

Ziba Mir-Hosseini The Lesson from Iran: How the 'Warning Signs of Fundamentalism' Were Ignored

Introductory note

In this paper I examine the engagement of Iranian women with the 'fundamentalist' ideologies and policies that dominated the early Islamic Republic, and I explore the lessons that this engagement has to offer. I ask two questions. First, why and how did Iranian women and the secular forces fail to see the 'warning signs of fundamentalism' in the Revolution which, having succeeded, treated them as second-class citizens? Secondly, was the dominance of a 'fundamentalist' agenda inevitable, or could it have been prevented?

To explore both questions we need to go back to the early revolutionary period. I limit my discussion to this period, not only because it was then that 'warning signs' that were ignored might have been identified, but also because what happened during that period enabled the Islamists to succeed through a policy of divide and rule. I begin with the massive participation of women in demonstrations during the 1978 upheavals, and end with the ascendancy of the Islamist forces in summer 1981.

Unity and ambiguity

Two points must be remembered with respect to women's role during the Revolution. Firstly, the Revolution in Iran was a popular movement and its success was due to the alliance of various political and social forces. What united them was their opposition to the Pahlavi regime and their desire for its removal. If women *en masse* participated in the Revolution and gave their support to its leadership, they did so not with a specific set of objectives and goals as 'women', but 'as members of different political and social forces'.¹

Secondly, it was only in the final stages of this revolution that Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as its indisputable leader and Islamists started to impose their ideological objective of the creation of an 'Islamic state'. Even then it was not clear what an 'Islamic state' would entail for women. The proclamations of Ayatollah Khomeini and other religious leaders were couched in very general terms and were open to interpretation. The scope of women's rights was among the main concerns of foreign and Iranian journalists who visited Khomeini in Paris in late 1978. Both in Paris and later in Iran, he repeatedly assured women that 'Islam' had the best programme for the advancement of women and protection of their rights. This was in line with the belief of the masses of women from the so-called 'traditional' classes who gave their whole-hearted support to the Revolution. For them, like other Muslim women, Islam had always been associated with justice and human dignity. As Leila Ahmed says, it is the ethical and egalitarian voice in Islam that women choose to hear and adhere to, not its patriarchal legal mandates as defined by *fiqh* (jurisprudence).² Iranian women who took part in the Revolution were no exception to this. Moreover, ideologues like Shari'ati and Motahhari had already succeeded in offering an 'Islamic ideal of womanhood' as a liberating alternative to the 'feminism' that they associated with Western decadence and the corruption of the Pahlavi regime. Neither Motahhari nor Shari'ati were explicit as to what this 'Islamic ideal of womanhood' entailed in practice, which left room for women active in Islamist organisations to turn it into a liberating project.³

Division and clarity

It was against this backdrop that the revolutionary forces succeeded in overthrowing the Pahlavi regime, and the provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan came into office on 11 February 1979. Comprising moderate Islamic and Nationalist personalities, Bazargan's government became the target of criticism and attack by both radical Islamists and secular leftist forces for not being 'revolutionary' enough.⁴

As far as women were concerned, Bazargan's government was marked by two concurrent developments. The first was the imposition of patriarchal interpretations of the *shari'a* and morality codes and the dismantling of pre-revolutionary legal reforms. On 26 February, a communiqué issued from the office of Ayatollah Khomeini declared the 1967 Family Protection Law (which had curtailed men's access to divorce and polygamy) non-Islamic. There followed other bans: women could no longer study mining and agriculture, or serve as judges, or appear in public without *hijab*. All these were in the name of 'protecting the Islamic dignity of women'.

The second development was the mushrooming of hundreds of women's groups all over the country, in mosques, government offices, factories, schools and so on. Ranging from small and spontaneous to large and organised, these groups represented the three main ideological tendencies, Islamic, Nationalist, and Marxist, which together brought about the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. Some of them were affiliated to underground political organisations in the *ancien régime*, others were formed during the Revolution.⁵ All these groups saw the issue of women's rights as secondary to wider anti-imperialist goals and interests. Women active in these groups shared the same view; they were concerned to win the struggle for control of the Revolution, and women's rights was a minor issue on their agenda.

These developments eventually brought about a breakdown of the apparent unity of women, their division into two distinct camps, Islamists and secularists, and an open confrontation between the latter and the state. This happened on International Women's Day on 8 March 1979, when thousands of women demonstrated in Tehran and Shiraz to protest against the gradual loss of their rights. Ayatollah Khomeini's statement on the eve of the demonstrations, requiring women working in government offices to observe the 'Islamic code' of dress, also made *hijab* an issue. The authorities ignored the demonstrations, and radical Islamist groups (including women's organisations) and radio and television (now dominated by them) denounced them as agitation by promiscuous women and agents of the previous regime. The demonstrations, planned by a number of secular women's groups, went ahead, and many other women joined in to register their protest against what they saw as violations of their basic rights. They were attacked and harassed by groups of religious zealots and men drawn from the urban poor. The leftist and nationalist political groups kept silent, and their forces - including the nationalists' armed militia - stood by watching, denying women any protection or support.⁶

Yet the scale of the women's protest was such that the Provisional Government had to modify Khomeini's statement on *hijab* and promise to set up new family courts to protect women's rights. But this gain was temporary and was soon lost as the nationalist and leftist forces - both inside and outside the government - denied their support to the women's cause. In so doing, they tacitly endorsed the Islamist gender rhetoric and allowed it to be translated into policy.

We know the rest of the story. The divisions among women and the silencing of the dissenting voices of secular women were the first success of the Islamists and set the scene for what followed. The onset of the war with Iraq in September 1980 provided the radical Islamists the best opportunity for implementing their version of Islamic ideology and eliminating any opposition. With Khomeini's dismissal of moderate president Bani-Sadr in June 1981, the hold of the radical Islamist forces was complete.

On the attitude of the secular leftist groups to women's rights, and the reasons for their tacit alliance with the populist policies of the Islamic Republic, and on the impact of the Islamic Revolution on the women's movement in Iran, there is a vast and eloquent literature produced by Iranian women academics, some of whom were active in these organisations at the time. What emerges from their accounts is that the gender vision of the so-called progressive male activists in these organisations was not so different from that of their Islamist counterparts.⁷

Conclusion

While concurring with the thrust of their analyses, I want to conclude this paper with two remarks. First, let me draw attention to a neglected aspect of Iranian women's engagement with Islamic fundamentalism. It was not only the women active in socialist organisations who felt betrayed by their male colleagues; women from all walks of life felt a similar sense of betrayal and confusion. This was something that I personally came to experience when I lived in Iran from 1980 to 1984, and documented in my subsequent research in family courts. Women felt that the very men they loved - their fathers, brothers and husbands - had tacitly colluded with the state in depriving them of what they considered their rights. What made the matter more painful for women activists who were believers was that religion gave these men the authority and legitimacy to do this. It was then that the seeds were planted of a new dissent, which contributed to the emergence of a reformist movement over two decades later, after the unexpected victory of Khatami in the 1997 presidential elections. Women's votes played a major part in bringing the reformist government of Khatami into office. Though the expected reforms have failed to materialise, the struggle for them continues.

Secondly, I suggest that the undemocratic and polarised political culture of Iran in the 1970s, together with the populist character of the 1979 Revolution, made the dominance of the 'fundamentalist' agenda espoused by the Islamist revolutionaries inevitable. Two elements that could have contained or moderated the Islamists' notion of gender rights and relations were absent from the revolutionary discourse. There was no indigenous feminist discourse around which women could rally, nor was the defence of women's rights a priority for the

various secularist groups who took part in the Revolution. The fact that both these elements were missing was - in different ways - a legacy of the skewed pattern of modernisation that had been espoused by the Pahlavi regime since the 1930s, and the appropriation of 'feminism' by the state in the 1960s. By the 1970s, in the minds of most political activists - whether Islamic or secular - 'feminism' and 'defence of women's rights' were both seen as part of the bourgeois project of the Pahlavis and as Western imports that should be resisted. When the Revolution happened, there was little in its political discourse and culture that could challenge and contain the populist agenda of the Islamists.

If Iranian women could not prevent the onslaught on their legal rights by the Islamist agenda at first, they later learned not only to resist it but even to turn it on its head. This is, in my view, what the Iranian experience has to offer.

Endnotes

- ¹ Nahid Yeganeh (1982) 'Women's Struggle in the Islamic Republic of Iran', in Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh (eds) *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran*, London: Zed Press, p. 35. See also the following for different perspectives: Nayereh Tohidi (1991) 'Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran', in Chandra Mohanty (ed.) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Indiana University Press, pp 251-67; Azar Tabari (1982) 'The Enigma of the Veiled Iranian Women', *MERIP* 103 (February), pp. 22-27.
- ² Leila Ahmed (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam*, Yale University Press, p. 66.
- ³ See Parvin Paidar (1995) *Women and Political Processes in Twentieth-Century Iran*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 175-82; Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1996) 'Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Iran', in Mai Yamani (ed.) *Islam and Feminism: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, London: Ithaca Press, pp. 284-320.
- ⁴ For an account of the politics of this period, see Shaul Bakhash (1985) *The Reign of Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, London: Counterpoint.
- ⁵ For a partial list, see 'Part Three: Women's Organizations in Iran', in Tabari and Yeganeh (eds) *In the Shadow of Islam*, pp. 203-230.
- ⁶ See Farah Azari (1983) 'The Post-Revolutionary Women's Movement in Iran', in Farah Azari (ed.) *Women of Iran: Conflict with Fundamentalism*, London: Ithaca Press, pp. 190-225; and Guity Nashat (1983) 'Women in the Ideology of the Islamic Republic', in Guity Nashat (ed.) *Women and the Revolution in Iran*, Boulder, CO: Westview, pp. 195-216.
- ⁷ See, for instance, Haideh Moghissi (1994) *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggles in a Male-Dominated Revolutionary Movement*, New York: St. Martin's Press; Azar Tabari (1986) 'Women's Movement in Iran: A Hopeful Prognosis', *Feminist Studies* 2 (Summer), pp. 342-60; Soraya Afshar, 'The Attitudes of the Iranian Left to the Women's Question', in Farah Azari (ed.) *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalism*, pp. 157-69.