Islam and Politics

The linkages between religion and politics are viewed in very different ways in the Western and the Islamic world. The separation of church and state was achieved to a great extent in Europe. Many governments in West Asia and North Africa, under the influence of the Western world, tried to practise politics with a curious equilibrium of religion and state through their separation, and accommodation of religious institutions and practices. Such a political practice had come under pressure from Islamic opposition and such a challenge attained greater momentum in the recent decades.

Many Islamic leaders underscore the fact that there can be no separation of Islam and politics. They argue that from the very beginning Islam was a political force as much as it was a religious movement. Prophet Muhammad himself not only preached and practised religion but also founded and institutionalised a new political entity and a way of governance.
If alluding to the fundamentals of Islam and calling for its application in the contemporary milieu have been the hallmark of the resurgence of Islam in the last few decades, the Iranian Islamic movement did assert those very aspects at every stage of its activity. The integral linkage of Islam and politics has been stressed in no uncertain terms by Iranian Islamic leaders and thinkers like Ayatollah Khomeini, Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati. The history of revolt, resistance and radicalism possessed by Shi'i Islam obviously found its contemporary expression in their thinking and activity.

Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who began his intellectual and activist life as a secularist, first "discounted religion as an oppositional force but then underwent a period of personal religious questioning and began to accept religion in Iran as a powerful indigenous oppositional force".\(^1\) The oppositional political potential of the Iranian brand of Islam thus identified by intellectuals like Al-e Ahmad has been transformed into a revolutionary force capable of overthrowing the imperialist-supported monarchist regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

For Ali Shariati, who is considered to be the "ideologue of the Iranian revolution" or the "philosopher of the revolution", Shi'ism was not an opiate like many other religions, but was a revolutionary ideology that permeated all spheres of life, including politics, and inspired true believers to fight all forms of exploitation, oppression, and social injustice. ²

Shariati interpreted the Qur'an in a way in which the contradictions between the haves and have-nots are brought forth. For him, the "pole of Cain" and the "pole of Abel" meant the polarities of evil and good not only in a theological sense but in a socio-political sense as well. They are two structures denoting divisions in society. Shariati's explanation goes like this:

1) The pole of Cain: The ruler = king, owner, aristocracy . . . . It has a political manifestation--power, an economic manifestation--wealth and a religious manifestation--asceticism . . . .

2) The pole of Abel: The ruled = God-the people. Confronting the three-fold class of king-owner-aristocracy is the class of the people, *al-nas*. The two classes have opposed and confronted each other throughout history. In the class society Allah stands in the same rank as *al-nas*, in such a fashion that wherever in the Quran social matters are mentioned, Allah and *al-nas* are virtually synonymous.³

Thus, for Shariati, Islam calls for a class struggle, the struggle between *mustazafin* and *mustakbirin*, the oppressed and the oppressor wherein *raushanfikr*, the intelligentsia has a lead role to play. He also asserted that it is the people who create history and change it. It is here that Ali Shariati departs very widely from other Islamic thinkers. He sees *al-nas* as a kind of unitary class, the antagonisms within which are of no great significance. The contradiction between *al-nas* and the class of the propertied and the powerful is of vital importance to his analysis.

We see that in all the various parts of the Quran, the people (*al-nas*) themselves are addressed. The Prophet is sent on a mission to the people. He speaks to the people. He is

questioned and investigated by the people. He is a transition factor to promote the people. The people are responsible for society and history. . . . The fundamental factor of change and transition of society are people without regard to their special form, face, class distinction or any other classification. 4

Another significant aspect of Shariati’s interpretation of Islam is its anti-clergy content. According to him, the Islamic movement, the return to true Islam, should be led by progressive intellectuals and not by the traditional ulama. 5 The following words of Shariati speak well of his political views:

It is not enough to say we must return to Islam. We must specify which Islam: that of Abu Zarr or that of Marwan the Ruler. Both are called Islamic, but there is a huge difference between them. One is the Islam of the Caliphate, of the palace, and of the rulers. The other is the


Islam of the people, of the exploited, and of the poor. Moreover, it is not good enough to say that one should be "concerned" about the poor. The corrupt Caliphs said the same. True Islam is more than "concerned". It instructs the believer to fight for justice, equality, and elimination of poverty.  

Ayatollah Khomeini brought the political Islam paradigm to a more mundane plain to explain the actualities of politics of his time. He viewed Islam as a force that challenges the monarchy and imperialism. He was of the firm opinion that the ulama have a great role to play in the present-day society. The ulama have to lead the umma towards fulfilment by actively involving in politics. Khomeini's book Hukumat-i Islami (Islamic Government), which came out of his lectures to students of religion at Najaf in 1970, portrays the political thrust in clear terms. He urges the theology students to "present Islam to the people in its true form" within which the inseparability of religion and politics is primary. He categorically states:

This slogan of the separation of religion and politics and the demand that Islamic scholars not

6. Shariati, quoted in Abrahamian, n. 2, p. 27.
intercede in social and political affairs have been formulated and propagated by the imperialists: it is only the irreligious who repeat them.\(^7\)

Khomeini connected Islamic praxis (or the lack of it) with imperialist plunder and exploitation. Any inactivity from the practitioners of Islam is viewed as an apology for imperialist expropriation. He called upon the students of religion to directly involve in politics to fight against imperialism and economic expropriation rather than just contemplating on matters spiritual. For him, Islam remains "one-eighth a matter of prayers and ceremonies and seven-eighths a matter of principles and organization, these latter being designed to bring men to an understanding of justice".\(^8\) Such involvement was central to Khomeinian Islamic thought and praxis. He addressed the students of Islam reminding them that

> If you pay no attention to the policies of the imperialists, and consider Islam to be simply the few topics you are always studying and never go

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beyond them, then the imperialists will leave you alone. Pray as much as you like; it is your oil they are after—why should they worry about your prayers? They are after our minerals, and want to turn our country into a market for their goods. That is the reason the puppet governments they have installed prevent us from industrializing and instead, establish only assembly plants and industry that is dependent on the outside world.9

This intertwining of the political economy logic with Islamic theology and vocabulary is one of the seminal achievements of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is with such a tool that he called for the overthrow of the monarchical and imperialist rule in Iran, though the applicability of such teachings is viewed to be of relevance throughout the Islamic world. Many times Khomeini portrayed Islam as an international force.10 In the Muslim world, the working of politics and government is found to be unIslamic by the Khomeinian worldview. Khomeini denounced "any government in the Moslem world which deviates from the rules of Koran as shirk (heretical) and its ruler as taghuti (a tyrant)." 11

11. Ibid.
The political logic thus brought forth served to employ Islam as an oppositional ideology on two counts: (1) Islam in opposition to a corrupt, tyrannical, exploitative and monarchical rule of the Shah and his like in the Islamic world; and (2) Islam in opposition to imperialism and the cultural authority of the West on Iran. The oppositional function of this ideology was inextricably linked with the enunciation of an Islamic political discourse.

The Islamic Political Discourse

Through the speeches and writings of Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Khomeini and a few other leaders, a number of words and usages from the Qur’anic and the Shi’i tradition started circulating with a political content in a big way throughout Iran. This Islamic vocabulary with contemporary political meanings provided enough scope for Islam’s function as a powerful ideology in the Iranian political scene. This new vocabulary was not merely a set of words but a system of signs and symbols. The discourse such a semiotic system produced powerfully communicated to the masses due to the fact that the corpus of signs originated from within the Iranian cultural milieu.

Ali Shariati was of the view that the "language that a religion chooses in order to convey its concepts
must . . . be a versatile and multi-faceted language". Such a language should be formulated and employed as against the "monofaceted" one which "will be comprehensible only to a single class, and totally without value for all other classes; accessible to one generation, but beyond the reach of the next". The monofaceted language is incapable of generating any new meaning. What is needed is a language which can communicate with the whole spectrum of classes and generations and which can produce newer and newer meanings. Shariati found that "all literary works written in symbolic language are immortal". He is, therefore, of the opinion that "religions must employ a symbolic language" which has the ability to address itself to "different human types and different generations of men".

Thinkers like Shariati tried to evolve new political meanings through putting into operation not only a literary genre but also a sophisticated sociological interpretative system. As Assef Bayat puts it,

Shariati provided his audience with a firm and rigorous ideological means, by re-interpreting Islam through "scientific" concepts employed by the modern social sciences, an interpretation

13. Ibid., p. 72.
which the traditional Islamic clergy were incapable of formulating.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, prior to the Iranian revolution, there was an attempt at making and propagating the Islamic ideology through the political discourse wherein the gamut of religio-cultural vocabulary were used in abundance and in high frequency. Jan Hjarpe, who studied various forms of articulations of Shi'i practice, noted that most prognoses on the Iranian revolution failed to an extent because the role of the "interpretative patterns" has not been taken into account.\textsuperscript{15} He finds that religion serves as a pattern of legitimation in the sense of the performance of "religion as a pattern of interpretation and a pattern for behaviour, religion as a source of attitudes and feelings leading to political standpoints and acts".\textsuperscript{16}

If the import of the production of interpretative meanings has to be grasped, the source, the context and the mechanisms of their operation have to be understood.


Edward Said speaks thus of interpretation: "All knowledge that is about human society . . . is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and interpretation". Of course, data and facts exist but "facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation".\(^{17}\)

For Said, "all interpretations are what might be called situational". In other words, "interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is in interpreting, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place".\(^{18}\)

In the case of Iran, the religious leaders were addressing the masses, a vast majority of whom were believers following Shi‘i religio-cultural tradition, with the purpose of building up a political opposition against the corrupt regime of the Shah and its main supporter the United States, at a moment of great socio-economic and cultural crisis in which political suppression and economic dependence were on the ascendancy.

The interpretative patterns of political behaviour rest upon, in the words of Jan Hjarpe, several "categories of thought belonging to the Shi‘i cultural tradition", which are "factors not readily incorporated into the socio-economic domain". They are factors like

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18. Ibid.
the worldview taken for granted by a vast majority, and the readiness of people to take on certain new behavior; the concepts of martyrdom and of the legitimate character of rebellion (the Kerbela-motif), the concept of leadership (imama); the concept of reticence and cautiousness (takiya).\(^9\)

The martyrdom of Husain, son of Ali and the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at Karbala, following his revolt against the Omayyad Caliphate of Yazid, was a significant event for the Shias and the commemoration of Husain's martyrdom remained a major source of authentic Shi'i cultural behaviour for centuries together. In the contemporary period, the legacy of sacrifice of Imam Husain has been transformed into a major political discourse and activity.\(^{20}\) As pointed out by a political observer,

\(^9\) Hjarpe, n. 15, p. 79.

Basic to the Shiite Weltanschauung is the notion of suffering and unjust persecution personified by the Immaculate Imams, all except the last of whom encountered violent deaths. The Shiite 'martyrdom complex' is reinforced during the month of Muharram when the death of Imam Hossein is commemorated and the devout try to empathise with his sufferings. This doctrinal stress on self-sacrifice provides in extenuating circumstances an impetus for overt political opposition, leading in the extreme to a glorification of death. . . . It is interesting to note in this connection that one tactic employed by the anti-Shah demonstrators was the calculated promotion of the fortieth-day mourning cycles which provided continuing occasions on which opposition to the regime could be expressed. 21

Such Shi'i religious practices in politics have been built up by the continuous assertion of the tradition of Husain and related concepts through oppositional speeches of leaders, posters and other media of communication.

Khomeini many a time repeated what is believed to be the testament Ali gave to his sons Hassan and Husain: "Be always the protectors of the oppressed and the enemy of the oppressor", and he maintained that Ali gave his testament not only to his sons but to all the imams and the fuqaha.\textsuperscript{22} In accordance with that tradition, during the 1963 anti-Shah movement, Khomeini provoked the believers for political action by comparing the Shah to Yazid, "the worst leader that any Shiah could imagine".\textsuperscript{23} In the days of the Iranian revolution of 1978-79, posters with proclamations like "those who follow the slain Imam Husain will gain victory over the tyrant Yazid who slew him" and "the blood of martyrs has prevailed over the sword"\textsuperscript{24} appeared in Qom and other cities in Iran, conveying the essential political message.

Jan Hjarpe establishes the interconnectedness of religio-cultural milieu and political happenings by bringing forth the role of patterns of interpretation in the case of Iranian revolution:

We find that the first part of the month of Muharram is significant, particularly the days  

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\item 22. Heikal, n. 8, p. 138.
\item 24. Ibid., p. 14.
\end{itemize}
around the Ashura, the commemoration of the tragedy of Kerbala on the 10th. The uprising in 1963 (from the end of May to the beginning of June) coincided with this period. In the revolutionaries' own historiography, this insurrection was the beginning of the end of the Shah. In 1978, the Ashura coincided with the climax of the demonstrations against the Shah (10-11 December). The ritual cry 'Death to Yazid' became the political slogan 'Death to the Shah'. The religious procession in memory of Imam Husayn assumed the role and function of demonstrations. In 1979, the days around the 10th of Muharram (late November to early December) were marked by huge demonstrations outside the occupied US Embassy. 25

In the context of the oppressive rule of the Shah and the high degree of surveillance by SAVAK, the secret police of the monarch, oppositional political discourse had to operate through alternative channels. The religious mode of oppositional discourse in itself was a great insurance against state intervention.

From a doctrinal perspective Shiism was excellently suited as a vehicle for protest due to: (a) its essentially oppositional nature; (b) the stress on self-sacrifice; and (c) the concept of bast (sanctuary), according to which the mosque was theoretically inviolable and could thus provide sanctuary for opponents of the regime.26

Thus mosques, along with the bazaar which also had a tradition of religio-political activity, were becoming the actual sites of operation of the oppositional discourse. The role of mosques and the bazaar as the spatial anchor of such a discourse in the case of the movement of the 1960s is vividly described by Roy Mottahedeh in the following way, which more or less holds true for the revolution of the late 1970s:

If the bazaar was the precinct of public discourse, the mosque was virtually the only precinct in which personal opinion could be publicly proclaimed. The market appraised ideas through thousands of informal discussions; in the mosque, at least once a week, opinion formed a part of the formal service of prayer. Not that

informal discussion was a stranger to the vast courtyards of mosques. When the bazaar shut, mosques filled as people sought the public space where exchanges of rumor and report could continue after the alleys and avenues of the bazaar were deserted.\(^27\)

One could observe, on the one hand, the "bazaar-clergy alliance" at the root of the production of the oppositional discourse and, on the other, peoples’ mobilisation taking place "through organising rauzeh khani (religious sermons), ta’ziya (passion plays), dasteh-yi a’zadari (ritual funeral processions), sofreh hazrat-i abbas (female religious gathering to fulfil a vow), etc."\(^28\)

Once both the temporal and the spacial distribution of the religio-political discourse is taken note of, then the making of the revolution is easier to follow.

\(^{27}\) Mottahedeh, n. 23, p. 36.

A sample of such a discourse proper, especially the 'catchphrases', emanating from Ayatollah Khomeini, is listed as follows by Abrahamian:

Islam belongs to the mostazafin, not to the mostakberin.
Islam is for equality and social justice.
Islam represents the shantytown dwellers, not the palace dwellers.
Islam will eliminate class differences.
We are for Islam, not for capitalism and feudalism.
Islam originates from the masses, not from the rich.
In a truly Islamic society, there will be no shantytowns.
In a truly Islamic society, there will be no landless peasants.
The duty of the ulama is to liberate the hungry from the clutches of the rich.
Islam is not the opiate of the masses.
The poor were for the Prophet, the rich were against Him.
The poor die for the Islamic Revolution, the rich plotted against it.
The martyrs of the Islamic Revolution were all members of lower classes—peasants, industrial workers, the bazaar merchants and tradesmen. 

**Mostazafin** of the world unite.

The **mostazafin** of the world should create a party of the **Mostazafin**.

The problems of the East come from the West—especially, from American imperialism.

Neither West nor East, but Islam.

The oppressed nations of the world should unite against their imperialist oppressors.²⁹

These Khomeinian 'catchphrases' were used as slogans for demonstrations during and after the revolution.³⁰ Khomeinian interpretations of Islam and politics and their linkages thus varied from theoretical expositions like Vilayat-i faqih to populist slogans cited above, the communion of which worked for Islam's function as a political ideology. For these reasons, the content and nature of the Iranian revolution are analysed by many observers by attributing to the revolution the fulcrum role of Islamic ideology and tradition. For Denis McEoin, "the growth of an articulate religious opposition" has


³⁰. Ibid., p. 113.
been "the central inspiration of the revolution".\textsuperscript{31} For Suroosh Irfani, the Iranian revolution was an Islamic Revolution, "because even though Justice, Freedom, and Independence were the objectives of this Revolution, they were sought in terms of symbols and expressions that stemmed from an Islamic tradition". He also notes that "people had risen not only because of a revolutionary religious idiom, but also in terms of it";\textsuperscript{32} thus pointing towards the centrality of the Islamic discourse in the revolution.

Jan Hjarpe is of the opinion that at a general plain "the set of ideas and concepts (expressed by words, symbols, symbolic behaviour)" is an important factor "for actual political behaviour in the short run" even though he is convinced of the decisive role of socio-economic factors in political development in the long run.\textsuperscript{33} Mary Hegland holds the view that "the purely cultural explanation of the revolution" provided by some academic circles is to be questioned. While giving the Shi‘i religio-cultural factor its due, she argues that "a


\textsuperscript{32} Suroosh Irfani, Iran’s Islamic Revolution (London, 1983), p. 163.

\textsuperscript{33} Hjarpe, n. 15, p. 87.
transformation in the understanding of the central meaning of Shi'i Islam among the Iranian masses coinciding with changing economic and political conditions was instrumental in bringing about the success of the revolution.\textsuperscript{34}

Sami Zubaida's analysis of the Iranian revolution stresses on the "conjuncture of factors"--the convergence of a number of political and economic contradictions, and Khomeini's powerful and uncompromising leadership backed by networks of religious organisations and personnel.\textsuperscript{35} She claims that "It was this conjuncture which made the revolution and made it an Islamic revolution". She relates the role of religion in the revolutionary process with state power by pointing towards their distance. According to Zubaida,

the importance of religion in the modern history of Iran was due to the fact that it remained the only major sphere not completely incorporated and controlled by the state, and as such retained the possibility of autonomous action and organisation. This is quite different from the

\textsuperscript{34} Hegland, n. 20, p. 218.

popular explanation of the Islamic revolution in terms of the effect of some religious essence inherent in Iranian culture and most readily appealing to the hearts and minds of Iranians.  

This rejection of religious essentialism is shared by Fred Halliday when he says that

Certainly, the Iranian revolution of 1979 took the form it did in part because of the belief systems of the Iranian people and the presence of a clergy committed to a course of political action: but the particular version of political Islam espoused by Khomeini, the willingness of the population to follow him, the inability of the state to defeat its unarmed opponents, and the failure of the Shah's allies to help him--none of these can be explained by reference to the Koran.  

Halliday argues that while Islam "does have certain specific implications in theory for social and even political practice, and legislates for areas some other

36. Ibid., p. 62.
religions do not, these doctrinal specifications are meagre and partial". He is convinced that

To explain the particular social forms and political beliefs of people in Muslim societies, other factors, external and additional to Islam, have to be examined--the patterns of class rule, the relation to external forces, the historical formation of the country.\textsuperscript{38}

In the Iranian case, Ervand Abrahamian notes that many of the Khomeinian religio-political populist rhetoric "at first glance, sounds highly radical, but more careful scrutiny shows it to be extremely vague on specifics and silent on the question of private property.\textsuperscript{39}

The above analysis calls for seriously looking into class and other socio-economic factors, while giving its due to the religio-cultural factors and the political discourse anchored upon them. Analysis of the discursive pattern is not a substitute for the analysis of basic socio-economic parameters for comprehending the undercurrents of a significant political event like the Iranian revolution.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.; emphasis in the original.

\textsuperscript{39} Abrahamian, n. 29. p. 113.