

Iran's Intellectual Revolution

Mehran Kamrava

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Iran's Intellectual Revolution, by Mehran Kamrava, offers an overview of the three major political orientations that have evolved in Iran since the Islamic revolution of 1979, especially since the death of Khomeini in 1989. The first chapter examines the silent, and often not-so-silent, revolution that

has taken place in Iran over the past few decades; the second and third chapters contextualize these emerging Iranian discourses; and the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters focus on the religious conservative, religious reformist, and secular-modernist discourses.

Chapter three surveys the religious conservative discourse of Khomeini, Khamenei, Montazeri, Mesbah Yazdi, Rafsanjani, and Amoli. The author focuses on issues of interpretation, emulation, and the rule of the jurist (both conditional and absolute), all of which are essential if one wishes to understand the country's current internal conflict and the varying conceptions of Islamic government that exist.

According Kamrava, Khomeini's Islamic republic differs greatly from the one of Khamenei that, in turn, differs drastically from the version of Islamic government espoused by the likes of Mesbah Yazdi. As is well known, Khomeini never described the leader's nature and powers as absolute in his seminal *The Governance of the Jurist*. After his death, however, Kamrava believes that Iran turned increasingly to the right and seems dismayed by the political direction it has taken. For the time being, he believes, Iran remains a republic in which the people give legitimacy to their rulers. He warns that others, like Mesbah Yazdi, reject the very notion of an Islamic republic, which implies the people's participation, and advocate the creation of an Islamic government in which the people are both powerless and voiceless. As the author explains, proponents of absolute *wilayah* believe that the jurist has the divinely sanctioned right to rule regardless of the people's wishes, a view that contradicts traditional Shi'i teachings and the *sunnah* of the Prophet and the Imams. As Khomeini himself stated, legitimacy rests with the people. For many Iranians, the contested results of the 2009 elections, which were accompanied by unprecedented government repression, removed the republican nature of the Iranian government.

The fourth chapter focuses on the reformist religious discourse expressed by Khatami, Soroush, Kadivar, and Shabestari. Although viewed as wolves in sheep's clothing by the religious conservatives, the author insists that the reformists ardently believe in Khomeini's revolutionary vision. Unlike the secular-modernists, he claims, they are not interested in destroying the Islamic republic, but merely in reforming it. The fifth chapter examines the secular-modernist discourse of Ahmadi, Ashouri, Bashiriyeh, Behnam, Ghaninezhad, and Jahanbegloo. As Kamrava explains, these secularists tend to temper their discourse to avoid censorship, persecution, and imprisonment. He also points out that the secular-modernist movement is no longer based in the West, but now is firmly rooted in Iran itself.

Although the religious reformists are suspected of being liberal democrats in disguise, the secular-modernists do not hide their agenda. They openly call for abolishing the Islamic Republic of Iran not through violence, but by means of a national referendum. Demonstrating their ignorance of both Islam and democracy, the reformists believe that Islam cannot be democratic unless it becomes thoroughly secular. In terms of the political turmoil they can cause, the secular-modernists seem as dangerous to Iran as the radical right. Kamrava concludes that the reformist discourse has great historical and theological significance; that the conservative discourse runs the risk of relegating itself to oblivion and irrelevance; and that, despite the support it draws from the middle class, academics, journalists, professionals and university students, the secular-modernist discourse represents a minority of Iranians.

Although the book is of value, it is not beyond criticism. The author's division of the religious right is questionable. For him, the traditionalists include politically influential conservative clerics affiliated with the Howzeh `Elmiyyeh (religious seminary). This is not a fair assessment, as Qum's Shi'ite seminaries represent a wide cross-section of views. He considers Mesbah Yazdi a traditionalist, although this man actually belongs to the radical right. For many Shi'ites, Mesbah Yazdi is more fascist than Islamic and closer to Mussolini and Franco than to Khomeini. Regarding elections, Mesbah Yazdi has said that it does not matter what the people think since the people are ignorant sheep." He has also compared the infusion of democratic ideas to injecting one with the AIDS virus, believes that an "Islamic Republic" is a contradiction in terms, and speaks of "Islamic Government" in the sense of "Divine Dictatorship." After President Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential election, Mesbah Yazdi asserted that elections were no longer needed as Iran finally had its first Islamic government, words many Shi'ites interpreted as an insult directed at Khomeini. Mesbah Yazdi even claims that Khomeini deceived the people regarding popular participation under Islamic rule. Ironically, the man who boasts that he has broken with the line of the Imam is the director of Qum's Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute.

Given that Mesbah Yazdi is Ahmadinejad's "spiritual advisor," wishes to replace Khamenei as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and has strategically placed his supporters in powerful positions to ensure his succession, Kamrava should have devoted greater attention to his ideas. Although the author mentions the Hojjatieh in passing, he does not expound upon their ideas and current covert ideologues.

Moreover, Kamrava has ignored some of Iran's most influential religious reformists, among them Grand Ayatullah Yousef Saanei, who is known as the "Shi'ite Martin Luther." It also seems unfair to evaluate figures like Khamenei, Khatami, and Khomeini on the basis of only one or two of their works. Although many voices are expressed in the book, they are virtually all male. Something could have been said about Faezeh Hashemi and Azam Alaei Taleghani, among other outspoken women.

The author's claim that the reformists are ardent believers in Khomeini's revolutionary vision is questionable. More than a reformer, Soroush is viewed by many Muslim thinkers as an innovator who seeks to reform the Iranian revolution to such a point that it would no longer be Islamic. Although his commitment to the West cannot be questioned, his commitment to Islam can. In point of fact, he recently wrote that the revelation received by Prophet Muhammad was of earthly origin.

It is also questionable whether one can examine Qum without considering Najaf, given that they are inextricably linked. In this regard, it is disappointing that the ideas of Baqir al-Sadr, Khu'i, and Sistani were not examined. The first represents conditional *wilayah*, while the last two represent opposition to clerical rule. The religious traditionalists who oppose clerical rule have been ignored. With the exception of Montazeri, virtually nothing was said of the various views of Qum's grand ayatullahs. The philosophical differences found in the Hawzah are far more subtle, nuanced, and complex than the author's attempt to "disaggregate the right" suggests. Politically, Khomeini, Taleghani, Muttahari, and Beheshti were open-minded, reformist activists compared to quietist traditionalists like Burujerdi, Mar'ashi-Najafi, and Khu'i. Although Kamrava views Khomeini as a right-winger, the Islamic revolution was centrist and the imam was critical of both the left and the right. Jurisprudentially, Khamenei is more liberal than his predecessor, although he is politically more conservative. Academically, Mesbah Yazdi can be quite moderate while politically he belongs to the radical right.

Finally, although we have employed the author's terminology in this review, applying terms like *conservative*, *reformist*, and *modernist* to Iranian politics is problematic. When describing the country's political currents, it is imperative to use the proper Persian terms and then translate, duly define, and contextualize them. In the Iranian context, the Shah and his supporters were viewed as conservatives. Although they claimed to combine Islam and Marxism, the partisans of the Tudeh Party operated like right-wing reactionary conservatives. Although they claim to combine Islam and Marxism, the partisans of the MKO behave in a fascist fashion toward their opponents.

The right and the left in Iran differ greatly from the right and the left in the West. Currently, *traditionalist* applies to scholars like Sistani, *principlialist* to religious conservatives like Khamenei, *pragmatist* to politicians like Rafsanjani, and *neo-fundamentalist* to people like Mesbah Yazdi. The reformists in Iran are indeed called *reformists*; yet they are also referred to as *modernists*, which conflicts with the author's secular-modernist category.

Despite its shortcomings, Kamrava's work is valuable as it exposes readers to many intellectuals who are virtually unknown outside of Iran and helps provide a deeper understanding of the more familiar ones. Although it does not provide a complete analysis of Iran's intellectual scene, it offers an essential overview of the country's three major currents of political thought. Furthermore, the author has tackled a delicate and emotionally charged debate with tact, respect, and objectivity.

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