

Neither theocracy nor secularism?

Politics in Iran

Ali Alizadeh

On Saturday 13 June this year, hours after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Ministry of the Interior announced his landslide victory as Iran's president and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the religious head of state, prematurely and unconstitutionally embraced these results, Tehran and several other major cities became the stage for spontaneous, sporadic and widespread protests. Despite the government's arrest of most senior opposition figures, campaign activists and journalists, the shutting down of mass communications, and the presence on the streets of factions of armed forces, in less than forty-eight hours these anomalous expressions of frustration evolved into a series of highly disciplined and mainly self-organized mass rallies known as the Green Movement. On Monday 15 June, up to 3 million people marched, and hundreds of thousands participated in silent demonstrations over the next three days. In the sermon of the Friday prayer on 19 June, Khamenei once again confirmed the election results, endorsed Ahmadinejad for having policies close to his own, associated the protestors with foreign meddlers and warned of violent consequences. These warnings were realized in the next day's protests: tens were killed and hundreds arrested and kidnapped in Tehran, Shiraz and Isfahan.

A crack has opened up in both the power structure and the historical consciousness of the Iranian people. Notwithstanding how deep it will go and what it will lead to, it has already reactivated the space of radical politics in Iran. The scale of the protests, their rapid formation into a popular movement, and the similarity of their tactics to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, along with the political ambiguity of Ahmadinejad and his social bases, have given rise to much speculation. But an understanding of the Green Movement and its possibilities requires an analysis of the historical matrix out of which it has arisen, whose origins date back to the early twentieth century.

The 'transcendental' space of politics in Iran

In the twentieth century, Iran experienced four major political events: the constitutional revolution of 1906, the popular and democratic movement constituted around the nationalization of oil in 1951–53, the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the reform movement precipitated by the 1997 election. The main demand of the constitutional revolution (*Mashrooteh*, literally meaning 'conditioning') was to limit the absolutist rule of the monarch in Iran's pre-modern society. Alongside this anti-authoritarian tendency, the constitutional revolution aimed at democratically pursuing a modern project of nation-state building via the establishment of the rule of law, parliament and an independent judiciary. It was hoped that such a state would overcome the semi-colonial situation

in which Iran acted as a buffer between the zones of interest of Russia and Britain. The main social forces involved were nationalist feudal lords, nascent bourgeoisie and merchants, cultural elites with modernist or socialist tendencies and senior clergy from Najaf theological centres. A wide coalition of seemingly contradictory forces and the upholding of the ambitions of the 1906 revolution have been constant features of progressive political movements ever since.

The nationalization of oil was made possible by a coalition between the nationalist Mohammed Mosaddeq and Ayatollah Kashani, and it enjoyed the initial support of the Tudeh Party (the Marxist party which accommodated many of the secular Left before becoming the official agent of Moscow). But apart from opening a space for political participation and resisting the colonial powers, this movement also confronted the young Shah, who was seeking support beyond the country's borders. Though there were some with republican tendencies in Mosaddeq's cabinet (for example, his interior minister, Fatemi, who was executed after the 1953 coup), Mosaddeq himself stayed faithful to the constitution and limited his demands to obliging the Shah to reign rather than govern. Similarly, despite later attempts to attribute it either to deep-rooted Islamic beliefs or to the class interests of workers, the 1979 revolution was an unprecedented popular mass movement which, despite the indisputable leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, at the time maximally accommodated all internal social forces: religious factions with modernist or traditionalist tendencies, seculars, liberal nationalists and Marxists. But the result of this process was more than a coalition. The 'subject' of the 1979 revolution is correctly named 'people', since it was produced by transcending – at least temporarily – class, ethnic and cultural differences. By December 1978, the vague set of negative sentiments against the Shah, his dependency on the West, his authoritarianism and forced modernization, had become articulated in the slogan 'Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic' (Khomeini himself insisted on the latter, replacing the 'Islamic Government' first chanted by Islamic forces).

The bone of contention has since resided in the role of Islam in this Republic, but the story is more complicated. Despite appearing to pertain only to the internal functioning of an exclusivist state, the presidential elections of 1997 and 2009 became sites for radical politics involving a coalition of all the forces historically at work in Iranian society. How can we explain this, in the light of the brutal purging of both the state and the social sphere of all non-Khomeinist and non-conformist factions since 1981? How did the difference between the Khomeinist factions that won the battle for hegemony of the 1979 revolution – seemingly minimal, when viewed from outside the situation – allow a maximal polarization of the society in the 1997 and 2009 elections?

First, on the occasion of both these elections, the ruling bloc had ambitions to totalize its power by monopolizing all elected and non-elected institutions; and Khamenei explicitly lent his support to hardliners. This totalization of power was less explicit in the 1997 election, but since 2004 Khamenei has openly moved towards an absolutist state, with the aid of theological interpretations of the absolute Guardianship of the Jurist (*velayat-e motlaqe faqih*) by figures such as Mesbah Yazdi, who is also Ahmadinejad's mentor, and an increasing empowerment of the Revolutionary Guards. Barring reformists from the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections, and the last-minute favouring of a relatively unknown populist fundamentalist figure (Ahmadinejad) over Larijani, the current speaker of the house and the more traditionalist conservative candidate in the 2005 presidential election, were widely understood as indicators of such a move. Second, both Mohammad Khatami and Mir-Hossein Moussavi, historically figures of the establishment, had become distanced from power. The former had resigned as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1992 in protest at the state's increasing control of the cultural sector and had taken refuge as head of the national library. The latter, after a period of relatively successful economic management as

wartime prime minister during the 1980s, became head of the Art Council. However, far from being a 'subtraction' from the state altogether (in the style fantasized by certain French theorists), this situation produced an ambiguous space for a dialectical relationship between politics and the state, in which popular politics has been able to occupy gaps within the state without fully reducing itself to it.



The result of the 1997 election was the election of a president who, albeit hesitantly and unsuccessfully, acted as leader of the opposition – similar in many ways to the role of Mosaddeq in the nationalization of oil. In a sense, more than an ambition to occupy the state fully, or force it to deliver certain policies, both occasions first and foremost represented attempts to set limits on the state. If after the social mobilizations leading to the high turnout in the 1997 elections (which took the hardliners and reformists alike by surprise) aspirations were raised that the state can be democratized step by step, through the occupation of electable posts, the experience of eight years of reform (1997–2005) proved that this was not possible. The hardliners successfully exhausted the political energies of 1997 through constant interventions by non-elected bodies: the Council of Guardians' vetting the reformist parliament's bills, for example, and the establishment of more parallel centres of power and coercion. This was exacerbated by the reformists' underinvestment in popular politics. They soon lost their bases in the student movement by failing adequately to support it against the hardliners' assault after the suppression of the Tehran University uprising in June 1999. Moreover, the theoretical poverty of leading figures such as Soroosh, who imported a Popperian liberalism for the reconciling of Islam and democracy, ended up throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and the link between Islam and politics became obscured.

Ironically, after 2000, when parliament, government and city councils were all still in the hands of reformists, the movement was already politically dead. Subsequently, the events of 11 September 2001 and the rise of the security paradigm at the level of global hegemony, targeting Iran for its nuclear ambitions, gave the hardliners justification for suppressing the reform movement further. Newspapers, one of the rare institutions of a non-state-organized public sphere, were closed down one after the other, and the few that remained internalized the constraints and voluntarily kept their print runs to a minimum so as not to offend governmental sensitivities. Some reformists were incarcerated, some migrated, and some shifted their focus to institutions of civil society, such as NGOs, with their near exclusive emphasis on the politics of human rights, which were easily suppressed. When in the 2005 presidential election Ahmadinejad went to the second round to face Rafsanjani, neither the efforts of opposition forces inside and outside the state to make analogies with the Chirac–Le Pen contest in the 2002 French election, nor the rare intervention of previously apolitical cultural figures such as the film-maker Abbas Kiarostami, succeeded in mobilizing people to vote, since it was Rafsanjani who looked more like an official face of the state.

In the recent election, Moussavi first appeared as an unattractive figure, out of touch with the post-ideological reformist discourse of civil society, and too nostalgic for 1979, which was for many the



original source of all problems. Despite the presence of a strong social welfare policy in Moussavi's campaign, what gradually transformed him into a figure of popular leadership for a wide coalition of social groups and political factions was his difference from the state, emphasized via a constant recollection of the revolution in its initial stages and the role of the self-organization of the people. Despite Ahmadinejad's attempt to reoccupy the role of opposition (successfully achieved in the 2005 election) by identifying Moussavi with Rafsanjani, his performances in the televised debates, and over-confidence in his populist oratory techniques, clarified his position at the heart of the power structure. A week before the election, the streets were already being reclaimed as the place for the actualization of popular politics. Mindful of the recent experience of the reform movement, people went to the polling stations knowing that an elected opposition government would not yield more than a small share of power in the gigantic state structure, inflated with the revenues of record oil prices over the last four years. Nonetheless, such a coalition of forces constitutes the minimal condition of possibility of a popular radical politics (the mass politicization qua political participation and representation needed to face an all-powerful state) in modern Iran. Historically, this possibility has been actualized when it has found a mode of expression in the Shiite religion.

Islam: state, church, theology

In his writing on the 1979 revolution, Michel Foucault proposed a similar formulation, surprisingly Hegelian for his taste. Observing correctly that 'the Shiite clergy is not a revolutionary force' and the Shiite religion is not the hegemonic ideology of the revolution, Foucault wrote,

it is much more than a simple vocabulary through which aspirations, unable to find other words, must pass... [It is] the form that the political struggle takes as soon as it mobilizes the common people... it transforms thousands of forms [of discontent, hatred, misery] into a force because it is a form of expression, a mode of social relation... a way of being together.¹

If there was any doubt about this at the time, the last thirty years' rise of political Islam in global politics, and even within the borders of Western societies, mixed with all sort of reactionary content, and the very fate of the Islamic revolution, should have ended such a debate. But, again, matters are more complicated.

To start with, as understood from the Quran, Islam is a combination of, on the one hand, theological, eschatological and social elements with a universalist tendency that addresses social justice in general terms (attributed to the first phase of the Prophet's life) and, on the other, particularistic legal and juridical decrees, picked up from Judaism and adapted to the cultural and political matrix of Muhammad's society in the process of state-building (after migration to Medina). Regardless of the historical interpretations, popular in the West, of the rise of Shiism in tribal factional infighting in the early years of a nascent empire, as seen by Shiites the matter is related to social justice and the divine legitimacy required for ruling the state. The failure to repossess the state after the turbulent five years of Imam Ali's caliphate, associated with egalitarian and democratic tendencies, prepared the ground for the introduction of messianism, perhaps more via contact with the Persian Zoroastrians than with Christians: the Twelfth Imam returns from occultation to establish the utopian just and egalitarian state. But while the establishment of the state is theologically postponed, the critique of power, whenever possible, is a theological obligation (*Nahy an al-Munkar*). The combination of these two factors produces a space of politics in dialectical relation to the state without exhaustion by it.² It was this historical temporalization of the present as a constant struggle of oppressed against oppressors that came to the fore in 1979.

If Iranians' initial attraction to Shiite Imams was to ally themselves with an opposition internal to their Arab invaders, more than eight centuries later the Safavid Turks picked up this tendency and turned Shiism into the official religion of Iran, to justify building an independent nation-state, in opposition to the hegemonic Ottoman Empire. They aided the consolidation and strengthening of a class of clerics who saw the rule of the state as justified: though undivine, this state could at least protect the lives of Shiite believers after almost a millennium of oppression as minorities. It was during the Qajar dynasty in the nineteenth century, with its weak kings who lost half of the land to Russia and were under colonial (and theologically 'infidel') influence, that clerics expanded their theoretical claims to the organization of the public sphere. However, this was not a claim for rule over the state, although it did implicitly allow for some supervisory function in relation to the state. The role of clerics in the anti-colonial boycott of British tobacco in 1891 and in leading the constitutional revolution should be seen as partially prepared by this shift. Apart from a singular republican attempt by Grand Ayatollah Nayini, in the midst of military assault on the constitutional revolution, to transfer the source of legitimacy of the organization of the public sphere and political sovereignty to the people (rather than the king), the aforementioned theoretical framework remained intact until Khomeini's experimental short treatises on *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Guardianship of the Jurist. Written in exile in the 1960s, these for the first time reserved the right of the management of state for the just clergy.

However, throughout the uprisings of 1978–79 leading to the Revolution, Khomeini never mentioned this concept, instead describing the form of the future state as a general republic that would observe Islamic rules due to the demands of the Muslim majority in the country. Khomeini left Tehran twenty days after the victory of the revolution for the holy city of Qom, merely to advise the revolutionaries as their spiritual mentor. It was not until December 1979, ten months after the victory of revolution, that *Velayat-e Faqih* was mentioned for the first time, and Khomeini was soon back in Tehran, for medical reasons. This move, central to the official interpretations of 1979, is often seen as a dissimulating act, a theologically devised survival technique for the historically minority Shiites. According to these essentialist readings, Khomeini had already revealed his real intention to build an all-Islamic state to be ruled by clerics and it was only the naivety of non-religious forces that allowed them to be blinded by his ostensive republicanism. But the matter is not that certain and the revolutionary process which resubjectivated a nation could have affected Khomeini too. Whether Khomeini had a Robespierrean period or was a Torquemada throughout³ does not affect the above analysis of the space of Iranian politics. The Islam understood by the participants of the Revolution was an indeterminate cultural form of expression, constituted through the potentialities of Shiite messianism and egalitarianism, whether in full abstraction from and opposition to the history of the semi-church in influential liberation theologians such as Ali Shariati, or by occupying gaps in the contradictory history of the semi-church which had produced progressive and reactionary clerics alike.

Since Khomeini and Khomeinist factions themselves exhausted these potentialities, first in the post-revolutionary battle of hegemony and then in the process of state-building – turning Islam into Islamism, martyrdom for justice into a driving motor for the state's legitimacy, and 'the people' qua revolutionary subject into homogenous orchestrated agents of the state – the quarrel over the potentialities of Shiism, the possibility of the disentanglement of its messianic and juridical aspects, and the duality or continuity of Khomeini's intentions cannot be settled solely via theoretical means. Ironically, recent events, still part of an open process, help clarify these ambiguities and partially corroborate Foucault's writings. While authoritarian forces have hidden behind theocratic slogans, identifying political dissidence with blasphemy, and the critique of power with infidelity or religious hypocrisy, political divisions are not focused on the

issue of religion versus secularism, but on discourses of power and citizenship. The Green Movement incorporates some Islamic slogans and constantly refers to 1979 – encouraged by Moussavi during the campaign, but more spontaneously picked up during the demonstrations. What differentiates the seeming repetition of the same slogans is thirty years of historical mediation that has allowed people to reclaim their religion from its theocratization and monopolization in the hands of the state, as an open matrix of Iranian culture with political significance.

The role of religion in Iranian politics should be understood in the context of the conjunction of Iranian history with the historicized inner structure of Shiism; it should not be overgeneralized by identifying it with political Islam *tout court*. Moreover, the crippling entanglement of religion and state has accelerated the inner history of Shiite theology, in both its progressive political and juridical aspects, the former focusing on how to reclaim some space away from the theocratic state and the latter resolving the contradictions of managing a modern state machinery in a globalized world. In contradiction to Foucault's depiction of the anti-modernizing tendency of the Islamic revolution, and notwithstanding its uncomfortable relation to modernity, in the last thirty years the theocracy has acted as a successful catalyst for indigenous modernization. Apart from yearning for the latest instrumentalities of the modern world, whether cloning or nanotechnology, the justification for whose compatibility with sharia is quickly produced in Qom, even the Islamization of the public sphere with its reactionary gender segregation policies paradoxically facilitated the rapid participation in the public sphere of women from traditionalist backgrounds, who soon asked for more civic rights.

State, capital, politics

Iran's first parliament was ended by Russian allies of the king bombarding its building in 1907. Though the constitution was restored after two years of military battles between revolutionary forces and monarchists (backed by some reactionary clerics), in the chaotic years leading up to and during the First World War and the partial occupation of the country by British and Russian forces, its initial ambitions were not realized. The first practical step in the project of modern bourgeois nation-state building was delivered by Reza Shah Pahlavi who established a new dynasty in 1925 and, with the support of Britain, secured the rule of central government, a forced cultural modernization and the industrial and bureaucratic infrastructure needed for the process of primitive accumulation. Nonetheless, his authoritarianism did not allow any class representation and the nascent bourgeoisie, Qajar reminiscent of aristocracy, and feudal lords all became weary of his frequent usurpation of their land and capital, and their transfer not to the state but at times to his own person. A faster development of capital took place after the Shah (Pahlavi the second) returned to power in the 1953 coup, staged with the aid of the CIA and MI6. The land reforms in 1962, advised by the Kennedy government, combined with increasing oil revenues accelerated this accumulation, along with the usual Third World corruption, and the Iranian class formation went through a more or less classical development. This allowed the Shah to transform Iran from a semi-capitalist Western-dependent state to an independent capitalist society with a strong, non-democratic state with a major stake in the economy.

According to Ahmad Ashraf, between 1956 and 1976 'the average share of the public sector in capital formation increased from 36 percent to 54 percent'.⁴ As a result the Shah became the authoritarian ruler of a massive capitalist machinery with an enlarged bureaucratic organization. He did not allow any parliamentary or even interest-based representation to the class of grand bourgeoisie (even at the level of a chamber of commerce), despite friendly personal relations with them, let alone political representation for the working class or political opposition. In a populist move, not dissimilar to Ahmadinejad's, in the mid-1970s the Shah moved to repress those few capitalists who

had managed to influence the parliamentary election. The only instance of genuine class-based representation during the post-1953 coup years perhaps was that of the oil-industry workers, who managed to establish a strong union and to get the state to listen to them in September 1978, after orchestrating an effective strike. But the workers refrained from a narrow class-based representation of interests and bestowed their political gains on the rest of the opposition movement. Their list of demands was: '1. End martial Law. 2. Full solidarity and co-operation with striking teachers 3. Unconditional release of all political prisoners. 4. Iranianization of the oil industry. 5. All communications to be in the Persian language. 6. All foreign workers to leave the country.'

The development of capital becomes more complicated after the 1979 revolution and requires some decoding. First, the factories and properties of the grand bourgeoisie, who had liquidated what they could and fled long before the Shah left the country, were either nationalized or transferred to a range of institutions called *Bonyad* (foundation). These bonyads (for example, the Foundation for the Downtrodden and the Imam Committee of Aid) came into existence in the urgency of the Revolution under the auspices of social welfare, but they later became semi- or para-state capitalist institutions. They grew very rapidly after the end of the war with Iraq and became a significant independent sector alongside the public and private sectors. They enjoy high manoeuvrability, using the privileges available to both private and public sectors whenever it suits them, and have special privileges such as immunity from taxation and secrecy of operation. This latter is usually justified as a matter of national security since they are under the control of the leader and part of their revenues allegedly finances Iran's foreign allies, such as Hamas and Hizbollah, but they may also be used to finance the paramilitary agents of domestic repression. Second, capital accumulation has been a tortuous process determined by infighting between the different factions of the Islamic Republic, which take refuge in the ideological rhetoric of revolution when it is to their economic advantage. However, instead of paying too much attention to the alleged economic policies of each faction, it is more useful to consider their political histories, which give classical terms odd meanings, such as when 'the Left' becomes the advocate of the free market, while 'the Right' turns to the rhetoric of economic justice.

After the purge of all non-religious factions in June 1981, the political space of the Iranian state was monopolized by two Khomeinist factions, which, while diametrically opposed to each other in some aspects, did not have antagonistic social bases. The first, known as the Left, were the students involved in hostage-taking at the American embassy in November 1979. Many of them were previously students of Shariati and had a strong leaning towards a social welfare system or state interventionism. In foreign policy they were more belligerent, believing in exporting the revolution (Mohtashemi, Moussavi's representative in the supervision of the recent election, for example, is one of the founding figures of Lebanon's Hizbollah), and culturally less traditionalist. The other faction, with its traditionalist cultural and juridical readings, known as the Right, the conservatives or today's 'hardliners', were rooted in the traditional mercantilist bourgeoisie (bazaar), had almost single-handedly financed the Revolution, and had tight historical relations with Shiite clerics. Notwithstanding the rule of the conservatives over domestic and international trade, the first decade, organized by Moussavi, is associated with the contradictory features of a strong statist economy, relatively successful social welfare programmes, and what has recently been called 'de-proletarianization' and 'structural involution'.⁵

Later, between 1989 and 1997, Rafsanjani moved towards a neoliberal economy, theologically justified in a Friday prayer sermon in which the Prophet was depicted as the advocate of legitimately accumulated (*halal*) wealth. However, the instrumental ideological slogan of anti-imperialism, which after expunging the Khomeinist Left factions from official positions from 1989 onwards was repossessed by the traditionalist conservatives, constantly prevented him from normalizing the relationship with the

West and fully joining the global market. Nonetheless, by 1996 the class formation of Iranian society and the ratio of state to private capital was almost the same as in the years before the Revolution. The reform government of 1997–2005 continued the privatization, but attempted to introduce regulations, reduce nepotism, and introduce some controls over parastate institutions (which were unsuccessful). While the reform government had the most successful economic results, it did not manage (or find it a necessity) to connect its political programmes to economic development. When in 2004, a year before Ahmadinejad's first presidency, two Revolutionary Guards' fighter jets took off to threaten President Khatami during the opening ceremony of Tehran's new airport, expressing their discontent with Turkish contractors taking charge of the airport's catering, a new economic force symbolically announced its existence. During Ahmadinejad's presidency (and a government that has, in four years, had as much oil revenue – \$320 billion – as the rest of the sixteen years of postwar governments put together), privatizations have accelerated, but the major buyer of state companies has been the Revolutionary Guards, an organization which no longer hides its identity behind agents. The introduction of 'capitalism with theological values' has been legitimized by the pseudo-leftist, pseudo-anti-imperialist figure of Ahmadinejad. But since the election, the mask has been removed. The overall dependency of the state – which still, directly or indirectly, owns two-thirds of the economy – on oil revenues permits it ever more mediating power with regard to capital accumulation and class relations. The seemingly liberal efforts to limit so-called statist rule over the economy, by emphasizing the rule of law and political freedoms, reflected in the priority of popular politics over class-based struggle, actually opens a space for deterring that unbridled capitalism that tends to totalize every social and economic sphere.

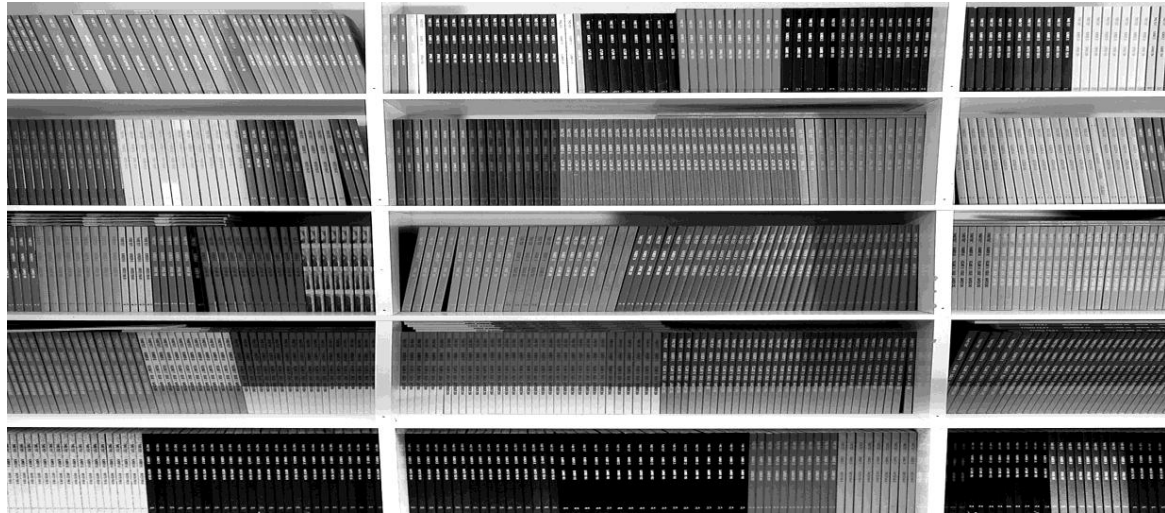
In addition, despite the analogies made between eastern European 'velvet' revolutions and the Green Movement, Iran is already well immersed in global capital. While, at the global political level, especially since 2000, the new hardline champions of anti-Americanism have managed to play a much-needed role as global capital's pseudo-Other by maintaining a mini cold war, in which the logic of war is maintained without being realized. Disarming the hardliners in Iran, with their urge to keep the war an open option, can partially disarm the conservatives in the USA, Israel and Europe. It could also present an internal solution to the crisis of democracy for an Islamic but not Islamicized Middle East. This more universal aspect of the Green Movement has been largely obscured from the point of view of the Western Left. In the temporally expanded politicization of the last few months, the historical experience of the last thirty years, the recent experience of a temporary autonomy of people from the state, and the state's violent coercion, have been mediated and are seeking further articulation. A political space that is neither theocracy nor Western secularism, neither anti-American nor pro-West, has become possible. Whether and when such a possibility can be actualized is yet to be determined.

Notes

1. Quoted in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005, p. 202.
2. This is particular to Twelver Shiites and not to other variations, such as Ismailis, who successfully established the Fatemid dynasty.
3. According to Maxime Rodinson's critique of Foucault, 'Khomeini does not have the necessary capacities, even at an illusory level, to be a Robespierre or Lenin ... Let us hope for the Iranian people that he does not reveal himself to be a Dundaloup tending toward a Torquemado.' In Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 245.
4. Ahmad Ashraf, 'From the White Revolution to the Islamic Revolution', in Sohrab Behdad and Saeed Rahnam, eds, *Iran after the Revolution: Crisis of an Islamic State*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1996, p. 31.
5. Sohrab Behdad and Farhad Nomani, *Class and Labour in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 2006, p. 4.

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