very short notice, to mobilise very large numbers of people and find the right tone to counter the various developments outlined above.

Sources like these and the plurality of ideas that they generate will help mitigate against any rise in totalitarian ideology. To quote Hannah Arendt once more: 'terror becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition: it rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way.'^[7] It is vital then for those who object to any of the practices described above to stand against them. Furthermore, a universalist outlook that critiques all forms of repression is an important theoretical perspective to adopt. It is important for those of us like me, who are able to speak out, to do so but to speak out not only against one of these forms of repression, but rather against both.

Notes

[1] *The Observer* 29 January 2017.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schoken Books, USA, 2004, First Preface.

[3] Sara Hassani, 'Maniacal Slaves: Normative Misogyny and Female Resisters of the Mujahadin el Khalk Iran, in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, August 2016, quoting Tohidi 1991, 254).

[4] Khomeini, 1979, quoted in Chitsaz, Sarvnaz, (2000) 'Two Decades of Oppression and Resistance', in *Misogyny in Power: Iranian Women challenge two Decades of Mullahs' Gender Apartheid*, Oise, France: National Council of Resistance of Iran, Committee on Women.

[5] Poya, M. (2000) 'Double Exile, Iranian Women and Fundamentalism', in Sahgal G. and Yuval-Davis N., *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, London, WLUML.

[6] See, Adam Curtis' film *Hypernormalisation*

[7] Hannah Arendt, 'Ideology and Terror; a Novel Form of Government', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 15, no.3 July, 1953, 310.

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