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The New Democrats

An intellectual history of the Green Wave.

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What we are witnessing right now in the streets of Tehran is, first and foremost, a political battle for the future of the Iranian state. But closely linked to this political fight is also an old theological dispute about the nature of Shiism--a dispute that has been roiling Iran for more than a century.

Shiism, like most religions, is no stranger to heated schisms. Shia and Sunnis split over the question of whether Muhammad had designated his son-in-law, Ali, as his successor (Shia believed he had). Some Shia, called Alawites, believe the only divinely designated successor was Ali, while another group, Zaydis, believe there were four imams. A large, intellectually vibrant third group is known as the Ismailis because it believes the line of imams ended with the seventh, Ismail. And the largest Shia sect is called the Ithna Ashari--or the Twelvers. Dominant in Iran, they believe in twelve imams and posit that the last imam went into hiding some 1,100 years ago. His return, bloody and vengeful, will mark the redemptive dawn of the age of justice.

It is within this branch that a further split took place beginning in the late nineteenth century--the moment when the Iranian elite began to confront the challenge of modernity. Ideas like rationalism,

individualism, constitutionalism, rule of law, equality, democracy, secularism, privacy, and separation of powers began to find currency in Iran's political discourse. By 1905, these ideas, prevalent primarily among the intelligentsia, led to the Constitutional Revolution--the first of its kind in the Muslim world. The Shia clergy were faced with a historic challenge not unlike what the Catholic Church experienced with the advent of the Renaissance. How two rival ayatollahs reacted to that challenge would divide Iranian Shiism--and lay the groundwork for what is taking place today.

Over the years, many scholars, both in Iran and the West, have argued over the years that Shiism shares less with Islam than with pre-Islamic Persian ideas. They point to the fact that, while Iran became Muslim in the seventh century, it refused to accept Arabic as its language. Islam won the battle, these historians argue, but pre-Islamic ways and values won the war by surviving in a Shia veneer. As an example, they cite the Zoroastrian belief in messianic eschatology. The messianic role of the twelfth imam, they say, is essentially a Muslim version of the same Zoroastrian idea. Shiism, according to this view, is really a thinly disguised form of Iranian nationalism. And this helps explain why so much of Iran's political debate has over the years played out in the realm of theology.

The roots of Iran's current divide to a great extent lie at the turn of the century, when the country's ayatollahs essentially split into two camps on questions of religion and politics. The first was led by Ayatollah Na'ini, an advocate of what is called the "Quietist" school of Shiism--today best exemplified in the character and behavior of Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq. According to Na'ini, true "Islamic government" could only be established

when the twelfth imam returned. Such a government would be the government of God on earth: Its words, deeds, laws, and courts would be absolute and could tolerate no errors. But humans, Na'ini said, were fallible and thus ill-fitted to the sacred task of establishing God's government. As the pious await the return of the infallible twelfth imam, they must in the interim search for the best form of government. And the form most befitting this period, Na'ini argued, was constitutional democracy. The role of ayatollahs under this arrangement would be to "advise" the rulers and ensure that laws inimical to *sharia* were not implemented. But it would not be to rule the country themselves.

Opposing Na'ini was an ayatollah named Nuri. He dismissed democracy and the rule of law as inferior alternatives to the divine, eternal, atemporal, nonerrant wisdom embodied in the Koran and *sharia*. As Ayatollah Khomeini would declare more than once, his own ideas were nothing but an incarnation of Nuri's arguments. But for the moment, at least, those ideas were on the defensive. It would be decades before they would reemerge to dominate Iranian politics.

Na'ini's paradigm, and the idea that Shiism must reinvent itself, continued to beget newer and more radical interpretations. During the Reza Shah period (1925-1941), as the clergy came under direct pressure from a forced secularism modeled on Ataturk's Turkey, a number of ideas critical of traditional Shiism began to take shape. Iranian reformers at the time called for a more rational, less rigid Shiism, and an end to the self-mutilation that takes place annually in honor of the third imam's martyrdom. They went so far as to advocate abolishing the dominant role of the clergy. Even in the conservative city of Qom, reformist ideas about Shiism found popularity in a magazine published by the son of a cleric. Ayatollah Khomeini's first book was a response to these arguments, calling them sacrilege and asking the pious to cleanse the nation of such

heretical ideas.

The 1940s in Iran were a period of rising political aspirations. Marxist ideas began to dominate the intellectual discourse, while democratic ideas began to permeate middle-class life. Faced with these new challenges, Shiism again tried to reinvent itself in ways that made it intellectually competitive. Mehdi Bazargan, at the time a professor of engineering--and destined to become the first prime minister of the Islamic Republic--tried to use the laws of thermodynamics to prove the existence of God. Another activist, based in the city of Mashhad, founded a group called the Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists, arguing that, long before Marx, Muhammad had been a proletarian revolutionary. In the smithy of this city's rapidly changing intellectual landscape, two young men were educated. One was named Ali Khamenei, and the other was named Ali Shariati.

Today, Khamenei is the intransigent and embattled Supreme Leader. And Shariati, who some have called the Luther of Shiism, would become his faith's most influential reformer. His eclectic use of Marx, Freud, Sartre, and Fanon, and his attempt to combine them with elements of Shia faith, allowed him to create an ideology appealing to the intelligentsia and the Iranian middle class. It was part fashionable piety (the way Kabbalah is the spiritual fad of Hollywood) and part facile radicalism. From Fanon, he borrowed the idea of the redemptive power of violence, and from Marx, he learned about the evils of alienation. He called for a Shiism bereft of the clergy, accusing them of offering a reactionary and deeply neutered rendition of Islam. What he lacked in theoretical rigor and intellectual depth he more than made up for with the power of his oratory. To many in the current generation of reformists, he is known simply as "the teacher." He provided the possibility of a new reading of Shiism--one as compatible with Marx's

idea of praxis as with Muhammad's notion of piety.

But, as soon became evident, Shariati's ultimate goal was less the reform of Shiism than using it as an instrument for social change. Many of today's reformists, though inspired by his ideas, have not adopted this "instrumental" disposition toward their religion. Ironically, however, one person who *did* come to share Shariati's "instrumental" attitude toward Islam was Ayatollah Khomeini. And this is an area where the traditions of Na'ini and Nuri--that is, reform and absolutism--would combine to legitimize despotism.

Before coming to power, Khomeini argued that the most important duty, indeed the *raison d'etre* of an Islamic government, was to implement fully the tenets of *sharia*. But once in power and faced with the complexities of modern Iranian society, he subtly changed the very foundation of his theory. He introduced the concept of *maslaha*--interests of the regime--and declared, much to the consternation of nearly every other ayatollah, that these interests, as determined by him or his successor, would supersede even the fundamentals of Islam. In other words, the state was everything--and *sharia* was nothing but its legitimizing narrative, a narrative that could be suspended at the will of the leader.

Khomeini muddled the Na'ini and Nuri traditions in another way as well: Aware that people wanted democracy in 1979, he pretended to be in the Na'ini camp. He even promised that he wouldn't allow a single cleric to hold a position of executive authority. After taking office, however, he would use an iron fist to implement the Nuri vision.

Iranians rightly felt stung by this development. But reformers in the Na'ini tradition did not give up. Betrayed by Khomeini, they became as

interested in political strategy as in theological innovation. Saeed Hajjarian, once a mastermind of the regime's intelligence agency, turned into an Andropov-style reformer. He argued that a frontal assault on the country's bastions of power was impractical. Instead, he called for his allies to mobilize the masses and use them as bargaining chips with Iran's rulers--a strategy by which he thought reformers could gradually chip away at the absolute power of the clerics. Other reformers, foremost among them Akbar Ganji, dismissed Hajjarian's strategy as unworkable. The only way out of the current morass, Ganji said, was to use the invincible power of peaceful civil disobedience.

Then there were the ideas of Iranian intellectual Abdolkarim Soroush. Around 1990, he published a seminal series of articles questioning the epistemological foundations of Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e-faqih*, the guardianship of the jurist. Soroush argued that any cognition of sacred text is ultimately no more than a mere mortal's cognition--and thus, contingent and relative, not absolute. Privileging one person's reading of these texts over others, he said, was an arbitrary political decision with no theological validity. Not surprisingly, Soroush's essays created an uproar in Iran. Apologists for the regime attacked him for channeling "Zionist" ideas, while many in the reform movement began to apply the same decidedly democratic principles to other arenas. The essays were also the beginning of Soroush's own odyssey, which took him from being an ally--if not a theorist--of the regime to being one of its most intractable and influential critics.

In recent years, many Shia intellectuals have traveled the same path as Soroush. Hitherto sacred topics--the life of the prophet, the nature of his mission, the meaning of the Koran, the place of metaphor in sacred texts, and, most importantly, the role of women--have been hotly debated. Those who voted for Khatami in 1997; the student movement of 1999;

the recent struggle of the bus drivers' union for the rights of its workers; the relentlessly defiant but peaceful women's movement, particularly the attempt to solicit one million signatures in favor of reforming discriminatory laws; and, now, the green uprising of 2009--all owe something to the tradition that Na'ini established more than 100 years ago.

This tradition has not always found itself on the side of the angels: For instance, many Na'ini disciples, worried about the creeping influence of communism, supported the Shah against Mossadegh in 1953. Moreover, like any diffuse intellectual tradition, it has spawned its share of destructive ideas and has sometimes been co-opted by its opponents. But it has also achieved something very valuable: It has kept alive the hope, through heady times and dark ones, that a different Shiism, and therefore a different Iran, was possible. Just as Shiism has been a thinly disguised manifestation of Iranian nationalism, the reform movement has been, from Na'ini to Mousavi, a thinly pious veneer for a country's relentless quest for democracy.

Abbas Milani is Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University.

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