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BOOKS IN
REVIEW

IRAN'S EXCLUSIONARY REPUBLIC

Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed. By Misagh Parsa. Harvard University Press, 2016. 406 pp.

In the final days of 2017, an astonished world witnessed an explosion of popular anger all over Iran that lasted for more than a week. It was not the first time that the Islamic Republic had faced irate demonstrators. In 2009, millions had marched peacefully in the streets of Tehran and other major cities to protest dictatorship and the rigged June 12 presidential election. Still recalled with horror is the death of one peaceful protester, a young woman named Neda Agha-Soltan, whose shooting by one of the regime's *basiji* militiamen was captured on video as it unfolded in a Tehran street on June 20.

Social media made Neda Agha-Soltan and the demonstrations in which she gave her life famous throughout the world. What the world did not know, however, was that since the early 1990s Iranian cities had been the scene of popular protests that occurred frequently but were hardly ever reported thanks to the Islamic Republic's censors.

With this in mind, one could assume that the late-2017 outbreak was just one more example of popular anger surging only to be met with violent repression (48 protesters killed, 4,792 arrested). A closer look, however, reveals the unprecedented nature of these most recent demonstrations. First, there was their geographic scope. Previous protests had been confined to a few cities. In 2017, the protest movement spread rapidly across 72 cities after starting with demonstrations against the high cost of living in the eastern province of Khorasan—protests that

at first had been discreetly egged on by conservative rivals of President Hassan Rouhani.

The most important thing about the protests was the slogans that the demonstrators chanted. These showed that a turning point had been reached. For the first time, protesters were openly demanding regime change. They dismissed Rouhani and his fellow regime reformists as purveyors of empty promises; denounced clerical rule; and complained about embezzlement, unemployment, and the high cost of living. Some demanded a secular republic or even the return of the monarchy.

How can we explain the recurrent explosions of popular anger in the Islamic Republic over the last three decades? How are we to make sense of the latest outburst, given that barely six months earlier the international media had been reporting the “moderate” Rouhani’s reelection with a resounding 57 percent of the vote based on an impressive 73 percent turnout? Had not Iranians said by this vote that they wanted to mend, not end the regime?

For those struggling to understand these confusing signals, this book by Dartmouth College sociologist Misagh Parsa is remarkably helpful. Most analysts of Iranian politics ignore larger social forces in favor of a narrower focus on infighting between reformists and hard-liners within the regime. Parsa, by contrast, explores the relationship between the Islamic Republic and civil society—a far more important dynamic.

He notes early on the huge irony that lurks at the heart of the Islamic Republic. Its founder, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89), rode to power in 1979 at the head of a large and inclusive coalition. His supporters came from many backgrounds and represented a range of ideological inclinations. Yet Khomeini’s rule unleashed an implacable dynamic of exclusion that was inherent in his theocratic project. Once he took over, exclusionary wave followed exclusionary wave. The non-Islamist elements of his coalition were the first to go. Then the revolution began to eat its own, as Khomeini purged hard-core Islamists who had been among the very architects of the theocratic regime, but who had for various reasons become political liabilities in his eyes.

Nothing about these purges was gentle. They made free use of harsh repression and violence. Between June 1981 and September 1985, the Islamist regime summarily killed about 12,000 dissidents. By 2009, only three out of the original twenty-six members of the 1979 revolutionary council still belonged to the ruling elite. Parsa shows how the shrinking of the polity and the ideological nature of the Islamist project have resulted in the politicization of the cultural, social, and economic spheres, which in turn has alienated society and given rise to popular resistance both active and passive.

Parsa sheds light for the first time on the four-decade process of estrangement that has split the Iranian state from Iranian society. To back up his analysis, he meticulously weaves his in-depth research into the

fabric of his narrative, bringing together facts and information that have rarely before resided between the covers of a single tome.

Consider his treatment of the religious sphere, for instance. Shia Islam, the cornerstone of the revolutionary project, suffers today from massive defections and lack of interest. Despite generous government funding, Parsa points out, more than half the country's mosques had become inactive by 2009. Over the years, state agencies and religious groups that promote Islamic culture have received billions of dollars, yet an official survey in 2000 found that three-quarters of all Iranians (and 86 percent of students) failed to say their obligatory prayers. Despite punishments for alcohol use that include eighty lashes for a first offense and death for a third, Iranians spend US\$12 billion a year on liquor. More than 74 percent of students surveyed admitted to engaging in "impermissible relationships with the opposite sex" (p. 18). Authorities repeatedly condemn Baha'i and Christian conversions, revealing an unmeasured yet significant underground trend of Iranians turning away from Islam. Women's defiance of the mandatory veil daily challenges the state.

The clerical oligarchy's politicization of the economy and its handing of large chunks of it to the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps have turned even routine criticism into a national-security threat. In this atmosphere, not surprisingly, cronyism, embezzlement, corruption, and general inefficiency run rampant.

In 2009, Transparency International (TI) ranked the Islamic Republic as tied for 168th place (out of 180 countries) on TI's influential Corruption Perceptions Index. Only eight other countries were deemed more corruption-riddled. Misdealing, graft, and fraud cost the economy \$34 billion a year, and even university doctorates—albeit mainly in the humanities and social sciences—were for sale. More than half (56 percent) of the official hires made during the administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) were illegal. Regular reports of massive embezzlement by regime cronies enrage and exasperate the masses who must struggle to make ends meet.

Parsa reports that Iran went from being the world's 54th most wealthy country (as measured by GDP per capita) in 1976 to being its 95th wealthiest in 2009, even before international sanctions against the Islamic Republic's nuclear program had begun to bite. And despite oil revenue going up sevenfold between 1979 and 2011, "a larger proportion of Iranians lived in poverty than before the revolution. Poverty and homelessness affected the middle class, including doctors, teachers, and professionals" (p. 139).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, reformists strove to strengthen civil society, reduce repression, enforce the rule of law, and expand democratic freedoms. Yet the conservative wing of the theocracy blocked them, drawing strength from the state's theocratic ideology, with its blunt rejection of democracy or anything resembling genuine popular empowerment.

The ruling oligarchy's manipulation of the voting results in 2009 sig-

naled that reform within the bounds of the system was impossible. When the reformist leaders of that year's Green Wave failed to confront this theocratic impasse, the movement lost impetus and became a ripe target for the campaign of crushing repression that the regime was waging against it. Change was stillborn.

Writing in 2016, Parsa was prophetic in his warning that politicization and polarization in Iran would produce further radicalization. Reformism was going nowhere, a solution no longer adequate to the times. "Successful democratization in Iran," he observed, "would more likely require a disruptive revolutionary route" (p. 319).

If Parsa is correct, Iran today contains no common ground for dialogue and progressive change. The wide scope and radically antitheocratic character of the demonstrators' demands in early 2018 seem to prove him right. But a question remains. Liberal democracy is only one option among many other forms of polity that might be tried. Even if we assume that social conditions friendly to radical change are in place—that Iran really is in a prerevolutionary situation—why should we expect that liberal democracy will be the outcome?

Parsa's optimistic answer is only partly convincing. He argues that, tracing all the way back to the onset of the Constitutional Revolution in 1905, there has been a "persistent" and "protracted" struggle for democracy in Iran. Internal and external forces combined to arrest it, with signal defeats for the cause of self-government coming in the form of two coups, the first in 1921 and the second in 1953. In 1979, Parsa suggests, Khomeini and his intimates deceitfully concealed their true intentions from millions of their followers, promising them democratic rights while planning to install a theocratic dictatorship.

Khomeini set forth his antidemocratic aims in his 1970 book *Islamic Government*, but most ordinary Iranians probably did not know about them. Those who should have acted as the champions of the democratic tendency in Iran—they included such officials of the February to November 1979 interim government as Mehdi Bazargan, Dariush Forouhar, Karim Sanjabi, and Ebrahim Yazdi—had no such excuse. They did know. Yet in the end, they wound up failing the cause of democracy; they did not effectively stand in Khomeini's way. This reviewer interviewed Khomeini about his political project a week before he took an Air France jetliner from his exile in Paris to Tehran on 1 February 1979. He refused to answer questions about this project, but did not repudiate it. His promises of democratic rights were always conditional upon their compatibility with Islam as he construed it. Those who made up the interim government that Khomeini put in place grasped all this, but they miscalculated, believing that they could control Khomeini when instead it was he who succeeded in controlling them or pushing them aside.

Parsa's account of the monarchy's final months and the revolution's early phase omits important facts. The Islamic revolutionary movement,

for instance, was not overthrowing a despotic monarchy, for that monarchy had already vanished. The Shah, weakened by the blood cancer that would kill him in 1980, had left Iran on 16 January 1979. By February, when Khomeini returned, the freedoms of expression, association, and the press had been granted; political prisoners had been released; parties were operating without restriction; and free and fair elections had been promised. For more than a month, the liberal-democratic option was on the table.

If it is clear why Khomeini and his close associates rejected this option, it is much less clear why more democratically minded members of the coalition turned away from it as well. Perhaps liberal-democratic ideology had lost its appeal in the course of the previous two decades. Revolutionary and anti-imperialist ideas were prevalent among students, and an Islamist version of this ideological strain had influenced a whole generation. Hence the appeal of Khomeini's revolutionary call. Thousands of those who would later resist his regime and be executed by it would go to their deaths not as defenders of human rights and liberal democracy, but as believers in the dictatorship of the proletariat. In 1979, hard-core liberal democrats turned out to be a rare breed in Iran.

This point matters. Not all disruptive political movements lead to liberal democracy.

Almost three decades ago, strengthened by their victories over fascism and communism, liberal democracy and human rights had emerged as the only plausible ideological option in the global political marketplace. The defeat of revolutionary ideologies and the implosion of communism shook the ideological certitudes of Khomeini's leftist allies, and they moved toward a more liberal and reformist stance. Meanwhile, leftist and revolutionary forces opposed to the Islamic regime found themselves evolving into advocates of human and civil rights.

The ensuing rise in tensions between reformists and conservatives inside the regime helped to create space for civic activism on the part of those outside the regime. Hence the emergence of Iran's energetic women's and students' movements. Parsa's account of the rise of activism among Iranian students bears witness to this remarkable prodemocracy trend. Yet the world political marketplace keeps changing. Neonationalism, "illiberal democracy," and authoritarian ideologies are gaining ground. If and when Parsa's projected disruptive change comes to pass in Iran, these hostile tendencies will be competing with liberal democracy to seize the opening. The question is which will win—liberal democracy or its rivals. If we understand how and why the liberal-democratic option was rejected in 1979, we may be better able to help it avoid a similar defeat in the future.

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