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The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society

Asef Bayat

Oliver Roy's contention about the "failure of political Islam" does not mean the end of Islamist activism and discourse. Indeed, more than at any other time, the global political language is filled with discussions about Islam and Islamic activism. Politics in Muslim societies is still predominantly religious; and the Islamic movements constitute the major oppositions to governments. An imagined Islamic threat to the West explains Western interest in the subject. A belief that Islam offers a possible solution to social, political and economic ills is what attracts the Muslims.

Surprisingly, while Islamic discourse permeates politics in most Muslim societies, in Iran, the first modern Islamic state, people seem preoccupied with secular concerns; Islamic language in politics seems to be waning. In fact, Iran is moving toward a new "post-Islamist" phase. What are the features of this "post-Islamism?" What are the causes behind this transition? It probably is too early to provide definitive answers. However, the phenomenon is very significant, and the observations expressed here are meant to stimulate further discussion. Before describing the post-Islamist phase, though, it is necessary to understand what Islamism has been in Iran.

The Islamist Phase

The Islamist phase began with the revolution of February 1979. The establishment of the first Islamic state in modern times set the stage for a gradual Islamization of society.¹ The process was enforced largely from above,

1. Pakistan, which was created out of British India in 1947, claims to be the first

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often with violence. The chief characteristic of Iranian Islamism was the creation of an Islamic government based on a novel/modern notion of *Valayat-i faqih*, the guardianship of the canon law jurist, who is to rule the community of the believers in the absence of the Shia Twelfth Imam. According to Iran's 1979 Constitution, all of laws of the land must accord with Islamic principles. Of course, there does exist a parliament, but the laws enacted by elected deputies can be modified or over-ruled by a Council of Guardians, a 12-member body of canon law jurists appointed by the Faqih. This council vetoes any legislation deemed to be in conflict with Islamic values. The establishment of the Islamic government also meant a change in symbols and slogans. Iran's flag and national anthem, for example, were modified to become Islamic. The internationalization of the Islamic order, or pan-Islamism, accounted for another aspect of the New Iran.

Islamism should be seen in terms of a systematic attempt from above to Islamicize society and the economy. In the early 1980s, a cultural revolution was launched to transform the education system, from universities down to pre-school nurseries. The idea was to set up a religious curriculum, employ Islamically-committed instructors, and add Islamic extra-curricula activities. The aim was to produce and reproduce Islamic citizens.

Compulsory hejab (veiling) for women in the early 1980s was the most drastic measure that gave a religious identity to post-revolutionary Iranian women. Hejab has been particularly significant as it is a highly visible Islamic symbol. Along with the forced veiling of women and surveillance of men, many liberal laws that had come into existence under the deposed shah were revoked. These included family laws, as well as employment and education policies favoring women. Day care centers and family planning programs were condemned as imperialist conspiracies; polygamy was tolerated, and men lawfully received custody of children and the automatic right to divorce. The imposition of a quota system effectively barred women from studying certain college courses and restricted their numbers in others. These changes were accompanied by a pervasive Islamization of leisure—of drinking habits, dress, music, movies, television programs, videos, holidays and satellite dishes.

From the very first days of the Revolution, there was a quest for an "Islamic economy"—one which was to be based on "Islamic justice" (*qist-i Islami*), an economy that would be neither capitalist nor socialist. Its cornerstone was a redefinition of property rights, or *mashru'a capital*. Assuming the prosperity of the *mustaz'afin*, the deprived, was its objective. Dozens of seminars were organized to discuss the issue of Islamic economics. Although no definite answer was agreed upon, those policies that were

modern Islamic state, but its government always have been controlled by secular political elites, not an Islamic clergy.

undisputed and practical were implemented. Banking interest was removed in theory, the labor laws changed, Islamic prayers were enforced in to the work places, “unIslamic” businessmen were purged, jailed or had their capital confiscated, and foreign investment was discouraged. These measures caused business insecurity and a sharp drop in investment and productive activities. The need to respond to these trends caused a debate between the “specialists” (*takhassosgeraian*) and *maktabis*. The former, representing President Abolhsan Bani Sadr, emphasized expert knowledge in dealing with economic and technical issues. The *maktabis* stressed the importance of Islamic/ideological commitment. For a long time during the early 1980s, the *maktabis* view was quite predominant, Islam was considered a complete social, economic, political and moral system that had answers to all human problems. It was up to the “true” Muslims, through resiliency and commitment, to discover them. Such a monopolization of truth meant that there was no room for the coexistence of competing views or systems. Islamism was exclusivist and intolerant of pluralism.

The Islamist phase prevailed throughout the 1980s. The war with Iraq, where Islamic symbols were utilized fully (the war of *haqq* against *batil*; Islam against unbelief), contributed to the prevalence of this phase. Although a large segment of the population opposed Islamism from the outset, the state and society nevertheless had its own support base. The support came largely from among the urban poor, the traditional urban petty-bourgeoisie, some rural youth, and a segment of the modern middle classes. Many urban youth were integrated through the war effort, Revolutionary Institutions (*nahadha-ye inqilabi*) such as the pasdaran, baseej, and the Jihad-i Sazandegi. The state further hoped that the Islamization of schools would reproduce this critical mass of supporters. This support base was inspired by the personality of Ayatollah Khomeini while he was alive. However, with the end of the war (1988) and the death of Khomeini (1989), a new phase began to unfold. It was inaugurated by a comprehensive program of post-war reconstruction, which marked the beginning of what might be term post-Islamism.

What is Post-Islamism?

By “post-Islamism” I mean a condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters. As such, post-Islamism is not anti-Islamic, but rather reflects a tendency to resecularize religion. Predominantly, it is marked by a call to limit the political role of religion. In contemporary Iran, post-Islamism is expressed in the idea of fusion between Islam (as a personalized faith) and individual freedom and choice; and post-Islamism is associated with the values of democracy and aspects of modernity. It is expressed in the idea that Islam does not have answers to all

societies' social, political, and economic problems. Post-Islamism implies an understanding that not only is Islam compatible with modernity, but its very survival as a religion depends upon achieving this compatibility. Yet, there also is a strong quest for an independent modernity.

Post-Islamism is summed up in the phrase "we don't mind destroying mosques in order to build freeways."² Post-Islamism expresses, even among committed Muslims, just such a state of mind, one of rationalization. It is manifested in acknowledging secular exigencies, in a freedom from rigidity, in breaking down the monopoly of religious truth, in the sacred giving way to the profane. Of course, Ayatollah Khomeini had expressed similar sentiments when he "absolutized" the Islamic state. However, his destruction of mosques had been justified for the sake of a more grand sacred, not for a secular, cause.

In contemporary Iran, a number of interesting social phenomena represent post-Islamist trend. Three of the most significant include the redevelopment of Tehran municipality and its socio-spatial rationale; the Alternative Thought Movement; and Islamic feminism. These trends are discussed below.

1. Teheran Municipality

Since 1989, Gholamhosain Karbaschi has been redesigning the city of Tehran.³ The capital has assumed a new character, which does not have much to do with the image of an Islamic city. Its spatial configuration and symbolism, freeways, huge commercial billboards, and shopping malls remind a visitor more of Madrid or even Los Angeles than of Karbala or Qom. There are no signs of those hurriedly-written revolutionary slogans and intense-looking posters which, during the early 1980s, covered almost every empty wall in the city. They have all given space to commercial advertisements as well as a handful of officially-sanctioned slogans adorned impressively by colorful designs and portraits.

Splendid cultural centers have been set up, both in the affluent north and poor south of Tehran, catering to the arts, music and modern technology. There is a tremendous popularity among the youth for Western and Iranian classical music. Over 75 percent of these concert goers are young men and women.⁴ Although forced veiling and gender segregation still are enforced by the state, the municipality's 500 newly constructed parks bring together in public space, not only various social classes, but specially, men and women, and adolescent boys and girls. There are other spatial arrangements that facilitate this mingling, including mountain climbing and north Tehran skiing, not to mention

2. Stated by an Iranian diplomat abroad, 1995.

3. For Karbaschi's role as mayor see Eric Hooglund, "Managing Metropolis," *Middle East Insight*, v. 11, n. 5 (July - August 1995), pp. 72-73.

4. For an interesting report on Tehran's new cultural centers (Farhang-saraa) see *Goft-o-Goo*, n. 9 (Fall 1995).

bike-riding in the man-made forests around the city.

The mayor has become one of the most popular politicians in the country. He even has started a daily newspaper, *Hamshahri*, which has color photographs and has overtaken in circulation all other established papers in the course of two years. The paper covers overwhelmingly secular concerns such as culture, art, citizen complaints and urban life. It sells everyday, but then is re-sold by street vendors for twice its official price.

2. The Alternative Thought Movement

At the intellectual level, the most dramatic manifestation of post-Islamism is a new movement, *Andisheh-ye Diger*, or Alternative Thought, led by a professor of philosophy, Abdul-Karim Soroush.⁵ Holding a doctorate from London University and a former ideologue of the Islamic state, Soroush is well-versed both in Western science and philosophy and in Islam, especially jurisprudence, and more sophisticated in these areas than Ali Shariati (1933-77), the important Islamist ideologue in the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution. The Alternative Thought Movement is neither anti-Islamic nor secular, but seeks to redefine the capabilities of religion in the modern age to address complex human needs.⁶ Epistemologically, it calls for a hermeneutic reading of the Qur'an, rejecting a single "true reading," or, for that matter, an exclusive "expert reading" by the ulama. In fact, the Alternative Thought Movement seeks to end the professionalization of religious interpretation by the clergy, who subsist on their monopoly of religious knowledge. Informed by enlightenment thought, the movement serves as an implicit critique of the idea of *valayat-e faqih*, the rule of supreme jurist, which is the basis of the Islamic state in Iran. It argues that the management of modern societies is both possible and desirable, not through religion, but through scientific rationality in a democratic structure. Soroush not only believes that Islam and democracy are compatible, but that their association is inevitable. In effect, the Alternative Thought Movement calls for the establishment of a secular democratic state that accommodates Islam as a faith.

Soroush explicitly rejects *al-Islam huwa al-hal* (Islam is the solution), the popular idea among contemporary Islamic movements in the Arab world. For him, religions have limitations in answering all of human problems. In fact, religions are the domain not of mundane concerns, but of mystery, perplexity, love and devotion. Religious faith, nevertheless, must be encouraged because,

5. *Andish-ye digar* is discussed in Eric Hooglund, "The Rule of Iran Today," *Middle East Insight*, v. 11, n. 5 (July - August 1995), pp. 41-42.

6. The discussion of the Alternative Thought here is based upon articles by Soroush and others in various issues of monthly *Kiyan*, a journal that presents these ideas systematically. As of completion of this essay, 31 issues have been published.

according to Soroush, it makes life tolerable by enabling humans to cope with the harsh realities of life and because it can provide the mechanisms of self-control against individual abuse of others, just as democracy facilitates external control.

The Alternative Thought Movement has generated widespread support among youth, the educated, and both religious-minded and secular Iranians, especially the modern middle classes, many of whom had been marginalized politically. Perhaps more importantly, Soroush has gained a significant following among theology students, more than that enjoyed by any senior clergy. These young ulama are concerned about religion as an institution and their future; they feel the basis of their prerogatives and legitimacy is being eroded amid a growing anti-clericalism in the society.

The ideas propounded by these *degarandishan* (alternative thinkers), as they are called in Iran, are being spread through lectures, symposiums, international conferences, books, articles, and specifically, the monthly *Kiyan*. Of course, similar ideas can be found among Islamic modernists such as Muhammad Arkoun, Hasan Hanafi or even the secular Nasr Abou Zeid in Egypt. However, originality is not the issue here, but rather that these ideas have gained popularity under a self-conscious Islamic state.

3. An "Islamic Feminism"?

A third trend in Iran's post-Islamism is a kind of Islamic feminist movement that has emerged within the framework of the Alternative Thought Movement.⁷ The activists, familiar with both the western feminist debates and Qur'anic teachings, are struggling within the Islamic discourse to revoke those anti-women laws and practices that are said to have religious justifications. Relying on the slogan, "equality of Men and Women in Islam," which has been accepted by clerical leaders, this movement has made considerable inroads to its effort to empower women in the domain of employment, education and family law. The stereotypes of Iranian women in the West as oppressed in the solitude of domesticity and hidden under the long black *chador* is no more than a crude over-simplification of what has been developing in Iran. Despite heavy pressure, Iranian women are active in social, scientific, and cultural fields, perhaps more now than at any time in their history. For example, half of the positions in the government sector and over 40 percent of education jobs are filled by women. Of course, women still are required to observe *hejab*. However, for some women, veiling has facilitated their mobility within male-

7. My analysis of the movement is largely based upon various issues of one of its leading journals, *Zanan*. So far I have seen 29 issues. I have also relied on various issues of *Zan-e Rouz*, another woman's magazine. Some issues of *Nime-ye Digar*, a feminist journal published in the US has also been useful.

dominated fields. Thus, many lower class women who previously remained at home now are mobilized and playing a social role in neighborhood and religious institutions. Nevertheless, those modern middle class women who resent forced veiling have not remained passive, and, consequently, many urban women wear their head scarves very loosely. Officials invariably have complained about *bad-hejabi*, the laxity of young girls in observing veiling in public, to refer to women's resistance against the imposition of *hejab*.

In addition, the opportunity for equal education with men has made a comeback following official restrictive quotas that favored men. Polygamy seriously has been curtailed, men's unilateral right to divorce has been restricted, and religiously-sanctioned *mut'a* marriage (according to which a formal contract is signed for a specified period of time ranging from a few hours to a few years) has been demonized. Child custody, which in Islamic laws favors the father (after the child reached a certain age), also is being debated. The struggle for women to become judges is now on the agenda.⁸ Women activities are organized in at least 60 civic associations that communicate their ideas through such publications as *Zanan*, *Farzaneh* and *Zan-e Rouz*, organize rallies, participate in international women meetings, lobby politicians and clerical leaders, and campaign in the Majlis (parliament). Iranian women see themselves at the forefront of the struggle for the empowerment of women in the Muslim world.

The Causes

Why did this new phase of post-Islamism emerge? It resulted primarily from the shortcomings and contradictions of Islamist experience in Iran. Some leaders feared that these shortcomings might undermine Islam as the legitimizing source of the Islamic republic. To begin with, the post-revolution political structure excluded many groups from participation. Although the *faqih*, supreme jurist, ruled alongside a democratically elected parliament, restrictions on forming political parties, and the Council of Guardians' disqualification of candidates for electoral office marginalized various political tendencies. Even some of the ardent supporters of the system became demoralized by the government's excesses in political control and factional infighting. Many former allies (such as Mahdi Bazargan, Sadeq Ghotbzadeh, Bani Sadr, the Mujahedin, Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari, Ayatollah Hosain Montazeri, and others) became opponents.

Islamic economy did not deliver as much as it was expected. Although income distribution improved compared to the situation before the revolution (in 1991, the top 20 percent of the population received about 50 percent of total

8. See for instance, Ibrahim Yazdi, "Revivalist Islamic Movement: Challenges and Crises," *Kiyan*, n. 30 (Khordad 1375 [1996]), p. 12, (in Persian).

income, while the bottom 40 percent received 13.4 percent; in 1977, the top 20 percent received 57.3 percent of the total income and the lowest 40 percent received 11.28 percent).⁹ Nevertheless, national income in general dropped to half of that in the late 1970s. Economic blockades, the war with Iraq and a major decline in international oil prices are important factors in this decline, but economic mismanagement and lack of economic security also were significant factors.

With the end of revolutionary exceptionalism and the beginning of normalization after the Iran-Iraq War, the mundane realities of wages, food, housing, and cars pushed ideology, altruism and the sacred to the sidelines. The social problems of political apathy, youth, marginality, and population growth rate surfaced. Some leaders believed that there was a serious danger of people equating these social ills with Islam. Consequently, they feared that people might turn away from Islam as a whole. The issue of youth, the children of the Revolution, was undoubtedly the paramount concern. The Islamization of schools had failed to reproduce an Islamic youth. Recent official studies revealed that *bad-hejabi* (laxity on observing veil), among school and university girls is increasing progressively. "We are encountering a serious cultural onslaught. What is to be done?" an official wondered.¹⁰ The official concerns about youth are highlighted in surveys: over 83 percent of young people spend their leisure time before TV sets, but only 5 percent of them watch religious programs; of 58 percent who read books, less than 6 percent are interested in religious literature.¹¹

Iranian youth sense that the future does not look very bright for many of them; they do not feel that their education brings them the expected rewards. The sluggish economy turns their expectation into outrage. Moral restrictions, in addition, suppresses the expression of their youthful desires. This is indeed a familiar scenario also in Egypt, where, in the absence of other credible alternatives, this morally-outraged groups turn to Islamic politics. In Iran, however, the question is: which ideological inclinations will these youngsters pursue if they already have experienced Islamism? In this new post-Islamist phase, young people are in an ideological void, in a situation whereby they have experienced many ideologies but have not gained much. They thus are added to the army of already demoralized new middle classes and public sector

9. See Ali Akbar Karbasian, "The Process of Income Distribution in Iran," *Iran-e Farda*, n. 17 (Ordibehesht 1374 [1995]), p. 44, (in Persian).

10. The contribution of Muhammad Hadi Taskhiri, of the Organization of Islamic Culture and Communication in the Second International Seminar on *Hejab*, 28 Aban 1376, reported in *Zanan*, n. 26 (Mehr/Aban 1376), pp. 8-9.

11. A survey of Supreme Council of Youth, cited by Golzari in the 2nd International Seminar on *Hejab*, *ibid.*, reported in *Zanan*, *ibid.*, p. 9.

employees. Some youth tend to internalize their conditions, orienting to nihilism. Many turn to forms of violence. Soccer matches, for example, have become big security headaches for the government because there have been numerous episodes of mass violence and riots in the aftermath of games, the largest being the Tabriz riots of 1994. The more ambitious youth fantasize about migrating to the West. It is against this general background that post-Islamism has emerged as a way out, as a world view to integrate such alienated and marginalized segments. Beyond alternative thought, secular authenticity—in the form of art, music and modern science—is being offered by some enlightened leaders.

The other factor behind post-Islamism has to do with the paradoxes of the Islamic state. First, the very Islamization of the state has led to a growing secularization of *fiqh*, or jurisprudence. The absolute *valayat-e faqih* gives power to the *faqih* to change any law, precept or injunction that he feels is in the interest of the state. Even the Constitution and religious *wajibat*, obligations, are not excluded. Because *valayat*, government in Islam, has precedence over all other obligations. Government is, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, *awjab wajibat* (the highest obligation). Not only does this mean sacrifice of religious sanctity in the interest of mundane exigencies, but also encroachment on the clergy's prerogative for an autonomous interpretation of *shari'a*.

On the other hand, the ulama's *fatavas*, or verdicts, on public affairs, are subject to approval by the *valli-e faqih*; and their access to *haq-i imam*, donations from the faithful, is conditional on the permission of the supreme *faqih*. Finally, the fusion of state and religion has tarnished the spiritual and social legitimacy of the clergy, and many Iranian Muslims tend to equate the failures of the state with that of the ulama.

For the first time in its modern history, the shi'i *ulama* in Iran are losing their independence and power and this development, ironically, has been happening under an Islamic state. Their prerogatives on *fiqh* are being undermined, and their financial independence and legitimacy before people are being curtailed. This dependency of the ulama on the state worries many ulama in the younger generation about their future and that of the institution of clergy. They feel that they may be better off if they leave dirty politics to politicians.

It should be borne in mind that the Islamic Revolution in Iran did not emerge out of a strong Islamic movement. There was no strong Islamic movement in Iran in the late 1970s. Islamization of society in Iran grew not from below as in Egypt, but largely was inaugurated from above by an Islamic government *after* the Islamic Revolution. This partly explains why large segments of the population resisted the institutionalization of Islamic principles such as veiling, control of leisure and behavior in the post-revolution period. Post-Islamism should be viewed in the light of these contradictions and failures,

which some religious leaders see as undermining Islam *per se*. In a sense, post-Islamism seeks to save Islam as faith by undoing Islamism as politics.

The Future

Is there a future for post-Islamism? There is no guarantee that post-Islamism will prevail. Indeed, it has aroused criticism and opposition, largely from power-holders and the more conservative elements within both the state and society. Soroush and his associates have been attacked by the president, some leading ayatollahs, and the foreign minister. The monthly *Kiyan* and some of Soroush's lectures have been attacked for advocating the separation of religion from the state. The weekly *Payam-e Daneshjou* and vigilante groups of hizbollah have assaulted the mayor and Tehran municipality for the spread of music, moral laxity in the public parks and for "Western-style urbanization." In the same way, colorful female outfit, bike-riding, women athletes, skiing, and women's public presence have been the subjects of major outcries in *Haftah Name-ye Sobh*, *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, *Fahang-i Afarinesh*¹² and other conservative publications. For example, *Farhang-e Afarinesh* has summed the "problems" that it claims the women's movement is causing:

... the growing presence of women in public places, freedom of fashion and colorful outfits, legitimizing interaction between men, assertiveness [of women] in public, expressing independent opinions in the household, activity in the male domain, the right to have jobs despite the opposition of family or husband, and education as the first priority under any circumstance—these are some of ideas that are being fed to the society.

The situation in Iran might remain in a state of flux and uncertainty. Contradictory trends can continue to coexist for a long time. The 1980s is witness to the resiliency of the Islamic state to contain such conflicting tendencies. However, the indications so far are that, despite these lapses, the post-Islamist trend seems well under way. If it is allowed to grow, it is likely to bring significant political changes in the country with vital implications for political Islam in the Muslim world. More immediately, it is bound to pose a challenge to democrats about the future of democracy in Iran.

12. See for example, *Haftah Name-ye Sobh*, 12 Dey 1374; *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, 10 Bahman 1374; *Farhang-e Afarinesh*, 26 Dey 1374.