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Reviews

The Quest for Democracy in Iran: A Century of Struggle Against Authoritarian Rule, Fakhreddin Azimi, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, ISBN 13-978-0-674-02778-7, 492pp.

One hundred years after Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906–09, there is still no unanimous view or assessment on what that revolution meant. Many questions remain, such as what the revolution's substantial demands were, how it established a context for future political change, and whether it resulted in a different Iran. More broadly, why have two revolutions and several massive social movements in the twentieth century failed to produce a parliamentary government in Iran? After a century of struggle, how do we explain what Fakhreddin Azimi calls "the tragedy of constitutionalism" (p. 292)? By reviewing Azimi's significant contribution, I want to discuss two major issues that I believe merit more elaboration. My primary thesis here is that two factors have worked as crucial obstacles to democracy in Iran: first, a prevalent misconception of national sovereignty that has enabled the state to suppress popular sovereignty under the disguise of anti-colonialism or anti-imperialism, legitimizing authoritarian rule; and, second, a state-controlled economy that has created unaccountable rulers.

The Constitutional Revolution was the backdrop for much of Iran's contemporary political history, from the rise and fall of Reza Shah, whose authoritarian modernization ended tribal government and moved the country toward a modern nation-state,

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to the nationalization of Iranian oil and the 1953 coup against Mohammad Musaddiq, and the 1979 revolution that toppled Mohammad Reza Shah. Each of these episodes had the potential to propel Iran in many different directions. For example, as Azimi writes,

> If, instead of a constitutional monarchy, a republican system had been set up with a directly elected president as the head of the executive branch, legitimately empowered to govern, the crisis of governance afflicting Iranian politics could to a large extent have been avoided, and the emergence of a viable democratic policy facilitated. (p. 4)

Again he writes, "Without the [1953] coup, Iran might well have escaped the cataclysmic later revolution" (p. 13). There is no question that many constitutional problems and diversions were avoidable or could have been minimized. However, without falling into the trap of historicism, given the reality of an inherited dominant state economy, many developments in Iran's contemporary history were largely beyond human control—unless the monopoly of power rooted in the state economy could have been surpassed by a strong private economy.

In addition to a prologue and epilogue, Azimi lays out his book in three parts consisting of twelve chapters. In the prologue Azimi provides an overview of major events in the century that followed the Constitutional Revolution. Chapter one begins with an assessment of the historical prospects of democratization in Iran. The objectives of the Constitutional Revolution are presented as going beyond the formation of the National Consultative Assembly; there was also a desire to create a constitutional representative democracy. In reference to its failure, Azimi outlines the multidimensional structural impediments to democratic change in Iran, emphasizing "that there were, of course, fundamental problems that could not be easily addressed" (p. 20). He provides an extensive explanation of these obstacles and adds that, "without the structural prerequisites and permissive conditions, democratic aspirations and legalistic blueprints could not easily be translated into functioning arrangements" (p. 20). In addition to these factors, he also argues that Iranian cultural characteristics are not a good match with democracy, writing that, "The neoliberal democracy as practiced in the United States will not work in strong collectivist or communitarian cultures, where notions of social justice continue to resonate with large segments of the populace" (p. 13).

Due to Iran's agrarian economy, a class backbone for democratic change in the Constitutional Revolution was absent. There was no middle class to propound democratic demands. In this revolution, peasants were absent, industrial workers were a small percentage of the labor force, and the bourgeoisie was weak. Iranian society did not invent constitutionalism; the idea and the text were adopted from the West. A despotic culture was interwoven with tribal relations and extended into modern social institutions, and consequently the constitutional order was fragile.

Chapter two covers the "Pahlavist Absolutism" that followed the defeat of the Constitutional Revolution. From 1906 to 1920, Iran experienced multiple crises

out of which Reza Shah emerged as the new head of state. Azimi explains this process and the strategy that Reza Khan cleverly used to elevate himself from an ordinary soldier to the throne. Following a decade of turmoil, civil and regional wars, poverty and the spread of diseases, "he capitalized on the undeniable need for order, stability, and reform," and promoted a strong central government (p. 55). In 1925, he overthrew Ahmad Shah, the last Shah of the Qajar dynasty, and founded the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–79). Azimi provides a vivid and detailed picture of how Reza Khan was chosen as head of state. The story begins with Seyyad Zia al-Din Tabataba'i, the 31-year-old son of an anti-constitutionalist cleric, and Reza Khan, who, with the help of a few British officers, launched a coup in 1919. According to Azimi, there were two specific reasons Reza Khan emerged as a shining military leader who ended the turmoil and suppressed the regional uprisings. These measures produced a sense of security and order that was sorely needed in Iranian society. Reza Khan was a man of ability who balanced the influence of foreign powers in his favor, so that, "the Soviets came to see Reza Khan as working to reduce British influence. Conversely, the British viewed him as capable of saving Iran from Bolshevism. Reza Khan skillfully endeavored to foster and exploit both perceptions" (pp. 50–51). Reza Shah's rule is marked by both socioeconomic development and political suppression.

The modernization of Iran was marked by the return of a group of educated elites from Europe who welcomed Reza Shah's plans for socioeconomic, judicial, administrative and educational change, but who failed to maintain these changes within constitutional rule. In 1941, with the expansion of the Second World War and Reza Shah's tendency to favor Germany, the Allies occupied the country and forced him to abdicate, but allowed his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, to succeed him under certain conditions. Azimi argues that the rise of Reza Shah in the 1920s was a setback for constitutional rule. His authoritarian modernization created some undeniable progress in infrastructural development, but his repressive political measures caused long-term damage to the quest for democracy by institutionalizing the modern dictatorship that was maintained by his son. Reza Shah's political opponents emphasized his dictatorial rule, not his modernization efforts, which had undermined religious traditionalism.

Chapter three covers the period between the abdication of Reza Shah and the 1953 coup. This period witnesses the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, the emergence of civil society, the resuscitation of constitutionalism, the rise of civic nationalism, Musaddiq's premiership, nationalization of oil industry, and finally the Anglo-American backed coup against him. The coup was another major blow to constitutionalism. The role of internal and external actors in orchestrating the coup continues to be debated. Azimi convincingly argues that

> the domestic opponents of Mosaddeq, encompassing a wide range of variously motivated forces, were powerful, but they would not have achieved their aims without the concerted support of Britain and later the United States. Nor could

> the Anglo-American operations have succeeded without significant domestic collaboration. (p. 147)

The role of British and American forces in the coup was largely one of psychological and moral support. Nationalists were exhausted by continuous street demonstrations, parliamentary factionalism, and conflict throughout the previous year. The Tudeh party, a crucial counter-coup force, notified Musaddiq about the plot, but mysteriously remained passive, which shocked their supporters who were demanding action. Apparently, they did not want to provoke Britain, the United States or the anti-Musaddiq forces at a very critical point, hoping that Musaddiq would himself launch a counter-coup. Musaddiq, however, refused to appeal to the public, most likely to avoid bloodshed. The country's high-ranking clerics such as Ayatollah Mohammad Behbahani and Ayatollah Abolqasem Kashani collaborated with the coup plotters. They led the coup to triumph just three days after its initial failure.

Part two of Azimi's work, consisting of a large portion of the book (chapters 4–9), provides a detailed analysis of Mohammad Reza Shah's authoritarian modernization (1953–79). This period was mainly characterized by a process of secularization, political repression and social permissiveness. The tragedy of constitutionalism was of course deeply felt after the 1979 revolution, when revolutionary demands, including freedom and popular sovereignty, were totally abandoned by the Islamic Republic. When the new clerical regime was established, the rulers chose the opposite direction—using brutal methods to impose their will through traditionalism and *shari'a* laws. Azimi writes: "The more politically astute opponents of the Shah feared that the dismantling of royal authoritarian rule could result in an even more ruthless, intractable, and intrusive form of authoritarianism" (p. 320). Azimi names Mostafa Rahimi, a prominent intellectual and lawyer, as one of these people who "incisively denounced the concept of an Islamic republic as an oxymoron and insisted that by rebelling against the monarch, the Iranian people aspired to affirm an inclusive notion of popular sovereignty as opposed to royal or clerical tutelage" (p. 320). Shapour Bakhtiar, a Musaddiqist and reformist who served as the Shah's last prime minister, had raised similar concerns, though he was not successful in his efforts to defuse revolutionary fervor, prevent the dismantling of the establishment and restore constitutional order. Mehdi Bazargan, a moderate religious politician and the head of the provisional government of the Islamic Republic, was also a Musaddiqist and reformist who unsuccessfully put forth a similar goal from within the Islamic Republic, denouncing violence and extremism. But the Iranian Left had ideologically allied itself with the religious radical and conservative groups and advocated a total dismantling of the regime, assuming that, as Azimi writes, "the violent overthrow of the existing order and the elimination of imperialism inevitably paves the way for a good society" (p. 319). Instead, victory created a situation for religious forces to take total power and repress all as some had predicted.

Part three of Azimi's book (chapters 10–12) discusses the period after the 1978–79 revolution. "For most of its participants," Azimi writes, "the revolution of 1978–79 was in crucial respects an attempt to fulfill the objectives of the Constitutional

Revolution" (p. 440). In essence, it was a movement for popular sovereignty and the Islamization of the revolution after its victory was an obvious regression. Iranians have paid a heavy cost for equating national sovereignty with some absolute notion of independence from foreign powers. Society did not recognize that the real obstacle to establishing democracy in Iran was not colonialism or imperialism, but homegrown authoritarian rule.

Azimi clearly distinguishes between popular and national sovereignty. While the first means representative democracy and citizens' rights, the latter refers to national interests. Theoretically, the state is supposed to protect both, but many questions arise in the Iranian context: how can an authoritarian state protect national interests while suppressing citizens' interests? This only makes sense in an Iranian context where resistance to imperialism is equated with defending national sovereignty. In Iranian society the distinction between the concepts of popular and national sovereignty has been lost. As Azimi writes, popular sovereignty, the rights of citizens, was "the foundational principle of the Constitutional Revolution" (p. 412). Why, then, have people sacrificed this foundational principle in the name of resisting a falsely constructed foreign enemy? The Soviet-backed Iranian Left is largely responsible for this development in Iranian political culture. During the Cold War they theorized and propagated the idea that developing nations must join the socialist bloc to resist world imperialism. Under such a misleading notion, the authoritarian regime of the Shah was bad, because it was allied with imperialism, and the authoritarian Islamic Republic was good, because it resisted "imperialism." As Azimi writes,

> Eradication of imperialism—which they never adequately defined and barely differentiated from "decadence" and modernity, but broadly identified as Western domination—emerged as the primary ideological leitmotif of the radical leftists. Without acknowledging it, they found much in common with radical religious activists, to the detriment of more thoughtful leftists, civic-nationalists, and liberals, who viewed them as having formed a Faustian pact with their ideological antagonists. (p. 318)

Therefore, "pro-democratic" Iranians had to join an anti-democratic regime to fight against the constructed colonial and imperial powers. Azimi writes, "The goal of sustaining national sovereignty, which also implied resisting imperialism, was a driving force in the revolutionary movement" (p. 29).

The Iran–Iraq war helped the Islamic Republic to fortify this false choice between democracy and independence in a situation where Iranians faced a real external threat. The regime glorified the war as an act of defending the land of Islam. Azimi provides rich, detailed analysis about the role and objectives of the war with Iraq, but he does not fully explain how the war started. Five months prior the outbreak of the war, Khomeini publicly invited Iraq's army to revolt, ignoring Saddam Hussein's warning not to intervene in Iraq's internal affairs. Saddam finally met with Mahmood Da'aei, Iran's ambassador to Iraq, to deliver his personal message to Khomeini. Iraq was the first country to recognize the Islamic Republic, Hussein said, adding that he was prepared

to travel to Iran to talk with Khomeini if there were any differences to be resolved. Otherwise, he warned, if Iran continued its interference in Iraq, he would attack Iran. Khomeini simply said "ignore him."[1] The war with Iraq broke out mainly due to attempts to export the Iranian revolution, in the hope that the Shi'a of Iraq would rise up against Saddam Hussein. "Although the war would be described as 'imposed', it would also be referred to as the 'sacred defense', even as 'a providential gift'" (p. 366). The "blessing of the war," as Khomeini described it, was the opportunity it provided to justify economic shortcomings and suppression of political opponents. It helped the Islamic Republic to stabilize its monopoly of power through excessive violence.

The persistency of authoritarian rule in Iran is based not only on this misconception of national sovereignty, but also on the state's continuing domination of the economy. A state-dominated economy leads to a monopoly of power and the politicization of economic decisions. In Iran's rentier system the government owns the nation's resource wealth and controls its distribution to a population that is almost entirely dependent on the state for its welfare. This rentier system produces a corrupt bureaucratic administration and discourages any distribution of power, the emergence of a strong private sector or an independent voice for the middle class. The state economy has been a major characteristic of Iranian society throughout history, beginning with state control of agriculture and later the oil industry. A small portion of the population benefits through this rentier system, which co-opts the elite while depriving the great majority of the people. After the 1953 coup, "foreign support and oil wealth gave the regime considerable leverage for purchasing the elite loyalty for cronyism and cooperation" (p. 7). State control of the civil and political domains became even worse during the Islamic Republic due to the confiscation of private property.

After the Iran–Iraq war, many parallel and rival power groups gradually emerged as the beneficiaries of Iran's clientelist system. Azimi asserts that "the state's control of the economy was gradually but steadily diluted by capitalist measures" (p. 376). Nonetheless, the state continued to own almost 70 percent of the economy and the system remained one of state capitalism with one of the highest Gini index in the world. A state economy can be capitalist or socialist. The Islamic Republic of Iran's economy is a corrupt capitalist system. Privatization of the economy began during the Rafsanjani presidency (1988–96), but despite his efforts, the economy remained dependent on state-controlled oil revenue. Given this situation, the state has been able to manipulate the public, monopolize the media, restrict civic activities, create state-run labor unions and political parties, privileging its loyalists and penalizing its opponents through the allocation of jobs and public services.

To explain why, after two revolutions and several large social movements in the twentieth century, Iran has failed to achieve democracy, some continue to point to colonialism and imperialism. Without dismissing the role of external and imperial interventions, this review essay has argued that the primary obstacle to democracy

[1]Hossein Zahedi, *Roozonline*, http://www.iranliberal.com/soton%20e%20azad/Zahedi_Gang.htm.

in Iran has in fact been domestic, i.e. authoritarianism. The idea of "imperialism as the primary contradiction" or "the real enemy" that should be the primary target of national struggle was theorized by the traditional (old) Left (religious or non-religious). They relegated the quest for democracy to the back seat, going so far as to unite with reactionary and despotic forces. In a similar vain, Azimi argues that "In the course of a century-long struggle for democratic governance in Iran, imperialism, whether British, Russian, or later American, found its interests best served by sustaining authoritarian regimes" (p. 445). But, as the evidence in Azimi's own book suggests, Western governments were not consistent in their policies toward Iran and have not always supported authoritarianism in Iran. To cite a few examples: the constitutionalists sought refuge in the British Embassy during the Constitutional Movement; the British demanded constitutional rule and the return of lands confiscated by Reza Shah at the time of Mohammad Reza Shah's accession to the throne; President Kenned "imposed" the liberal Ali Amini and his reform agenda on the Shah; and President Carter emphasized human rights and political reform.

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