

Islamic Fundamentalism

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Over the last few years Islamic fundamentalism has been portrayed by some in the West, especially the US administration, as a major world threat. The atrocities committed by a number of Islamic groups, such as the GIA in Algeria, fundamentalists in Egypt or the Islamic states in Iran or Afghanistan, have been used to whip up a sense of hysteria against Islam. In this article we will try to explain the diverse and often contradictory nature of Islamic fundamentalism, both in Iran where an Islamic state came to power in 1979 and among Islamic movements in the Arab world. We will argue that fundamentalism – contrary to the propaganda of its supporters and its enemies alike – has only strengthened capitalism in Islamic countries, and that, since it poses a diversion to the development of revolutionary movements in these countries, it can only reinforce the status quo. We will further argue that as Islamic fundamentalism is not a monolithic force, and because most of the Islamic world is an integral part of world capitalism, twentieth century Islam is unlikely to threaten "The West" as some want us to believe. In this respect it is important to note that the financial backers of some of the most barbaric Islamic groups, such as the Taleban, are Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Pakistan, all amongst the staunchest allies of the United States in the region. Others, such as the GIA (Algeria) and the Egyptian fundamentalists responsible for recent bombings, are by-products of the Afghan war paid by Saudi money or CIA funds in Pakistan – although at present some of these groups might be out of the control of their pay masters.

Why fundamentalism?

The sociological reasons behind Islamic fundamentalism have been discussed by many writers and analysts. Industrialization and the rural exodus that started in the 1960s in most Middle Eastern countries saw the creation of shanty towns around many cities. The state in these countries was incapable of dealing with this demographic change. Poverty, unemployment, cultural differences and lack of social mobility all played a part in the alienation of shanty town dwellers from the rest of urban society. At the same time, the rate of literacy increased and state education allowed sections of the petty bourgeoisie access to higher education. Many of the cadres of Islamist parties came from this section, while their rank-and-file support is mainly from the lumpen youth of the shanty towns. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East coincided with disillusionment with Marxist, secular ideologies and the failures of Stalinist parties. In Egypt, Algeria and Iraq the popularity of fundamentalism was a reaction to the failures of Arab nationalism and Baathism, and in Afghanistan it was a direct consequence of the failure of the Stalinist state. Contrary to popular belief, neo-fundamentalism is not simply a reaction against modernisation, but a by-product of modernisation. As a result it is often a nationalist movement dominated by the cultural and political aspirations of various nation states, rather than a monolithic Islamist movement.

Contradictions and impasses of Islamic fundamentalism

There are many reasons, inherent in Islam, why it cannot become a world threat, unifying Muslims in tens of countries. First and foremost is the division between Sunni and Shia sections of Islam, which is at times more profound than divisions between Muslims and followers of other religions. Shias mainly live in Iran, parts of Iraq, and as a minority in Lebanon and Afghanistan; the rest of the Islamic world is predominantly Sunni. The establishment of the first Shia state in Iran has led to some virulent anti Shia propaganda by Sunni clerics and Sunni fundamentalists of the Islamic Brotherhood. Second, the divisions within either of these sections regarding essential theological issues, as well as arguments regarding the role of political Islam, the position of women and economic issues have constantly fragmented and weakened Islamic movements. As there is no single Islamic culture and no single Islamic nation or language, Islamist movements are primarily divided along national and regional lines.

The Iranian revolution of 1979

If the Iranian revolution was the beginning of the rise of fundamentalism – albeit in a Shia state – the failure of "political Islam" in Iran, and the gradual yet consistent transformation of the Islamic state in Iran to "civil society" marks the beginning of the end for the dream of an Islamic state based on Sharia (religious law and practice). The Iranian uprising was a direct result of the failures of the Shah's regime to respond to the economic crisis that followed the economic boom of the early 1970s. Most skilled workers faced a drop in their living standards in 1976. The White Revolution had left

massive numbers of peasants landless and penniless, going in search of seasonal jobs in major cities. Recession in the Iranian economy left them unemployed and destitute in shanty towns. In addition to the above two groups, the small independent producers had been forced out of business (made bankrupt) with the help of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, to rescue the already privileged position of big industrialists. Corruption and the rule of a clique around the Royal court meant that many traditional merchants, often associated with the bazaar, were deprived of large profits available to the more privileged sections of the ruling class. The clergy, which had survived the repressive measures of the Shah's dictatorship by compromising with the regime, was in a much better position to benefit from political discontent than secular, socialist groups who had had lost many in their ranks through execution and imprisonment.

Historical background of Shia clergy in Iran

Historically, Iranian intellectuals are responsible for portraying Shia Islam in Iran as a "progressive force". This concept, encouraged in the 1950s-1980s by Stalinist ideology, is based on the myth that Shia clerics were absent from political power during the rule of various dynasties in Iran, and therefore were part of the movements against absolute monarchs. In fact religious Shia leaders were functionaries of the court (in the Safavid/Qajar dynasties), lived in the court and were part of the establishment and the state. During the Constitutional Revolution, the main aim of the clergy was to stop radical movements and, at best, sections of the clergy sided with constitutional monarchists (e.g. Ayatollah Behbahani), while the majority of the clergy was mainly concerned with defending feudalism. During what became known as the "tobacco uprising" most of the Shia clergy ended up in the gardens of the British Embassy supporting one colonial power (Britain) against another (Russia). During the oil crisis of 1953 a minority within the Shia clergy originally supported the limited demands of the nationalists – but as the balance of forces changed in favour of the Shah, they suddenly moved back to support the Shah. The role of the clerical leader of the time, Ayatollah Kashani, is well documented. In 1963, at the time of the Shah's White Revolution, a reform from above aimed at transforming Iran to a modern capitalist state, the opposition of the clergy led by Khomeini was completely reactionary. The main planks of his main opposition were two issues: firstly, on the expropriation of the land of feudal land owners, Khomeini's objection was based on the sanctity of property in Islam; secondly, he opposed vehemently the reform to give women the right to vote. On both counts this opposition to reforms was clearly reactionary.

Contradictions of Sharia (Islamic laws) – the case of Shia Islam

One of the principle pillars of Shia ideology is the concept of the return of the 12th Imam, who disappeared 13 centuries ago and will only return to earth when corruption, injustice... have reached unbearable levels. In his absence any government is deemed to be unjust and corrupt. In fact as many clerical delegates of the Iranian parliament have repeatedly reminded us over the last few years, any attempt by government, even a religious government, at improving social conditions, reducing corruption, reducing poverty or narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor can only delay the arrival of the 12th Imam and therefore contradicts Shia theology. Such ideas are useful when the clergy is in opposition, as they were in the early history of Islam in 7th and 8th century, but it is a serious hindrance to them when in power. The Shia state is further based on the cult of personality of its martyred imams and innocence of these imams. Again this worked fine as a historic concept, when stories of the bravery of long-dead imams could inspire devotion martyrdom. It is more difficult with a living imam (in this case Khomeini) in the last decades of the 20th century, when a minor (or major) indiscretion such as the Irangate scandal can tarnish the image of the supreme cleric overnight. Rule of Sharia in a country where the capitalist mode of production and urbanisation are so advanced is doomed to failure.

However the principle cause for the failure of political Islam is that once it takes power, it institutionalises itself and in the absence of any Islamist economic policy (i.e. an alternative to capitalism or socialism) it inevitably becomes another third world capitalist state, with all the limitations of such a state. Let us remember that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism had a lot to do with the envy of the merchants of the bazaar who could never match the colossal fortunes gathered by the industrial bourgeoisie around the court and the state in the previous regime. This envy of "monopoly" capital led them to back the clergy, their traditional ideological representatives. Yet once in power, in order to survive and prosper in an international capitalist order, this bourgeoisie inevitably had to replace the very capitalists they despised. In some cases, where expertise and international capital were necessary, the Islamic state invited the previous capitalists to return. In other cases they themselves tried to replace the old capitalists. The very people who argued against Western consumption and accumulation became the consumers, and indeed as modernity is irreversible and universal, the bazaar merchants of Iran who so vehemently were anti-Western in the late 1970s, have become pro-Western in the late 1990s. A reflection of this, which can also be seen in the "Hezbollah" (supporters of the clergy), is described by Olivier Roy as the

neo-fundamentalism of Iran with a schizophrenic approach: a hatred of one self for wanting Western consumption (therefore under the influence of Western culture) and a long battle to possess it.

The economics of a capitalist state necessitate a "civil society". Most of the internal battles of the Islamic regime in Iran over the last 9-10 years are indeed part of this struggle. On the one hand those who still believe in the rule of Sharia and those (religious forces) who have decided that the only way to survive is the establishment of the rule of law in a truly capitalist state. The current president of the Islamic regime best portrays this position – but even as early as 1979, despite all the religious rhetoric, the constitution of the first Islamic Republic is far more law-based than many people have been led to believe, with a role for the parliament, the legislative and executive centres of power in the day-to-day running of the state, and religion in all senses taking very much a secondary role. Many have seen this as a clear reflection of the poverty of Islamic thinking on the issue of political institutions. Olivier Roy suggests that, despite many books and essays written by Islamic theologians on details of the rule of Sharia, Iran's policies over the last 19 years can be described as the policies of the crown (the previous order under the Shah) being pursued under the turban (a reference to the clerical hat worn by shia clergy) ("la couronne sous le turban"). Many arguments typical of capitalism have been aired in the Iranian parliament, the Majles – the battle between the statist reformers and defenders of the free market being a primary example. It has been argued that until 1989 and the death of Khomeini, those favouring state ownership dominated the Majles, whereas it is quite clear that since 1989 defenders of the free market have had the upper hand.

In summary, both in economic and political spheres, the first Islamic state has been predominantly, and is increasingly becoming, a capitalist state with "nationalist" overtones rather than religious ones.

International politics

Another pillar of the Sharia deals with the concept of Islamic "Ummah" or the Islamic nation. In many nations, including Iran, examples of Islamic forces in power and in conflict with fellow Muslims over land or oil can be seen. Thus the concept of the Islamic nation is no more than a myth, with nation states fighting for "national" or "regional" interests far more aggressively than they do in defence of the so-called Islamic nation. The eight year war between Iran and Iraq clearly demonstrated this, where both countries relied heavily on Arab and Persian identities.

Contrary to those who believe that Iran's foreign policy was third worldist, one could argue that it was never more than a continuation of the Shah's policies of becoming a regional power. The real policy of Iran has been dominated by competition with Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia with strong nationalist overtones. In order to become a regional power, Iran pursues a pragmatic foreign policy rather than an Islamist policy, despite all the rhetoric we have heard from its leaders. For example in pursuit of a fierce competition with Turkey, Iran supported Christian Armenia versus Muslim Azerbaijan, simply because Turkey backed the latter. Iran opposed the Taleban advances in Afghanistan; its propaganda talked of the Taleban giving a bad name to Islam. But in reality the defenders of Hezbollah in Lebanon can't be too concerned about the public image of Taleban, rather the main concern was that Taleban were supported by Saudi and Pakistani money, competitors with Iran in the battle for domination of Afghanistan. Iran has kept contacts and reasonable relations with Israel, mainly because the enemy of its enemies (the Arabs) must be a friend.

Of course Iranian leaders have made a great deal of their support for the deprived Muslims of the world. But in practice, given their total mistrust of Sunni groups, this has amounted to support for a handful of specific splinter groups of the Shia community in Lebanon (under Hezbollah) and a minority of the Shia community in Iraq and Pakistan, most of whom are of Iranian descent. In fact the Islamist rhetoric of the Iranian regime is very much coming to an end. The recent interview of the Iranian president with CNN signals a significant shift in this policy; he not only expressed great admiration for the American civilisation and its struggles for independence but went further and expressed regret at the takeover of the US embassy in 1980.

The only issue that remains of Iran's Islamist international rhetoric is the Fatwa on Salman Rushdie, and in this the fundamentalist regime is in a dilemma. Economic needs require better relations with European countries, yet Khomeini's word cannot be contradicted and Iran's competition with Saudi Arabia as the defender of the faith depends on this.

Women and Islamic Fundamentalism

For over 19 years Iranian women have been victims of the patriarchal laws of the first Islamic Republic.

Both under the current regime and the previous regimes Iranian women have been deprived of many of their basic human rights and have suffered from both patriarchal ideologies that treat women as irrational and immature, and from widespread discrimination which affects their lives from birth to death. There is no doubt that since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the plight of women has become worse. During the years of modernisation in the 1970s, a large number of Iranian women found work in factories and offices. Many clerics argued that "the honour and dignity accorded women by Islam" had vanished. One of the first acts of Ayatollah Khomeini was the enforcement of the veil on the 8th of March 1979, less than a month after the establishment of the Islamic regime. The refusal of many organisations of the left to defend women's rights on this day led to catastrophic consequences: the Iranian regime started a systematic attack on women's rights, and the left lost credibility as a defender of women's rights and a supporter of democratic rights.

The policy of enforced hejab (veil) and segregation was subsequently used to limit women's access to education and recreation facilities, and to institutionalise women's confinement to the limited career and life opportunities available to them, thus ensuring they become second class citizens. The new government also launched a campaign to drive women out of office jobs and to discourage them from any careers other than nursing and education.

Government propaganda openly talked of the "shame and dishonour" of working in an office and school hours were changed to make life more difficult for working mothers. All government-funded nurseries and day care centres attached to offices and factories were closed.

Some Iranian feminists have since argued that Islamic laws including those on the hejab (veil) have had a liberating effect on Iranian women. But in reality the veil was used to ensure that Islamic moral order is not defied and the veil became an institutionalised practise of Islamic patriarchy.

Behind it all was a strategy of ensuring a return to traditional roles. The emphasis on motherhood as an essential feminine character forms a pillar of Islamic gender ideology. The heroine of Shia ideology is Fatmeh, a daughter of the prophet who married Ali (the first Shia Imam) at a very young age, gave birth to his three sons and died at eighteen.

The majority of Iranian muslim girls live in a world dominated and manipulated by their male relatives. They can be given away in legal marriage without their knowledge or consent while still in their childhood. The process, in effect, paves the way for selling families to sell their under-aged girls in return for financial gains.

The law of Hodud and Qesas (the law of tallion and physical punishments) treats women as half-human (or nothing) even in their honesty or observation power, valuing a woman's testimony in courts as half of a male's testimony (or even as nil when it comes to testifying against murderers; according to article 33 of this law, no woman's testimony is ever admissible in murder cases).

The laws governing marriage are among the most regressive in the world in terms of the discrimination against women. While males are allowed to marry up to four wives at a time in permanent marriage and an unlimited number of women in what is known as "temporary" marriage, strict monogamy is expected from women. Any woman who deviates from this set-up may be brutally and savagely punished by publicly, by being stoned to death – the officially-sanctioned, and frequently executed, punishment for extra-marital affairs.

Inside marriage, the man is given almost a free hand in controlling his wife or wives. Rape inside marriage is sanctioned (as no consent is required for sexual relations inside marriage); wife-beating is tolerated and even encouraged by the Koran: women who disobey their men should be beaten up (soura 30).

A woman's movement may be restricted by her husband, and his permission is required for getting official travel documents. The law gives very few (if any) rights to women in sharing decisions in married life and/or in regards to the custody of children. Moreover, there are no proper provisions in the law to prevent men from transgressing their rights and/or abusing the extensive power they have inside marriage.

When it comes to divorce, again, the man has almost a free hand, while the woman has a very limited recourse to the law. The grounds on which a man can divorce his wife are almost unlimited, while only in very unusual circumstances can a woman file for divorce. The extent of this gross and utterly discriminatory law was best exemplified by a report last year that an Iranian court has taken fourteen years to approve a divorce request from a woman who complained she was tortured by her husband, regularly reporting new incidents of abuse to the court; she finally agreed to drop all financial demands against her husband, and had to contact Iran's Prosecutor-General to get her divorce. In another case, the process took eight years.

The divorce law also inflicts huge financial and emotional blows to the woman. The woman has to forfeit almost all financial claims if she files for divorce, while the settlement she receives if the divorce is initiated by the man is still very limited. The emotional loss is much greater and more hurtful: the woman is deprived from the custody of her children (some as young as two); custody is usually awarded to the man. Within and without marriage, even the father's father is given priority over the mother in custody matters.

The extent of discrimination against women in marriage goes still further. A virgin woman (whatever her age) has no right to marriage without the consent of her father (or her father's father, in the absence of her father). A Muslim woman has no right to marry a non-Muslim, (a right her male counterparts have, with some limitations).

Discriminatory laws against women have created favourable conditions and a suitable environment for widespread abuses and atrocities against women. Women have no effective recourse to the law in case they are abused, beaten or raped. Even many incidents of rape outside marriage go unreported because of the justifiable fears of the victim from being "dishonoured", cursed or even murdered by members of her own family and friends, or being prosecuted by the State and brutally punished by a large number of lashes or stoned to death if she was judged by the court as being a willing partner.

Many of the common laws such as the law of Hodud and Qesas, in conjunction with the discriminatory laws mentioned above, work directly against women. As another example, if someone commits homicide in an all-female environment (the frequency of which is itself a consequence of sexual segregation inside and outside the house), it will be impossible to get a conviction based solely on the testimony of the women present (no matter how many of them). According to article 33 of the law of Hodud and Qesas, no homicide case may be proved in court solely on the basis of women's testimonies.

Defiance of the hejab code is punishable by 74 lashes (as very few women will ever dare walk out without a head scarf this often means showing a fringe) and, "since the crime is self-evident", punishment does not require a court decision and enforcement of the punishment can be immediate. Women are either arrested or given verbal warnings. Those who are caught showing a fringe under a hejab are accused of "flaunting their naked bodies in the streets" and denounced as "corrupt, seditious, dangerous and destructive of public honour and chastity". Others face the 74 lashes. Some women have had paint splashed on their faces by patrolling Islamic squads.

Iranian women have been fighting hard against these injustices, but have had limited success in the face of the overwhelming power of the State and its institutions. The privileged position of a handful of token women, mainly close relatives of senior clerics, in higher echelons of the Islamic government, should not deceive anyone.

At a time when many Iranian feminists in exile have become apologists for the Islamic regime, it is up to the revolutionary left to defend and support the struggles of Iranian women with commitment, determination and as a major part of the struggle against the Islamic regime.

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