

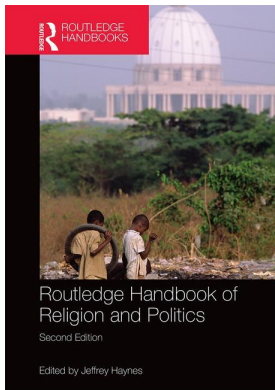
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Mohammad Nafissi

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7

SHIISM AND POLITICS

*Mohammad Nafissi*¹

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON, UK

Shiism represents Islam's largest minority branch with up to 15 per cent of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims. Like the majority Sunnis, the Shia further divide into several sects of which the Imami or Twelver Shias are the largest and politically the most significant. This has not always been the case. If this account had been written almost any time in Islam's first millennium, the Ismaili or Sevener sect, the founders and rulers of the Fatimid empire in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, would have formed its main focus. But this being the twenty-first century and the subject of a short essay, I concentrate on Twelver Shiism and discuss its political impact with reference to Iran, its main home since the Safavids made it the religion of the empire they founded in the sixteenth century. After Iran's revolution in 1979, the country's status as Shia Islam's core state was further enhanced by the establishment of Islam's first clerical theocracy.

In part thanks to the resonance and resources of the Islamic Republic (IR), in the past three and half decades political Shiism has gained momentum in most states with a significant Shia population. Muslim-majority states with ten per cent or more Shia in the total Muslim population include Azerbaijan (approximately 75 per cent), Bahrain (75 per cent), Iraq (70 per cent), Lebanon (55 per cent), Yemen (40 per cent), Kuwait (25 per cent), Pakistan (15 per cent), Afghanistan (15 per cent), Saudi Arabia (15 per cent), UAE (10 per cent), Oman (10 per cent), Qatar (10 per cent).² Not only variations in the size of Shia community but also other differences, including institutional capacity and sociological composition of Shia sects, geo-political factors and relative significance of other sources of identity, contribute to significant variations in the impact of the so-called Shia revival.³ Note, however, that due to their cultural resources and geo-political concentration, Shias' political and ideological influence has historically been and remains greater than their numbers as a proportion of the Muslim population might suggest.

The first part of this chapter discusses the sacred foundations of Shiism with reference to which subsequent significant Shia approaches to politics have developed. These foundations were laid during a period where the 'proto-Shia' lost the early confrontations over the Prophet's succession. The second part examines the period characterised by the 'quietist' rejection of politics and the consolidation of 'private jurisprudence'.⁴ The period between Shiism's emergence from semi-clandestine conditions as the official religion of the Safavid state and Iran's Constitutional Revolution (CR: 1905–11) which divided the Shia hierarchy for and against democracy is discussed in the third part. The fourth part examines the

development of democratic and theocratic Shiism under the ‘modernising’ Pahlavi monarchy which approached Islam as a developmental hindrance. The post-revolutionary ascendancy since 1979 of theocratic Shiism and its contradictory realisation in a theo-democracy or electoral theocracy is covered in the fifth part.

Islam’s sacred foundations and the rise of Shiism

Although signifying a diverse, changing tradition, Islam is understandably considered the political religion *par excellence*. As the ‘final’ re-formation of the Abrahamic tradition, Mohammad realised Judaism’s Messianic promise and ruled Medina by fusing spiritual and temporal authority. Judaism, as Weber observed ‘never in theory rejected the state and its coercion but . . . expected in the Messiah their own masterful political ruler . . .’⁵ Mohammad, however, fulfilled this expectation by extending, in line with Christian universalism, Yahweh’s constituency to humanity as a whole. In the process, he resolved the Christian problem of the Saviour’s postponed return and unified the secular and religious realms. It is thus not surprising that the rise of Shiism is traced to succession conflicts following Mohammad’s death in AD632.

Performing the Prophet’s burial rites, his son-in-law and cousin Ali and his followers (the *shiat*) were absent from the community’s council that elected Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s father-in-law. Following the consolidation of Shiism, this dispute came to be seen as the first of a series of transgressions committed by ‘usurpatory’ caliphs against the Prophet’s ‘true’ ‘successors’, i.e. Ali and his ‘infallible’ offspring. To avoid martyrdom, the fate believed to have been visited on all his forefathers, the Twelfth Imam went into occultation in 874 CE⁶ Like Christ, who will accompany him, Mahdi is to return to restore the just order before the Judgement Day.

Although this primordialist (re-)construction of the Sunni–Shia split is understandable in the schism’s retrospective light, it is not supported by a critical scrutiny of scanty historical evidence or indeed the mytho-historical accounts that have functioned as facts for generations. The salient observation here is that however unhappily, Ali himself accepted the consensus of the electors, even if critically and to avoid internecine conflict,⁷ and went on to be elected the fourth caliph and venerated by the future Sunnis as the last of the ‘rightly guided caliphs’. The consecration of these caliphs took place when the proto-democratic basis of their polity was replaced by the dynastic principle and the armed might of Umayyads. This was the development to which the Sunni–Shia divide may be traced.

All notable branches of Islam were consolidated in response to the coercive transformation of the caliphate into a hereditary institution and the separation of the sword and the word thus ruling out popular and merited rule.⁸ Both Shii and Sunni solutions were crucially influenced by the example of Ali’s sons, the realist Hassan and the idealist Hussain, the second and third Shii imams. Elected the fifth caliph after his father’s assassination amidst the ongoing Umayyad armed rebellion, Hassan gave up the caliphate in favour of Mu‘awiya ‘since I considered whatever spares blood as better than whatever causes it to be shed’.⁹ In return, the new caliph agreed to allow the community to choose his successor. Instead, Mu‘awiya installed his dissolute son Yazid as the next caliph, laying the ground for Hussain’s and other uprisings. Invited by the people of Kufa to lead them against Yazid and then abandoned in the face of the overwhelming force of the caliph’s army, Hussain refused to escape and was martyred along with his closest companions. Hussain’s martyrdom became Shiism’s most commemorated hallmark, a militant counterpart to the passion of Christ.

In view of the double failure of these and other attempts to restore righteous rule even after the success of the ‘Abbasid revolution’ in 750 CE, both Shii and Sunni political theologies

developed via two versions of ‘quietism’, which may be distinguished as oppositional and accommodationist or ‘realist’. Repelled by the divisiveness and futility of opposition to ruling caliphs, and committed to guarding Islam’s sacred legacy from their despotic reach, the emerging Sunni hierocracy developed an ingenious ‘second best’ solution that prevailed until Western modernity intervened. Sanctifying and drawing mostly on the Prophet’s at least partly fabricated words and deeds (tradition/sunna), ‘traditionist’ scholars developed Islamic law (*fiqh*, although now Islamic law and *sharia*, a broader idea denoting the normative way of life, are generally equated) that effectively replaced the Qur’an as the Muslim’s ultimate guide. This enabled them to (a) extend and resolve the Qur’an’s limited and ambiguous legal content, and (b) trump all living claimants to Islam, including caliphs, Shia imams, rationalist theologians and Sufi masters, with the legacy of the dead Prophet. Thus armed with the *sharia*, the men of the word struck a compact with the wielders of the sword which separated political and religious realms but masked it in view of the sacred era’s unified legacy. Accordingly, the caliphs retained the title of ‘commander of the faithful’ but had generally little to do with matters of faith, and the religious establishment, although projecting a comprehensive and binding *sharia*, left the political sphere to the rulers without following or developing Islam’s political legacy. Western modernity eventually highlighted the debilitating costs of this ideological conflation of the ideal and actual in Sunni Islam, including its comparative ‘closure of the gate *ijtihad*’ (independent reasoning) and the associated preclusion of an authoritative agency, able to respond effectively to new challenges. From this perspective, Shiism presents a contrasting, evolutionary, case, even though it lost the battle of hegemony for compelling reasons: insistence on caliphate as the preserve of Ali’s offspring undermined the case for opposing the ruling dynasties and minimised the role of community (*umma*) and consultation (*shura*); the insistence on divine endorsement and holiness of imams appears to contradict Mohammad’s position as God’s last messenger. The full explanation of this paradox requires a comparative account of the Sunni developments;¹⁰ here only an overview of the Shii trajectory is provided.

Shiism and political principles

Emerging in response to injustices suffered by the Prophet’s ‘family’ at the hands of usurping caliphs, Shiism rested on an oppositional political theology emphasising the intrinsic illegitimacy of rulers. In addition to Islam’s three universal principles that there are no gods but God (the principle of *tawhid*), that Mohammad is his (last) messenger (*nubuwwa*), and resurrection (*ma’ad*), the Shia asserted two other principles. These are justice (*’adl*) and divinely guided leadership (*imamate*), confirmed in a longer call to prayer that attests to Ali’s divine appointment as Muslims’ ruler-guide (*wali*) and enjoins the community to act justly.¹¹

The major Shia sects originally divided over the leadership and organisation of the struggle for just governance. Ismailis built a centralised missionary organisation around the offspring of Ismail, the predeceased eldest son of the Sixth Imam, eventually establishing the Fatimid Empire in North Africa. For a period, this revolutionary-hereditary fusion of *imamate* and *caliphate* posed the gravest threat to the Abbasid *caliphate*. Eventually, however, it proved unsustainable as Caesaropapism retarded the work of Ismaili missionaries and left the empire with a majority Sunni population open to the restoration of Sunni rule, and a political order threatened by incompetent hereditary rulers, patrimonialism and sibling rivalry.¹² In contrast, a two-stage occultation, closing the gate of infallible *imamate* in the case of Twelver Shiism, cleared the ground for the development of an institutionally authoritative hierocracy to guide the community until the Imam’s return. Fearing persecution, Imam al-Mahdi is said to have appeared in public only once when six years old on the occasion of his father’s funeral

(874 CE), after which he went into 'lesser' occultation. During this period he guided the community through four successive 'gates' (sing. *bab*) or deputies (sing. *na'ib*) who also collected the religious taxes. The 'greater' occultation was declared in a written message from the Imam shortly before the fourth deputy's death when he would thence have no direct envoy. This allowed for the emerging Shia clergy to follow the Sunni school in developing their own overlapping variant of the Law but with the additional collective authority and resources of Hidden Imam's deputyship. From this angle, occultation contributed to at least five long-term evolutionary developments.

First, whilst maintaining the universal Shii claim that God never leaves the world without a living guide, occultation minimised the institutionally debilitating consequences of patrimonialism by making the Imam invisible and imamate inaccessible to new claimants. Thus patrimonialism was removed as a source of politico-religious schism, as was reliance on inherited or personal charisma that blocked the institutional development of other Shii sects.

Second, the occultation completed the differentiation of religious and political fields by withdrawing the only legitimate agent for restoring their original union. As the last imam became invisible to avoid martyrdom, so were his followers given the option of using dissimulation (*taqiya*) to ensure their own survival as individuals and communities in the face of persecution. The corollary of this double occultation and distance from the established order was reliance on the community's resources, and the believers' involvement in the choice of religious leaders rather than submission to those favoured or imposed by the state.

Third, occultation left a massive void that, borrowing from the pioneering Sunni schools of law, the Shia filled with their own version of the law. Although radically limiting in many intellectual and creative respects, this legalistic turn was important in grounding a stable identity and a degree of 'innovative' action.

Fourth, adding the traditions of the dead imams as the distinguishing source of Shii law did not satisfy the demands for personal guidance. This was addressed in part by waiting for the Imam's return, but also through the gradual clerical assumption of his 'prophetic' and welfare functions (*hisba*). Compared to Sunni jurists, senior Shii clerics (sing. *mujtahid*) retained a still limited, but normatively legitimate and historically consequential exercise of 'personal reason' in their rulings. This in turn allowed comparatively greater space and openness to draw on the legacies of rationalist theology and philosophy marginalised early under the hegemonic Sunnism.

Fifth, in contrast to revolutionary Shii sects whose radicalism was often driven by charismatic claimants to Mahdihood, Twelvers' institutional closure of the holy imamate entailed a quietist programme. Nevertheless an 'inner' ideological distance provided Shii leaders with a comparatively flexible ideational space and motivation to switch from quietism to activism and vice versa. Although this ideological versatility did not necessarily serve the community's interests, it facilitated the hierocratic accumulation of social power. As the Imam of the Age, the Twelfth Imam is invisible yet ever-present and a source of dynamic tension in a context dominated by the secularising/rationalising tendencies of the legalistic jurists. The Imam's shadow spreads to the present day, with Iran's former president Ahmadinejad being one of the self-proclaimed beneficiaries of his direct blessing.¹³ On the other hand, by ending the period of quietist waiting for the return of the Imam, reformist clergy were able to play leading roles in Iran's revolutions to contrasting democratic and theocratic outcomes.

Yet, it is unlikely that these advantages would have added to an evolutionary breakthrough without the forceful, and theologically questionable, patronage of the Safavid state that inaugurated a new, public, stage in Shiism's evolution. Distinguished by the installation of Imami

Shiism as an imperial religion, the threat of Sunni persecution, the main reason for the double occultation of Imam and community, is thence removed, and the conversion of most Sunnis by persecution as well as by persuasion is effected. This ended the period of so-called private jurisprudence stretching between the occultation (874 CE) and the coronation of the first Safavid shah in 1501.

For over two centuries, the Shia hierocracy and the Safavid state served each other, despite the continuing refusal of many *ulama* to recognise the legitimacy of even such a supportive state.¹⁴ It was, however, the growing anti-Sunni sectarianism of the hegemonic clergy that played an important part in provoking the Afghan invasions that led to the dynasty's collapse in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Although the Safavids had entrenched the Shia scholars to ensure their own longevity, they ended up by serving the latter both when in power and then by losing power. The only society-wide institution to maintain continuity in the unstable interregnum between the Safavids' fall in 1721 and the crowning of the first Qajar monarch in 1795, the hierocracy emerged in the following century with its prestige and power enhanced absolutely and relative to the state. A tribal formation with no claim to sacred lineage or heritage, the Qajars lacked the religious credentials of the Safavids or the hierocracy's three-century-evolving 'national' reach. In this context the hierocracy could extend its role as 'the Imam's deputy' beyond charitable distribution of religious taxes, supervising care of orphans and the disabled, and ensuring the correct implementation of religious rituals. At the hands of the hegemonic *Usuli* faction, this went as far as a clear division of the members of the community into a mass of followers or imitators and a few senior *mujtahids* or *Marja' Taqlids* (Sources of Emulation, SE). The latter were so qualified by virtue of their knowledge of Islamic law and principles (certified by their predecessors and demonstrated in their own catechism), and justice in the practice of law and piety (*taqwa*). However, instead of taking this to its hierarchical conclusion of establishing a supreme authority, the choice of one or other SE to 'emulate' was left to the potential followers themselves. Consequently, the hierocracy has remained a multi-centred network, only occasionally engendering, without any formal mechanism, an SE with paramount authority. The influence of the SEs to this day varies with their sense of 'leadership' (*riyasat*) as indicated by the size of their voluntary following among the clergy and lay believers.¹⁶ The followers provide the religious leaders with the social and financial resources with which the SEs support the junior clergy, who in turn transmit their rulings and maintain their network.

The hierocracy's official association with the state was thus complemented by its role as the society's representative agency with growing capacity for collective action in opposition as well as in support of the state.¹⁷ The resulting dynamic dialectic was reflected in the so-called theory of bipolar governance. Bipolarity refers to the division of the political domain overseen by the sultan/shah (*saltanat*) and the socio-religious domain represented by the SEs, the sultan's counterparts. Although sometimes conflictual, this relationship was primarily a partnership based on mutual need. The CR forced the clergy to choose between continuing this partnership or the one they had forged with the increasingly rebellious nation and thus help create a new type of society.

Between the state and the nation: autocratic versus democratic Shiism

The governor of Tehran's public flogging in December 1905 of two respected merchants, the civil society's leading strata and the main source of religious taxes and charities, was a catalyst for CR. The anti-despotic camp that sprang into action had already had its dress rehearsal during one of the world's first and most widely observed consumer boycotts ever. The 'Tobacco Rebellion' of 1891–2 stopped the consumption of tobacco until the monopoly concession

awarded to a British subject, Major G. Talbot, to produce and sell the country's entire tobacco crop for fifty years, was cancelled.¹⁸ Driven by reformist clergy as well as the intelligentsia and merchants, the mass mobilisation was made possible by an edict from the paramount SE calling for the boycott and consolidated the position of the clergy as leaders of the civil society against a weakened state.

Again driven by the *bazaaris* and reformist clerics and officials, but primarily fronted by mainstream *mujtahids*, the first, generally peaceful, phase of CR was victorious after a short campaign (1905–6). Royal assent was given to a liberal constitution which was subsequently amended to both give a role to clergy in vetoing transgressive laws and strengthen the equality and rights of all citizens. The revolution entered its second and far bloodier phase with the enthronement of Mohammad Ali Shah, an autocrat who bombarded the parliament and was met with the resistance of the revolutionary forces who recaptured Tehran in 1909. The royalist forces, however, only gave up with the Shah's escape to Russia in 1911. This was also the year that Iran's first experience of parliamentary government ended in the face of the advancing Russian army which forced, with British support, the dissolution of the parliament for trying to assert the country's full economic and political independence.¹⁹

It is in this phase that for the first time Imami-Usuli Shiism divided openly and violently over the question of just order. Standing opposed as leaders of the revolutionary camp or apologists of the autocracy, the jurists were compelled to articulate their polarised political agendas clearly and publicly rather than in truncated and obscure legal commentaries. In the period between the tobacco protest and the execution of the leader of the autocratic faction, Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri, Shia political theology developed to explain and legitimise its own surprising political power. Among the many often hasty, confused or weathervane pronouncements, two mutually illuminating treatises may be singled out: Nouri's *Illegitimacy of Constitutionalism* (1907) and Ayatollah Mohammad Hossein Naini's *Government from the Perspective of Islam* (1909) in defence of constitutionalism and what may be called democratic Islam. Both Nouri and Naini, however, recognised the classical Shia insistence on separation of religion and state. The central political difference between the opposed camps was whether autocratic rulers should remain clergy's partners and in charge of the political domain. For Nouri, the answer was 'yes', whereas the constitutionalists turned to the nation and its elected representatives. Nouri's fundamental theological objection to constitutionalism rested on the claim that 'Islam has no gap for somebody to fill' through democratic legislature.²⁰ In this he anticipated Ayatollah Khomeini's theorisation of Islamic Government (IG) as the *Guardianship of the Jurisconsult (Velayat-e Faqih)* in a series of lectures delivered in 1970.²¹ At the time a utopian or 'academic' exercise by an exiled cleric in Iraq, it was recalled only after the revolution and used as the basis of the country's new theocratic constitution when Khomeini retreated from the revolution's unifying democratic platform. In sharp contrast to Nouri, however, Khomeini never prayed for the success of autocrats or sanctioned their dependence on foreign powers.

Perhaps more acutely than his rivals, Nouri sensed the threat democracy posed to clerical privileges and traditionalist sharia. Yet, he was undermined by failing to answer the question still facing Muslim traditionalists and anti-modernists who called for the renewal of pre-modern clerical-sultanate status quo, namely how to account for the incontrovertible comparative decline of Iran and the Muslim world which in the first place made their submission to 'Christian' powers unavoidable. Naini's tract opens by addressing this question and identifies the 'despotic' regime and religion as primary causes of Muslim societies' backwardness, and traces the European ascendancy to having got rid of both earlier.²² This entailed not only learning from Europe but also acknowledging the merit of Sunnis' original emphasis on consultation in the choice of caliphs rather than relying on sacred inheritance. Naini

thus followed reformers such as Sayyid Jamal, enhancing the universalist basis of their pan-Islamism by authenticating democracy as internal to Islam's sacred, proto-modern heritage.²³ Absolute justice depended on the Saviour's return, but democracy was meanwhile its closest human approximation.

Anti-Islamic modernisation and the rise of theocratic Islam

Iran's CR was Asia's first modern revolution and for a time it appeared that democracy was to be an irreversible evolutionary advance from both modern and Islamic perspectives. Violent factionalism pitting moderates (including most religious leaders) against radicals (mainly revolutionary social democrats and secularist nationalists) broke out, exacerbated by tribal and regional centrifugal forces unleashed by the reinforcing coincidence of several turns: the revolution, the First World War, and Anglo-Russian interventions. The ground was thus prepared for a new type of ethno-nationalist autocracy. As the Sassanid name, Pahlavi, he chose for the dynasty he founded in 1925 suggests, Reza Shah viewed Islam as a hindrance to his mission of revitalising Iran. Instead, the Janus-faced Pahlavi state looked back to an idealised ancient Persia to mobilise the nation for a modern future variously represented in Europe and above all by Kemalist Turkey.

In this context, quietist, depoliticised Shiism managed to reclaim its predominance. Unlike the pre-Safavid period, however, this revival took place within a generally shrinking religious field, with one notable exception. The graduates of the newly established Tehran University and the scholarship students sent to Europe as part of the modernisation drive articulated their own liberal and socialist variants of Islam and broke the hold of clergy as monopoly suppliers of Islam. Their agendas spread when Iran entered another unstable democratic interregnum following the Allied invasion and forced abdication of the pro-German Shah in 1941. The years before the new Shah regained autocratic power following the Anglo-American-engineered coup in 1953, saw the rise of political groups such as God Worshipping Socialists and professional bodies such as the Association of Engineers whose co-founder as well as the first chair of the country's nationalised oil industry was Mehdi Bazargan, the 1979 revolution's first prime minister. In between, Bazargan co-founded the Freedom Movement, the main liberal Islamist party from among whose members and supporters came many of the revolution's leading figures.²⁴

On the theocratic side, the Devotees of Islam, an organisation inspired by the example of the Muslim Brotherhood, achieved notoriety with several high-profile assassinations including Prime Minister Razmara and the country's most notable historian (and critic of Shiism), the former cleric Ahmad Kasravi.²⁵ Khomeini was associated with this movement and his first book-length contribution is an uncompromising defence of traditionalist, 'Safavid', Shiism against the charges of backwardness raised by Kasravi and others.²⁶ At the time, in contrast to both theocratic and democratic Islamists, the religious leadership was resigned to further loss of ground under the Pahlavi modernisation, which was considered less damaging than the agendas of the liberal and leftist opposition. This explains its general support for the royalist camp in the conflict over the powers of the monarch and the nationalisation of oil. However, in return the second Pahlavi proceeded with a more grandiose variant of his father's authoritarian ethno-nationalist modernisation. This fuelled the rise of revolutionary Shiism in both theocratic and quasi Marxist forms.

An important turning point came a decade after the 1953 coup that restored the Pahlavi autocracy. To gain legitimacy especially in the eyes of the fast-growing educated, urban stratum, the regime started its own 'White Revolution' by appropriating the many demands of the

left and liberal opposition that the Shah, along with Western (and Soviet) social scientists and intelligence agencies, considered his regime's main threat. Instead, lacking popular legitimacy, the autocracy not only lost its traditional mainstays, but failed to gain a reliable constituency among the emerging modern sectors. The extension of women's rights alienated the mainstream clergy, and the land reform effectively eliminated the landlords as a socio-political force, whilst increased oppression and dependence on the US discredited the reform package as a whole.²⁷

Khomeini's rise as a national leader is traceable to this moment. He was the youngish SE who issued an edict banning '*taqiyya*', thus ditching quietism in what he considered an existential struggle against the state.²⁸ On 5 June 1963, hundreds of (mainly) Khomeini followers were killed in an aborted rising against the 'White Revolution', projected as another Ashura, the day of Hussain's martyrdom. However, one telling difference was that this time the martyred were the ordinary followers while their leader was eventually exiled in Iraq whence he made via Paris his triumphant return to assume the title and authority of the Twelfth Imam. In the intervening period, Khomeini reformed his corner of the hierocracy into a revolutionary network linking his supporters in mosques, seminaries, bazaars, charitable associations and several clandestine organisations engaged in activities ranging from assassination to distribution of his edicts and collection of religious taxes. In retrospect, Shiism was about to find its own Luther, Pope, and Constantine, not to mention Lenin, rolled into one.

Democratic revolution and theocratic republic

According to Kadivar, Khomeini was the first among the Shia jurists to have used the term Islamic government and to have theorised it politically as an absolute theocracy.²⁹ This position, however, still remains that of a minority of senior clerics, and indeed was only one among several advocated by Khomeini himself.³⁰ Khomeini's writings and pronouncements feature four different approaches to Islamic governance: the traditional bipolar theory whereby the state respects the sharia (1943); theocratic governance of the jurisconsult (1970/1981); democratic bipolarity championed by Naini and his modern descendants (1978–9); and electoral theocracy (1979–) whose theological basis was radically undermined by the time of Khomeini's death in 1989.

As the legitimating source of the theocratic-military (Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basiji Militia) axis dominating Iran, however, IG remains Khomeini's most influential political contribution. The gulf between the theocratic Khomeini of IG and the traditional Shia view of governance may be gauged by the following passages. In his first major work on Shiism and politics he leaves no doubt about bipolar governance: 'We do not say that government is the task of the jurist. But we say government should be run in accordance with divine law which is in the interest of the country and the people. And this cannot be undertaken without the supervision of the clergy as stipulated in the Constitution.'³¹ Contrast this with what he says about the same issue in 'Islamic Government' (IG): 'If the ruler adheres to Islam, he must necessarily submit to *faqih*, asking him about the ordinances of Islam in order to implement them. This being the case, the true rulers are *fuqaha* [jurisconsults] themselves, and rulership ought officially to be theirs . . .'³²

Underpinning his practical revolutionary stance against the Pahlavi regime, this political theology was crucial in turning Khomeini's hierocratic network into a quasi-party machine dedicated to the seizure of political power. The Shia community is now re-imagined in its pre-Safavid situation where all 'non-Shia', i.e. all existing polities, are 'systems of *kufri*' or anti-Islamic/Shia, but, and here's the major advance, where the believers no longer have to await

the return of the Imam for the establishment of the just Islamic state governed by jurists with the same authority attributed to the Prophet and the Imams.³³ In time, Khomeini reincarnated as Imam Khomeini.

Despite some 'vigorous criticism' from senior SEs³⁴ this revolutionary, if not heretical, reform did not marginalise Khomeini within the hierarchy; nor did its totalitarian-theocratic agenda lead to his isolation among the rest of the opposition. This was, first, because of the historically decentralised flexibility of the Shia hierarchy where the autonomy of individual *mujtahids* was theologically entrenched and geo-politically dispersed. Second, Khomeini's position enhanced the powers of the clergy overall and appeared as the evolutionary culmination of a century of institutional and theo-political development. Third, it was presented at a time when his fellow clerics shared his particular concerns over the autocracy's anti-Islamic direction. Fourth, Khomeini's revolutionary clericalism replete with attacks on imperialism resonated widely in the 1960s and 1970s, coinciding with the rise of new radical agendas throughout the world in a variety of Third Worldist, neo-Marxist, and liberationist-clerical guises. In this context, rather than losing support for his break with traditional Shiism, his theocratic militancy attracted a large contingent of energetic junior clerics enhancing his links with other 'anti-imperialist' and even liberal movements. Fifth, whereas every other political agenda (with the partial exception of the Shah's own suicidal one) had an exemplar in Western or communist camps, Khomeini's was truly novel even in Islam, and thus had an untested and utopian quality that seduced many into overlooking its questionable features.

Khomeini thus represented a potential second-best option for most of the opposition. The revolution, let alone 'the Islamic revolution', however, would not have taken place without the Shah's own self-destructive moves that blocked the possibility of a reformist resolution of his regime's deepening crisis. Nor would Khomeini's position as the leader of the widest revolutionary front in the modern era³⁵ have been assured without the groundwork laid by pluralist Islamists.

In the late Pahlavi era, the standard bearer of democratic Shiism was the Freedom Movement led by the aforementioned Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleghani, both ardent supporters of the secular nationalist Mossadeq and most prominent Muslim opposition leaders of their generation. The armed People's Mujahedin Organisation represented socialist Islamism and was led by Masoud Rajavi, who, following the Organisation's failed attempts in the 1980s to overthrow IR, has presided over its cultish decline.³⁶ Associated with both movements, but remaining an independent thinker with the greatest influence in renewing Islam in Iran, was Ali Shariati, who died in 1977. Shariati has been singled out as 'probably the only twentieth-century Iranian intellectual who created a socio-political momentum which gave birth to a social movement, culminating in a social revolution',³⁷ albeit one which engendered a theocracy exhibiting many features that he had characterised and thoroughly rejected as 'Safavid Shiism'.³⁸ Eclipsed by Khomeini's triumphant legacy is the fact that the overall share of this broad pluralist camp in Iran's second revolution was at least as great as that of the former and his theocratic followers. Yet, exemplifying victor's history, current academic and journalistic writings on the Iranian revolution and 'political Islam' almost universally equate 'Islamism' with the theocratic variant that eventually dominated Iran's post-revolutionary state, and ignore the pluralist Islamists and their secular allies whose inclusive agenda won the revolution. Thanks to the pluralists and their modernist application of *ijtihad*, Islam regained its appeal among the educated strata and especially the young, without whom there would not have been an Islamic revolution or republic.

By the time of the revolution, Khomeini had, as discussed above, already developed his preferred, theocratic, option. In the course of the revolution, however, either as a result of genuine

conversion as some of his democratic followers believed, or pragmatic recognition of 'the objective conditions', Khomeini himself gave every impression that he favoured an Islamic state that respected democratic norms.³⁹ Crucially, he never once referred to the government of jurist and specifically rejected any suggestion that he would have an executive role or assume the powers of the monarch,⁴⁰ and to this extent his position coincided with 'the best option' of the religious and lay democrats.

In retrospect, Khomeini's shifting agenda resembled and was influenced by that of the influential authoritarian left whose constituent groups generally saw liberal democracy as a transitional stage to some idealised version of Soviet, Chinese, Cuban or even Albanian socialism.⁴¹ The liberal agenda, however, united the opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy not only because democracy is the default option of all modern movements against autocracy. It also reflected the socio-political conditions after seven decades of uneven and often misguided but continuous socio-economic development. The terminal decline of the Pahlavi regime may be dated to the period in March 1975 when having crushed all open opposition and awash with oil money and international admiration, the Shah decided against his earlier promise of return to 'constitutional monarchy'. Instead, he dropped all pretence to competitive party politics by replacing the two long discredited 'legal' parties with the Resurgence Party of the People of Iran, a would-be totally totalitarian 'movement' encompassing the country's entire adult population, as he therefore offered refuseniks the choice of leaving the country or going to prison.⁴²

Beyond the articulation of a generally democratic Islamic vision, Khomeini's recognition of the revolution's democratic trajectory was indicated by the appointment of Bazargan as the revolution's prime minister presiding over a cabinet whose members all came from lay liberal religious and secular ranks of the Freedom Movement and National Front. This was followed by the democratically inclined Abolhassan Banisadr's election as IR's first president with Khomeini's tacit blessing. The draft constitution, based on the French presidential system and the country's existing constitution, too, was written in the main by Hassan Habibi of the Freedom Movement. It was approved by Khomeini himself who advised that it be put to a referendum. Ironically, it was especially at the insistence of Taleqani and Bazargan, who argued that without ratification by the Constituent Assembly promised in the course of the revolution the new constitution would lack legitimacy, that Khomeini conceded the convocation of the Assembly of Experts.⁴³

Only then and there, the approved draft was radically revised around the office of a supreme clerical leader with the consequences that continue to bedevil Iran and the world. Replete with authentic and opportunist theocrats, the Assembly enshrined in the new constitution the most momentous development in Shiism since the Safavids by giving the fallible Khomeini and his successors as the Supreme Leader the same authority and powers as the awaited infallible Imam. The turbaned imam was thus enthroned in place of the crowned sultan⁴⁴ and Twelver or now Thirteener Shiism came to have its first caliph-imam since Ali.

A potent brew of mass adulation, radicalising logic of the revolution, and historical fear may have persuaded Khomeini to assume or, as his Shia opponents would say, usurp the title and powers of the Hidden Imam. Referring to the assassination of his closest disciple and the chair of the revolutionary council, Ayatollah Mottahari, one of his most senior and respected disciples, by a dissident Shia group in the early days of the revolution Khomeini remarked: 'They want to sideline the clergy just as they did after the Constitutional period. They killed Nouri and diverted the path of the nation. They have now the same plan; they have killed Mottahari and perhaps it is my turn tomorrow.'⁴⁵ Khomeini's fear was informed by the fact that those who intended to 'sideline' the clergy included many of the highest-ranking clerics, who considered the assumption of the Imam's unique privileges a step too far. Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari,

a 'moderate' and theo-politically progressive *marj'a* with a large following especially among Azari Shia, even permitted his followers to establish the Muslim People's Republic Party to fight the dominant, Khomeini backed, Islamic Republic Party on a democratic platform. Proving too popular, the party was banned and later Shariatmadari was forced to recant on state television. Such coercive measures against senior clerics overturned another central plank of Shiism underlined by Khomeini on his way to absolute power: 'the *fuqaha* do not have absolute authority over all other *fuqaha* of their own time, in the sense of being able to appoint or dismiss them. There is no hierarchy . . . endowing one with more authority than another.'⁴⁶

By the revolution's second anniversary in the winter of 1981, Bazargan's government had been replaced by a hardline lay theocrat and a cabinet with a sizeable clerical membership. Ayatollah Taleqani, Tehran's Friday Prayer Imam and more popular than Khomeini himself before and after the revolution, was dead under dubious circumstances having more openly than ever declared his opposition to theocracy in his last sermon. President Banisadr was well on his way to impeachment by a parliament dominated by the theocrats. He would soon be back in Paris to join forces with the Mujahedin, Kurdish Democrat Party and others in the National Resistance Council, promising to return to Iran within three months to complete the transition to democracy. That was in June 1981 with the said Council reduced subsequently to a discredited instrument of a much shrunken Mujahedin.

By the time of Khomeini's death in 1989, IR had survived many challenges including an eight-year war against Iraq, several coup attempts, a civil war, and a US-led economic siege in response to its embassy staff being kept hostage between November 1979 and January 1981. In the process, all groups, Islamic or otherwise, opposed to the 'governance of the jurist' were suppressed. The main threat to theocracy over the last two decades has instead come from reformist tendencies evolving out of the original theocratic camp with the support of many who, given the choice, may have opted for secular alternatives. This reflects the nature of IR whose institutional configuration, national and international contexts, ideological goals, and socio-economic roots display characteristics of a 'torn state'. The country's constitution effectively frames this condition by its dual theocratic and democratic conceptions of sovereignty. Theocratic tendency's foremost guardian, 'the supreme leader of the World Muslims', is appointed by an Assembly of Leadership Experts (Islam's first formal 'college of cardinals') which in turn is elected by popular vote, but from a restricted list filtered by the unelected Guardian Council. In addition to 'the supervisory' function 'over the proper execution of the general policies of the system', article 110 of the new constitution gives the leader the power to appoint or dismiss the following:

- clerical members of the Guardian Council;
- supreme judicial authority of the country;
- head of the radio and television network;
- chief of joint staff;
- commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps; and
- supreme commanders of the armed forces.

Among many other notable sources of unaccountable power, the leader also appoints the heads of vast semi-public 'charitable' foundations, and has 'special emissaries' variously 'guiding' the otherwise formally accountable ministries and public organisations inherited from the Pahlavi period. Yet, according to article 107: 'The leader is equal with the rest of the people of the country in the eyes of the law' and article 6 of the Constitution stipulates that 'the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by

means of elections'. True to these articles and compelled by its internal divisions, IR must have held more competitive, if highly restricted, elections, than any other authoritarian state. This contradictory insistence on theocracy and democracy has engendered, on the one hand, a crisis-prone, factionalised state incapable of articulating any viable conception of the 'national interest' and, on the other hand, contested domains and democratising tendencies that dispute theocratic domination and may have paradoxically helped ensure its resilience.

Between praetorian theocracy and secular democracy

Khomeini's theocracy has survived at the cost of the collapse of the theocratic case that originally underpinned it. This is most obviously attested by the defection of its once most credible champions, from the late Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, the former chair of the Assembly that drew up the republic's constitution, to Abdul Karim Soroush, the country's foremost Islamic philosopher and a one-time member of the Council of the Cultural Revolution that presided over the closure and purge of the universities. The depletion of the regime's religious legitimacy became fully evident when Ali Khamenei, the incumbent president but a relatively junior cleric, was installed as Khomeini's successor, even though he was far from achieving the rank of *marj'a*, the principal religious qualification for the job. With the removal of Montazeri as Khomeini's confirmed successor for his growing opposition to Khomeini-sanctioned measures (including mass execution of many sentenced but supposedly 'unrepentant' political prisoners), there was no one left in Khomeini's camp with the theo-political standing to succeed him. Thus a choice had to be made between religion and politics, and Khomeini chose the latter and on his deathbed convened the Assembly for Revising the Constitution, which duly removed the qualification of *marja'iyat* along with several other changes.

This turn was already anticipated by another implosive reversal in an edict issued to resolve one of the many conflicts between the government, the parliament and the Guardian Council (entrusted with vetoing anti-Islamic measures), this time clashing over the 'national interest' and sanctity of private property: 'Islamic government . . . is one of the primary injunctions of Islam, taking precedence over all subsidiary precepts, even praying, fasting . . . The government may even unilaterally annul the legally-binding agreements it has made with the people when these agreements are against the interests of the Islamic state'.⁴⁷ As Khomeini's biographer noted, 'from now on religion would serve the Islamic state rather than vice-versa'.⁴⁸ But then what would be 'Islamic' about IR and who could determine its interests, now that religious knowledge and/or infallibility were made redundant as the decisive qualification for supreme leadership?

But to have acknowledged the answer implied by this formulation of the question would have meant returning to the platform of pluralists who claimed that in the absence of direct divine guidance in the secular era inaugurated by the death of the Seal of Prophets (and occultation of the Imam) the 'Islamic' state had to be a democratic state. To save IR, Khomeini drank 'the poison chalice' and agreed to end the war with Iraq after prolonging it for over five years in the hope of 'liberating Jerusalem via a liberated Baghdad'. But he could not bring himself to do the same when faced with his state's impasse and join his deposed heir apparent in exonerating the political programme of the liberal Islamists, nationalists and socialists persecuted for a decade as agents of the Great Satan and 'corrupters of the earth'. That, after all, would have been tantamount to overthrowing his 'Islamic state'. But nor could Khomeini abandon his electoral theocracy in favour of unifying it as a full-blown theocracy. Indeed, throughout his ten-year rule not only did he refrain from implementing his own 1970 theocratic programme, but he ensured that a left-right balance was maintained within the ruling camp

with his closest associates, the then Speaker of Parliament and acting commander of the armed forces, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, and President Ayatollah Khomeini, holding the 'centre' ground.

Thus, although those who refused to embrace the Guardianship of Jurisconsult in the first place were politically excluded or annihilated, their appropriately 'adjusted' programmes were pursued within the authorised public sphere to provide a degree of dynamic political openness not found in most post-revolutionary ideological states. The present-day reformists therefore have a strong case that more often than not, Khomeini backed them against the conservatives, theocrats, and traditionalists, not least by coming around to asserting the interests of the Islamic state over Islamic law. But unwilling to take the next step and let the people decide among conflicting determinations of their state's interest, he moved to consolidate his own variant of pluralism by creating the last institution of his career, The Expediency Discernment Council. Members were drawn from various branches of government including the Guardian Council and Revolutionary Guards (RG), with the intention of resolving their recurring conflicts. But this only further acknowledged factional 'state capture' rather than overcome it. The revised 1989 constitution made the new Council a permanent fixture and another arena to ensure that IR would remain governed by an ungovernable state.⁴⁹

Khomeini's passing marked the end of a decade of revolution, liberation and repression, civil and foreign wars, institutional innovation, terrorism, and martyrdom as hopes were raised and sunk of inspiring the Muslim world's renewal through exportable models of popular revolution and Islamic democracy. Once seen from the perspective of consolidating an untimely theocracy, Khomeini may have indeed been wise to have encouraged governance in accordance with his infamous maxims that 'economics is for donkeys' and 'war is a blessing'. They signposted an emerging trajectory where the 'faithful' (to 'Imam's line') took over from the 'experts' in the old institutions and populated the new ones such as RG and the *Basij* Militia, who received intense training and exhaustive resources through war and repression. But to sustain the theocracy in the absence of Khomeini's theo-revolutionary authority and the 'war economy', his successors had to address the resulting dire socio-economic and political conditions. Thus the sequential projects of economic and political liberalisation respectively undertaken under the presidencies of the pragmatic 'centrist' Rafsanjani (1989–97) and the insider 'reformist' Khatami (1997–2005).

In neither case, however, could Iran's asymmetrically gridlocked and redistributive political economy be sufficiently loosened to maintain their initial promise of respectively sustained economic and political reform. In contrast to Khomeini, Khamenei compensated for his lack of theo-political authority and charisma by sanctioning the expansive appropriation of the largest swathes of the private sector, autonomous 'charitable' foundations, and state institutions (e.g. the judiciary and the Guardian Council) by 'conservative' clergy-*bazaar*i networks. For the same reasons the RG were allowed to expand into a self-governing military-industrial complex. Together with the vast politico-economic resources of the Supreme Leader, the space for rationalisation and reform was (and remains) severely constrained. Nevertheless, the presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami seemed to unveil the country's shift to an insider-reformist track towards democracy for which the ground was now sufficiently cleared by the coincidence of several developments. These included the death of Khomeini and Soviet Union's demise as well as the IR's theological, military, and socio-economic setbacks reflected in suing for peace with Iraq, accelerating popular discontent, and amending the constitution.

Ahmadinejad's two-term presidency (2005–13) dramatically reversed this shift in every respect. On both occasions, he was elected with the 'forceful' support of the Supreme Leader, Revolutionary Guards, the conservative camp, and the militant theocrats, and for a time it seemed that the primordial democracy–theocracy clash was about to end in a praetorian

theocracy. Indeed, it was with the unprecedented vote rigging which ensured Ahmadinejad's re-election, and the violent suppression of the ensuing mass protests in mind that Ayatollah Montazeri pronounced that his own handiwork was no longer 'an Islamic Republic but a Military Republic'.⁵⁰ This is true enough insofar as the theocracy has lost the support of a large majority of the population and survives thanks largely to fear and repression. It is also the case that RG, as the regime's chief repressive arm, has long grown into a 'total institution' with its own expansive economic, political, and international interests and resources which would not survive a functioning democracy.⁵¹

Yet, the repressive unification of the regime implied by theocratic-military dictatorship of, say, the Zia-ul-Haq or al-Bashir type seems beyond the reach and capacity of any one of the regime's factions. At its simplest, this is both because the majority of the population vocally and electorally rejects theocracy and because the ruling camp no longer has a credible theo-ideological vision or leadership to unify around even an internally compelling governance agenda. The ruling factions thus can only exercise their collective domination negatively, that is, to block the reforms that may force their retreat from the captured public resources and state institutions. What they have been able to achieve 'positively' and on a sustained basis is accumulation of factional power. This, however, only further fuels the multiple crisis of governance, economic decline, and legitimacy that may only be partially contained through elections and emergency reformism as well as repression.

This was clearly demonstrated in the period of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Despite benefiting from the exceptionally high oil revenues and the geo-political gains made on Iran's behalf by its adversaries, Anglo-American imperialism, Saddam Hussein, Taleban, and al Qaeda, Ahmadinejad's presidency performed badly on almost every socio-economic and political front, from growing inequality and drug abuse to failure to resolve the nuclear standoff or stem the rising sectarianism that is tearing the region apart. Most telling, however, was the break-up of the theocratic-military coalition that had ensured his re-election at great cost to the credibility of the leader and the regime as a whole. Not long after containing the Green Movement and incarcerating its leaders, the president and the Supreme leader and the president and the 'conservative' Speaker of Parliament variously clashed with the threat of impeachment raised against Ahmadinejad in parliament amidst hostile measures and counter-measures. With the necessarily temporary silencing of the reformists, the winners thus reverted to factionalism characteristic of usually short revolutionary transitions but now a nearly four-decade-long fixture of the IR as a state in and of permanent transition. This affirms both the effective redundancy of the theocratic theology as the supplier of the unifying vision and principles of the ruling camp and its overarching importance not so much as a legitimising ideology, as a unifying discourse for blocking reform without having the capacity to run the country without reformists.

In this context, Ahmadinejad's twofold ideological agenda, Mahdism and renewal of Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, is less bizarre than its reception suggests. The revival of the apocalyptic promise of the return of the Twelfth Imam indicates the extent to which the 'guardianship' of a supreme clerical leader (the 'Thirteenth Imam') as the inheritor of the rights and powers of the infallible Prophet and Imam has been discredited even within the ruling factions. The renewal of the inheritance of pre-Islamic Iran reflects the extent to which Twelver Shiism as a whole has lost ground among the people, to need buttressing by an agenda hitherto damned as the preserve of nationalism.

By the 2013 election, the Islamic Republic was as close to becoming a 'martyred state'⁵² as at any time since Khomeini drank the poison chalice of peace to save it from collapse but then was compelled, as was seen, to theologically and constitutionally undermine it. Rouhani's election reflected the recognition that forcing the election of one of the 'conservative' candidates

through another electoral coup was no longer a viable option. Equally important, the reformists understood that with Green Movement leaders Mousavi and Karoubi still under house arrest and even Rafsanjani excluded from standing, their only chance of political renewal was to extend their reach to centrists and moderate conservatives. As a middle-ranking cleric with a doctorate from a British university and a seasoned international and domestic 'diplomat' who has managed to maintain close links with both the leader and Rafsanjani, Rouhani stood at the right place. By effectively joining forces with former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami to support Rouhani, the current standard bearers of (radical) reform (Mousavi, Karoubi, the Green Movement) showed that they had learned the lessons of earlier failures to establish the broadest unity to balance the dominant bloc. Rouhani's success thus both extends and diversifies the counter-hegemonic movement on a differentiated spectrum now extending into the leader's inner sanctum. This may prove the moment reformism broke through to a cumulative power trajectory long achieved by the 'conservative' bloc.

Such a balancing, a necessary step in transition to a stable democracy, is, however, far from assured. The institutionalised power gap between the two sides is large enough to suggest that the likelier medium-term outcome is the isolation-instrumentalisation of Rouhani's government as a firefighting agency which sorts out the sanctions/nuclear programme emergency. This raises the crucial role of international actors in shaping both the history and pre-history of the Islamic Republic and the fate of rival accounts of Islam, from the 1907 Anglo-Russian treaty that divided the country into zones of imperialist influence and played a major role in ensuring an autocratic outcome to Iran's first democratic revolution, to the present day. In recent years, Anglo-American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Israel's invasions of the Lebanon, and the continued occupation of Palestine, the Anglo-French bombing of Libya, Western support for 'revolutionary' regime change in Syria, and reactionary regime consolidation in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf 'states' and now Egypt have all handed the theocratic Islamists in Iran (and elsewhere) their most important victories and grounds for further advance.

This underlines the long standing position of 'the West' as an internal as well as international actor in the affairs of Iran and the region and is sharply illustrated by the nuclear issue. The sanctions increased ordinary Iranians' hardships, and for a time strengthened the hands of hardliners. But, as with hostage taking, prolongation of the war with Iraq, or the Rushdie fatwa, they demonstrated the clash of factional and collective rationality and the limits of the former in the present global context. From this angle, the sanctions played a positive role in Rouhani's election, and should the current negotiations succeed in ending them, they may prove just the boost the emerging reformist-centrist-moderate conservative coalition needs to turn Rouhani's presidency to more than an emergency turn. Such an outcome may also enhance the chances of similar coalitions emerging in the region or even in 'the West' to address the issues for which it bears direct responsibility, from Israeli colonialism and nuclear arsenal to the unlimited wealth laundered through and by the 'Saudi' Arabia and the Gulf 'states' in the cause of corporate profit, oppression, and sectarianism in the region and beyond.

Concluding remarks

Khomeini died in 1989, having already presided over the collapse of the theological basis and global ambitions of his theocracy.⁵³ He had come to power with most Iranians and other Muslims literally at his 77-year-old feet. The rest of the world also listened to his every word; many took him for a new Gandhi. Others saw him as the modern world's first transnational Muslim leader, Islam's own popularly acclaimed pope. For a historic moment, Khomeini stood alongside his younger contemporaries, Pope John Paul and the Dalai Lama, but with greater

legitimacy and well placed to address Islam's 'crisis of authority' and perhaps inaugurate a progressive stage in the evolution of Sunni as well as Shii Islam. At that moment, Khomeini was indeed 'the leader of the world's Muslims', the healer of the Sunni-Shii divide, and the scourge of every tyranny in the Middle East. 'No to East, No to West, Islamic Republic is the Best' seemed a battle cry that would soon spread across the region and elsewhere. As an egalitarian democracy renewing Islam's and Shiism's cardinal principle of justice and Sunnism's ideal of consultation in the light of the comparative institutionalisation of these values in European states, the Islamic Republic seemed to show the way across Muslim-majority societies.

By switching the revolution's track from democracy to theocracy, Khomeini ensured the redundancy of his own vision of renewing Islam as the religion of both worlds and terminated any hope of exporting his model of Islamic state to the rest of the Muslim world. Even in the Shii majority states the Guardianship of the Jurisconsult never had a chance, let alone in Sunni majority societies. By opting for it, IR condemned the country's Sunni population to second-class citizenship along with other religious and ideological 'minorities'. It suffices to note that Tehran, a metropolis of twelve million inhabitants, is yet to have a Sunni mosque. What is more, the official or 'governmental Shiism' currently practised by the regime has itself become a minority affair. Sectarianism is the counterpart and legitimising source of factionalist power politics nationally and internationally. But the difference is that constituting no more than around 15 per cent of world's nominal Muslims, sectarian Shiism in all its varieties cannot hope to counter Sunni sectarianism to any sustainable benefit. The rise of Daesh (also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) is a clear illustration not only of the costs of Anglo-American imperialism (and the redundancy/complicity of EU internationalism) or Saudi-Gulf states' sectarian-economic colonisation of vast areas of the Muslim world, but of IR's own sectarian expansionism with its comparatively meagre resources.

Iran's dilemma in Iraq is directly traceable to abandoning the democratic promise of the revolution, the IR's own variant of original sin. Having opted for theocracy, the ruling factions could not switch back to democracy when they were gifted with the role of the hegemonic foreign power in Iraq. But ethno-religious composition and geo-political factors apart, the Iraqi hierocracy led by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, now Shiism's preeminent SE, had no truck with clerical rule (rather than 'guidance') even before the 1979 revolution, let alone after witnessing its record since. In this context, the only option for ensuring Iraq's territorial integrity and political stability would have been to pursue policies that accorded with the first article of Iraq's constitution defining the country as 'a single federal, independent and fully sovereign state in which the system of government is republican, representative, parliamentary, and democratic'. Having discarded the constitution that was drafted in similar terms, the Iranian leaders stood by Maleki government's sectarian colonisation of the Iraqi state, only to be forced to reconsider when faced with the advancing Daesh forces, recalling other cases of costly factionalist overstretch, from the prolongation of the Iraq war to the still unfolding nuclear dispute.

Seen in the context of Shiism's evolutionary trajectory, the costly experience of revolution and electoral theocracy has not been wholly in vain. Hegemonic quietism was rooted in persecution and the depoliticised theology of occultation, but continued after the Safavid turn in alliance with autocratic states to maintain clerical privilege and power, and survived the CR strengthened. In between the two revolutions, democratic Islamism was mainly the eclectic pursuit of religious intellectuals and professionals squeezed by traditionalists, theocrats, and the authoritarian left as well as by the global ascendancy of secularist modernity. Now, democratic Islamism is the only programme standing in the religious field with any historical and ideological credibility whose consistent exponent, the Freedom Movement, nevertheless

remains excluded from the electoral process. Yet, its non-violent means as well as its democratic aims and account of Islamic governance are to be found in the uneven but convergent political theologies and practices of powerful tendencies evolving out of quietist and revolutionary wings of traditional Shiism.

This is most clearly exemplified in the initially contrasting careers of the late Ayatollah Montazeri, the exemplary revolutionary theocrat and Khomeini's heir apparent, and Ayatollah Sistani, who rose to his present position as Shiism's pre-eminent SE as the prize student and successor to Grand Ayatollah Khoii, Khomeini's main 'quietist' opponent. The evolutionary significance of their eventual convergence over democracy lies in the fact that each retained the defining elements of his original tradition whilst extending and transforming it by appropriating elements from the other. Thus Montazeri remained faithful to theo-political activism and guardianship of the jurists but in the form of guidance and support for just causes rather than clerical governance. Sistani, on the other hand, has retained the quietist distance from governorship, but sanctioned guardianship as political engagement as well as religious guidance or providing for orphans and others unable to support themselves.⁵⁴ From this perspective, Shii hierocracy has maintained its capacity for evolutionary development, albeit as an altogether diminished force within a theo-political field increasingly occupied by comparatively junior clergy and lay Islamists, many armed with sectarianism and guns.

In this context, a key question is whether the hierocracy is theologically and institutionally further democratised by drawing on both the long standing Usuli Shiism's reliance on believers' traditional right to choose an SE of their choice, and the IR's two-stage process whereby the leader (or leadership council) is elected by an Assembly of Experts whose members are elected by the people from a currently restricted list vetted by a partial Guardian Council.

From the Islamic revolution of 1979 to the revolutionary upheavals that shook Arab countries in 2011 and the ups and now downs of Islamism in Turkey, the one common lesson is that only by consistent adherence to democracy may Islamism serve the aim of renewing Islam as a religion and civilisation that persuades rather than coerces.⁵⁵ From this perspective, it is Tunisia that now stands out as a compelling example. Yet, compared to Saudi Arabia, its main regional rival, but also most other Muslim-majority states, IR's electoral theocracy benefits from institutional, religious, and historical resources as well as a democratic space to engender and survive significant degrees of open political and ideological conflict and debate. Thus it may yet emerge from one of its recurring crises with the socio-political balance required for sustained reform rather than awaiting a third revolution or the return of the Hidden Imam.

Notes

- 1 I thank Najma Yousefi whose incisive and stimulating comments have variously improved this article.
- 2 Pew Research Center, *Mapping*.
- 3 Nasr, *Shia Revival*.
- 4 Kadivar, *Theories*, 13.
- 5 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 594.
- 6 Momen, *Shii Islam*, 165
- 7 *Nahjul Balagha*, Sermon 3; Momen, *Shii Islam*, 62–71; Hodgson, 'Early Shia', 1–13.
- 8 Nafissi, 'Reformation'.
- 9 Madelung, *Succession*, 323.
- 10 Lapidus, *History*, 2014.
- 11 Sachedina, *Just Ruler*.
- 12 Daftary, *Ismailis*; Hodgson, *Venture*, 25–8.
- 13 Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam*, 221–51.

- 14 Newman, *Myth*, 264–301.
- 15 Algar, *Shiism*, 326.
- 16 Amanat, ‘Madrasa’, 99–111; Cole, ‘Imami Jurisprudence’.
- 17 Algar, *Religion*.
- 18 Keddie, *Religion*.
- 19 Shuster, *Strangling of Persia*.
- 20 Nouri, ‘Illegitimacy’, 167.
- 21 Ever since the publication of these lectures in book form both titles have been used separately or together in various Persian editions. The English translation by Hamid Algar (1981) used here is published as *Islamic Government*.
- 22 Naini, *Enlightenment*; 1–17; Hairi, ‘Shiism’.
- 23 Bellah, ‘Islamic Tradition’, 150–2; Crone, *God’s Rule*, chaps 5, 6, 16, 19.
- 24 Chehabi, *Iranian Politics*.
- 25 Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, chapter 3.
- 26 Khomeini, *Discovery*.
- 27 Katouzian, *Political Economy*; Abrahamian, *Iran*.
- 28 Moin, *Khomeini*, 96.
- 29 Kadivar, *Theories*, 24.
- 30 Kadivar, Velaii, 160–204.
- 31 Khomeini, *Discovery*, 222.
- 32 Khomeini, ‘IG’, 60.
- 33 Khomeini, ‘IG’, 63.
- 34 Moin, *Khomeini*, 158–9.
- 35 Kurzman, *Unthinkable*, vii–viii.
- 36 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*; Banisadr, *Masoud*.
- 37 Rahnama, *Islamic Utopian*, 370; Bazargan, *Iran’s Revolution*, 103.
- 38 Shariati, *Alavid Shiism*.
- 39 Bazargan, *Iran’s Revolution*, 49–55; Banisadr, *Betrayal*.
- 40 Kadivar, *Velaii*, 172–5; cf. Martin, *Creating*.
- 41 Behrooz, *Rebels*.
- 42 Abrahamian, *Iran*, 440–6.
- 43 Shirazi, *Constitution*, 27–33.
- 44 Arjomand, *Turban*.
- 45 Cited in Moin, *Khomeini*, 223; Martin, *Creating*, 75–99.
- 46 Khomeini, ‘IG’, 64.
- 47 Cited in Moin, *Khomeini*, 260.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 259–60.
- 49 Shirazi, *Constitution*, 229–44. On the formation of IR’s factional politics see Barzin, *Political Factions*; Moslem, *Factional Politics*.
- 50 Cited in Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, 408.
- 51 Safshekan and Sabet, ‘Ayatollah’s Praetorians’.
- 52 Duss, ‘Martyr State’.
- 53 For a recent assessment of various aspects of Khomeini’s career and legacy see Adib-Moghaddam, *Critical Introduction*.
- 54 Rahimi, ‘Discourse’.
- 55 Qur’an 2.256.

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