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Middle East

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The Literacy Corps in Pahlavi Iran, 1963–1979

The Literacy Corps (*sepah-e danesh*) was implemented in Iran in the framework of the White Revolution (1963–1979) during the reign of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979). Suggested by the Kennedy administration as an alternative to red revolutions and as a condition to US aid, the White Revolution aimed at propelling Iran onto the level of the most modernized countries. However, since about 40% of the labour force was illiterate and, thus, could not foster productivity, the government realized that action had to be taken in the field of education.

According to two government decrees issued on 26 October and 3 December 1962, and approved by the Majles on 26 January 1963, young men holding a secondary education diploma – mainly urban middle-class youth – were given the option of serving in the Literacy Corps instead of serving in the army. Dispatched to rural areas, 166,949 corpsmen and 33,642 corpswomen (since 1969) taught over 2.2 million children between the ages of six and twelve who had not yet attended school up to the second grade, plus a million adults. The Literacy Corps absorbed high school graduates who could not be drafted in the army and had no labour skills; used military facilities and the army's experience in literacy training; saved funds, especially as compared to the previous teachers training programme; and – according to an American observer – the programme was peculiarly suited to the Persian temperament because nothing could 'get Iranians to help their fellow man or participate in any sort of Peace Corps activity except force or the threat of force.'¹

With the Literacy Corps 'the state combined the stick of conscription with the carrot of monetary advantage and opportunity for service'.² Corpsmen were paid \$16 per month during the training period³ and then 300–400 tomans (\$50) per month, according to their military rank. Women received 450 tomans per month (perhaps because women were not obliged to serve in the army and a decent salary could help in finding volunteers). The cost of educating a student in a school run by the Literacy Corps was considered minimal (100 tomans, equivalent to \$13.33), that is, one-third of the costs for a student at a conventional school. Furthermore, the villagers paid for the construction of facilities.⁴

With the Literacy Corps, education to some extent escaped the control of the ulema, who used to shape the younger generation along traditional lines. This programme actually aimed at helping the regime in establishing a modern nation-state on a basis other than religion. Persian as a common language was the major tool used to inculcate the spirit of national unity: 'I viewed central control of public education as one means of ensuring national unity. Teaching the Persian language throughout our country fostered a common bond among all', wrote the Shah whilst in exile.⁵

Teaching the history of the Persian Empire was a means to make people feel part of Iran. In the textbook for the third year of high school, for instance, the interference of the Zoroastrian clergy in politics caused the defeat of the Sasanian Empire by the Muslim armies. Therefore, religious interference in political affairs was extremely dangerous.

Involvement in politics

In 1966 some corpsmen were involved in political activity within the Islamic Nations Party. Arrested in the autumn of 1965, fifty-five members of this organization were sentenced in March 1966. Three of them were literacy corpsmen and their leader had just ended a tour with the corps a few months before his arrest. In addition, 'there are also indications that the Government, concerned over reports that corpsmen wittingly and unwittingly have spread anti-regime propaganda in the villages (often as a result of communist radio broadcasts), is moving to counter this situation. In an operation as large as the Literacy Corps and in a country like Iran, some activity of this sort is to be expected.'⁶

Two decades of White Revolution improved standards of living. At the same time, however, 'deprivations deepened, differences widened, and disparities became

the Literacy Corps in the early 1970s: '[h]is understanding of the problems of village life politicised his consciousness and spurred the formation of a new revolutionary identity in him and many others. His subsequent involvement with leftist groups was the direct and unintended consequence of the state's programs of development.'⁹ In contrast, some corpsmen declared that their experience in the countryside had strengthened their support for the regime.¹⁰

Oppositional activities

In addition, many of the corpsmen's parents were influenced by their 'children's new-found radicalism' and the political impact of the Literacy Crusade was thus larger than generally thought. According to a survey, 82.3% of literacy corpsmen declared that this experience had made them more aware of the actual situation in rural Iran and they had realized that no prompt solution was available. Eight per cent declared they had become 'more aware of the inefficiency and inertia of the government bureaucracy'.¹¹

According to Ali Rezavi, in the 1960s the widespread opinion among leftist corpsmen was that the White Revolution had been implemented because the Shah had been instructed to do so by imperialist countries wishing to have cheap labour and to rule over people. With the White Revolution imperialist countries supposedly wanted the villagers to migrate to towns, increase the unemployment rate and thus decrease wages to the benefit of the imperialists themselves. At the end of the day, the only real change brought by the White Revolution was that 'the landlord's power had been weakened and he and his sons could not enjoy the *jus primae noctis* any longer'. This advantage for the villagers was pointed out to my interviewee by Darvish Mahmud, who spent his time travelling, reciting poetry and collecting money: 'Sarkar, up to four years ago any bride in the village would have had to spend her first night with the landlord or his sons. Therefore, 50% of the children of our village are illegitimate. Everything changed when the White Revolution was launched and the villagers dared to set the landlord's car on fire. Can't you see the difference between now and the past?'¹²

It is, however, difficult to distinguish between the political implications motivated by the experience in the Literacy Corps and those generated by the turbulent atmosphere of those years. My interviewee, Ismail Bayani, stated that after having watched the television programme on Golsorkhi's trial, his perception of the regime was so negative that he decided to join the street protest and throw stones at the windows of the university. Some of his anger was surely

motivated by Golsorkhi's death sentence, but it was also the result of his personal experience. In fact, at the beginning of the 1970s Bayani was directly involved in the Fedai'in-e Khalq, which he joined after a period spent attending lectures by the influential reformer Ali Shariati at the Hoseyniyeh-ye Ershad college and leading a group of pro-Islamist students. Before entering university, Bayani had served as a literacy corpsman in a village in Mazandaran and this experience helped to shape his political thought. As a corpsman he had tried his best in order to implement the White Revolution, had written to many ministries complaining about the lack of resources, but was disappointed by the fact that in reply he only received threats for being too active. Though it is not possible to give an exact dimension to one experience compared to another, Bayani declared that serving in the Literacy Corps surely had an impact on his political activism.¹³



PHOTO: GHOLAMREZA SADRAI

► Two members of the Literacy Corps.

Notes

1. 'The Literacy Corps', NARA, US National Archives, 8 December 1962, n. A-356.
2. J.W. Ryan, Educational Resources and Scholastic Outcome: A Study of Rural Primary Schooling in Iran (Ph.D. diss. Stanford, 1973), 131.
3. Airgram, 'Initial Implementation of Literacy Corps Proposal in Azerbaijan', NARA, 13 January 1963, n. A-46, 888.43/1-1363.
4. R. Sanghvi, C. German, and D. Missen, 'The Literacy Corps', in *The Revolution of the Shah and the People*, vol. 7 (London, 1967), 23.
5. M.R. Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York, 1980), 128.
6. 'The Literacy Corps – Growing Maturity', NARA SOC 6-5 Iran, 10 May 1966, n. A-749.
7. H. Hakimian, 'Industrialization and the Standard of Living of the Working Class in Iran, 1960–1979', *Development and Change*, vol. 19 (1988): 30.
8. Idem note 6.
9. Z.T. Sullivan, 'Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran', in L. Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women. Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1998), 227.
10. Johanes Farhadian, London, 13 May 1999.
11. H. Faris, *Conscription of Urban Youths for Rural Education and Development in Developing Countries: Iran as a Case Study* (Ph.D. diss. The American Univ., Washington, 1975), 313, 316–317.
12. Interview, London, 10 April 1999.
13. Interview, Venice, 21 September 1998.

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