

The Situation in Iran

Ebrahim Yazdi

Middle East Institute

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1-Introduction:

a) Iran is in the state of a transition from a traditional society to a modern one. This process towards modernization of politics and economy, which started almost 150 years ago, has been expedited by 1979 Revolution.

b) Iranian culture could be described as having two dimensions, nationality and religiosity, or Iranian as well as Islamic. These two are so tightly woven together that their separation is almost impossible.

c) One of the major questions regarding the process of modernization in Iran is the compatibility or incompatibility of Islam with such modern concepts as the natural rights of man, democracy and notions of nation and state. Conservatives who lean towards traditional norms insist on the incompatibility of democracy in their reading of Islam and consider it as a sort of blasphemy. Intellectual Muslims, nonetheless, strongly believe that the Islamic world view, including the perception of man in the context of his rights and liberties is compatible with fundamental elements of democracy. Intellectual Muslim thinkers are of the opinion that in order for the concepts of modernity, including democracy, to be institutionalized, they must be incorporated into the national culture and to be domesticated.

Now let us examine briefly what has occurred in Iran before and after 1979 revolution.

2- The traditional political power structure in the Iranian society in the past centuries has had two well-coordinated and balanced pillars: The Shah and the clergy.

-The king, relying on military power and the clerics enjoying deep-rooted influence among the masses.

-The inter-relation between the two and their respective relations with the Iranian people has been such that in any struggle between the two, Shah has always lost to the clergy.

-on the other hand, the clerics seldom ruled directly.

3- In 1960, a dispute between the Shah and the clerics developed. The Shah neglected history's lessons regarding the long standing balance of power, and instead of seeking a compromise with the clerics, he confronted them actively and openly, thus lost any chance and opportunity for reconciliation. As a consequence, clerics joined the anti-despotic movement spear-headed mainly by the intellectuals, resulting in the overthrow of the Shah.

4- Three major political forces were involved in the Iran's Revolution and contributed to its victory:

- a) The clerics,
- b) Muslim intellectuals and
- c) Secular intellectuals.

5-The first group, the clerics had particular qualifications which helped the revolution to succeed and at the same time led to their consolidation of power after the revolution:

a) They have a deep rooted influence among the masses. To understand the impact of this influence, one must consider two points.

Point one – Although Shah succeeded in manipulating and neutralizing all the intellectual political opponents, he failed to control entirely the clerics or to close down religious institutions.

Point two - There are many thousands of otherwise independent active institutions, e.g. mosques all over the country. The number of clerics is estimated to be around 160000. All clerics have been educated in seminaries with comparable curriculum, resulting in a very homogeneous ideology. These qualities were instrumental in mobilizing and bringing masses in to the rank and file of the anti-despotic movement.

6- Also ignoring the lessons of history, the clerics made a historical mistake by assuming direct rule. They were not qualified for such a rule. Despite their traditional grip on the masses, clerics lacked the knowledge and comprehension of the complexity of contemporary human society and institutions that govern its social norms, and economy. While the contemporary economic, political and sociological networks, as compared with the traditional societies are quite complex, the clergy's point of reference in governance is antiquated *Khilafa*. It is relied on an understanding of socio-political and economic issues that had meaning and substance in the early Islamic history in a very simple community with no complex social structure. The notions of state, nation and nation-state building have changed drastically the nature of government and its institutions. Many of them believe and insist that by implementing the traditional *fiq'h*, without due reconsideration, they could manage the present day affairs of a modern society. They fail to recognize that traditional *fiq'h* is a by-product of the people and the social and economic realities of traditional society. ***Shariah*** in the context of *fiq'h* is meaningless if it is not adapted to the needs and expectations of contemporary society.

In addition to this and its resulting consequences, they altogether reject the basic elements of democratic rule and its prerequisites, such as the rights and liberties of people, the concept of citizenship and the necessary separation of branches of government- which in its modern form, is an evolution of the centuries old balance of power between the ruler and ruled.

Thus the ruling clerics are failing to provide the society with doctrines and policies that could be conducive to establishing viable forms for needed economic, political and social services of which our people are badly in need. They also lack the comprehension of contemporary world affairs, the globalization of politics, culture and finance particularly at a time that the evolution of the international relation prescribes interdependency and cooperation for the welfare of the whole.

As a result of their failings, the deep-rooted influence of the clerics among the masses has eroded tremendously and has jeopardized the social and political position of this class. Furthermore, the incompatibilities of their views of Islam with the present day circumstances have remarkably developed a sort of either anti-religion feeling and/or non-religiosity among the new generation of our people. The public dissatisfaction and resentment to the cleric's rule is rising expeditiously.

7- The ruling clerics also have a problem with the constitution which presents a continuing headache for them. In their perception of Islamic government, there is no room for a constitution. During the revolution, the political atmosphere was such that they could not oppose the public demand for a democratic regime in the form of a republic and prevent the adoption of the new constitution based on the sovereignty

of the people. The first draft of the constitution was prepared by the provisional government of the late M. Bazargan and did not contain any articles concerning the position of the supreme leader. These articles were added later to the constitution without careful thought and consideration of articles that were needed for a coherent politics and government. Thus, the constitution suffers from the existence of contradictory articles. On the one hand it is based on the sovereignty of the people and on the other hand there is the absolute and unlimited power for the supreme leader. Consequently, the ruling clerics, while cannot drop the constitution all together, are disregarding or violating those articles specifying the rights of our people. This is one of the major sources of the present political crisis in the IRI. The present aim of reformist movement of Iran, none-the-less, is not to change the legal structure of the Constitution, but rather it is after the creation of a popular political force as a source of pressure on the authorities to confine themselves within the limits of the constitution, particularly those articles that are related to the rights and liberties of our people.

8- However, there are many serious obstacles in the way of democracy in Iran. We believe that democracy is not a commodity to be imported or exported by foreign powers. It is an indigenous learning process, which must come from within, not from without. Learning democracy means accepting the pluralistic nature of human society, tolerating, compromising and cooperating with each other, irrespective of their beliefs and political orientations. Democracy, however, cannot be taught in classrooms. Rather it must be learned through political and social interactions and encounters among various political, economic and ideological groups. For democracy to succeed and take root in a society not only the liberal minded individuals and political groups

must believe in it, the conservatives also must acknowledge its usefulness to their cause and its inevitability. Through my long involvement in, and observation of, the Iranian political scene, I can say with some degree of assurance that various groups, from liberal minded and reformist to the conservative, are all learning their lessons. Many hard liners, among them some prominent clerics, are coming to the conclusion that their original perceptions of issues such as nation, state, Islamic government and traditional *fiq'h* are not suited for contemporary circumstances and could not be implemented without due reconsideration.

One more aspect in learning process of democracy in Iran is the policies and deeds of the present administration. President Ahmadinejad is representing the interests and ambitions of the Revolutionary Guards. This RG, along with the regular army, was involved in the Iraq's war of aggression against Iran and they were successful in defending the homeland. They have recently begun to be politically more and more active and now claim certain rights to run the country. Many active members of the RG are now occupying prominent and sensitive positions in President Ahmadinejad administration, without required management background or promising acumen. He is enjoying the full support of the Supreme leader. His economic, political and social performances internally as well as in foreign affairs are below the expected level, by any criteria and have hardly impressed even some of his supporters among the extreme rightists. He and his group are the last ones trying to implement what the extreme conservatives had in mind to do to establish the Islamic government. To many of us inside Iran, he is doomed to fail. And his failure, for sure, would be one of the last steps in changing the political set-up in Iran.

9- Now let us examine the impact of external circumstances and international relations on the cause of democracy in Iran. I said earlier that democracy is not a commodity to be imported and/or exported from one country to another. Nonetheless we are living in a newly developed global village. The cold war is over. In the post cold war era, unlike the cold war time, economic priorities are playing a crucial role in international relations. Among the most important prerequisites for long range strategic economic relations is political stability. The definition of political stability has changed dramatically. For a while under the Cold War, relying on dictatorship was a norm for achieving political stability in some academic studies of development. Huntington believed in the 1970's that one party system under totalitarian regimes was good for growth and stability. The weakest democracies, however, are more stable than any dictatorial regimes. Thus a wave of democracy is spreading over the former socialist block and third world countries. Consequently, one may say that the long struggle for democracy in former third world countries now has become a prerequisite for the strategic economic priorities of the developed countries. That means external forces no longer hinder the process of democracy in third world countries. Present day global circumstances are conducive to and supportive of democracy in developing countries.

In the global village, international relations have also changed the value and effectiveness of the national sovereignty. Although national sovereignty is recognized by the charter of U.N., nonetheless, the validity and creditability of this concept is directly related to the realization of the sovereignty of the people of a nation and institutionalization of democracy.

The external factors, however, would help to expedite the internal democratic process in a given country, only and when they are directed in accordance with internal circumstances. Iranians are essentially patriotic and do not like, and would not accept, any foreign intervention in their country's internal affairs. Frankly and honestly speaking, US policy towards Iran is not helping the cause of democracy, but rather is hurting it. It needs a drastic overhaul and rearrangement.

10- In conclusion, the consequences of recent on-going political developments and related evidences indicate that the direction of changes in Iran is towards democracy. The growing dissatisfaction and resentment by many social and political factions, such as students, workers, teachers and women in one hand and the gradual economic, social, political and cultural chaos, particularly recent ones, may lead Iran towards a detour. The by-product of such a state of affairs possibly forces the entire ruling group to recognize and acknowledge that the continuation of present situation is impossible. If and when this is accepted by all factions within the ruling group, then the process of political and economic changes towards democracy would begin.

The road to democracy is not paved. The learning of democracy is a time consuming and tiresome process. It needs patience, hard work, perseverance and a lot of love and conviction for the cause for which we all strive.

When I say that the internal factors as well as international circumstances are all in favor of democratic changes in Iran, it may look very optimistic. But I am optimist, both rationally and heartfelt. We have come a long way, and still we have a longer way to go. Thank you for your patience.