

Michael Hughes

Louise Marlow

REL 263: Islam in the Modern World

8 May 2008

Khomeini's Ideological Revolution

Innovation, Activism, and Pragmatism in the Shia Clergy and the Islamic Republic

1 Introduction: *Who was Khomeini?*

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the figurehead of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the first Supreme Leader of Iran, remains strongly associated with Islamic fundamentalism, especially in the stereotypical American mind. Pointing to his support of the execution of apostates as well as his government's call for women to veil, many see Khomeini as a rigid religious hardliner. The contemporary American press of his time largely treated him as such. TIME Magazine called him "wholly consistent—and totally unbending" immediately after his revolution (TIME 1980), while the New York Times declared his ideology a "revolutionary fundamentalism" at his death in 1989 (Abrahamian 1). However, a close comparison of his thoughts and actions against historical Shia doctrine reveals that Khomeini's ideology represented a significant break with traditional theology and politics. Driven more than anything by a strong anti-imperialist agenda, Khomeini borrowed some ideas external to Shiism and invented new ones to radically reconceive the role of the clergy, the ideal form of Islamic government, and the proper guiding principles for day-to-day rule of law. Although he leveraged Shia symbols as tools to incite revolution and maintain order during his reign as Supreme Leader and viewed religious clergy as ideal rulers, Khomeini while in power eschewed traditional Shia piety and on numerous occasions even implemented policies found in violation of *sharia* ordinances. After a decade as Supreme Leader, Khomeini's concern for security over Islamic justice within Iran caused him to reject the authority of religious clergy and instead advocate a pragmatic system of Islamic government ruled by clergy trained in political and social affairs. Khomeini's ideology, decisions,

and actions ultimately favor activism over quietism, utilitarianism over dogmatism, and innovation over traditionalism. He can hardly be called a strict Islamic fundamentalist.

2 The Historical Politics of Iranian Shiism: *Quietism and Tolerance of Monarchy*

Since the occultation of the Twelfth Imam around 939 CE, the Shia clergy have been somewhat divided over the legitimacy and sovereignty of this-worldly government. Throughout history, Shia scholars agreed that no earthly authority can be truly legitimate so long as the rightful ruler, the Twelfth Imam, remains hidden. However, diverse opinions existed over the question of day-to-day obedience to secular laws and institutions. In Iran in particular, the arrival of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century began a long period in which monarchy was largely endorsed by the Shia clergy, as the earliest Safavid monarchs claimed direct descent from the 12 Holy Imams. While this claim was later disputed, the clergy consented to allow the shah to assume the Prophet's mantle of temporary political authority so long as his regime protected Shia identity and the Shia realm (Nasr 121). This clerical endorsement of monarchy as an acceptable political institution continued in Iran until Khomeini's revolution.

Acting alongside the monarchy, the Shia clerical establishment throughout its first millennia of existence was overwhelmingly apolitical. No mainstream Shia writer argued that monarchy as an institution was illegitimate or, more importantly, that the clergy should exercise political authority. Rather, clerics held power only as jurists of Islamic law and lacked legislative or executive functions. Historically speaking, the idea of the guardianship of the jurist, which Khomeini would later transform, meant no more than "the legal guardianship of the senior clerics over those deemed incapable of looking after their own interests — minors, widows, and the insane." (Abrahamian 19). In relegating clerics as custodians of religious practice and the shah as a temporal secular authority, Iranian civilization operated under a "theory of two powers" (Arjomand 33). It was not until the late nineteenth century that this separation between Shia religious and political authority would begin to change.

The conventionally recognized watershed moment in Shia clerical activism came in 1892. At this time, the current monarch, Nasir al-Din Shah, gave exclusive control of Iranian tobacco trade to a British company. Many citizens were appalled at this gratuitous slight of native Iranians in favor of a foreign colonialist power. In response, the Ayatollah Mirza Hasan Shirazi issued a fatwa from his home in Samarra which banned tobacco use. Shia believers across Iran, including the Muslim servants who prepared the shah's pipe, boycotted the tobacco industry. Shirazi carefully stressed that he would withdraw from politics once the monopoly was broken (Abrahamian 20). However, his disclaimer seems to have been largely lost in the fray. With this pivotal clerical action, which had very little to do with Shia religious tradition, the Shia ulama became "Iran's first line of defense and loudest spokesmen against colonialism" (Nasr 122).

3 Khomeini's Early Years: *Activism against Imperialism*

Shirazi's tobacco *fatwa* set the tone for the increasing political activism of the Shia *ulama* in response to the growing corruption and Western influence of the Iranian monarchy in the 20th century. This *fatwa* in particular inspired the young Ruhollah Khomeini, whose father had been a student of Shirazi's. Armed with activist aspirations against the increasingly corrupt and anti-cleric actions of the shah, Khomeini began studying at the famous Faizieh Seminary in Qum in 1920 and soon began educating others about his political ideas. He offered an "unconventional" curriculum which blended mysticism, philosophy, ethics, and Islamic law unlike any other Shia education available (Brumberg 52). His classes on ethics, which largely focused on political science from an Islamic viewpoint, became particularly popular with students (TIME 1979). Often, he would lead discussions that would last many hours after school had ended for the day. Ayatollah Muhammad Javad Bahonar, a former student and colleague, recalls that Khomeini demanded activism and "was never pleased unless you could stand up to him" (TIME 1979). According to Bahonar, Khomeini emphasized two points: "the necessity for Islam and Iran to be independent of both Eastern and Western colonialism" and "the need to get the clergy put of the mold of an academic

straitjacket" (TIME 1979). Throughout his tenure as an instructor and scholar at Qum, Khomeini educated some 1200 religious leaders with his rapidly anti-colonialist message of clerical activism (TIME 1979). These political *ulama* would later form the vanguard of his Islamic Revolution.

4 The Injection of Sunni Realism: *Khomeini as a Populist Utilitarian*

Throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, Khomeini's ideal of activist clergy, which had not yet been crystallized as a political framework, began to become heavily tempered by the utilitarian populist movements sweeping the Sunni Islamic world. Khomeini reportedly read pamphlets authored by Hasan al-Banna and met with members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Najaf in 1937 (Brumberg 61). Additionally, the Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hoseyn Borujerdi, elected as Iran's leading cleric in 1946, dispatched emissaries across the Sunni Arab world and encouraged supporters such as Khomeini to bridge the Sunni-Shia divide. Through these channels, Khomeini and other Shia clerics began to gain the pragmatic logic of "Sunni realism" (Brumberg 60). This approach to governance holds that the supreme goal of politics is not justice but security. The Brotherhood's Muhammad Ghazzali argued that Islamic government should be primarily based on *maslahat*, meaning the "expedient interests" of public welfare (Brumberg 61). Implicitly, this claim prioritizes these popular interests over the *shariah*, especially when the safety of the community is threatened. This utilitarian, populist viewpoint would come to dominate Khomeini's ideology, even more so than his desire for clerical activism.

After his contact with the Brotherhood's populist pragmatism, Khomeini began adopting the concept of interest-based governance to his own purposes, mentioning it in his 1943 political tract *Kashf al-Asrar* ("The Revealing of Secrets") as well as in later work despite its sharp departure from Shia legal and political tradition. In his opus *Islamic Government*, Khomeini declares "preserving Islam" more important even than fasting, prayer, and other traditional pillars which define a practicing Muslim (Brumberg 84). He praises Shirazi's anti-tobacco fatwa in 1892 as a prime example of "a governmental ruling, based on the

interests of Islam" (Brumberg 84). While orthodox Shia theologians worried that *maslahat* could be a dangerous slippery slope used to justify any government action seen as temporarily advantageous, Khomeini continued to advocate confronting the West and the shah using "whatever political institutions and ideas *most effectively served this end*" (Brumberg 77).

5 Velayat-e Faqih: Khomeini's Ideal Government of Pragmatic, Activist Clerics

Throughout Khomeini's time teaching at Madrassah Faizieh, he had not yet openly criticized the institution of monarchy, only its corruption by imperialistic and anti-Islamic influences. His writings in *Kashf* reminded readers that Imam Ali had tolerated "even the worst of the early caliphs" and that his current argument was against one specific shah and not the "whole foundation of monarchy" (Abrahamian 20). Even in 1963, when he emerged as the most prominent anti-regime critic and was later exiled from Iran, he did not call explicitly for revolution. Through middle of the 1960s, Khomeini remained tolerant of the "theory of two powers" as a viable form of Shia government. It was not until 1970, when Khomeini gave his famous lecture series on *velayat-e faqih*, that he "declared in no uncertain terms that Islam was inherently incompatible with all forms of monarchy" (Abrahamian 24). What prompted this radical switch remains largely unclear, as Khomeini was "conspicuously silent" during these crucial years in exile and "was not in the habit of footnoting his works ... especially if the sources were foreign or secular" (Abrahamian 22). What is clear is that Khomeini's new concept of *velayat-e faqih* – the guardianship of the jurist – combined his ideals of an activist clergy and pragmatic governance to fundamentally transform Shia politics.

In *Islamic Government*, the text directly built from his lectures on *velayat-e faqih*, Khomeini develops the theological and practical basis for rule by the Shia *ulama*. He first builds the pragmatic case for an Islamic government in the absence of the Imam, claiming that it would be "illogical" for God not to want his laws and the Prophet's teachings imparted while the Imam remained hidden (Brumberg 85). An Islamic state must exist to preserve the religion and prevent the *ummah*, the worldwide community of

believers, from descending into “anarchy and disorder” (Brumberg 83). The notion of preserving security as well as justice in this argument certainly echoes Khomeini’s exposure to “Sunni realism” and *maslahat*.

After laying the foundation for an Islamic state, Khomeini then selects the clergy as ideal rulers, calling the Quran’s “authorization” passages as well as numerous *hadith* to argue that only the religious clergy can undertake leadership of the Islamic community during the Imam’s absence (Brumberg 85). He makes it clear that the *faqih* in no way shares the status of infallibility that the Prophet and the Imams enjoyed as God’s Deputies. However, he claims that lacking this quality does not preclude the clergy from ruling, as earthly governance is heavily based on rational knowledge of Islamic law rather than spiritual perfection. Khomeini thus expects clerical temporal authority to be treated with the same level of political respect which the Prophet and the Imams would enjoy (Brumberg 85). In this manner, Khomeini completely transformed the concept of *velayat-e faqih* from a quietist custodial role into a full-fledged, divinely sanctioned political framework. In its final form, activist clerics could exercise the total governing power of the Prophet and the Imams to reach the interests of popular Muslim welfare. Although in his original concept Khomeini heavily emphasized the role of the religious clergy, his later actions during the revolution and as leader of Iran would strongly temper this stress on dogmatic Islamic rule with his desire for pragmatic laws in the interest of popular welfare.

6 The Islamic Revolution: *Shia Imagery as a Tool for Inciting Rebellion*

Interestingly, Khomeini’s radical new concept of Shia governance had very little to do with inciting revolution in practice. The theological implications of Khomeini’s *velayat-e faqih* represented drastic departures from traditional Shia doctrine, including the insertion of clergy into the political fray and the subordination of all other clergy under one leading *marja*. Khomeini’s concept had many detractors and critics among the *ulama*, including the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Ayatollah Shariatmadari, both of whom could trump Khomeini in terms of religious credentials. It is thus no surprise, then, that as he and his followers

began to sow the seeds of revolution, Khomeini's public speeches "rarely mentioned doctrinal issues, especially his highly controversial concept of *velayat-e faqih*" (Abrahamian 30).

Instead, Khomeini and his supporters harnessed the charismatic emotional power of Shia lore and imagery to frame their rebellion against the shah as part of the historical Shia struggle against tyranny as well as the apocalyptic expectation of the Twelfth Imam. The first significant use of this tactic came during the Ashura observances of 1963, a time when many student protesters were killed in the streets by the shah's forces (Brumberg 74). Khomeini seized the opportunity to give one of his most fiery anti-regime speeches to date. Speaking to a massive crowd of clerical students and pious lower-middle class Shia, Khomeini called the shah a modern-day "Yazid", after the tyrannical Sunni caliph who brutally massacred the Imam Huseyn on the first Ashura a millennia before. The shah summarily arrested Khomeini, sparking more violent protests which killed several students and "heightened the apocalyptic expectations" of Khomeini's supporters (Brumberg 74). That day in 1963 became a "Second Ashura" in the minds of Khomeini's following among the clerics as well as the lower-middle classes (Brumberg 74). Later, while exiled in Paris in 1978, Khomeini used his vast network of former students among the clergy to distribute cassettes with a prerecorded speech calling on Iranians to rise up against the "Yazid" in power and thus hasten the return of the Twelfth Imam (Brumberg 92). Throughout this sixteen-year struggle, Khomeini and his followers "adroitly manipulated popular beliefs to cultivate loyalty to and veneration for Khomeini and to compel the population to sacrifice for the revolution" (Nasr 136). By the time full-blown revolution came in 1979 and Khomeini returned to Iran to lead the formation of a new government, his repeated message calling the revolt a "new Karbala" which would hasten the return of the Twelfth Imam had forged a strong charismatic bond between himself and the Iranian masses, especially in the lower classes. The actual government Khomeini had in mind, however, was hardly known to many of his followers in the streets.

7 The Islamic Republic in Practice: *Pragmatism Dominates Piety and the Sharia*

After the revolution was complete, a nation-wide referendum confirmed that over 98% of the Iranian people supported the Islamic revolution. Seizing this popular mandate, Khomeini and his followers transformed the far more secular original draft of the constitution into one which enshrined the concept of *velayat-e faqih* into the core principles of the new government. When all was said and done, Khomeini emerged as the nation's Supreme Leader, capable of exercising supervisory powers over executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Additionally, the constitution institutionalized a Guardian Council of supporting clergy. Appointed by Khomeini, the *ulama* on the Council were tasked with reviewing all legislation passed by the new Iranian parliament to ensure compliance with the *sharia*. Despite Khomeini's claims that his new government would be primarily Islamic and based on *sharia* law, however, the undercurrents of pragmatism and *maslahat* which heavily influenced the concept of *velayat-e faqih* would soon come to dominate the government's attitudes towards Shiism and politics.

Significantly, despite its ostensible claim as the ideal Shia government, Khomeini's Islamic Republic actually discouraged popular Shia piety and Shia traditions. After spending the entire revolution invoking the symbolism of Karbala, Khomeini did not preside over a single grand observance of Ashura during his reign. Even the shah, for all his accusers' claims of his corrupt, anti-Islamic nature, had held royal Ashura processions during his rule. As Vali Nasr aptly points out, "Khomeini not only eschewed Ashoura observances but also never bothered to visit the vastly popular shrine of the Eighth Imam in Mashad" (Nasr 135). Khomeini and his followers seem to have harnessed Shia lore and imagery exclusively as instruments to secure unity and order.

Only when order was threatened, such as during the Iran-Iraq war, did the Islamic Republic dispatch Shia symbolism and reach out to Shia piety to achieve its goals. Faced with the daunting task of motivating their inexperienced peasant army against the technologically superior forces of Saddam Hussein, Khomeini's government hired professional actors to become apparitions of the Twelfth Imam,

dashing through the Iranian army camps at night on white horses and cloaked in white shrouds (Nasr 132). Sent to “bless” the troops and boost morale, these actors succeeded in helping Iranian troops see the conflict as a holy war and become willing to sacrifice their lives for a moral as well as a political cause. This forms perhaps the most extreme example of how far Khomeini became willing to unabashedly employ Shia apocalyptic symbolism to maintain the security and unity of the Iranian people.

7 Khomeini’s Last Days: *Reformulating a Pragmatic Guardianship without Religion*

Alongside the Republic’s exploitation of Shia practice and symbolism as tools to maintain unity and order, the decade long tenure of Khomeini’s regime also saw traditional Shia jurisprudence and *sharia* law shoved aside for the pragmatic needs of the state. Since the beginning of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini had advocated restricting the ownership of agricultural lands as part of his populist agenda. When parliament attempted to codify this restriction into law in 1981, the measure was vetoed by members of the Guardian Council as violating *sharia* protections for property holders. However, Khomeini deemed this measure “indispensable”, so he used his status as Supreme Leader to override the *ulama’s* veto (Schirazi 63). Faced with continued clashes with the *sharia* and the Guardian Council which inhibited his populist agenda, Khomeini in 1984 declared that resolutions passed by two-thirds of parliament no longer required the consent of the Guardian Council (Schirazi 64). Finally, in 1988, Khomeini settled the issue once and for all with a sweeping declaration that the Islamic state had the right to completely disregard Islamic ordinances when passing resolutions and framing laws. Significantly, he claimed the overarching principle which should guide leadership was “the interest (*maslahat*) of maintaining [the ruling] order” (Schirazi 64). This stark pragmatism reiterated Khomeini’s earlier claims that the necessity of maintaining security trumped all other Islamic ordinances, even mandated daily prayer and pilgrimage. To achieve this ruling order, Khomeini established a *Maslahat* Council in 1988 to intercede as final arbiters in disputes between the *Majles* and Guardian Council. The members of this committee were directly appointed by Khomeini

himself and were not required to be religious scholars. Pragmatism now totally dominated Khomeini's conception of how the Islamic state should be executed.

It seems that after a decade of experience as Supreme Leader, Khomeini had backpedaled from his concept of the religious cleric as the ideal earthly ruler. Knowing that many *ulama* disagreed with his *velayat-e faqih*, he likely anticipated the problem of finding a successor among the high-ranking religious clergy who could provide the strong, pragmatic leadership Khomeini thought the state would need. In March 1989, Khomeini in a major speech sharply delineated between clergy well-versed in religious scholarship and those knowledgeable about the "problems of the day" – the economic, social, and political challenges of the contemporary state (Abrahamian 35). During his final months, he radically and publicly transformed his conception of *velayat-e faqih* from the guardianship of a religious cleric to the pragmatic leadership of a politically-active cleric familiar with the affairs of this world. This transformation culminated in the 1989 Constitutional Amendments of 1989, which fundamentally changed the qualifications of the Supreme Leader. The requirement that the ultimate authority of the Islamic Republic be a high-ranking source of religious emulation was struck from the document in favor of the stipulation that he must only be "well-informed about ...socio-political problems" (Shevlin). Formalizing this transition, which resolved the problem of succession for Khomeini, completed a dramatic about-face in his ideology. After decades of denouncing secular politics and insisting that the religious clergy should rule, Khomeini had concluded that the "affairs of this world were separate from the understanding of the sacred law" (Abrahamian 35). This shift solidifies the final ideological legacy of Khomeini as a "political pragmatist, not a religious fundamentalist" (Abrahamian 35).

8 Conclusion: *Activism over Quietism and Pragmatism over Fundamentalism*

A careful trace of Khomeini's influences, thoughts, and actions before, during, and after the Islamic revolution reveals that despite stereotypical Western labels as a "fundamentalist" and even his own claims

of Islamic authority, his ideology represents a remarkably flexible and innovative approach which departs sharply from Shia tradition. He fundamentally transformed the role of Shia clergy from quietism to militant activism to institutional political involvement. He drastically altered Iranian Shia political theory from the cooperative “two powers” of monarchy and clergy to a pragmatic state governed exclusively by his activist clergy. In the interest of gaining and keeping power, Khomeini leveraged the historical and apocalyptic imagery of Shiism as a charismatic tool to motivate and direct his popular following. Outside of this instrumentalist use of Shiism, however, Khomeini’s government in practice discouraged Shia rituals and overrode *sharia* law even against the advice of other learned clergy when these conflicted with the regime’s overarching goals. After many years, Khomeini’s early fascination with religious authorities as the ideal guardians of the Islamic state eventually gave way to the practical concerns for public welfare he borrowed from contemporary Sunni realists. This domineering, centralized utilitarianism seen throughout his reign as Supreme Leader ultimately suggests that Khomein’s ideological legacy, when considered holistically and thoroughly, relates much more closely with “Third World populism” than Islamic fundamentalism (Nasr 134, Abrahamian 17).

Works Cited

- Abrahamian, Ervand. *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California, 1993. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft6c6006wp/>
- Arjomand, Said A. "Islam and Constitutionalism Since the Nineteenth Century: the Significance and Peculiarities of Iran." Constitutional Politics in the Middle East. Portland, OR: Hart, 2008. 33-62.
- Brumberg, Daniel. Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Nasr, Vali. The Shia Revival. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.
- "Portrait of an Ascetic Despot." TIME Magazine 7 Jan. 1980. 8 May 2008
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,923857-1,00.html>
- Schirazi, Asghar. The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic. London; New York: Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Shevlin, Neil. Velayat-E Faqih in the Constitution of Iran: The Implementation of Theocracy. Univ. of Pennsylvania. 1999. 8 May 2008. <http://www.gongfa.com/yilangxianfa.htm>
- "The Unknown Ayatullah Khomeini." TIME Magazine 16 July 1979. 8 May 2008
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,920508-1,00.html>