REVIEW ARTICLE

Democracy and Secularism in Iran: Lessons for the Arab Spring?

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Civil Society and Democracy in Iran
Ramin Jahanbegloo (Ed)
Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2012, ISBN 0-7391-6545-3, 318pp, £21.95

Democracy in Modern Iran. Islam, Culture and Political Change
Ali Mirsepassi
New York, New York University Press, 2011, ISBN 0-8147-6344-8, 224pp, £14.99

Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey. The Paradox of Moderation
Günesç Murat Tezcür
Austin, University of Texas Press, 2010, ISBN 0-2927-2883-2, 322pp, £19.99

Political Islam, Iran and the Enlightenment. Philosophies of Hope and Despair
Ali Mirsepassi
New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, ISBN 0-5217-4590-X, 238pp, £19.99

The 2009 Iranian anti-regime protests and the Arab Spring took scholars of Middle Eastern studies and the international community by surprise. In order to explain the events, scholars have for the most part referred to well-known theoretical debates and paradigms. In the case of the Arab world, the fall of dictators has revived interest in transitiology, with studies on the resilience of authoritarianism now perceived as outdated. In addition, the electoral success of Islamists has re-ignited enthusiasm for the rather trite debate on the compatibility between Islam and democracy.

In the case of Iran, similar debates centred on democratization and on the relationship between Islam, democracy and modernity have been animating academic discussions for two decades. Indeed, many social scientists of Iranian studies support the idea that the explosion of political and social crises, such as the 2009 uprising, demonstrates the existence of a liberal, secular and ‘modern’ civil society willing to shake off a backward authoritarian regime. These four books

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elaborate on this interpretative line of inquiry, setting forth interesting arguments for an analysis of the current state of Iranian studies and offering elements of reflection to scholars of the Arab world as well.

The Ideology of Democracy in Iranian Studies

Iranian studies is often characterized by strong political fervour, a trait obviously not confined to it, yet particularly passionate in this field. Many scholars are indeed engaged in promoting peace and democracy within the international community and Iran, thanks to their public visibility and intellectual discernment. However this mission has to some extent turned into a far more rigid, in some cases even ideological, posture informing scientific claims and analyses. Some traits of such an ideological stance are present in the books under review. This is particularly evident in the interpretation of Iranian national history they subscribe to, which centres on a highly symbolic idea of democracy, on the clear-cut separation between society and the state and on a traditional understanding of modernity, which is a composite of a secular public sphere, liberal democracy and individualism. This interpretation, which is also present in Iranian reformist political circles, argues that a ‘quest for democracy’ (Azimi, 2008) characterizes Iranian history and that Iranian civil society has been conducting this quest in opposition to the state throughout the centuries. The state and its authoritarian nature are the main obstacle on the path towards liberal democracy.

Jahanbegloo’s edited book builds explicitly on this narrative of national history, based on the ideas of ‘civil society resilience’ and ‘persistent struggle for democracy’. As he writes, the core questions of the volume deal with the ‘enduring legacy of previous social and political movements, starting with the Constitutional revolution of 1906, in the struggle for democracy in Iran’ (p. xiii). The book collects 16 contributions from well-known scholars and activists. Generally, the volume is more an ‘activist book’ than an academic one. The first two sections of the volume (‘Theorizing Civil Society in Iran’ and ‘Islam, Secularism, and Efforts for Democratization’) are aimed at underlining the legacy of this ‘quest for democracy’. For instance, Nader Hashemi argues that ‘the origins of today’s ideological conflict between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi can be traced back to the Iranian Constitutional revolution of 1906–11’ (p. 97). The remaining two sections deal with efforts for gender equality and minorities rights. The common thread among the chapters is the reference to Iranian secular democratic tradition, which shaped the Green Movement’s identity. According to Farhad Khosrokhavar, this influence determines the division of today’s Iranian society in ‘a non-organized secularized Islamic society on the one hand, and anti-modern, violent, Islamist groups on the other side, backed and organized by the theocratic government’ (pp. 72–73).

Ali Mirsepassi’s Democracy in Modern Iran echoes these arguments, explaining that ‘[The Green Movement] must be read within the context of this broader historical discourse in which the struggle for democracy and the rule of law has been waged against both authoritarian ideologies and political regimes’ (p. xi). Contrary to Jahanbegloo’s however, Mirsepassi’s volume evaluates quite
pessimistically the likelihood of a democratization in Iran. Focusing on the intellectual milieu, Mirsepassi argues that Iranian intellectuals are concerned with epistemological and philosophical issues rather than with the concrete establishment of democratic institutions as the first step for promoting a democratic culture. Despite offering critical and interesting arguments against the celebrated democratizing function of Iranian intellectuals, Mirsepassi’s volume does not add novel perspectives to debates that have already been examined. This is the case, for instance, of his discussion of the relation between democracy and secularism, and of the idea of modernity (pp. 25–80). Furthermore, despite supporting an open interpretation of modernity, Mirsepassi clearly suggests that democracy in Iran has to be inspired by western models of modernity and secularism.

Reacting to Previous Scholarship

At the core of Jahanbegloo and Mirsepassi’s books are the issues of democratization and social secularism in Iran. The persistence of these arguments and the way in which they are approached can be seen as a reaction to two historiographical trends that developed in the 1970s and 1980s within Iranian studies. The first is a culturalist approach, which tends to explain social and political facts through the prism of religion and its social appeal; and the second is the ‘state-centric’ approach, which understands ‘history through the ideologies, institutions, and personalities that dominate a given society’ (Matin-Asgari, 2002: 3). In post-1979 Iran these two perspectives have merged. This has determined among scholars, some of whom experienced the revolution, the understandable will of reacting to the representation of Iran as religiously dominated, politically static and socially backward. Indeed, mainstream historiography has depicted the history of modern Iran as characterized by a struggle between the state and the Shiite clergy, apparently the only two existing political and social forces in the country. This is why, according to Said Amir Arjomand (1988) or Ira Lapidus (1988), the only possible outcome of the 1979 revolution was an Islamic republic. Such an interpretation has drawn the criticism of younger scholars, who not only devoted their studies to unofficial and repressed movements, such as non-orthodox Marxists or leftists, but also reclaimed their enduring influence on today’s activists and movements. Thus, the post-Iran–Iraq war ‘democratic revival’, which saw the re-emergence of a public sphere and the political success of Khatami and the reformists, was the outcome of such a legacy. In reaction to the ‘state-centred’ perspective, a number of scholars proposed the ideas of ‘democratization from below’, the separation between society and the state, and focused on the democratizing activities of Iranian ‘civil society’ (Yaghmaian, 2002). In the context of this reaction to previous representations of Iran, however, the terms of the debate and the objects of analysis have sometimes been confused with ideology. For instance, the idea that in post-1989 Iran society became de-ideologized, disillusioned with the Islamist regime, and therefore democratic is very popular (Sheikholeslami, 2000). The principal reason is that concepts such as ‘democracy’, ‘civil society’ and ‘modernity’ have often been used
as one, bound together in a teleological, positivist relationship. Furthermore, to support the claim about Iranians’ liberal inclinations, scholars argued that Iranians are more democratic and less religious than Arabs. As Khosrokhavar writes, ‘in terms of democratic social movements, the contrast between Iran and the Arab world is glaring. … In the Muslim world at large … democracy is supported neither by the government nor by any large scale social movement’ (p. 49). Following from this, is the assumed fact that, contrary to Iran, in Arab countries there is still the belief in political Islam ‘as the ultimate political and social solution’ (p. 49).

When presented in such fashion, the narration of Iranian history as a struggle for democracy, civil society and human rights against state authoritarianism is very unproblematic and therefore highly questionable. This is not to deny the fact that political resistance characterized Iranian history: we all know that where there is power, there is resistance. What is questionable is the reading of resistance as aimed at establishing a poorly defined ‘democracy’, presented as the goal of almost any form of dissent at any point in time in Iran. There are significant issues with this deterministic perspective. First, it is not clear what it adds to our understanding of Iranian history and politics. The history of almost every nation may be read as the people’s struggle for some objective such as the establishment of an independent, democratic government. Arguing that Iranian history is characterized by an unchanging pattern of ‘democratic resilience’ seems either wishful thinking or an ideological statement. In this sense, the authors’ reference to the Constitutional revolution sounds like the propagandistic use that politicians make of events of the past in order to legitimate today’s actions and choices by contextualizing them in a normative, broader historical trajectory.

Second, there is a problem with the definition of ‘democratic’, to which an unchanging, positive meaning is attached. It is interesting to note how the authors use today’s language to describe social and political dynamics that took place in radically different contexts. This is the case also with ‘civil society’, which has become an all-encompassing concept employed not to describe a concrete phenomenon, but to allude to something symbolically and ideologically linked to positive, democratic values.

The third weakness of this understanding of Iranian history and social transformations is the dismissal of Islamism as an appealing political force. This is quite similar to early reactions to the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings. Olivier Roy (2011), for instance, wrote that the revolts were dominated by a new generation ‘not interested in ideology’, who ‘does not invoke Islam like the older generation did’. Such a quick dismissal of Islamism conflicts with later events such as Islamists’ electoral success or the emergence of Salafism (Merone & Cavatorta, 2012). In the case of Iran, as mentioned, many scholars argue that Iranian society is secular, often overlooking the complexity of such a statement. Indeed, their analysis is sometimes based on questionable factors and thus questionable in its findings. For instance, Khosrokhavar argues that ‘large sections of the Iranian civil society have been secularized, due to internal evolution, the access of many young people to education, the influence of the Iranian Diaspora abroad … and Internet culture which has
partially neutralized the ideological views propagated by the regime’ (p. 60). Despite possibly holding some truth for particular social strata, such claims are based on only partially valid sources. Social secularization is often linked to the democratic discourses of Soroush, Kadivar and other intellectuals (p. 46), but their influence over the population beyond university students and activists is likely to be limited. Similarly, the mingling of sexes (p. 45) cannot be cited as supporting the argument of secularization given class stratification and social cultural differences. The rise of female education (pp. 45–46) also does not necessarily equate with gender emancipation and secularization (Rezai-Rashti, 2011). Finally, the impact of Gene Sharp’s theory on non-violence (pp. 57–58) is nonexistent outside the community of activists.

The prominence of secularism in Iranian studies is probably understandable because it offers a partial redemption from culturalist and neo-orientalist views on Middle Eastern societies. Mirsepassi’s *Political Islam, Iran and the Enlightenment* partly demonstrates this, as stated by the author, who aims at defining the ‘non-Islamic’ ideas that have been essential to the development of the Islamist ideology, disturbing at once the Islamist claim to local ‘authenticity’ as well as the too-common assumption that these radical politics represent a ‘natural’ or ‘logical’ extension of Islamic religious or cultural history as such. (p. 5)

The volume is composed of an impressive review of a very broad literature the author perfectly masters. All this is aimed to defend the progressive and liberal values that result from a democratic understanding of the Enlightenment and its modernist vocation. However, the book presents one main weakness: it is a passionate promotion of a political ideology, namely liberal democracy, rather than a critical examination of it or an analysis of the appeal that criticism of liberal democracy may have in Iran. The assumption here is that since 1979, Iranian society has changed to the point that criticism against the Islamic regime is equated with support for liberal democracy – an assumption which raises doubts.

Generally speaking, recent studies on the topics of democratization and social secularism in Iran rest on very refined theoretical elaborations, but are quite ideological in their premises. A further demonstration of this is the fact that we still do not have a scientific examination of the idea of democracy as understood and promoted by Iranian non-reformist intellectuals and theorists. Important transformations have taken place within the traditionalist elite as well, which is sharply divided on the fate of the Islamic republic. The 2009 crisis and intense factional competition led to the emergence of intra-elite conflicts, which in some cases are caused by diverging views on the limits of dissent. This is probably because, according to received wisdom, topics such as democracy are exclusive to reformists’ ideological system. Furthermore, given their growing prominence in Iran and in the region, conservative Islamists and their values would deserve more attention.
A Possible Way Out?

In recent years, the issues of democracy, social discontent and progressive activism in Iran have been linked to Khatami’s reformist governments, whose activities have been examined under the general rubric of democratization. Tezcu¨r’s Muslim Reformers examines reformist political forces in Iran and Turkey in an original manner, avoiding many of the scholarly pitfalls described above. First, the author avoids approaching Khatami’s efforts of political liberalization through the lens of democratization studies. Instead, he approaches the reformist era through moderation theory. Building on Jillian Schwedler’s critique of the moderation theory and on Carrie Rosefsky Wickham’s studies on Islamist parties, Tezcu¨r argues that moderation can be an obstacle to democratization rather than an incentive, contradicting what the moderation theory and democratization studies posit. Second, Tezcu¨r suggests that reformism and moderation can be analysed from a different perspective other than their supposedly pragmatic and anti-ideological nature. Furthermore, he refers to the ‘international dimension’ of reformism, meaning that reformist forces are normally more welcomed by the international community because they are considered as non-ideological and more cooperative than other factions (pp. 9–10).

Despite the positive aspects of Tezcu¨r’s analysis, which brings to scholarly attention a number of theories usually neglected in Iranian studies, the author misses a more general critique of what could be called the ‘ideology of reformism’, or the preference for moderation over radical means of political struggle as an attitude informing scholarly claims and theoretical premises. An example of such an ideological approach can be found in Mirsepassi’s Democracy in Modern Iran. In the preface, the author states that ‘an important but poorly understood fact is that Iranians historically prefer reform of existing political institutions to total change – this is why important figures in the modern history of Iran are known as “reformers”’ (p. xiii), a claim which is hardly demonstrable with only the author’s perception as empirical support. In her analysis of Ben Ali’s Tunisia, Béatrice Hibou (2009) demonstrated that ‘reformism’ is an ideological tool to which, in the twenty-first century, political forces refer in order to gather domestic and international endorsement. Appealing to democracy has a similar legitimizing effect, since almost any social or political actor has to refer to it.

The internationally dominant rhetoric of democracy, reformism, human rights and non-violence frame both the regime and the activists’ discourse and indicate the right language to be spoken to reach an international audience (Rivetti, 2013). No surprise, then, that the Green Movement defines itself as non-violent, pro-human rights and democratic. Within this framework, the interpretation of Iranian history as a ‘quest for democracy and civil society’ and the normative, positive value attached to reformism look like assumptions informing an ideological manner of approaching these issues, ignoring the instrumental use that actors can make of democratic ideals and their sometimes evanescent meaning. This does not mean denying the democratic nature of the Green Movement. It rather indicates that scholars should go beyond the activists’ self-representation and instead contextualize the experience of
democratic struggles in a broader analytical setting, where the activists’ discourse does not answer all our scholarly queries. Tezcür’s book does not expand in this direction, but should be praised for its original review of theories on political change that are normally overlooked.

**Conclusion**

The overcoming of an ideological approach to the study of social conflicts and transformation in Iran is only possible through the disempowerment of the symbolic strength of concepts such as democracy or civil society, bringing them back to research and engaging the genealogy of their meaning and use (Foucault, 1977). These four books do not operate in this direction. Paradoxically, their most important contribution is an urgent call for a discussion about the state of Iranian studies, which would benefit from a serious engagement with social scientists from Arab studies. Indeed, the ‘unfinished’ Arab Spring (Sakbani, 2011) may help some scholars of Iranian studies to abandon their teleological analytical perspective, which individuates a predefined form of government, namely liberal democracy, as the goal of all social conflicts, elite competitions, and even the national history of Iran.

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