

Towards fundamentalism: globalization, moral order and the case of Iran

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Abstract

Globalization is a multi-faceted phenomenon that causes the steady erosion of political, cultural and economic boundaries of nations by facilitating an increasingly uniform world system. Culturally, globalization expects to substitute traditional and allegedly parochial cultural practices with so called progressive values which just happen to coincide with western ones.

However, cultural globalization is not a simple matter of replacing one culture with another. The glaring incompatibilities between tradition and modernity have resulted in the stiff rejection of a global order by fiercely traditional societies for whom compromising their identity is not an option, thus making global culture a far-fetched dream.

Iran stands as a classic example of such resistance. Despite its initial endorsement of modern American values during the Pahlavi regime, the country prioritized the preservation of conservative values after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. With the aim of discovering the connection between globalization and religious fundamentalism, the paper explores cultural and religious underpinnings of Iran's transformation that collectively manifested themselves as an anti-globalization movement that regarded globalization as corrupt and extravagant, qualities with which the existing monarchy was identified. The turn to Islam was thus necessitated to preserve pristine Iranian values which were viewed as the essential anti-thesis of globalization.

Using secondary sources including books and web articles, the paper takes a historical approach to Iran's case and concentrates on the growing antipathy of traditional societies towards globalization which makes them cling to their familiar value systems ever more staunchly. In conclusion it argues that Iran's value system cannot be considered backward simply because it is incompatible with that of the West. It does not arrest development in an absolute sense but simply offends the prospect of a global model of development which, after all, is only the ultimate measure of development in the eyes of the West.

Key words: *Globalization, Iran, Religion, Culture*

Introduction

In an era where globalization is invading all political, social and cultural spheres, there also grows a strong opposition to the rather arrogant universal appropriation of certain ‘values’ through globalization. Cultural homogenization implicit in the process of globalization has generated this resistance obviously due to the reluctance of one identity to be absorbed into another, however ‘acceptable’ the dominant identity is believed to be. The conviction that so-called backward societies would invariably adopt these values, thus, seems misinformed. As proven time and again globalization has left many societies with hopeless feelings than hopeful ones.

Iran stands a classic example of such hopelessness. The post-revolutionary Iranian state was in fact the embodiment of opposition for the values advocated by globalization. This paper aims to trace the transition of Iran from being the United States’ principal ally in the Middle East to perhaps the strongest Middle Eastern opponent of the West with a special focus on the religious and cultural factors that underlined the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Towards this end, the paper will progress in five steps. It will first give a brief introduction to the concept of globalization emphasizing its cultural aspect. Next it will present an account of pre-revolutionary Iran that contained the ideal ingredients for a revolution in the form of Western values that resulted in a steady erosion of traditional Islamic cultural values. Thirdly the paper will concentrate on the dynamics of the 1979 Revolution, especially the religious and cultural perspectives of it, with an emphasis on the quest for a pristine Iranian identity grounded in Islamic values. In the fourth section, it will examine the case of religious and cultural values that kindle political developments using the Iranian case as an example. In drawing a conclusion, the paper will highlight the nexus between the cultural homogenization effect of globalization and the inevitable resistance it generates. It will conclude on the point that societies that hail values that do not correspond to those of the West cannot be considered backward merely because those value systems are not compatible with their western counterpart which, after all, is considered ‘developed’ only according to its own standards.

Globalization: Universal Culture or Cultural Imperialism?

‘Globalization’ has become a buzz word in the academic and political discourse in today’s increasingly global society. However the idea of globalization is a very complex and confusing phenomenon largely owing to its multi-faceted

nature. Put simply, it refers to the increasing interconnectedness of people across national borders due to regular interchange of products, ideas and values. As such, it concerns all economic, political, cultural and religious aspects of life.

As Reyes (n.d.) notes in 'Four Main Theories of Development: Modernization, Dependency, World-System and Globalization,' there are three principal points in the theory of Globalization: 1. Cultural factors are the determinant aspect in every society 2. It is not important, under current world conditions, to use the nation-state as the unit of analysis since global communications and international ties are making this category less useful 3. With more standardization in technological advances, more and more social sectors will be able to connect themselves with other groups around the world.

Extending his analysis to the modernization theory he identifies two common elements of the two theories, namely, that both theories consider the direction of development to be that undertaken by the US-led West, and that both theories share the same ethno-centric view point that US and Western models are the only models capable of facilitating development.

It follows, then, that modernization denotes an evolutionary transition from a pre-modern or traditional society where customs play a predominant role to a modern one characterized mainly by urbanization, and industrialization which, according to the Western mind, is not only inevitable but also desirable.

Globalization owes largely to advances in technology that have enabled a speedier exchange of knowledge and information pertaining to all aspects of life. Naturally, this means that the dominant ideologies will enjoy increasing legitimacy because their already strong foothold in a number of societies will convey a message of common acceptability to the rest of the world. Economically it means the spread of free market economy while politically it means the spread of democratization that is necessary to sustain a free market. Culturally speaking it reflects a standardization of cultural expressions around the world (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). Globalization has therefore been seen as a trend toward homogeneity that will eventually make human experience everywhere essentially the same (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). This is where globalization faces the staunchest opposition.

While globalization is a historical process of human integration, the popular idea of globalization as a 'vehicle of Westernization' is quite a new phenomenon. Western cultures that thrived from the transition to Capitalism

and whose dominant role today owes much to colonialism resulting from the hunt for new markets and new sources of raw material necessitated by the emerging economic ideology, are now found appropriating their value systems to the whole world as the ideal values. Globalization, in other words, has become synonymous with western cultural imperialism and continues to meet with fierce opposition in societies whose fundamental value systems are incompatible with that of western societies.

Quite ironically the idea of a standardized global culture is in fact what constructed specific notions of national cultures in the developing world. Prior to the dominance of globalization in the popular discourse, the need to define or defend one's culture was absent, and the prospect of all cultures being absorbed into a single domineering culture is what actually spurred perceptions about cultural identities in the face of growing susceptibility of certain traditional cultures to vanish in the emerging system. It would be accurate, therefore, to say that globalization at once creates and destroys fractured cultural identities. Notwithstanding the philosophy of this argument, however, certain 'traditional' societies, like in Iran, continue to resist the encroachment of globalization into their societies in order to preserve their esteemed religion and the value system it entails.

Iran: Recipe for Revolution

The 1979 Iranian Revolution as noted by Parsa (1989) has appeared unusual and, undoubtedly, very complex. There is no single factor that could be highlighted as the trigger of the revolution. The revolution was in fact a reaction to many ailments that plagued the Iranian society ranging from economic underdevelopment to policies of modernization. The pre-revolution Iranian society was characterized by undermined traditional values, arrested socio-economic development and corrupt and extravagant ruling that left distaste in the heart of the average citizen. Following is a brief analysis of the Iran that provided the ideal ingredients for a revolution.

Iran, formerly known as Persia, lies between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and shares borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan on the north, Kazakhstan and Russia across the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan and Pakistan on the east, Iraq on the west and Turkey on the northwest. With a population of over 77 million people, it is the 18th largest country in the world.

Iran boasts of a lengthy history of civilization captivatingly featuring the rise and fall of countless dynasties mingled with periods of anarchy defined, as any

anarchy is, by chaos and confusion. From Persians to Medes, from Assyrians to Macedonians, from Huns to Sassanians, from Arabs to Mongols, from Timurids to Safavids, all ruled Iran from time to time, steering the land to dizzying heights of glory. The paper, however, takes the liberty to fast forward to 20th century Iran bypassing the ancient marvels of the country since they fall outside its purview.

Whilst foreign rule was not an unfamiliar phenomenon in ancient Iran, the Western influence in the country started to increase in large proportions only during 18-19th centuries. It was Russia and Great Britain whose influence was felt most during this time. Discovery of oil in the 1900s was a further incentive for these countries to be concerned about Iran. Balaghi (n.d.) notes.

At the outset of the 20th century, Iran was embroiled in a bifurcated struggle. On the one hand, Iranians struggled to maintain their national independence in the face of growing colonial pressures. Iran's geopolitical importance made it a central focus of the colonial "Great Game" between Russia and Great Britain. Ultimately, in August 1907, the two great powers decided to carve Iran up into spheres of influence; the agreement sealed Russian supremacy in the north and British supremacy in the south of Iran.

At the same time a constitutional revolution was taking place in the country. Iran's constitutional history was marred with turmoil mainly due to the unwillingness of Shahs to relinquish power to the national assembly, divisions amongst revolutionaries, and colonial interests regarding maintaining control over certain aspects of the Iranian government (Balaghi, n.d.).

With the ending of the Qajar dynasty in 1925, Reza Khan established the Pahlavi dynasty which initiated many modern reforms in the country. However by 1941 with the outbreak of World War II, Reza Shah who had close cultural ties with Germany was exiled to be replaced by his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi by the Allied Forces whose presence was very much felt in the country. It is during his reign that the revolution took place.

As Abrahamian (1980) correctly states, "the fall of the Shah will go down in history as perhaps the most dramatic revolution of modern times." In contrast to most other revolutions that succeed in toppling a government with external aid, the Iranian revolution was purely led by internal forces. Deviating from the popular practice of creating a democratic and pro-modernist political system, Iran proved authentic by opting for a traditional theocracy in which the clergy

was considered supreme. Following is a brief analysis of the regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his policies that triggered the revolution.

A Practical Critique of Rapid Modernization

Whilst it is important to acknowledge that it was not Reza Shah who began the process of modernization in Iran, the paper will primarily be concerned with policies executed by him in the name of modernization that suffered widespread unpopularity in the Iranian society immediately prior to the revolution. Economic, political and social aspects of Shah's modernization policies are briefly dealt with below.

Economic Policies: From an economic perspective, Shah's regime was able to introduce ambitious development schemes that stimulated economic growth, but these were all short lived and distributional inequalities were huge. By means of increasing oil revenues on which a large part of the Iranian economy was dependent, the Shah was able to spur an impressive increase in the GDP.

During the period of 1973 to 1977, Iran's GDP grew by an average annual rate of 8.4 percent at constant price (AMUZEGAR, 1991: 58). Between the years 1973 and 1976, Iran's per capita income reached a Third World record of \$2000 (BENARD / KHALILZAD, 1984: 12). Quickly-growing oil revenues resulted in the Shah developing more-ambitious industrialization programs. The budget of the Fifth Plan, 1974 to 1978, was doubled overnight, from \$60 billion to \$120 billion. The Shah dreamed of transforming Iran into the fifth most industrialized nation in the world, in less than twenty years (AMJAD, 1989:31) (Amuzegar, 1991, Benard and Khalilzad, 1984 and Amjad, 1989, as cited in Gurbuz, p. 111-112).

However, the economic modernization plan was too ambitious for a country that did not have satisfactory levels of labour competence and technological sophistry. Against such a backdrop, the treasury was exhausted very quickly and as Gurbuz (n.d.) correctly notes, "the oil bonanza was turned into a terrible industrialization failure." On the one hand, Iran's excessive dependence on imports was posing a major threat to the country's economy while on the other this also created a disgruntled group of traditional merchants whose products promised little appeal alongside imports. Added to this was the extravagance of the royal family whose lifestyle was too expensive even for a highly developed country to afford.

Nevertheless one should not forget the positive implications of the Shah's development programme. These were clearly evident in the spheres of GDP growth, improving standards of life due to uplifted health conditions and education and the improvement of the condition of rural peasants due to land reforms introduced by the regime. In all actuality as Gurbuz (n.d.) notes "Iran's economy was not so awful that it warranted revolt." What, then, was the chief trigger of the revolution?

Providing an answer to the question Gurbuz (n.d.) states that "political and social causes had far more impact on the revolution." Attention will now be shifted to the political and social factors that were instrumental in spurring the revolution.

Political Oppression: Despite introducing so-called democratic and progressive Western values, the Shah was one of those typical US backed puppet dictators in the Middle East. Mocking the essence of a constitutional monarchy, he functioned as a dictator who did little to improve the political conditions of the country. Political freedom was painfully restricted after the 1953 coup and adding insult to injury the 1958 parliamentary system was made a one party system in 1975. The Resurgence Party was thus created as the rubber stamp of the Shah and the sole representative of the will of Iranians. The party that got all state benefits needless to say was a corrupt force that tolerated no opposition.

Bazaaris, the traditional middle class of society who were so far allowed to exercise their free political will, for the first time in Iranian history were oppressed severely. The party cracked down on bazaars by dissolving traditional guilds and creating new ones under the direct supervision of state bureaucrats (Abrahamian, 1980). Furthermore the party also appointed wealthy businessmen from outside bazaars to lead them and had plans to eradicate bazaars to pave way for western type shops that supposedly looked more sophisticated. The small-scale shop owners of these bazaars bore the brunt of the infamous economic policies of the regime. However against a backdrop of increasing censorship by the state, the oppressed had no option but to retreat into silence.

Freedom of Expression was thus dealt a serious blow in Shah's Iran. Resentment towards continued political oppression eventually manifested itself in the form of a number of anti-regime movements and campaigns, deriving their strength and legitimacy from the disgruntled sections of Iranian society. The clergy played a crucial, if not the most important, role in masterminding such opposition movements due to both political and moral reasons. Politically

they were not happy about Shah's elevation to the position of a spiritual guide by the Resurgence Party. Furthermore adoption of some infamous policies such as replacing the Muslim calendar with a new royalist one, disregarding *Sharia* Law, establishing a new religious corps that mocked the *Mullas* and advocated a new form of Islam, and cracking down on religious leaders who opposed such policies left distaste in the collective mindset of the clergy.

However there was a more pressing question of morality that called for the clergy's intervention. This was directly linked to the social repercussions of the Shah's modernization schemes.

Social Modernization: The Shah's plan to westernize, secularize and educate the Iranian society without giving proper thought to the traditional foundations of it is in fact the primary trigger of the emergence of the 1979 Revolution. According to Abrahamian (1980) "In the nineteenth century England, haphazard urbanization produced the Methodist movement. In contemporary Iran, the same problem helped to create the Khomeini phenomenon."

Increasing levels of crime, alcoholism, prostitution, delinquency and rising suicide rates, all of which were products of rapid urbanization posed serious questions about the cultural character of the Iranian society. Along with the construction boom, a massive number of migrant workers flooded the cities and most of them were unmarried young men who occupied shanties due to the dearth of housing facilities in the cities. Shanties gave rise to an array of social ailments that concerned the clergy. Abrahamian (1980) quoting Ahmad Khomeini elaborates on the point in the following manner: what had led these clerics to break their silence was not the realization that the Shah was destroying the country and selling Iran to Western imperialism, but rather the shock of seeing "moral decadence" flaunted in the streets and the double shock of finding that the authorities were unwilling, if not incapable, of cleaning up the "social filth." Having no channels through which they could communicate the grievances to the political system, they reluctantly joined the anti-regime clergy to mount the final assault on the Shah.

The statement aptly captures the distaste Western led globalization had left in the minds of the traditional clergy in Iranian society. Though not explicitly stated, Khomeini's statement is hardly cryptic about how the traditional clergy viewed Shah's policies that exposed the country to the West in the name of modernization and the resultant social decadence of such exposure.

The Shah's land reforms that were justified as a measure taken to make space for the underprivileged to enjoy the benefits of the privileged became another unpopular policy of his. These reforms aimed at redistributing land holdings of the wealthy to the peasantry, at least in theory. In practice however, there arose a number of issues ranging from Pahlavi family reaping disproportionate benefits of the programme to not providing majority of the peasantry their promised share of land. For the clergy this became a problem since it would have reduced considerably the holdings of both mosques and some individual clerics (Parsa, 2000). Furthermore the creation of a Religious Corps, the traditional clergy believed, who knew nothing about true Islam and was simply distorting the religion to cater to the whimsies of the regime was a singularly immoral act that ridiculed the essence of Islam.

Even Iranian intellectuals of the secular western education system felt the need to reconcile modernization and local culture without compromising the pristine spirit of Iran. Gurbuz (n.d.) commenting on the motives of three leading secular intellectuals states: They all shared the conviction that in Shiitism one must find all the ingredients of progressive and modern ideology capable of neutralizing the cultural hegemony of the West in Iran, ending the alienation of educated Iranians from their native culture. The central theme ... was a return to Iran's indigenous Shiite culture. Despite having differing opinions about the version of Islam to be adopted, both the clergy and certain segments of secular intelligentsia believed in one cause: the return to tradition! Gurbuz (n.d.) further states that as opposed to the anti-tradition of early intelligentsia, the young intelligentsia in 1970s interpreted Islam as a revolutionary ideology. This is perhaps because it was them who were directly victimized by the social erosion of the Shah's policies. For whatever reasons, the intelligentsia and the clergy forged a fleeting alliance to ensure a return to tradition.

Globalization, Religion and Culture

As stated previously, the defining characteristic of the Iranian revolution was the religious/moral drive of the traditional sects of society that aggregated and organized already mounting grievances about the eroding Iranian identity. The increasing antipathy of the population in general and the clergy in particular towards modernization sought to remedy the social error by revolutionary means. The positive change thus envisioned was, according to the belief of the revolutionaries, able to rectify the erosion of social values by reverting to a culture grounded in Islam.

Like in most other developing countries, religion played a significant role in constructing a national identity in the Iranian society. The rejection of modernization mainly stemmed from the erosion of their traditional culture and social structure. While economic mishaps and political oppression were also factors leading to the popular resurgence, none of these is able to successfully account for the creation of a theocracy instead of a modern democratic system which according to the West would have been the obvious result of the immediate aftermath. The creation of a theocracy itself proves the faith Iranians had in Islam and their traditional values.

Iran's return to the fundamentals of Islam based on the Quran and the Sunnah (way of life prescribed for Muslims) resulted in the coining of the Iranian revolution as the Islamic Revolution of Iran and made Ruhollah Khomeini an epitome of Islamic fundamentalism. The revolution could thus be considered a political victory for Islam fundamentalism.

The Iranian case study sets a prime example of how religious ideas and values can mobilize massive public support to topple a regime that had according to Benson (1989) virtually unlimited foreign support. Or in other words how traditional forces defeated modern ones! Benson (1989) further introduces three major factors that highlight the connection between Iran and Islam: 1. Islam as the defining element of Iranian identity 2. Hostile influences which threatened the survival of Islam in Iran and 3. The rigid stance of the radical Shi'ite sect that any degradation of Islam would effectively imply a compromise of the dignity of the Iranian identity.

Iran's *Mullas* have always had a tremendous impact on political mobilization against imperialism both prior to the World War II by the British and Russians and following the World War II especially by the US and Israel. Elaborating on the point, Benson (1989) presents the example of the 1892 confrontation of Mirza Hassan Shirazi, the leading *Mullah* of the day and the Shah who endorsed the sales of tobacco by a British company. *Mulla's* issuance of an order prohibiting the use of tobacco was not only able to mobilize angry crowds to the streets but also was instrumental in the Shah cancelling the agreement with the British company. This bears testimony to the fact that the *Mullas* had the clout to appeal to the religious streak of the public whenever Islam teachings were at stake. This same clout survived into the next century and was used to materialize the revolution.

Mullas who took great pride in the pristine Iranian culture defined by Islam, defied the Western model of development advocated by the Shah since it

resulted in the steady erosion of values in the society. What the Shah's secular western model failed to understand is that religion has two dimensions: the personal and the social. It is the latter that brought the Iranian society into confrontation with western values hailed by the Shah.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran went down in history as an authentic form of revolution in modern times which gave precedence to religion and traditional culture defined by it rather than western models of democratic liberation. The liberation Iranians envisioned was not a freedom advocated by the West but freedom from the West!

Conclusion

This paper presented the case of the Iranian Revolution to illustrate the impact modernization and globalization have on religion and culture. The case study bears testimony to the fact that continued undermining of traditional value systems gives rise to fierce opposition in traditional societies in which compromising their culture is not an option. The revolution was a culmination of anti-modernization/globalization sentiments by various segments of the Iranian society including Bazaaris, secular and nationalist intellectuals, and the clergy all of whom actively carried out Islamic propaganda in the society. Despite differences in their interpretation of Islam, they were united in the belief that the western culture imposed by globalization was causing a value-erosion and a religious revolution alone could purge the religion of the wildly distorted interpretations and the society of its newly acquired ills.

The revolution thus waged resulted in the emergence of an Iranian society that offers an interesting alternative to the established western models of development. For Iranians the political system should not essentially be ruled by secular leaders, education should not follow the western curriculum, and economic modernization is not a quintessential factor of the country's development. Rather, the preservation of tradition, culture and most importantly religion is development. Any 'development' that compromises the country's religious character and thereby undermines the Iranian identity would thus be looked down upon.

The negative relationship that religion and culture share with modernization/globalization in traditional societies has been highlighted in the paper by elaborating on the adverse effects of the attempts to forcibly inject globalization into these societies. The political implications of offending or threatening religion and/or culture should not be underestimated because

religion and culture are elements that are closely associated with the essence of individuals and as such prompt passionate reactions in the face of a threat or an offense.

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