

## Ayatollah Khomeini's Political Thought

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### Abstract

Iranian revolution and the subsequent creation of Islamic Republic of Iran are seen as one of the major moments in the 20th century history especially in the context of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa). The revolution itself and the regime it engendered are rooted in the theological and political thought of one man – Ayatollah Khomeini. His interpretation of political Islam (especially Shi'ism) has been the guiding philosophy of Iran ever since. Any analysis of Iran or even international relations in the MENA Region today requires an understanding of the ideological moorings and undercurrents of the Iranian regime. With Trump administration's rejection of Obama Era Iran Deal and later increasing confrontation between the United States of America and The Islamic Republic of Iran it seems the crisis will not see an end in the near future. Iran and American allies in the region (Gulf Arab states) have been for years embroiled in covert and overt conflict in the region. The Syrian war, the Yemen conflict and the Iraq situation have seen further entrenchment of Shia-Sunni sectarian divide in the region.

In this paper we attempt to understand Ayatollah Khomeini's political thought- his peculiar interpretation of doctrine of vilayet -i- faqeh, his assertion regionally and internationally of Iran's Shia Islamic, his peculiar brand of populism and anti-westernism.

**Key words :** Iran, Shia Islam, vilayet-i-fiqh, populism

### Ayatollah Khomeini's Political Thought

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 is seen by many as the first expression of revivalism of political Islam in the modern era. Its reins were in the hands of a charismatic leader belonging to the clerical or the motjahed class – Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Iran's Constitution of 1979 and the subsequent Islamic Republic were based on the ideas expounded by Khomeini. His role as the Supreme Leader in the subsequent years shaped the internal and external policy of Iran. The international role of Iran as a regional power in the Middle-East has much to do with Khomeini's interpretation of Shia Islam and its role in the policies of and practice of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It will be redundant here to quote Keynes exhortation on the salience of ideas in the realm of practice as Khomeini's ideas have conspicuously been the principle driver of the Iranian history after the 1979 revolution. As a political leader as well as an ideologue Khomeini's ideas and practice showed great adaptability, his theory and praxis can be classified as a sort amalgamation of clericalism and populism<sup>1</sup>. One feature which remained constant in his thought was also his chief improvisation that is the principle of Vilayat-I fiqh or Guardianship of the Jurist.

### Background

To analyze the central themes of his thought and their effects we must briefly look at the socio-political history of Iran i.e. the background of the germination of his thought.

At the turn of the century Iran under the Qajar dynasty (1789-1925) was a pre-modern state which lacked a functioning centralised state apparatus, the direct authority of the monarch was effective only in the immediate vicinity of the capital Tehran. The rest of the country was not run but managed by the Qajar monarchs. They positioned themselves to be the supreme arbitrators among the multiple powerful interests in their society. They played the role of manipulators and managers of the powers and interests more local powers like the tribes and tribal leaders, the land magnates, the Clergy, the powerful merchant class in the provinces.

There were attempts by the monarchs for what has been defensive modernization under the pressure

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from the Russian and British Empires which viewed Persia, as Iran was known in those days, as the playground for their intrigues - a part of the Great Game. The capitulations by the Qajar monarch before the demands of the foreigners led to the Constitutional revolution of 1907. The democratic mobilization even though it consisted of some genuinely radical elements was mainly led by men of aristocratic backgrounds whose families had been in the notables in the Qajar system. The practice of democracy was often called feudal democracy as the traditional element using their authority in a limited franchise system to pack the majlis with themselves and their candidates. These notables setup a limited democracy which aimed at modernization of Iran but were, like the Qajars, unsuccessful due to the lack of a centralised state. The ensuing confusion in the wake of the invasion by the allies during the First World War helped the rise of General Reza Khan who later took over the reins of the state, declared himself Shah, founded the new Pahlavi dynasty and inaugurated what he called a constitutional democracy but was for all intents and purposes a military dictatorship. He relentlessly pushed forward with state building and was able to strong arm the various dominant elements into submission and lay the foundations of a strong centralized state. He used religion to his own ends, prominent Shi'i clerics were patronised when they helped his interests but were made to bend to his will if they strayed from his programme. He broke the power of the tribes and land magnates. The aristocratic elements of the society who accepted his ascension were co-opted. The Second World War saw the invasion and occupation of Iran by the British and Soviet Russia post occupation a nascent democracy took hold. A popularly elected leader Mohammad Mosaddegh became the Prime Minister but his program of nationalization of the Iranian Oil Industry led to his being removed in a coup supported by the American and British Secret Services. The new king Reza Shah Pahlavi was keen on modernization and westernization of Iran. Beholden as he was to western help he capitulated to western commercial interests. The social situation declined as most of the reforms were stuck in corruption and nepotism. Traditional elements like the clerical class *motjaheds* were enraged at the states encroachment into their traditional sphere and the general forced top-down modernization pursued by the Shah. Socialism found many adherents especially among the intelligentsia *rowshafiqr* and urban poor. The Shah however resorted to repression with his secret police the SAVAK. In 1979 all this led to massive protests against the Shah, Khomeini returned from exile and took up the reins of the revolution and founded the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Khomeini was thus a part of the clerical class, his main concerns were the growing westernization and modernization pursued by the Shah. Resisting the state's growing interference in the traditional area of the *fiqh* or jurists as well as opposing the state's attempts to co-opt friendly clerics and hierarchize and thus bring under its control the diffused clerical system in Iran. He also had to compete for students and influence with other clerics.

### **The principal political questions**

Iran converted to Twelver Shia Islam during the Safavid era. Twelver Shi'ism holds that legitimate spiritual and temporal leadership belongs to the divinely ordained line of Imams descended from Prophet Mohammad. Their wisdom and judgement is held to be God given and infallible. The struggles of Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn with the Ummayyad Caliphate culminated in a disproportionate battle between Imam Husayn and the Sunni Caliph Yazid at Karbala, an event which shaped the history of Shia Islam and the Sunni-Shia schism. The impact of this battle in the collective consciousness of the Shia community has been immense. It is often used as a metaphor for the battle of good and evil.

Twelver Shias also hold that the Twelfth and the last Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi went into Occultation or *ghayba* in 969 C.E. (invisibly present in the physical world) and is due to return as the savior of mankind to deliver it from evil 1. According to Abbas Amanat the millenarian aspect of this belief has had a crucial role in shaping the history of Iranian Islam.

The principle political questions which arise from this are: What is the legitimacy of secular rule be it monarchy or democracy and to what extent should it be obeyed. As the legitimate rule is rule by the divinely ordained Imams and the Twelfth Imam is in occultation- invisible (but effectively) present in the physical world; are secular authorities legitimate?

Khomeini's answer to this was that the only legitimate government is *Hoqumat-e Eslami* i.e. an

Islamic theocracy which he interpreted as being based on the guidance of learned clerics who could guide their community in accordance to the precepts of Islamic law. This evolved into the doctrine of vilayet-e-faqeh or Guardianship of Jurists which was later institutionalized in the Islamic Constitution of 1979

### **Vilayet-e-Faqeh**

In Twelver theology legitimate rule was the rule of Imams who were descended from the Prophet. They were divinely ordained and their judgment and wisdom was infallible. After the Twelfth Imam's occultation, after which he is held to be invisibly but still present in the physical world and due to return in the future, who possesses the right to rule the community? Is there a possibility of cooperation with the authorities as any government can be construed to be unjust as it is not ordained by God?

In response to this Khomeini propounded the doctrine of vilayet-e fiqh, the guardianship of the jurist. The well learned jurist or the cleric is uniquely qualified to guide their community in accordance to Islamic law and were superior to any temporal authority howsoever constituted. This expression of clerical absolutism had its origins in the Shia clerical class's struggle with the state authorities their attempts to resist institutionalization and thus cooption by the state.

Let us look at the brief history of the complex relationship between the Shia clerical class and secular authorities. Many early Shia theologians conceded the need for acceptance of those rulers who were tolerant of Shias and Shi'ism. This spawned politically quietist tendencies among some while the wait for the reappearance of the twelfth Imam was a source of millenarian hopes and political activism among others.

The Safavids (1501-1736) established Shi'ism as the state religion of Iran and fashioned themselves as the defenders of the faith. However even the state patronage during the Safavid era did not induce the clerical class towards institutionalization and establishment of well developed hierarchies.

The Qajar (1789-1925) era system of mutual respect between the central Qajar authorities and the clerical class, with the clerical class as one of the notables which were part of the Qajar arrangement as discussed earlier led to considerable local influence of the motjahed class especially in seminary towns like Qom but there was no conception of a supreme jurist guiding his community above temporal powers. Individual clerics of great influence wielded power in accordance to their popularity and width of their student circles.

During the initial years of the twentieth century which was an era of Qajar decline the clerical class too was also part the tug of war among the notables for increased political power. The clerical class naturally used its status as the legitimate interpreters of Quranic law and the earlier largely informal concept of marja or emulation (the cleric being a source of emulation in behavior as the interpreter of Islamic law) to cement their political role. During the two Shah eras it proved to be the source of power for clerics if they stayed in line but it could invite the displeasure of the authorities if they were seen as opposed to the interests of the monarchy. The growing state interference into the judiciary was one of the reasons for the reaction on the part of the jurists to claim political authority. It led to greater solidarity among the clerical class which was alarmed by growing secularization and modernization of society<sup>2</sup>.

Ayatollah Khomeini in 1971 published anonymously his collected lectures Vilayet e-Faqeh: Hoqumat e Islami (The Jurist's Guardianship: Islamic Government). The doctrine served two purposes for Khomeini at the political level it attacked the legitimacy of the Shah's government and at a personal level it was aimed at other more popular clerics with whom Khomeini struggled for a wider circle of followers. Vilayet was a strictly legal term. It signified the guardianship of the jurist over legal minors, the destitute and mentally handicapped. It did not in any sense signify the role of supreme legal authority which it came to mean later<sup>3</sup>. The way Khomeini articulated it, was much wider than the concept of marja'iat or cleric leadership based on the cleric as the source of emulation. It was for the first time a Shia jurist extended the concept of vilayat to public affairs in addition to legal affairs the proper sphere of jurists. Vilayet-i faqeh was centralized and institutionalized into a well developed clerical hierarchy tied with the state after the Islamic Revolution.

The basic idea behind vilayet-i faqeh is that legitimate political as well as spiritual leadership

belonged to the Imams who as direct descendants of the Prophet were infallible. The Twelfth Imam was in Occultation i.e. invisible but effectively present in the physical world due to reappear, thus it was the personal duty fard' ayn of the clerical class to lead the masses. Political authority not subject to the supreme guardianship of the clerical class be it the Shah's monarchy or a liberal democracy or a Socialist regime was illegitimate.

Khomeini denounced monarchy itself as a pagan (taqut) institution - a survival from the pagan era. He framed the struggle of Moses against the Pharaoh and Imam Husayn's struggle against the Ummayyads as the struggle of leaders of their people against hereditary monarchs. It was the duty of all Muslims to oppose all monarchs who signified injustice and oppression. Islam belonged to the mostazafen (the oppressed) and was the source of social justice<sup>4</sup>.

Vilayet-i faqeh is in essence the very founding principle of the Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>5</sup>. Islamic revolution and the subsequent Islamic constitution of 1979 institutionalized this doctrine with the establishment of the Guardian council and Khomeini assuming the post of Supreme leader. The office of the Supreme leader is presently held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Guardian Council acts as the supervisory body over the legislature and is composed of six fiqh or experts in Islamic Law chosen by the supreme leader and six jurists elected by the Iranian Majles, the popularly elected house.

In accordance to Vilayet-i faqeh any bill in order to become a law must be approved by the Guardian Council. The Supreme Leader has considerable power and influence. He can “determine the interests of Islam”, “set general guidelines for the Islamic Republic”, “supervise policy implementation,” and “mediate between the executive, legislative, and judiciary.” He vets candidates for the post of president and can dismiss him as well. He is the Supreme Commander of the Armed forces and can declare war and peace in that capacity. He also has wide ranging amnesty and appointment powers. These plenary powers are in consonance with Khomeini's ideas of Guardianship of the Jurist.

### **Populism**

Key feature of Khomeini's ideas which he expressed at various junctures of his life were informed by a sort of populism which according to Eravand Abrahamian has parallels in similar populist movements in South America led by charismatic authoritarian leaders. Khomeini emphasized that he was the leader of the oppressed (mostazafen), the slum dwellers (zaghehnashin), of landless laborers<sup>6</sup>. He used his charismatic authority to mobilize the grievance of the poor against the Shah's government. He asked for a return to the roots away from the corruption of the cosmopolitan corruption. This template does fit the model of populist movements especially Peronismo in Argentina.

### **Anti-Westernism: The Great Satan**

The foreign penetration into Iran in the Qajar era was one of the factors which had forged links between influential groups in the Iranian society the motjaheds (the clerics) were always wary of foreign influence tampering the socio-religious moorings of the country, they were always wary of the effects of foreign influence on their social standing in society, the powerful bazaar interests of prominent merchants who controlled the urban economic sphere were especially concerned with the concessions to foreign interests and the potential of loss of influence and profit, the rowshanfiqr the intellectual class animated by the progressive ideals wanted a nation which would not be dominated by colonial powers and interests. The earlier emphasis on the hostile and expansive neighbors in the north and the south i.e. the Russian and the British Empires during the Qajar era were not unfounded as Iran was a theatre of the Russian British geopolitical rivalry being played out from Crimea to the isolated valleys of Hunza and Chitral on the northern tip of the Indian subcontinent. Lord Curzon's Persia and the Persian Question is representative of the expansionist designs of the British Empire in Iran. The discovery of oil and the growing influence of Western interests in Iran was a constant concern for the progressive as well as the clerical class the bulwark of tradition. The Anglo-Russian invasion and occupation of Iran during the Second World War was evidence of the 'Western' designs against Iran. Western supported and orchestrated coup which led to the ouster of the democratically elected and popular Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and establishment of the Mohammed Shah Pahlavi regime was a clear indication to many in Iran of the strength of western interests and the inability of even popularly elected leaders

to successfully oppose them. Anti-western sentiments were further aggravated by the westernization pursued by Mohammad Shah Pahlavi, not only was he seen as a installation of western interests, his interference in the social issues was negatively perceived.

Belonging to the motjahed class Khomeini held negatively the encroaching westernization into Iranian society. Khomeini held the shariah or Islamic law as perfect and did not see the need for modernization and westernization pursued by the Shah. The solution to societal problems lay in proper application of Islamic law and jurisprudence and not on westernization. Subversion by the west was a common theme in his lectures. History of Iran provided many examples of Western interests interfering in Iran, so when United States of America was referred by him as the Great Satan or shaytan-i buzurg it found resonance among the public. United States was the Great Satan and the Pahlavi rule supported by it was thus servants of Satan. Later he termed Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War as shaytan-i kuchuk or lesser Satan which was an obvious reference to United States support during the war.

According to Abbas Amanat this Manichaeian categorization of the Iran versus the West found currency among the people of Iran due to the existence of such ideas of binary conflict of good versus evil in the collective conscience of the Iranian Society. This age old dichotomy is expressed in ideas like Ahura Mazda versus Ahirman in Zoroastrianism, Iran versus Aniran (rest) in Firdausi's Shahnama. In fact the religious belief of Manichaeism which is the origin the word Manichaeian originated in Iran.

This idea of Manichaeian struggle resurfaces in the contemporary rhetoric of the Iranian Government aided by Khomeini's ideas of Iran versus the West i.e. the Great Satan along with its proxies like the Arab states supported by the West.

At the international level in the Middle-East this, along with the already existing Shia-Sunni schism has played a prominent role especially after the U.S. Invasion of Iraq. The U.S. has already clarified that it seeks to prevent the formation of a 'Shia-crescent' in the Middle-East politically led by Iran. Internationally Khomeini had often called for a united ummah or Islamic community even staked claim on the leadership of the Islamic world. He claimed that the sectarian dissensions were part of the western strategy to weaken Islam and the Western backed states in the gulf were collaborators.

Iran's aspiration as a regional power are hardly new but Khomeini's articulation of Shia Islam and the establishment of a theocracy post revolution clearly put forward Iran as a leader of Shias in the region. Khomeini through various pronouncements and acts internationally, like the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, tried to claim the leadership of the Islamic World. This along with sectarian divide further fueled its conflict with Saudi Arabia in particular which also sees itself as a regional hegemon and a leader of the Islamic World. This rivalry has played out in the Syrian Conflict; with Iran, the Shia militia Hezbollah supporting Bashar al-Asad's regime and Saudi Arabian assistance for the rebel Free Syrian Army. Iran has provided materiel and men, Iranian and Shia Hazara volunteers from Afghanistan to help the Asad government. There are links between Iran and Shia militias fighting in Iraq against the Islamic State as well. The Yemen conflict too has been part of the larger Iran-Saudi rivalry with Iranian support for Houthi rebels and Saudi bombing operations against the same. It would simplistic and reductionist to portray the complex genesis of the current conflicts to the sectarian divide in the Middle-East but the sectarianism does form a major part of it. Iranian identification, especially post-revolution, with the cause of Shia Islam and its aspirations as a regional power have come in conflict with the similar aspirations of Saudi Arabia which stands on the opposite side of the sectarian divide. Both these powers share the motivation of being leaders of the Islamic community, an aspiration Khomeini was keen on as well.

Khomeini consistently called for unity of the Ummah and falling back on the same dualistic worldview reiterated his claim that the sectarian divide was being fueled the enemies of Iran and Islam chief amongst them the Shaytan-i buzurg or the Great Satan i.e. the United States of America and its support to powers like Saudi Arabia.

Also pertinent is the use of the Iranian government during Khomeini's rule in the initial years of the revolution and after and the subsequent rulers of anti-western rhetoric to deny the legitimacy of the regime's

critics and portray them as puppets of foreign interests.

Khomeini's view of capitalism, communism and to some extent democracy were intimately connected to his view of Islamic law as a complete and perfect way of life and not needing any western ideologies to complement them. What was needed was a society led by clerics who could guide a society in accordance with precepts of Islamic law, this forms part of the main feature of his ideology that is vilayet-e-fiqh or guardianship of Islamic Jurist.

According to Khomeini the western colonial interests distorted Islam and sowed sectarian dissensions, 'sent Orientalists into the East to misinterpret Islam and the Koran and that the colonial powers had conspired to undermine Islam both with religious quietism and with secular ideologies, especially socialism, liberalism, monarchism, and nationalism.' 7

### Conclusion

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a charismatic political leader who instigated and led the Islamic revolution of Iran was acutely aware of the virtue of adaptability and improvisation in political practice however he was always guided by his belief in Huqumat-i Eslami or Islamic government which for him could only be achieved by Vilayet-e Fiqh, the doctrine of the guardianship of the jurist which he had propounded. This principle is the bedrock of the Islamic Republic of Iran and has been institutionalized in the constitution. The subsequent history of Iran domestically as well its impact in the international affairs, its conflicts with the West starting with the Tehran U.S. Embassy Hostage Crisis then its insistence on a nuclear program and its rivalry with U.S. supported Gulf states bears the mark of Khomeini's ideas.

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