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| IRAN'S STRUGGLE WITH MODERNITY\* |
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During the past two hundred years the true drama of the so called Third World countries has been their encounter with the phenomenon of modernity. All the important events in their respective histories have had this mark on them and more or less shaped by it. Of these countries, the Islamic Middle East is a particular case, since it has been especially slow in integrating the tenets of Modernity. The case of Africa is similar and even more so, but the Middle East of early nineteenth century, when the great impact of West was first felt, was much more advanced and presumably better qualified for adopting the Western ways, as was proven by the Japanese example.Here one should distinguish between Modernity and modernization. Modernity is the long and deep process of profound change in culture and values; a "traditional" society`s progress on the path trodden by the Europeans in the five centuries since the Renaissance. Modernity implies a new world view based on rationalism, secularism, and humanism. By modernization we mean a new way of organizing life and society ; the process of bringing the institutions and infrastructures that have been mainly developed in the West, through the process of Modernity, to a traditional and, by definition, backward society. It goes without saying that unlike in the West, these two processes have not gone hand in hand in traditional societies. It has been too easy to forget the link between modernization and Modernity -- the fruit and the tree. Modernization is always easier and not only comes first and takes the place of Modernity, but ironically in most cases, especially in the Islamic Middle East, is used as a line of defense against it. Iran, as will be shown, is a most dramatic case of struggling with this problem in all its twists and tensions.No society could be expected to easily abandon its habits and value system, its traditions. In every country it has been imposed by overwhelming outside force. However, in the Middle Eastern societies, an additional factor has been at work: a sense of self sufficiency and inherent virtue that would only allow borrowing from others, taking them into one's service. Iranians had a double sense of superiority. They were content in their feeling of historic and cultural superiority, not only towards those Western upstarts but other Middle Easterners as well. Who could among them match Iran's past glory -- about which they themselves had the faintest ideas and had to wait for European scholarship.The role played by Islam in the struggle with Modernity has been the same for all , the Arabs, the Turks, and the Iranians. For Arabic speakers of Middle East, Islam and the history of Arab conquest was the main source of pride and hence an added barrier against Modernity. The Turks, until early 20th century the Ottomans, even though converts to Islam, had for centuries made it their own as heirs to the great Arab-Islamic Empire. Their pride in Islam was in no way less than the Arabs themselves. The Turkic tribes that overrun Iran and settled in Asia Minor, had not been conquered and were persuaded to become Muslim-mostly by Iranians. For Iranians, the glory of Islam was tainted by Arab victory and the dark and bloody period of Arab occupation, pillage and systematic destruction. Iranians, unlike others, with the exception of Spaniards -- a thousand years later- had successfully fought back, and that has also been part of the national pride. A nation that had always vanquished its many conquerors, could also resist and overcome Europe if only it could go back to its roots.All three people were slow in realizing the true nature of the new adversary. Europe was another invading power for Iranians; another Crusade for Arabs; and Turks ( Islamic fundamentalists still think in such terms.) It dawned rather late on them that the West was not only vastly superior to whatever they had experienced, but it was in a way their future and destiny. As a result, precious time and energy has been wasted in modernizing without Modernity.The Turks were far ahead in this drive-- helped by their well organized state machinery and long and deep exposure to Europe. Before Ata Turk started his drive to make a European nation out of Turkey, there had been a few hundred years of reorganization of the society along European lines. In the Arab world, Egypt was the forerunner in modernization from early nineteen century, after the eye opening blast of French invasion.The Iranian modernizers in their search for applicable models looked to Turkey and later Japan. What was happening in the Arab world seemed irrelevant to their conditions. The Arabs were not independent - as Iran had at least nominally remained even in its darkest hours. Japan would seem a perfect model but for the fact that it was far away and nobody knew much about it. Turkey proved a more practical example.Under Nassereddin Shah ( 1840s to 1890s ) a very limited reform program was aborted again and again. During the years of Reza Shah Pahlavi's ascendance (1921 - 41) Iran wholeheartedly, pursued a program of modernization copied from Turkey. The plan did not go as far as Latinizing the script (which many consider as a mistake) or declaring a secular state; and due to extreme backwardness, could not go far enough; but for about half a century remained as a national goal and agenda; one of the few points enjoying consensus among Iranian political class. While people of almost all political and intellectual leanings agreed on the need for rapid modernization, there was no comprehensive discussion about its strategy and why it really had to be undertaken. The material and quantitative changes that were rapidly transforming Iranian society, were of course assuming a life on their own, creating disequilibrium and sharpening the contrasts in a rapidly evolving situation nobody could fully articulate, let alone control. From late nineteenth century, when it became clear that a great deal more is at stake than trying to modernize the army and administration, most Iranian intellectuals, who themselves were the product of modernization, started to think about much deeper changes in society. That was a time of a new national awakening mainly due to the spread of Western idea of nationalism and democracy, and rediscovering Iran's pre Islamic past through the work of European scholars and Orientalists. Islam, and the role the Islamic clergy had played in national backwardness, became a main target for critical reappraisal, leading many intellectuals to its denunciation. The more conservative among modernizers, arguing that Iranians are too religious to tolerate a breach with the Islamic clergy, and too traditional to become wholly westernized, soon established their dominance, forcing some of the radicals into repudiating their own views. They also managed to work with an influential fraction of the clergy, at least for a vital period, during the Constitutional Revolution (1906-9). Whatever Iran has achieved in modernity goes back to that revolution, the first democratic popular uprising of the Third World which succeeded in imposing a constitution over an absolutist monarchy - another first. The adherents of this school, who in one form or other, have dominated the discourse of Modernity ever since, had a clearer view of the dimensions of Western all out preponderance. They argued that this time the nation is not confronted by Arab Bedouins or Mongolian hordes, and therefore it has to arm itself with science and technology. To them modernization was the only way to defend not only Iran's independence but also its culture and identity. This defensive and limited view of Modernity, logical as it was, has been one of the three main misunderstandings that has distorted Iran's discourse of Modernity-- and other Middle Eastern nations for that matter. To become modern so as to remain even more like oneself, is a contradiction that has doomed the whole process to failure.There of course is nothing wrong with the desire to preserve one's independence, identity, and culture. The problem arises -- as has been the case with different nations of the Islamic Middle East-- when all these lofty concepts are lumped together and used more or less interchangeably. The major fallacy in this respect has been the identification of culture with identity, which created the second misunderstanding. Culture is a distinctive characteristic of any nation; a part of its identity. But culture is and should be a changing phenomenon-- if a nation is to survive as an active part of world civilization. All older nations have been transformed politically and culturally, sometimes beyond recognition from the stand point of previous generations. But as long as they have preserved their sense of identity, their national consciousness, they have been recognized by others as such. A nation's identity is mostly based on its common history, and history is much more than culture. Iran among the nations of Middle East is a supreme example of this persistent identity.To claim that a nation by yielding to Modernity loses its culture, and therefore identity -- the main argument of the ruling Mullahs' campaign against "cultural invasion" meaning democracy and human rights -- is to condemn it to stagnation. This attitude even militates against itself. The "culture" becomes more and more irrelevant and not much worth defending.The third misunderstanding, again based on a conception of change for the sake of remaining even more the same; and going back to the earliest phases of discourse of modernity, has been the claim that it can be drawn from Islam itself; that all science, in fact everything needed for progress, is to be found in Qur’an and the prophet and other saints' tradition. The writers and propagandists of this school, if not rejecting the whole notion of modernity, have a simple explanation for the endemic Islamic backwardness: when Muslims were true to their faith they were on top; their problem now is not being good enough Muslims. As an Iranian poet has said: "Islam in its essence is flawless; whatever shortcoming, is in our Muslimness."\* \* \*The modernizing drive under Reza Shah was more influenced by the ultra nationalist, anti clerical modernizers who, nevertheless, tried to respect popular sensibilities. But when it came to unveiling of women, a short bloody religious uprising broke out. It was an authoritarian, non participatory modernization that concentrated on creating the bare fundamentals of a modern state and society, hoping that quantitative changes would gradually lead to qualitative ones. Iran under the leadership and direct supervision of the Shah became a nation - state, brought back from the verge of a certain disintegration, and achieved a degree of progress only dreamed of a generation before. However this preoccupation with material progress neglected a vital aspect of modernization. Unlike the Turkish model, little attempt was made in promoting civil society, especially political parties. This political weakness not only eroded earlier popular support for reforms, thus helping reactionary forces to regroup, but also slowed down the process itself. Corruption and incompetence in the absence of control, set in and increased the sense of disillusion. Thus when Reza Shah was forced out by the invading British and Russian forces, most people at least for a while rejoiced -- soon to their deep regret. In the more open atmosphere after Reza Shah, debate about modernity, like other issues, intensified. His extensive and remarkable reforms came under fire from three quarters, two of which, the Islamists and the Leftists, increasingly became powerful and eventually succeeded in toppling Pahlavi Monarchy with the help of the third one, the Mossadeqists. The Islamist attack's main concern was Iran's sweeping westernization, and rediscovery and renewed pride in its pre-Islamic past that covers more than half of Iran's history and an even more proud part of it. In their emphasis on Iran’s identity as a Shiite-Muslim country, they felt obliged to play the nationalist card by portraying Shiism as an Iranian form of Islam. They also asserted Islam's superiority and repeated the claim by the 19th century Islamic revivalist Jamaluddin Afghani, an Iranian who changed his allegiance as easily as his name. He and his Egyptian followers argued that Islam is fully compatible with modernization, so Muslim societies need no more than take Western knowledge, without any change in values. Some of the later propagandists of this school , Iran's first prime minister under the Islamic Republic among them, went to ridiculous lengths in their attempts to prove the "scientific" foundation of Islamic teachings on "cleanliness" or proving the existence of God through Newtonian physics. This argument, and their emphasis on the need to go back to the original Islamic roots, for all its superficiality, has proved the most potent factor in slowing down and temporarily derailing Iran's quest for Modernity; and is the Ideological basis of Iranian and Egyptian schools of Islamic Fundamentalism. The Leftist critics repudiated Pahlavi's modernization program from the standpoint of the so called Non-Capitalist Road to Development. They turned to Soviet Union for inspiration and cavalierly labeled other modernizers as mere Imperialist lackeys. As for the nationalist followers of Mossadeq, who nationalized Iranian oil industry and dominated Iran's politics in the 1943- 53 period, it was the Pahlavi Shahs' dictatorial rule and the role of foreigners in certain stages of their reign that were real issues. They ignored the problem of Modernity, even modernization. Many of them belittled Iran's undeniable progress either as harmful or a colonial creation.After an interlude of 20 years during which Iran haltingly managed to stumble along the way laid down by Reza Shah, the second Pahlavi Shah embarked upon a more ambitious plan made possible by previous achievements. The center of the plan, a comprehensive land reform, although poorly implemented and ridden with concessions to a new class of political capitalists, is along with the unveiling of women and the revolution of mass education, the greatest social changes in Iran as far as one can go; and the most important contributions of Pahlavi dynasty. Again Iran was on the move, driven by a nationalist, all powerful Shah pursuing an authoritarian, non-participatory reform program high on material progress and short on civil society. Again modernization i.e. westernization, came into conflict with Islamic resistance, this time even more violent and with catastrophic results. What distinguished this latter phase of confrontation, was the modernization of Islamic traditionalism itself -- a telling if perverse testimony to the success of Pahlavi’s' modernizing effort. During the 60s and 70s Iran experienced an unprecedented transformation that left nothing unaffected, including Islam that became radicalized under the influence of Third Worldism and a crude Marxism - Leninism. The new Muslim radicals, high clerics among them, cloaked their rejection of Modernity in a language of anti imperialism and quasi-socialism. They successfully turned culture and national identity—which were equated with Islam-- into a weapon against westernization. This backward looking political philosophy, advocated by the leading "intellectuals" of the time, was the greatest single factor in rallying Iranian middle class, en masse, behind the most reactionary elements in the clergy.In the wake of their victory, Islamic revolutionaries, who had turned the discourse of Modernity upside down, tried to undo seven decades of modernization. Khomeini preached the glory of the past, when people lived the simple life of his younger days. Much of what had been achieved was either destroyed or left to disrepair. They even tried to wipe out Persepolis and the mausoleum of Ferdowsi, Iran's national poet. Their problem, however, was that the previous seven decades had not only modernized Iran, in the sense of institutions, organization, and infrastructure; but had developed a new society with millions of educated people, well acquainted with the ways of modern world and at the same time more aware of their distinct Iranian identity and therefore more nationalistic than ever before.This modernizing populace soon came back to its sense after a disastrous lunatic spell, seeing and labeling the Islamic Republic as the second Arab invasion; and trying to defend itself and the country against a government that considered itself as a conqueror and in the words of its leaders, who embarked upon across the broad confiscation of public and private property, entitled to "war booty."\* \* \*All schools of thought and the whole political spectrum of Iran were confronted with their moment of truth in the Islamic Revolution and Government-- the Islamists more than the others. The Islamists realized their dream of all power to Islam and found that Power and nothing else is what there is. After more than two decades of absolute rule, Islam has nothing to say about statecraft. The Islamists have reduced religion to a mere justification for imposing a new reign of terror, pillage and destruction on Iran. They have abandoned all pretentions about bringing prosperity, even providing people with basic necessities. Their "nativist" stance on modernization in ruin, they are content to act as an occupying force.The Left that has sustained more casualties from its "victory" in the revolution than the ancient regime in its defeat, came to realize its grave inadequacy, which as proven in Eastern Europe on a much larger scale, was fatal. This realization goes far beyond the so called non capitalist road to development. The entire philosophy behind it has proven bankrupt. There is no other alternative to rationalism against faith; humanism against any abstract concept (nation, class, Umma ); and secularism (encompassing ideologies that assume the role of religion). The authoritarian nationalists of the old Monarchy, were brutally confronted with the superficiality of their paternalistic and inadequate reforms. But while paying dearly for their disdain of democracy, fortified their belief in modernization, this time at the service of Modernity-- meaning in a democratic framework. The worsening condition of Iran gave more credence to Constitutionalists' hundred year project. Iran at the beginning of 21st century faces the same problem: how to become a truly modern society?Again popular desire for progress, for pushing forward in the direction of most advanced societies, is resisted by a repressive, obscurantist regime. This is a most auspicious change, since for most of the constitutional era (1906-1978) it was the government which imposed reforms on a reluctant population. Once more Iran is experiencing a situation like pre 1906 era, on a vastly larger scale.There are other welcome differences. Iranians especially the expanded middle class seem to be reaching a consensus on democracy, human rights, and emphatically, secularism. These ideas hand in hand with awakened nationalist feelings, informs a dynamic and growing segment of Islamic thinkers, most of whom from the clergy, who are openly challenging the right of religion to rule the country. There is a maturity in political action and expression, never seen before, by so many different groups. The more provocation by the Islamists, the more resolve and restraint on the part of the people.Even the strict enforcement of Islamic law on women have given a new momentum to feminist struggle. Only two months after the revolution, Women in Tehran staged the first demonstration against the Islamic Republic. They forced Khomeini to withdraw his edict on wearing the Islamic veil. Although the regime gradually got its way, women from then on have steadily widened their rights. They even have regained the right to become judges which originally was considered un Islamic. The veil has proven to be a sort of ally for women. Fathers and husbands in traditional families no more object to their womenfolk going to school or work. Before the revolution the government had to pass a law punishing fathers who prevented their children from attending the school. Now more than half of university freshmen in Iran are girls.The old and persistent argument on a so called nativist approach to modernity is on the vane. Hard and costly experience has proved that there is no alternative but to fully adopt to the Western value system. People should chose their national approach to modernization, retaining their distinct identity and much of their way of life. But whatever about their culture that contradicts humanistic-democratic attitudes and practices in education, social relations, and politics must be changed.It is very interesting that many intellectuals in Turkey and Arab countries, with secular or semi secular governments, look enviously to Iran. What they see as the basic difference in Iran, one that is defining the future, is the depth of popular awakening-- no doubt as a result of their bitter experience. Reformers in other countries of the region, are fighting in two fronts-- the more difficult of which being their own traditional and/or apathetic people. In sharp contrast to Iran, many of these countries face a resurgent Islamism that has radicalized politics. Even Turkey with all its growing ties with Europe and a secular government has a longer way to go towards a secular society.In another typical paradox, Iran under cleric rule has become the most enlightened society in the region; the one that could achieve modernity sooner than most others. Turkey, as always through most of the 20th century, remains schizophrenic about secularism, and its acute ethnic problem makes the progress towards Modernity even more problematic. As for the Arab countries, any opening up of the system helps Islamic fundamentalism. The Army with its "right" to defend Ataturk’s legacy" has again and again intervened in politics in a very decisive way, and most probably would do the same in the foreseeable future.As for the Arab world, the twin problems of Islamic fundamentalism and Palestine -- let alone the deep conservatism of Arab societies -- leaves not much hope for optimism. When almost every writer and poet feels obliged to sing the praise of Palestinian extremists and Saddam Hossein, it is not realistic to expect anything but even more conformity. I am not here indulging in value judgment.The Arab world does not seem ready to free itself from its many psychological barriers, the greatest of which its self pity and the sense of victimization -- going hand in hand with its superiority complex. One could only hope that the Iranian experience would help all these societies. \* **This is the text of a speech delivered at Cornell University’s Institute for Public Affairs ( CIPA ) on April the 12th 2001. It was attended by some of the Institute’s students and faculty and was followed with a session of question and answer.** |
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