The Disenchantment

by Afshin Molavi

Amid the clutter of commerce in Isfahan's old bazaar, a dust-colored dome rises modestly above the shops in a rock-and-dirt-strewn side street. Low arches lead into the courtyard of the simple, domed shrine for a 17th-century cleric, Mullah Mohammad Bagher Majlesi. By Iranian standards, Majlesi's shrine is not elaborate. But the modesty of the shrine masks the importance of the man buried there. A leading court cleric in the palaces of the Persian Safavid kings from 1680 to 1698, Majlesi dramatically affected the course of Iranian Shiism. He is the first example of a powerful Shia cleric who sought to influence the state as well as society.

To understand the rise of Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini in the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the creation of a modern theocracy in Iran, it helps to understand something of the history of Majlesi. In his story the seeds of the Islamic Republic of Iran are sown, and its failures, including the current revolt against the conservative ruling clergy and their intransigent lay allies, are foreshadowed.

Like most Shia clerics of his era, Majlesi descended from a group of Arab clerics who came to Iran in the early 16th century at the invitation of the Turkish warrior clan that had conquered Iran in 1501. The Safavids, as they were called, sought to impose on Iran's majority-Sunni population an unorthodox version of Shiism that mixed religious reverence for the Safavi leader with a powerful and mystical reverence for the first imam of the Shia faith, Imam Ali. To teach Iranians their new faith, the Safavids imported Arab Shia clerics from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain.

The early Arab Shia clerical imports preached orthodox Twelver Shiism, so named because of its reverence for the 12 imams of the Shia faith. This reverence is a "deviation" that Sunnis, who revere only God and his prophet, view as blasphemous. The Sunnis also rejected the Shia practice of interpreting the Quran broadly and engaging in vigorous theological speculation. Most important, the Twelver clergy emphasized their own role as intercessors between man and God—another major point of difference with the Sunnis—and they looked with disdain on the Safavid leaders' claims of divine access, though without openly challenging their patrons.

By Majlesi's time, Iranians generally accepted the Twelver clergy as intercessors, and the Safavid rulers had moved away from their claims of semidivine status. Still, Iranians had thus far acceded to their new faith only superficially. Majlesi was determined to remedy that, in part by writing a series of religious tracts—more than 60 in all. Hoping to reach a broad audience, he wrote in Persian rather than the customary clerical language of Arabic. But his books of esoteric theological arguments and rigid social rules did not attract

How times have changed: An Iranian student confronts police officers at a Tehran rally last fall protesting the death sentence meted out to reformist scholar Hashem Aghajari.

Iranians as much as the rituals and stories he propagated, and sometimes invented; those rituals today constitute an important part of Iranian Shia religious life.

In 1695, while serving as chief mullah in the court of one of the weaker Safavid kings, Majlesi felt secure enough to challenge the monarchy on issues of public morality. He ordered that 4,000 bottles of fine Georgian wine from court cellars be smashed in the grand square of Isfahan, then the capital of the Safavid state. The king remained silent. Some three centuries later, in 1979, in a move eerily reminiscent of Majlesi's action, Iranian religious revolutionaries smashed wine bottles found in Iran's parliament building.

One of the challenges facing Majlesi was that his was not the only version of Shia Islam. Other members of the Shia clergy preached an "Islam of the spirit" that was more tolerant than Majlesi's "Islam of the law" and disput-

ed the clergy's role as sole intercessors between man and God. The debate between the two strands of Shiism continues in today's seminaries. On the Iranian street, "Islam of the spirit" is the more popular of the two—Iranian Islam tends more to the spiritual and emotional than to the ritual and sober. The rituals that Iranians have embraced—the mourning for fallen Shia imams, the passion plays, the pilgrimages to the tombs of saints—have a theatrical, emotional aspect to them. They resonate with pre-Islamic Iranian historical themes of loss, martyrdom, and frequent invasion by marauders—including the Arabs, who brought Islam to Iran with their defeat of a tottering Persian kingdom in the seventh century A.D. The dour, simple, noble faith of the Arabian desert had, in its subsequent Shia "deviation," the right elements to attract Iranians, who then grafted the color, theater, and historical memory of Persia onto their new Shiism.

In one sense Majlesi was resoundingly successful, since the vast majority of modern Iranians are Twelver Shia Muslims (though he would frown upon the mysticism that remains a motif in their religious life). But the great mullah's effort to impose rigid social codes was a dramatic failure. His long discourses—on subjects ranging from why dancing is prohibited and religious mysticism is blasphemous to how to cure a stomach cold, prepare soup, or have sexual intercourse—fell for the most part on deaf ears. Today's Islamic Republic, with its strict regulation of public morality, represents a long-delayed victory for Majlesi, who never saw his behavioral suggestions enforced on a statewide level.

There is one way in which Majlesi's influence is particularly relevant. Though the classical Shia Muslim view held that the clergy should not get involved in governing the state, from Majlesi's era onward Iran's Shia clergy concerned themselves more and more with such matters, though they never wielded direct power. Sometimes they took on the role of "people's protectors" against unjust kings; sometimes they joined alliances of convenience with Iran's rulers. This role of the clergy as state influencer, which was temporarily reduced during the reign of the secular, modernizing Pahlavi kings (1921–79), laid the groundwork for Khomeini's bid to be statecrafter.

The Shia clerical practice of vigorously interpreting the faith, in conjunction with the clerical role as state influencer, helped open the philosophical loophole through which Khomeini stepped forward with his idea (or, as he would call it, interpretation) of clerical rule—a radical innovation in Shia thought that is still widely repudiated by the majority of senior Shia clerics in Iran and elsewhere. Lacking the support of Iran's ayatollahs, Khomeini could attract only a cadre of mid-ranking clerics, who led a "revolt of the colonels" against the senior clerical establishment. And Iranians followed them. In 1979, the country voted overwhelmingly (albeit in a limited referendum) for the establishment of an Islamic republic. With cries of "neither East nor West," Khomeini proclaimed a third way: a modern theocracy supported by the peo-

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ple that would resemble neither the liberal democracies of the West nor the authoritarian communist systems of the East.

But the Islamic Republic fell into the very traps that undid communism: hollow, state-sponsored glorification of a leader (Khomeini); dramatic but abrasive attempts at social engineering to create a "vanguard" of the Islamic Republic ("Islamicizing" Iran's universities, for example, and creating "Islamic tests" for officials); purges of "disloyal" officials; corruption within the nomenklatura; tight control of the media; a sluggish and failing state-dominated economy; and the use of hired street thugs to quash dissent.

Eventually, inevitably, Iranians began to grumble. Today, the country is in a state of quiet revolt, punctuated by the occasional loud protest. Iranians are hungry for change. They seethe under the weight of an inert economy, disillusioned by the failed political promises of the revolution (and, more recently, of the country's reform movement), and frustrated by restrictions on social freedoms, by government corruption, and by the domination of the conservatives and hard-liners. Their frustration can be seen in the resounding defeat of conservatives in elections for the presidency (1997 and 2001), parliament (2000), and local councils (1999); in the great popularity of the beleaguered reformist press; in the overwhelming sales of prodemocracy books such as those by the jailed journalist Akbar Ganji, now serving a six-year jail sentence for condemning Iran's conservative clergy as "fascists"; in the frequent outburst of street protests against economic conditions and the jailing of journalists; in a rising tide of anti-clericalism; and, most recently, in the student protests that were sparked by the death sentence imposed on the reformist academic Hashem Aghajari.

TODAY, IRAN IS IN A STATE OF QUIET REVOLT, PUNCTUATED BY THE OCCASIONAL LOUD PROTEST.

Aghajari's crime was to dispute the clergy's role as intercessors between man and God and to call for an Islamic Reformation. Borrowing from themes laid out by other 20th-century Iranian intellectuals, notably the writer and lecturer Ali Shariati (1933–77), he has come down hard on Iran's traditionalist clergy for trying to block the paths to God of other Shia Muslims by demanding the role of intercessor. "We are all capable of interpreting the Quran," Aghajari has said, "without the help of clergy." For him, the ruling clergy's claims about their role are a "fabrication" and a "racket," jealously guarded for fear of losing their privileges, and the state clerics have become "a ruling class" that reminds him of the worst excesses of the Roman Catholic papacy.

The demonstrations in behalf of Aghajari took on a life of their own when students demanded not just his release but that of all political prisoners. For the first time, Iranians in large numbers (5,000 students at Tehran University, 2,000 to 3,000 in other cities) chanted slogans in a public venue against a key legacy of Khomeinist government—the

office of supreme leader and its current occupant, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Khomeini had envisioned it as a position for a high cleric who would rule justly in the name of Islam, but it has morphed into a virtual clerical dictatorship that grants the supreme leader kinglike powers. The protesters daringly called for the separation of mosque and state.

The Islamic republic that emerged from the maelstrom of Iran's 1979 revolution must today contend with a bitter reality: The successful governance of a modern nation-state requires more than revolutionary slogans, esoteric theological arguments, and social engineering. Neither Majlesi nor Khomeini wrote or thought much about theories of economic management. When Khomeini spoke about the economy, he grandiosely promised Iranians a fair share of the country's oil bounty, and he lambasted the corruption of the rich merchants and the shah's elite. He promised that a new dawn of political freedom would rise from the debris of a strangling monarchy.

THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF MORE TRADITIONAL MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES ARE LISTENING TO WESTERN MUSIC, ATTENDING PARTIES, AND USING ILLEGAL DRUGS.

On the issues that matter most to the average Iranian—jobs, the economy, education, social freedoms, political freedoms—there is overwhelming evidence that the system has been a failure. Clerical privileges have stirred deep resentment. Aghajari attracted wild applause when he said "I drive a Peykan," referring to a cheap but sturdy Iranian-made car, "but they [the ruling clergy] drive the latest model luxury cars."

Iran's misery index has risen to alarming levels. Iranians today earn a quarter, in real terms, of what they did before the revolution. They face high unemployment (16 percent officially, 25 percent unofficially), an unhealthy rate of inflation (13 percent last year), and stagnant wages. The middle class has been devastated, with many families reduced to selling carpets, gold, apartments, and other assets acquired after the 1973 oil boom to keep up with the rising cost of living. Iranians eat 20 percent less meat, bread, and rice than they did before the revolution, and in a food-centric culture that prizes meat-based stews and generous hospitality toward guests, the turn rankles. One in four Iranians with a college degree works outside the country, and in 2001 an estimated 200,000 Iranians, most of them highly educated, emigrated.

Social freedoms have been drastically reduced since 1979. Women are forced to wear the hijab or risk jail time; mixed-sex parties are still occasionally broken up by "morals police"; dancing in public is prohibited; and young men and women who are unrelated can be taken to the police station for strolling together in the park. For the country's large, modern middle class, which recalls more liberal days, these social restrictions, imposed from above by stern men in gray beards and enforced by young thugs in wispy beards, are as much an irritant as the political and economic restrictions. The sons and daughters of more traditional middle-class families—whose parents might have supported

Hard economic times have led to measures such as this government-sponsored mass wedding, which spared 14,000 university student couples the expense of private ceremonies.

the social restrictions in the early years of the revolution—are rebelling against their parents, listening to Western music, attending parties, and, in some cases, using illegal drugs.

Iran's political freedoms have marginally increased since the autocratic days of the shah, but there remains a powerful current of authoritarianism. Every "democratic" layer of the Islamic Republic is covered by two or three authoritarian layers. For example, the president (currently Mohammad Khatami) is popularly elected, but every presidential candidate must be approved by the unelected Council of Guardians, a 12-member body of six clerics and six lay jurists that was originally intended to "oversee" the popularly elected parliament. Once in office, the president must contend with the unelected supreme leader, who has virtual veto power over all matters of state and controls the elements of coercive force: the judiciary, the security services, the army, and the revolutionary guards. These competing layers reflect the tensions between popular sovereignty and religious legitimacy that were never fully resolved by the crafters of the Islamic Republic's constitution.

Governments that fail to meet the basic needs and desires of their populations are nothing new in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Citizens of Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, and Algeria will recognize all too well Iran's state-dominated, inefficient economy, which rewards well-connected merchants and marginalizes middle-class professionals. Muslim youth from non-Persian Gulf states certainly know the emotional and psychological strain their Iranian counterparts feel as they line up outside foreign embassies hoping

for a visa that will lead, perhaps, to a life of economic dignity. Even residents of the wealthy gulf Arab states and oil-rich Muslim Indonesia will understand the frustration of living in a country with squandered oil bounty and high-level corruption.

But Iran's failures take on added meaning because of what the government represents: a modern attempt to fuse mosque and state. Today's Iranian discourse of protest is increasingly secular, in marked contrast to the winds of Islamist protest swirling around most regimes in the Muslim world with secular "monarchical presidencies" or traditionalist monarchies. The sociology of protest against failed and failing states in the Muslim world has become familiar: A young Muslim man or woman hungry for change is attracted to the angry Islamist with the courage to challenge the state, or to the moderate Islamist with a clearly articulated "alternative" and the resourcefulness to provide public services the government does not. The young man grows a beard; the young woman from a modern family suddenly takes to wearing the headscarf. They read leading Islamist theoreticians and buy cassettes of angry clerics berating Israel and the United States. (Most of these Islamists are Sunni Muslims, and they still have important doctrinal differences with the Shia, but many Sunni clerics in recent decades have adopted aspects of Shia clerical practice, including more wide-ranging interpretation of the Quran, to guide the faithful on matters relating to society and state.) These young Islamists see salvation not in the vague, half-baked, angry leftism of their parents, but in a vague, half-baked, angry Islamism. The pattern is being repeated all over the Muslim world—except in Iran.

In Iran, where the failing government is Islamic, the colors of protest are of varying and often subtle secular hues. In major cities, clerics have trouble getting taxis to stop for them. A young cleric told me that when he needs a taxi, he "defrocks," changing to civilian clothes. In a small village in the north, a farm laborer told me that "it's time for the men with neckties to return," a reference to secular technocrats. A deeply religious veteran of the devastating 1980–88 war between Iran and Iraq spoke bluntly: "The men of religion have tainted themselves in the eyes of the people. My own son has little respect for them. For their own good, they should retreat."

I have heard similar sentiments all across Iran. The talk today is of de facto regime change, a sweeping away of the old guard of conservative clerics and their lay allies who still control key levers of power in favor of a genuinely popular democracy that would allow any Iranian to hold the highest offices in the land. A philosophical and intellectual movement undergirds this street sentiment. Dissident clerics are stepping forward to condemn corruption, argue against "fascist" interpretations of Islam, and call for a return to the clergy's traditional role as guardians of the faith. The silent majority of clerics who repudiate clerical rule are speaking out more and more against the system. Former lay revolutionaries turned reformists hint at separation of mosque and state. Well-respected Islamic philosophers, such as Abdol Karim Soroush, write books, articles, and essays that make a theological case against theocracy and promote democratic ideas. Journalists and reformists

call for "Islamic democracy," though the logical result of their prescriptions would dismantle the current system.

What may be most significant is that a new discourse has emerged from Iran's student associations, which in the past generally supported the reformist ideas of Khatami and other advocates of "Islamic democracy." As one student leader, Akbar Atri, put it: "We want democracy without a prefix or suffix. That means no Islamic or religious democracy. The two are incompatible."

Atri is a member of the Daftar-e-Tahkim-e-Vahdat (Office to Foster Unity), a university student association that was formed in the early 1980s to "safeguard" the revolution and confront, often violently, secular democrats, communists, and Islamic Marxists on campus. Over time, however, the group evolved into a more moderate force, and it played a key role in the election of the reformist Khatami in 1997. Now the group is going one step further by breaking free of Khatami and the reform movement and calling, in effect, for a secular democracy. Iran's student movement should be watched closely. Nearly two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, and half is under 21. Iran's youth will not only determine the future, they will overwhelm it.

In a bold public-relations move, Atri and other student leaders have called for a referendum on college campuses to gauge the popularity of the current system. They point out that a referendum was held in 1979 to create the Islamic Republic. Why not hold another to determine whether Iranians still want the system? Even if such a referendum were held, the regime's supporters would likely disrupt it and intimidate voters. But the call for a referendum dramatized what most Iranians already knew at some level—that the results would deal a harsh blow to the conservative rulers, and would probably repudiate the system of rule by clergy.

A student-led referendum is hardly a major threat to Iran's hard-line clergy and their allies. But now there is some talk of a national referendum. The writing is on the wall. Iran's attempt at creating an Islamic republic has failed politically, economically, and socially, resulting in massive disenchantment with the government and an eagerness for change, possibly even regime change. Iran's youthful population is certain to make Iran a different place 20 years from now, and in this Internet age, change might come even more quickly.

Secular autocrats and traditionalist monarchs in the Muslim world shuddered when Iran's revolution thundered onto the world stage in 1979, toppling a powerful monarch and creating an Islamic republic. Would similar revolutions engulf them too? For the most part those revolutions did not occur, although Iran's success inspired other Islamist groups throughout the Muslim world. Today, a different movement within Iran has caught the attention of Muslim intellectuals and dissidents: the movement toward democracy. The only internal argument seems to be over whether to seek a secular democracy or the Islamic democracy that leading reformists call for. (Even in the Islamic version, the reformists hint, a clerical monopoly of power would be intolerable.) So the Iranian debate has shifted dramatically. If Iran manages to pull off this second revolution, the repercussions within Muslim societies that have flirted with, but never achieved, democracy in their own 20th-century struggles for political and social freedom and economic dignity might well be just as dramatic. ❑