

that, unlike the secularism of the 1920s, which was imposed top-down, these demonstrations signified the reclaiming of the principles and ideology of secularism by *the people themselves*. This diagnosis is mistaken. First, it is dubious to regard these demonstrations as popular. Second, if Turkey's political and social conjuncture reveals a significant transformation of the modernizing efforts of the early republican period, it is nonetheless misleading to search for the indicators of transformation in these demonstrations. Rather, the true indicator is the entrance of religion into the public sphere, via a unique articulation of the religious with other social, political and cultural issues.

Notes

1. Bernard Lewis. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 268.
2. See Mahmut Mutman, 'The Nation Form', *Third Text*, forthcoming.
3. See Michel de Certeau, 'The Formality of Practices: From Religious Systems to the Ethics of the Enlightenment (the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)', in *The Writing of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988.
4. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003.
5. Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*, Merlin Press, London, 2003, p. 23.

Secularism and politics in Iran

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The establishment of an Islamic state in Iran and the imposition of a system of ideological discrimination have turned secularism into a magical concept. For its defenders, it signifies a sacred cure for all the ills of Iranian society; for the Islamic state, it is a kind of sacrilege. In Iran, the concept of secularism is wholly determined by these two great forces; its political function is thus problematic. It is as if religion and the state have filled the space of history, leaving no room for politics.

Secularism is no less ambiguous in Western societies. It comprises many different, even divergent, moments, from the expropriation of the Church to Republican anti-clericalism and a Weberian disenchantment of the world. This ambiguity, intensified through decontextualization, means that any analysis of secularism in Iran has to be selective. What follows is an attempt to analyse the relationship of secularism to the possibility of democratic politics – or politics as democracy – in Iran. This analysis is based on belief in the political potential of the 1979 revolution, which to this day has remained inexhaustible. Unable to tolerate the void of this potentiality, the official jargon of the state tries to fill it in with the word 'Islamic', understood in an adjectival sense, rather than as part of the proper name 'the Islamic Revolution', given to the event by the event itself. The question is: can the word 'secular' act as a gatekeeper that keeps open the strait-gates of politics, or is it just another adjective that fills the gap between the state and the community, but cannot be internalized by them?

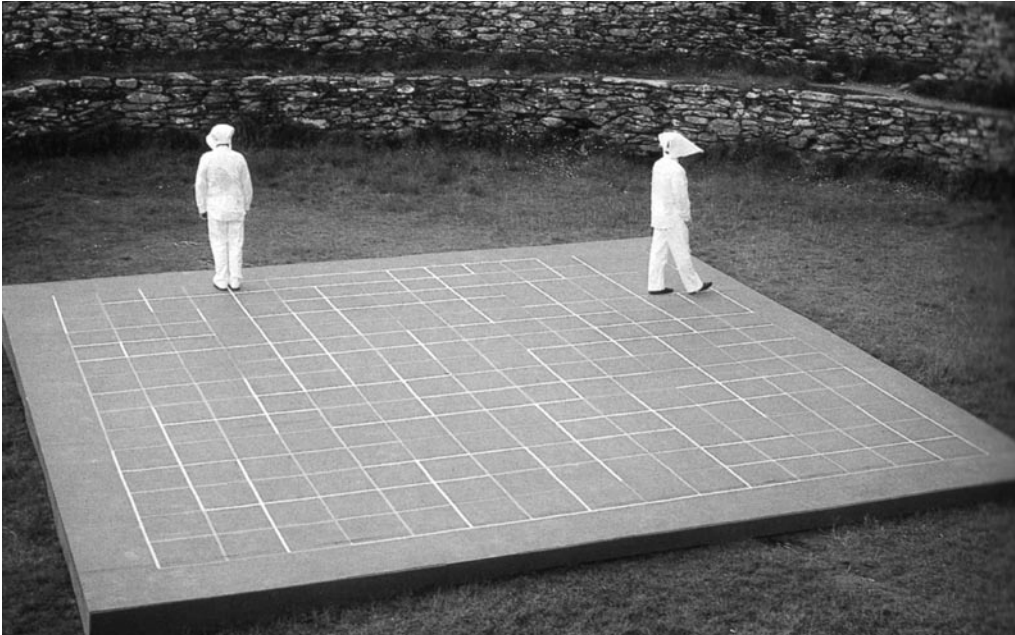
We can begin with a simple argument: every democracy or democratic state entails the formal equality of citizens before the law; a religious state, by definition, negates this condition; therefore, only a completely secular state can be considered democratic.

However, no actual or historical democracy can be grasped and explained by this logic. In the United Kingdom, the nominal head of the state is simultaneously the head of the national Church. The most aggressive democracy of our time, the USA, is governed by an administration that owes its power to the stirring of religious zeal. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the situation is still more complex and confusing. In post-revolutionary Iran, secularism was first introduced as a demand for separating religion from politics, in contrast to its universal definition as the separation of religion from the state. This confusion, which persists to this day, has never been corrected by either the defenders or the opponents of secularism. In a country in which any popular action worthy of the name 'politics' has involved religion – for example, the anti-colonial boycott of tobacco at the end of the nineteenth century, the constitutional revolution of 1906–07, the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951–53, and finally the 1979 revolution – such a demand automatically leads to the exclusion of politics. Therefore it is clear: what the above-mentioned confusion involves is nothing but the reduction of politics to the state and hence the omnipresence of a statist ideology.

This statist ideology, expressed in explicit or implicit terms, is at the core of all contemporary debates for and against secularism in Iran. It is the secret common ground of both camps. Nonetheless, in a country with three thousand years of despotic rule, whose absolute synthesis of state and religion in the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire (226–651) has been a model for the tyrannical and monarchical rules of early Moslem caliphs, statist ideology is bound to lead to the recreation of despotism, be it enlightened or religious. Such a judgement may seem unfair when applied to contemporary defenders of secularism, yet an old Marxian maxim tells us that the true political significance of a faction is determined not by what it says or believes but by the objectivity of its praxis. So let us consider the actual history of secularism in Iran and its implications as manifest in the actual actions of its friends and enemies.

Sins and positions

Nearly two years after the revolution, with the closing down of universities as a result of the 'cultural revolution' and the downfall of the first elected president of the Republic, all non-Islamic political activities and discourses were banned and excluded from the sphere of 'legitimate' politics. However, the dialectic of unfreedom did not remain limited to the outside, but very quickly spread to the core of the system. In the three decades that followed, not only Marxists and members of minority religions but also Sunnis and even the majority of Shi'ites were excluded from all higher and middle official positions of power. Later on, with the victory of conservative hardliners, these exclusionary tactics were also applied to other factions of the ruling elite such as the reformist followers of Khatami. It is therefore clear that discrimination and exclusion has always been a matter of state policy rather than religious fanaticism. The state has employed catchwords like 'secularism' or 'liberalism' to brand and ostracize its critics in a purely pragmatic manner, without the slightest regard for the content of beliefs. No wonder that the present Iranian rulers have never endeavoured to remove the aforementioned confusion or to criticize the separation of religion and politics for its anti-democratic tendencies, but only for posing a threat to the monopoly of state power. The spiritual mentor of the current administration, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, has explicitly stated that the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is by no means rooted in the people's will as expressed in elections. According to him, all people can do is to support the divine choice, and even their vote is somehow influenced by divine providence. The victory of the right-wing conservatives in Iran, as in any country in the era of global capitalism, is the product of rampant depoliticization and indifference, and, despite its populist trappings, it expands political apathy. As a result, secularism is now perceived as a sin against the state itself rather than a political position.



Brian O'Doherty, *F49, Vowel Grid*, 1970

The list of political groups, parties and individuals that in some way or other ask for different degrees of secularization is long. Nevertheless, most of them suffer from the same predicament of statism, or, as we shall see, are caught in the vicious circle of a statist interpretation of secularism. For the religious intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush, who supported Khatami and the vast reformist movement that arose after his election, secularism was at least partly a political issue. It was a means to set limits to the ubiquity of the state. They did manage to introduce some gaps in the space filled by the official discourse, but the political significance of their demand for religious democracy kept changing as they vacillated between emphasizing its religious and its democratic dimensions. The strategy of 'pressure from below, haggling from above' coupled the political energy of the movement with the process of give and take between the ruling elites, thereby reducing politics to state policies once again. Some individuals, such as Akbar Ganji, eventually grew tired of this wavering and opted for a clean break, demanding the establishment of a pure secular republic through the tactics of civil disobedience.¹ Yet, even this orientation did not prevent them from getting involved in the paradox. Ganji called for passionate militant politics and exhibited readiness to pay its price. However, the ultimate goal of struggle for Ganji was the establishment of a liberal democracy. He aimed at overpoliticizing people in order to achieve a de-politicized society with free markets, a small state and minimum tension, where people could immerse themselves in their private lifestyles.

The futility of such conceptions indicates that the paradoxes of secularism are not so different from the paradoxes of democracy. The main paradox of democracy is that it is not itself democratically produced. The origin of democracy, whether in a long process of reform or a sudden violent change, remains external to it. Democracy itself is never put to the vote. In a situation like the Middle East, this means that the election can be won by the so-called 'enemies of democracy'. This is what happened in Algeria a few years ago, and is happening presently in Palestine with the success of Hamas. In the established state-oriented democracies, whenever the election erects obstacles to a continuous rule of capital and state oligarchies (as recently occurred in the Netherlands and France, when people said 'no' to the European constitution), one can always repeat the election. Yet such options are ruled out in the Middle East (even though the winners in Algeria and Palestine, considered as a threat to the dominant powers, never got the chance to prove their commitment to democracy). We are left with the paradox of establishing democracy before holding democratic elections.

This also holds true for secularism. The typical reaction to this impasse is to insist

on ‘the primacy of liberalism’ (the rule of law, individuals’ rights, etc.) over democracy. However, according to this view, in countries where people do not know ‘the rules of the democratic game’ the only solution is to ‘educate’ them from above. The military dictatorships of Atatürk in Turkey and Reza Shah (1925–41) in Iran tried to realize this logic, by imposing their own versions of secularism. None of the known historical routes to the secularization of the state – such as civil war between religious factions in the Thirty Years War, or gradual change through centuries of conflict between king and parliament, or the establishment of a new state on ‘virgin soil’ – applies to a country like Iran (95 per cent of whose population are Shi’ites) or the rest of Middle East. The present situation in the multi-ethnic society of Iraq shows that the survival of a semi-democratic secular state requires the presence of an occupying force. Recent events in Turkey prove that even half a century of ‘education’ by the army has not solved all the paradoxes of secularism. It seems that in this region a secular democratic *state* must come either from above or from outside. (Some people both inside and outside Iran are now even hoping for an external solution – that is, the military American solution.) But does this mean that here secularism and democratic *politics* are mutually exclusive? The answer is no.

The not-all against the state-all

Every modern state, particularly a democratic one, is an expanding force that creates an *all*. An Islamic state fills this *all* with religious ideology whose content is chosen from bits and pieces of tradition, myth or even superstition. The secular state tries to exclude all religions from this *all* and confine them to the so-called private sphere. Although, as can be seen in the historical examples of Egypt, Syria and Iraq, it may subsequently be filled with nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism. As long as the word ‘secular’ is conceived as a description of a state, we are forced to follow the logic of the *state-all*. But if we cut out its relation to the state, then secularism can be another name for politics. Using the Lacanian idea of the logic of *not-all*, secularism can act as a gap or a wound in the body of the state. In contrast to the impotent and depoliticizing emptiness of the secular state, secularism as politics would be a birthplace for political passions, inventions and subjects. Secularism would no longer be understood as a form of government; the formula of ‘the rule of state must exclude all religions’ would be replaced by that of ‘no religion can have a claim to total rule’. In political terms, this means that every religion would be separated from itself by secularism and would thereby be not an *all* that comprises every thing and every one, but a *not-all* divided from itself.

As to the compatibility of this idea of secular politics with the situation in Iran, until recently the theory of *Velayat-e-faqih* (the rule of clergy) had no political significance and was limited to authority over those who cannot manage their properties, such as orphans or the mentally handicapped. (This is still the opinion of the majority of independent Shi’ite authorities.) Moreover, Shi’ite political theology is essentially messianic: the establishment of the just universal state is deferred until the coming of the Twelfth Imam. It is a divine matter that cannot be decided by human action.

As Horkheimer and Adorno once wrote, ‘the particularist origin and the universal perspective of thought have always been inseparable’. History suggests that there will be no political truth or true political thinking as long as we remain inside the realm of state. A democratic politics that is not anti-Islamic and is not obsessed with the security paradigm created by the American war against terror is the only viable politics in contemporary Iran. A religiously inspired politics that internalizes the gap of secularism and abandons its claim to statist rule is a necessary part of democracy as politics.

Notes

1. Akbar Ganji, an Iranian ex-reformist journalist, was imprisoned in 2000. He was released in 2006 after almost eighty days of hunger strike. While in prison he wrote *Republican Manifesto*, demanding a fully fledged democratic republic.

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