

The Independent

June 27, 2009

Robert Fisk's World: The jury is out on the Iranian model of religion and politics

So what of the famous revolution? Was it a return to the basic values of Shia Islam?

The most nauseous photograph to come out of the Iran tragedy was not the bloodied demonstrators in Tehran, but a Reuters picture of former Iranian Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, “fighting back tears” in Washington as he declared that Neda Agha Sultan, the young woman shot dead by Ahmadinejad's thugs a week ago, “was now for ever in my pocket”. I bet she is, by God! “I have added her to the list of my daughters,” the son of the brutal and merciless late Shah, told the world.

Needless to say, the son of the Light of the Aryans did not add the many thousands of equally young and innocent women tortured to death by his father's sadistic secret police to his “list of daughters”. Back in 1979, I met a man who had tortured and killed a woman by scorching her on a metal rack over gas burners. His name was Mohamed Sadafi, by profession a weightlifter. “You killed my daughter,” the poor girl's father shrieked at Sadafi in front of me. “She was burned all over her flesh until she was paralysed. She was roasted.” Sadafi told the man – without explaining why – that the girl had hanged herself after seven months in custody. But “there was not even a single sheet in Evin prison from which she could hang herself”, the father replied in fury. Yes there was, Sadafi replied. He had himself seen the Evin laundry bills.

No, I don't think that Reza Shah has put this young woman “in his pocket”. But nor would the Shia clergy, which reputedly backed the original Anglo-American coup against Mohammed Mossadeq, the democratically elected leader of Iran in 1953. At that time, a senior Tehran cleric was sent to Qom to persuade the leading Ayatollah of his time, Sayed Mohammad Hossein Boroujerdi, to issue a fatwa, calling for a holy war against the Tudeh party communists to whom Mossadeq was allied and give his support to religion and the throne. A certain Ruhollah Khomeini was rumoured to have urged Boroujerdi to adopt just such a step.

The CIA's own analysis of the overthrow – which, of course, has been recalled with ever increasing enthusiasm by Ahmadinejad and his chums over the past two weeks – includes a telling post-coup interview between Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA boss in Tehran, and Winston Churchill, who was living out his last months as British prime minister ([reprinted](#) now, by the way, by Ken Coates's ever intriguing [Spokesman Books](#) in Nottingham). “This was a most touching occasion,” the CIA report said of the Roosevelt-Churchill meeting.

“The Prime Minister seemed to be in bad shape physically... He had great difficulty in hearing; occasional difficulty in articulating; and apparent difficulty in seeing to his left. In spite of this he could not have been more enthusiastic about the operation. He was good enough to express a wish that he had been “some years” younger and might have served under his (Roosevelt's) command. Our operation had given us a wonderful and unexpected opportunity which might change the whole picture in the Middle East.” This was Condoleezza Rice-speak. Remember her “birth-pangs” of a new Middle East, when the Lebanese were being splattered with blood by Israeli bombs in 2006? But Churchill's “whole picture” did indeed change – in 1979.

So what of that famous revolution? Was it really a blossoming return to the basic values of Shia Islam, a return to the golden age of Ali and Hussein, when Islamic rule could never be set up alongside a secular government? This is the narrative that is now laid down in Tehran. This is the story that Ayatollah Khamenei purports to believe in; that Ayatollah Khomeini – whatever his advice to Boroujerdi in 1953 – took Iran back to the purity of Shia Islam's roots, when there was no attempt to separate religious from secular power.

By extraordinary chance, a new volume has just been published by Professor Nader Hashemi of the University of Denver that is probably the most pertinent book to read today about the latest dramatic events in Iran. With the awful obligations of academia, he has entitled his work *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* – a real DO NOT READ title – but it is worth every page. Hashemi, I know well; he has a habit of putting visiting speakers through two lectures, three seminars and six interviews within an hour of crossing the Atlantic. This is absolutely true; I am one of his victims.

But here is a chilling Hashemi quotation from Khomeini, while the Ayatollah was in exile in the Iraqi city of Najaf in 1970. “This slogan of the separation of religion and politics and the demand that Islamic scholars not intervene in social and political affairs has been formulated and propagated by the

imperialists; it is only the irreligious who repeat them. Were religion and politics separate in the time of the Prophet? Did there exist on one side a group of clerics, and opposite it, a group of politicians and leaders?"

Again, in 1999, Ayatollah Abolghassem Khazali, a tough former member of the Guardian Council, insisted that "when a jurisprudent like Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi" – by chance today a close supporter of Ahmadinejad with a strong desire to become Supreme Leader after Khamenei – "says something, you should say 'I shall listen and I shall obey'. If there is a danger, it is coming from the slogan of 'civil society's' and now the situation has reached the point when the existence of God is being debated at universities".

No wonder Tehran University was plundered and abused by the regime's Basij militia last week. No wonder Mir-Hossein Mousavi's "secular" imprint is now so dangerous to the regime. But as Hashemi observes – and here is the real shaky foundation of the Iranian regime – "There is a near consensus that Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of the 'rule of the Islamic jurist' marked a significant break with Shia tradition in terms of the relationship between religion and politics. Senior ayatollahs within the Shia world (including in Iran at the time) strongly objected to Khomeini's political doctrine because it was considered an innovation and a radical break with the historical quietist role played by the clergy in political society."

So there you have it. Khomeini invented the so-called "velayat-e faqih" (rule of the Supreme Leader); the Islamic Republic was never conceived of in Islamic history. It's a try-out, an experiment that may or may not continue. The past two weeks suggest it needs a lot of work to survive.

Meanwhile, let's remember what Mossadeq said 46 years ago: "No nation goes anywhere under the shadow of dictatorship."