

# The Iranian Impasse

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During a visit to Tehran in the spring of 2005, we were impressed by the degree of intellectual freedom Iranians had carved out within the Islamic Republic. The numerous bookstores on Enqelab Avenue across from Tehran University carried an array of newly translated books by Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, among others. A lecture on "Foucault and Feminism" at Alzahra Women's University elicited enthusiastic responses, including one from a high university official clad from head to toe in a black chador. A visit to the literary editors of the country's most prestigious newspaper, *Shargh* (daily circulation 100,000), led to a conversation that ranged easily from religion and politics to Continental philosophers like Foucault, Theodor Adorno and Giorgio Agamben.

Of course, this was not the whole picture. Books on contemporary politics continued to be heavily censored. On the streets, the morality police harassed women who violated the regime's stringent dress codes, and Tehran University still maintained sex-segregated cafeterias. Those who fought for social and political freedoms lived under constant threat. A feminist activist told us in a matter-of-fact tone that she feared a return visit to "Hotel Evin"--the notorious Evin Prison, where she had been tortured.

We were in Iran during the last days of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, who had been elected by a landslide in 1997 after promising to carry out democratic reforms and open Iran to the outside. Some of those promises were kept, but many were not, and the real power remained in the hands of more conservative clerics like Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Even in the spring of 2005, we felt a hint of a chill as we left the country. At the airport, one of us had to go through a security check, a requirement for any Iranian passport holder trying to leave the country. It was during precisely such a procedure that, a year later, reformist philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo--who had brought Jürgen Habermas, Antonio Negri and the late Richard Rorty to speak in Tehran--was arrested and forced to make a public "confession." By then, conservative populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been elected to the presidency. Ever since, Iran and the Western powers have clashed over Tehran's nuclear program, leading to threats of military action from the United States and Israel and arrests of Iranian diplomats in Iraq.

At home, the Islamic Republic has cracked down hard on reformists, shutting down *Shargh* for six months and drastically tightening the enforcement of dress-code violations. Ahmadinejad's initial Holocaust denials--which *Shargh* indirectly but courageously rebutted by running stories about the Nuremberg trials in late 2005--tarnished Iran's reputation in the West. Khatami's era of a "dialogue of civilizations" was over, at least as far as the state was concerned. As if to dispel any doubts about this, the regime arrested several Iranian-American intellectuals who had committed the "crime" of promoting cultural and scholarly dialogue between Iran and the West, among them Haleh Esfandiari, a 67-year-old scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and the wife of Shaul Bakhash, a distinguished historian of Iran. (Esfandiari was in Iran visiting her mother when she was detained.) While the situation is not entirely bleak--Tehran's bookstores continue to display their new titles, and *Shargh* has won the right to reopen--the cause of human rights and intellectual freedom has suffered a significant setback since 2005.

What went wrong? When reform-minded Iranians discuss this question, the conversation often turns to the 1906-11 Constitutional Revolution, widely seen as a missed opportunity for democratic modernization. This has been especially true in the past couple of years, as its centenary is celebrated by Iranians at home and abroad.

The Constitutional Revolution was the first democratic revolution to take place in the Middle East, and perhaps the most important. The revolution established a freely elected Parliament and a Constitution with civil liberties, severely limited the powers of the shah and promoted the establishment of women's schools and councils. It also set up a state-based judiciary that challenged the traditional authority of the Shiite clerics. As Yann Richard, France's leading Iran specialist, observes in his latest book *L'Iran: Naissance d'une république islamique* (Birth of an Islamic Republic), from the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century the Shiite clergy had provided a counterweight to the monarchy. But with the emergence of two heterodox offshoots of Shiism in the mid-nineteenth century, Babism and Bahaism--both of which challenged social hierarchies, including gender inequality--the clerical establishment drew closer to the state in order to combat these dissident religious movements. When the Constitutional Revolution broke out, some influential clerics sided with the state; one of them, Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri, was executed by the revolutionaries. Yet the leading clerics were by no means united in opposition to the revolution: Quite a few embraced the changes, with some going so far as to endorse Nuri's execution.

As Hamid Dabashi recounts in *Iran: A People Interrupted*, this "revolution in the very moral fabric of a nation" was, like most later progressive movements in Iran, marked by the participation of its ethnic and religious minorities--Azeris, Armenians, Bahais and Jews. The revolution also saw an unprecedented flowering of Iranian literature. Hoping to build what Dabashi calls "an anti-colonial modernity," the great writer Ali Akbar Dehkhoda launched a campaign in the press against oppressive social customs (especially regarding gender). Socialist ideas from the 1905 Russian Revolution entered the country through Baku and Tbilisi.

The revolution faced two formidable external adversaries, however, in the British Empire and Czarist Russia. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, which divided Iran into a northern Russian and a southern British sphere of influence, showed that the great powers were bent on pursuing a more aggressive imperialism in the region. In 1911 Russian troops, with British approval, moved to just outside Tehran and threatened to take over the capital unless the Parliament was disbanded. An internal coup ended the standoff and brought the revolution to an end. Although the 1906 Constitution was retained until 1979, it was reduced to a formality.

Marking the birth of democratic politics in Iran, the Constitutional Revolution remains a source of inspiration for Iranian progressives. And because the revolution drew upon the support of Western progressives, it has also led some Iranians to reassess their relationship with their Western peers. Not the least of the virtues of Mansour Bonakdarian's erudite and original study *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11* is that it challenges some of the fashionable postcolonial assumptions about Iranian history, particularly the notion that the British of a century ago were uniformly Orientalists bent on establishing imperial hegemony over Iran. Without in any way minimizing the brutality and destructiveness of imperialism, Bonakdarian argues that Iran's democratic experiment was fostered--and not merely undermined--by engagement with the West. His Occident is populated not only by British diplomat Lord George Curzon, who orchestrated the 1907 convention, but also by W.E.B. Du Bois and other participants in the 1900 Pan-African Conference in London, as well as Irish MPs who identified

with Iran's struggle for self-determination and freedom. The Constitutional Revolution had many British supporters, at the head of whom stood the remarkable Cambridge Orientalist Edward G. Browne. Iran's supporters in Britain included radical MPs in the Liberal Party, Labour MPs, Irish Nationalist MPs and socialist members of the Persia Committee, which worked closely with Iranian democrats. The socialist and liberal press, including the *Manchester Guardian*, also sided with the Iranian revolutionaries. These groups maintained that Iran and other nations of the East had the right to determine their own destiny. For a time, their pressure stayed the hands of Britain and Russia.

After the Constitutional Revolution, Iran's modernization continued but under starkly different conditions. (The best overview of this process in English remains Nikki Keddie's *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, published in 1981 and updated in 2006.) Brought to power with British support in the early 1920s, Reza Shah Pahlavi imposed a new form of authoritarian nationalism, in contrast with the Constitutional Revolution's democratic nationalism. Even as he crushed the left and muzzled political life, he also secularized the legal and educational systems, integrated women and minorities into civil society, and decreased the powers of the clerical establishment. After the Allies replaced him with his young son Muhammad Reza Shah in 1941, the struggle for democracy resumed, with the formation of new political parties like the pro-Soviet Communist Party (Tudeh) and Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh's National Front. The immensely popular Mossadegh, who had earlier taken part in the Constitutional Revolution, became prime minister in 1951.

As prime minister, Mossadegh achieved two cherished goals of Iranian democrats: wresting control over Iran's oil from foreign interests and limiting the authority of the shah. Studies like *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, edited by Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, and Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men* have chronicled how the United States and Britain calumniated Mossadegh as a Communist sympathizer, using their intelligence services to orchestrate his overthrow and restore the shah to absolute power. Democratic political parties and trade unions were then crushed by the SAVAK, a brutal secret police force trained by the CIA and Israel's Mossad. Over time, the religious opposition filled the political vacuum.

Muhammad Reza Shah enacted land reform and women's suffrage through the top-down White Revolution of 1963. It unleashed fierce clerical hostility against the shah, with nationalists and leftists divided in their response. Soon to be designated an ayatollah, Ruhollah Khomeini led antigovernment protests against the White Revolution that combined opposition to women's suffrage and land reform with anti-imperialist and antimonarchist rhetoric. In the 1970s, younger intellectuals like the lay theologian Ali Shariati, author of *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, wove Shiism and anti-imperialism into a political theology that won over many leftists and nationalists. For his part, Khomeini resurrected an obscure religious principle known as *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurist or cleric) and began to advocate the replacement of the monarchy by an Islamist state, to be led by a supreme religious leader.

As Richard and Dabashi remind us, the revolutionary left played a role in the opposition to the shah. Although the Tudeh had been eviscerated by the SAVAK, a new generation of socialists influenced by Maoism engaged in small-scale guerrilla warfare. In admiring language perfumed with nostalgia, Dabashi celebrates the mid-1970s, with its secular revolutionary intelligentsia, as a period of "cosmopolitan worldliness." That it was, indeed; but for all their sophistication and creativity, the Iranian leftist intellectuals of the 1970s failed to grasp the dangers of Islamism, ignoring or overlooking its racist, sexist and theocratic aspects in the name of the struggle against

the shah and Western imperialism. During the 1978-79 revolution, Khomeini promised a break with Western imperialism--both cultural and political--and a new type of politics that would be superior to both liberal democracy and statist socialism. Instead, as Said Amir Arjomand has shown in *The Turban for the Crown*, Khomeini established a theocracy that had some parallels to fascism and immediately targeted leftists, feminists, gay men and Kurds. Bahaism was proscribed, and other religious minorities were reduced to second-class status.

Although some Iranian leftists briefly defended women's rights during the March 1979 demonstrations against the new regime's policy of compulsory veiling, their myopia on gender, human rights and democracy left them ideologically defenseless against Iran's Islamist rulers once the latter adopted a strongly anti-imperialist program. In books like Haideh Moghissi's *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, feminists who participated in the revolution have grappled with the left's failure to confront Islamism's repressive features. The new generation of Iranian intellectuals, for whom Islamism's authoritarian face is only too familiar, has been equally critical.

As Richard shows, the Western left responded to the 1978-79 revolution in sharply divergent ways. Some preferred to look past the Iranian Revolution's religious dimension, viewing the events as an essentially nationalist insurgency. Michel Foucault stood out for recognizing the novelty of the revolution, particularly the significance of religion, but, Richard writes, he was "fooled by the romanticism" of a revolution that sought to undermine Western modernity through a "political spirituality." The most sober appraisal on the left came from Richard's mentor, the late Maxime Rodinson, a renowned French Marxist scholar of Islam and author of the definitive biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Rodinson warned that Khomeini's anti-imperialism concealed an authoritarian "moral" agenda that would curtail individual freedom and women's rights. This assessment has held up far better than Foucault's, but the Islamic Republic also proved to be more resilient and adaptable than its critics predicted.

During the first months after the revolution, Khomeini's grip on power was tenuous, but the vastly popular seizure of American hostages in November 1979 strengthened his position. Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of Iran, undertaken with Western encouragement and underwritten by the Arab Gulf states, galvanized patriotic sentiment to the benefit of the new regime. During this long war, which lasted until 1988, Khomeini accused his critics of treason and increased the pace of repression. A variety of new paramilitary groups aided the regime in carrying out a "cultural revolution" to "cleanse" the universities of secular and leftist students and faculty members. This harsh early period is the subject of Azar Nafisi's poignant memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

The Islamic Revolution broke with the national, political, legal and social ethos of the Constitutional Revolution, though not entirely with its modern institutional apparatus, such as the Parliament, the media and the military, which it harnessed to its agenda. Islamist women attained leadership posts in the state, were recruited for the war effort and joined women's paramilitary organizations that enforced the state's rules of morality on other, more secular women.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, Ali Khamenei emerged as the new Supreme Leader, with Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as the new president. At this juncture, some disillusioned founders of the Islamic Republic slowly began to question the system, occasionally making common cause with more secular dissidents. The so-called New Religious Thinkers (*now andishan-e dini*) focused on the project of democratizing Shiite Islam, and their ideas gradually gave rise to a new

civil society movement (*nehzat-e jame'eh-ye madani*), which helped elect President Khatami in 1997 and has continued to conduct a highly sophisticated debate about Islam, modernity and democracy. Some of the New Religious Thinkers, such as theologian Abdolkarim Soroush, have called for a re-examination of the tenets of Islam where they clash with religious tolerance. Others, such as cleric Mohammad Mojtaba Shabestari, have joined more secular human rights activists like Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi and journalist Akbar Ganji in calling on the government to ratify the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. But the Khatami administration was cautious and sought only to moderate the Islamist regime. In the summer of 1999, large-scale student demonstrations were crushed by hard-liners after Khatami refused to support them.

Jean-Daniel Lafond and Fred Reed's *Conversations in Tehran* offers a wealth of interesting interviews with members of the reform movement. Cleric Mohsen Kadivar believes that he and other reformists broke new ground in their criticisms of Khomeini's concept of clerical rule, showing that it had no basis in the Koran or the traditions of the Prophet. Reformists also called for religious reform along modern lines. Ali Paya, a reformist philosopher, thinks that the reformists succeeded in changing the public conversation and even "transformed the mindset of an entire generation" by popularizing phrases like "public sphere," "human rights," "rule of law" and "democracy." Others are less sanguine about the future. Javad Tabatabai, a former professor of philosophy, thinks that Iranian intellectuals have always tried to create an untenable amalgam between Islam and Western thought. And an economics professor notes that the economy was "Khatami's Achilles' heel"--Khatami and his reformist allies lost, in his view, because they failed to address the public's basic needs.

In his new book, Dabashi echoes some of these criticisms of the reform movement. He also reminds readers that many reformists played a role in the intellectual repression of the 1980s, especially at Tehran University. Yet Dabashi refuses to recognize the contribution that reformist theologians like Soroush, Kadivar and Shabestari have made to a more tolerant and democratic Iranian society. Dabashi also casts aspersions on Ganji's hunger strike outside the UN in 2006 in protest of repression inside Iran, arguing that "people like Ganji" are becoming "very natural bedfellows of the U.S. neocons."

In Dabashi's view, Ganji and other dissidents should have been "placing the Iranian situation within the larger geopolitics of the region," at a time when Israel had attacked Lebanon and the United States was threatening Iran. Never mind that Ganji denounced the invasion of Lebanon, or that he opposes strongly not only US military action against Iran but also its so-called democracy funding, or that Ganji enjoys considerable prestige among students and dissidents inside Iran because of his defiant behavior in the regime's courts and his hunger strikes at Evin Prison. Apparently, the timing of his protest was just wrong. That, unfortunately, has too often been the attitude of progressives toward Iranian oppositionists from the onset of the revolution, when the feminists were the first to come onto the streets against the new theocracy, in their demonstration of March 8, 1979.

Dabashi is staunchly critical of the Iranian state's racism, narrow nationalism and anti-Semitism. But while he styles himself as a feminist, he is surprisingly dismissive of contemporary Iranian feminists, who are often treated in his book as misguided at best and, at worst, fellow travelers of the Bush Administration. "Services" rendered to "the US imperial design" are attributed to Azar Nafisi, while the young Iranian-American feminist writer Roya Hakakian also comes under attack. Shirin Ebadi is accused of getting dangerously close to the neocons because she made the

"unfortunate choice" of working with another liberal feminist, Azadeh Moaveni, the translator and co-author of the Nobel laureate's 2006 memoir, *Iran Awakening*. These are risible charges, since all of these feminists have opposed US intervention in Iran and have denounced US policies in the region. (For a feminist response to Dabashi, see Firoozeh Papan-Matin's forthcoming article in *The Common Review*, "Reading (and Misreading) Lolita in Tehran.") The main sin of the Iranian dissidents and feminists Dabashi assails seems to be their decision to devote more attention to human rights in Iran than to the critique of American imperialism.

Dabashi's discussion of Iranian studies is equally coarse. Take, for instance, his intemperate denunciations of the Columbia University-based *Encyclopedia Iranica*--an exemplary work of documentation that has paid special attention to Iran's religious and ethnic minorities and has substantial entries on feminists, homosexuality, slavery and numerous other subjects that cannot be discussed as openly inside Iran today--and of the flagship journal of the field, *Iranian Studies*--currently edited by Homa Katouzian, a leading historian of the Mossadegh era. The scholarship of the *Encyclopedia Iranica* and *Iranian Studies*, indeed of the entire field of Iranian studies, he opines, is "a direct descendent of old-fashioned Orientalism...now mostly inhabited by native scholars, a nativist disposition, and cast in entirely domesticated and (ultra) nationalistic terms." This kind of rhetorical overkill permeates Dabashi's book and is especially regrettable coming from the author of such nuanced studies as *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*.

For the hard-liners who sought to rein in the reformers during the Khatami era, the election of George W. Bush provided an unexpected opportunity. When Bush called Iran part of an "axis of evil" in 2002, despite its behind-the-scenes assistance in toppling the Taliban, and warned of possible military action against Iran, the reformers, many of whom had campaigned for diplomatic relations with the United States, became easy prey. Hardliners clamped down on the press, arrested ministers and parliamentary deputies, and escalated the kidnapping and murder of reform activists and even some members of Parliament.

The election of Ahmadinejad to the presidency in June 2005 marked the end of the reform era. While religious and secular oppositionists continued to call for greater civil liberties, they and much of the youth had become disillusioned with Khatami and his reformist colleagues. More than 20 million voters boycotted the elections, from which many prominent reformists had been excluded through a vetting process. Boycotters were heeding calls from democratic dissidents like Ganji and Ebadi. A former mayor of Tehran backed by the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards, Ahmadinejad was able to defeat the corrupt Rafsanjani. Ahmadinejad's election marked the ascendancy of militant veterans of the Iran-Iraq War. Shrewdly exploiting the reformists' failure to address issues of poverty and class, Ahmadinejad promised to reduce unemployment and to provide greater subsidies, especially low-interest loans. Since his election, conservatives have gained a firmer grip on power and cracked down on labor, women and gays.

Thanks to US interventions in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq, the Islamic Republic's two most formidable enemies in the region, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, have been vanquished, while the Shiite-dominated state emerging under the American occupation in Iraq is poised to become a key ally of Tehran. Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have also turned the nuclear issue into a matter of national pride, comparing it to Mossadegh's fight for the nationalization of Iran's oil. The Islamic Republic's support for Hezbollah during the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon has gained it many admirers internationally, while Ahmadinejad has forged alliances with Latin American leftists like Hugo Chávez and Daniel Ortega.

Nonetheless, opposition inside Iran has continued, whether in the form of the One Million Signatures Campaign for women's rights, or the Tehran bus drivers' strike, or the 2006 local elections, where candidates backed by Ahmadinejad were soundly defeated in Tehran and many other places.

For many people on the left outside Iran, the era of Ahmadinejad has presented a quandary, forcing them to choose between anti-imperialism (at the risk of defending an Islamist theocracy) and solidarity with the opponents of a repressive theocracy (at the risk of appearing to do the bidding of the Bush Administration). Danny Postel, an editor at the online journal *openDemocracy*, believes that much of the left has made the wrong choice, ignoring the great promise of Iran's dissident movement. In *Reading "Legitimation Crisis" in Tehran*, Postel takes the US left to task for neglecting this important social movement and suggests that the new Iranian democratic discourse is an original form of "liberal Third Worldism" that is distinct from neoliberalism and deserving of our support. (One chapter is pointedly titled "We Know What We're Against, But What Are We For?") The US left, he believes, has made the error of viewing Iran through a narrow "American prism," rightly opposing US military threats against the Islamic Republic but failing to raise its voice in support of Iranian progressives battling theocratic repression--i.e., failing to demonstrate solidarity with our true allies in Iran. But anti-imperialism need not come at the expense of solidarity. (A similar error, notes Postel, was made during the Bosnian war, when "anti-imperialism" led some on the left to side with Milosevic's Serbia.)

The heart of Postel's book is a long interview with French-educated philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo, who discusses the ongoing interplay between Iranian and Western intellectual traditions and social thought. Unfortunately, by the time Postel's book was published, Jahanbegloo had been imprisoned in Evin and pressured into silence. (Dabashi, while praising Jahanbegloo as a "sincere social activist," writes that he possesses a "colonized mind" because of his belief in "modernity" and his supposed failure to endorse the critiques of modernity by Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida.)

Jahanbegloo's fate echoes that of other Iranian progressives over the past century who have so often been driven into exile, imprisoned or killed. The secularizing, progressive revolution that began in 1906 and continued with Mossadegh remains unfinished, the pace of reform slowed by the weight of clerical rule. While the Islamic Republic has been forced to open up somewhat since Khomeini's death in 1989, it has also shown itself to be far more resilient than its critics understood. This is partly because, by many sociological measures, Iran has come a long way since 1979. Life expectancy has increased to more than seventy years, infant mortality by age 5 has dropped to thirty-six per 1,000 live births, fertility rates have decreased to 2.1 births per woman and women make up more than 60 percent of the students enrolled in colleges and universities. But the chief card the regime has played is national unity in the face of external threats--a gift that keeps giving, courtesy most recently of the Bush Administration. These threats (particularly talk in Washington of "regime change") have emboldened Iran's hard-liners and driven its vibrant democratic movement into a strategic impasse. The challenge facing progressives in North America is to find a way to give more support to Iranian democrats and feminists even as we oppose the US imperial agenda. The international solidarity displayed by progressive members of the British public during the era of Iran's Constitutional Revolution just might provide us with a model.

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