

Beyond Religion: Ulama and Politics in Pre-revolutionary Iran

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Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to investigate the relations between the ulama and politics in Iranian history throughout the period between the 1950s to late 1970s. It will focus on two interrelated questions: 1. Were the ulama always led the mass opposition movements in Iranian history, as they often claimed or were credited to be? 2. Did the Iranian Revolution occurred mainly thanks to the ulama's efforts? By analyzing the relations between the ulama and politics in three consecutive periods in modern history of Iran, which are 1951-1953 period of oil nationalization, 1963 the White Revolution and finally the revolutionary struggles of 1977-1979, the paper shows that there was not a predetermined area of conflict or cooperation between these two domains, but a dynamic interaction shaped by the very political interests of the actors.

Keywords: Iran, ulama, religion and state relations, mass opposition movements, Islam and politics

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Dinin Ötesine Bakmak: Devrim Öncesi İran’da Ulema ve Siyaset

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Öz

Bu makale İran’da, 1950’lerden 1970’lerin sonuna kadar olan dönemde, ulema-siyaset ilişkisini incelemektedir. Birbiri ile ilişkili iki soruya yoğunlaşmaktadır: 1. Sıklıkla iddia edildiği gibi, İran tarihinde büyük siyasi kitle hareketleri ulema tarafından mı yönlendirilmiştir? 2. İran devriminin temel harekete geçiricisi ulema mıdır? Makale, İran tarihinin üç dönemini ele almaktadır 1951-53 İran petrolünün millileştirilmesi, 1963 Rıza Şah’ın Beyaz Devrimi ve son olarak 1977-1979 arası devrimci dönem. Makalede ulema ve siyaset arasındaki ilişkide önceden belirlenmiş çatışma veya uzlaşma alanları olmadığı, aksine bu ilişkinin aktörlerin siyasi çıkarları tarafından belirlenen dinamik bir etkileşim süreci sonucunda oluştuğu gösterilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, ulema, din-devlet ilişkileri, muhalif kitle hareketleri, İslam ve Siyaset

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We owe everything to clergy; History shows that in the past millennium it was always the clergy who led to popular and revolutionary movements. It was the clergy who always produced the first martyrs. It was the clergy who always defended the oppressed against the money worshippers.

Ayatollah Khomeini's speech (1989)¹

Önce un davası sonra din davası gelir.

Anonymous

Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the relations between the ulama and politics in Iranian history throughout the period between the 1950s to the late 1970s. The infamous execution of Socrates for his disrespect/disbelief for “the gods of the city” illustrates that the relationship between religion and politics has always been a problematic one. Both the structure of religions and politics has been transformed since ancient Greek civilization, yet such power struggles continue to exist. Modern history is no exception for this dichotomous relationship. Some states try to stamp out all religious symbols from the political sphere whereas some others are heavily dominated by religion. Iranian state has been an instance of the latter since the Revolution of 1979. After nearly sixty years of –semi- secular rule, Iran has transformed into one of the two states of the modern world where the clergy (ulama in Islamic terms) is in power². As the first epigraph indicates, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, considered the ulama as the driving force behind this transformation. By the same token, most scholars of the Iranian Revolution considered the ulama as the major social group behind the revolution.

The primary aim of this paper is to question this argument by investigating the role of the ulama in pre-revolutionary era. It will focus on two questions: Have the ulama always led the popular movements in Iranian history, as it has often been claimed, or have they been credited to do so? Did the Iranian Revolution occurred, solely, as a result of the ulama's efforts? I be-

¹ Quoted in Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism Essays on the Islamic Republic*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 88.

² The other one being the Vatican

lieve to answer to these questions, one needs to examine Iranian historical trajectory with a particular emphasis on the relations between the ulama and the masses. In the paper, these relations are analyzed by looking at three consecutive turning points in modern history of Iran, which are 1951-1953 period of oil nationalization, 1963 the White Revolution and finally the revolutionary struggles of 1977-1979.

Rationale of the Paper

Iran is one of the few states in the world that somehow automatically invokes religion in the global academic and popular culture. Even a brief look at the literature on Iran can demonstrate that in fact, there are only a handful of resources exploring their subject matter without giving peculiar attention to religion. Therefore, the topic at hand here -the role of the ulama in modern Iranian history- is one of the most widely explored subjects. Yet, much of the academic discourse on the issue assumes that the ulama have been the most powerful political actor in the most part of the Iranian history³. Perhaps the reason behind the establishment of such a perspective is the rewriting of the history by the new elites of the Islamic Republic. Like most states founded after revolutions, Islamic Republic also attempted to use history in order to gain more legitimacy. So, it aimed to show the ways in which the ulama have 'saved' the country from the political evils such as imperialism, feudalism and despotism⁴. This exaggerated the role of the ulama and undermined the power of other societal actors who played their part in the course of the history. Interestingly, not only Iranians who have been influenced by the state discourse but also the members of western academia have often portrayed the ulama as the prime actor in Iranian his-

³ Just to name a few: Fatih Varol, "The Politics of Ulama: Understanding the Role of the Ulama in Iran", *Milel ve Nihal*, 13 (2), 2016; Hamid Algar, "The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth-Century Iran", in: Scholars, Saints, and Sufis, ed. by Nikki R. Keddie, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972; Hamid Algar, *The roots of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, London: Open Press, 1983; Michael J. Fischer, *Iran from Religious Dispute to Revolution*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980; Samih Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, New York: Routledge, 1992; Taha Akyol, *Türkiye ve İran'da Mezhep ve Devlet*, İstanbul: Milliyet Yayınları 1999; Theda Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," *Theory and Society*, (11) 3, 1982.

⁴ For a brief discussion on historical revisionism in post-revolutionary Iran see Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, chapter 4: History used and abused, pp 89-111.

tory. Their particular approach cannot stem from the historical revisionism of the Islamic Republic. It can be argued that such works attributing an exaggerated role to the ulama suffer from adopting a culturally essentialist approach to Islam. As Edward Said in his pioneering study on Orientalism showed, European academic tradition has the tendency to place Islam at the center of analyses when looking at the Muslim World⁵. In this tradition, Islam is portrayed “as a political religion, a religion in which politics and religion are difficult to separate”⁶. This portrayal generates an a priori assumption that all political activities originating in the Muslim Societies can be approached and categorized as religious activities. Therefore, these movements and activities are considered to be led by the ulama⁷.

This paper challenges this discourse by looking at the Iranian political history between the 1950s to the late 1970s without holding such an assumption. It will demonstrate that it is not possible to find an established alliance -or separation- between religion and politics. It will also show that, there is not a predetermined area of conflict or cooperation between these two domains but a dynamic interaction shaped by the very political interests of the actors. By the same token, the paper will show evidence to the diversity within the ulama as a social and political group. This will require us to explore the relations between the masses and the ulama by situating the analysis into the social context instead of adopting an essentialist approach.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Noida: Penguin Books, 2001.

⁶ Mahmut Mutman, *The Politics of Writing Islam. Voicing Difference*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p.1.

⁷ Eve a brief look at the history of Muslim world, if one chooses to use such a term, shows us that it hosted various examples of separation religion from politics. See Ira M. Lapidus, “The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, (6), 1975; See also Nazih Ayyubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, London: Routledge. Ayyubi in the “The Theory and Practice of the Islamic State” chapter of his work explored the ways in which Islamic state evolved through the course of history and how the ulama gradually developed an Islamic theory of politics according to the needs of the rulers.

Precursors of the Iranian Revolution

Two events will be discussed in this section. The first one is the period of oil nationalization which was followed by the US engineered coup in August 1953. The second one will be the reaction of the ulama to the Shah's White revolution in 1960's which resulted in Khomeini's exile in 1963. As Khomeini's return to the country would mark the success of the revolution in February 1979, his exile is of enormous importance for the political history of the Iranian Revolution. This section will analyze the discourse and deeds of the ulama during these periods by focusing on their reactions to the political developments of the era.

Politics, Masses and the Ulama During the Oil Nationalization

With the forced abdication of Reza Shah by Britain and the Soviet Union for being in contact with Nazi Germany, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi -the son of Reza Shah- came to power in 1941. This transformation of power resulted in a rapid change in the political climate of Iran. During the old Shah's rule, the state had tightly controlled the society. So, his abdication was followed by a partial breakdown of the state control over society. In this era, Iranian parliament emerged as an influential political actor and started to impose its control over bureaucracy. Freedom of press and of expression were also reinstalled. Because of this tolerant social atmosphere, the number of politically active people has increased leading to the formation of numerous political organizations across the country. National Front was one of these political organizations and its leader was Mohammed Mousaddiq. The organization was founded in 1949 as an umbrella organization. The main political bodies contributing to it were: The Iran Party (led by Mehdi Bazargan), Toilers Party (led by Dr Baqai) and the Nationalist Party of Iran (led by Darious Foruhar). Ayatollah Abul Kasem Kashani (a prominent member of the ulama) was also supporting the organization⁸. In addition to these organizations, though not a formal part of the National Front, the communist Tudeh Party also played a role in this period. In these political organizations the bazaaris⁹ and a small segment of the ulama,

⁸ Sussan Siavoshi, *Liberal Nationalism in Iran: The Failure of a Movement*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1990, p. 59.

⁹ Coming from the name of the traditional marketplace of Iran Bazaar, bazaaris are

which were the social classes most active in the constitutional revolution of 1906, were again prominently active. The bazaaris, as part of the national bourgeoisie, were looking for a government that supported national economy and was against foreign economic penetration. Some segments of the ulama were however, concerned with the impact of foreign cultural influence on traditional Iranian society. They were also displeased about the domination of Iran by Britain. The critical notion in this context was “independence”. Richard Cottam summarizes the character of this period as follows: “It was the Mossadeq period that was unreal. For a brief euphoric moment Iranians had deluded themselves into believing that they could assert their independence”¹⁰.

During the era, the oil industry was nationalized by forming the National Iranian Oil Company. The twenty-eight-month tenure of Muhammed Musaddiq (from April 1951 to August 1953) came to be seen as one of the most important periods of Iranian history in which the democracy was flourished. In this period, Iranian masses were involved in politics in a way that they had never been in the history of Iran. For many of the Iranians, the era of Musaddiq was deemed as the only legitimate and democratic government of Iran.¹¹

Yet, the ulama`s reaction against Musaddiq`s policies was not in line with the popular sentiments of the period. As mentioned in the previous part, the ulama were not a homogeneous social group. Although the majority of the ulama were the opponents of Musaddiq, some members of the ulama supported Musaddiq`s struggle against the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The most famous figure amongst them, as mentioned above, was Ayatollah Kashani. He was known for his strong anti-British stand long before 1950s. His main concern was the impact of foreign cultural influence on the traditional Iranian society. Because of this common political stand, he

merchant class of Iran. It is a name given to both workers of the marketplace and the traditional petty bourgeoisie of Iran.

¹⁰ Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964, P. 231.

¹¹ One can find numerous books covering the importance of the era for Iranian democracy. See Homa Katozian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London: I.B Tauris, 1999. For a sentimental piece about the era see: Masoud Kazemzadeh. “The Day Democracy Died. *Khaneh* vol 3 No. 34 2003 available at <http://www.ghandchi.com/iranscope/Anthology/Kazemzadeh/28mordad.htm>

made an alliance with the followers of Musaddiq. He led large numbers of religious Iranians to National Front. Yet there were major political differences between Musaddiq and Kashani. Musaddiq did not want to share power with him yet he was keen to participate in the government. In 1953, they had a dispute over the role of Tudeh Party and Kashani left the National Front. Kashani, like many members of the ulama, thought that Musaddiq was not powerful enough to protect the country from the communist threat. In the same context, Musaddiq made some political moves that the ulama did not like. He drafted a new proposal which gave women the right to vote, he tended to favor state enterprises over the Iranian bazaar and perhaps more importantly he refused to ban alcohol. As a result of these decisions, Kashani's shifted his support from Musaddiq's government to the Shah. Americans fully exploited this disagreement between Kashani and Musaddiq and they managed to get his support against the National Front. Although Kashani still is seen as one of the most important figures of nationalism in 1950s, he actually did not hesitate to maintain close contact with the Americans¹². His supporters took part in the US sponsored coup d'état which brought Reza Shah back, namely Operation Ajax. Later, in an interview with an Egyptian journalist Kashani declared his support to Shah as follows: "Our King is different from [Egyptian King] Farouk (...) The Iranian King is neither corrupt nor greedy like Farouk, nor a dictatorial autocrat. The Shah is an educated and wise man"¹³.

It is important to note the context of the declaration above. These words were expressed at a time when most of the Iran's middle class were rallying in favor of Musaddiq. When he resigned they made him come back to his office through popular demonstrations¹⁴. Hence, there was a real and irreconcilable difference between the view of the bazaar, the middle class in general and the Shi'a ulama. Not only Ayatollah Kashani but also most of the respected Ayatollahs announced their support for the Shah and the royal family. When the coup succeeded in overthrowing Musaddiq they

¹² Khamenei praised his role in nationalization of oil this year <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/412090/Without-religious-scholars-nationalization-of-oil-wouldnt-progress>

¹³ Misagh Parsa. *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989, p. 182.

¹⁴ Misagh Parsa. *Social Origins*, pp 42-43.

“welcomed the monarch’s return to power”¹⁵. Another indicator of a lack of an alliance of any class with the ulama is the perspective of Khomeini himself, who disliked the nationalist movement of Musaddiq. For instance, once, the members of the National Front named a dog on which they had put glasses as “Ayatollah” and brought it to the Majlis. Khomeini commented later: “Mosadegh will be slapped; and it was not long before he was slapped; had he survived, he would have slapped Islam”¹⁶.

Hence, there are compelling evidences supporting the significance of the role played by ulama in weakening the most genuine nationalist and independent political movement in Iranian history -if not in destroying it¹⁷. Cottam explains why ulama failed to represent population’s support for Musaddiq as such: “The conclusion is defensible that had Musaddiq not been overturned by a foreign-sponsored coup, the Khomeini regime would never have appeared”¹⁸ Musaddiq was a secular figure, and under his administration the religious establishment was bound to undergo a transformation. Regardless of the reasons behind the ulama’s response, there are two important conclusions to be drawn from this period. The first one is that the ulama, like any other social group, was after its own interests, as it is evidenced once again in the period between 1977 and 1979. The ulama is not an essentially monolithic group pursuing oppositional politics. On the contrary, like bazaaris or industrial workers, it reacts when its interests are adversely affected by the government’s politics. Contrary to what Khomeini claims in the epigraph, “the clergy did not always defend the oppressed against the money worshippers”; at least not during the rule of Musaddiq.

The second important conclusion is that the Iranian masses did not need ulama’s encouragement to rally and mobilize for what they considered to be beneficial for their political interests. In the context of early 1950’s Iranian masses were supporting Musaddiq against imperial powers, mainly the Britain. During this period anti-British feelings were so strong that Iranians preferred giving up their money than seeing it in the hands of the

¹⁵ Misagh Parsa, *States, ideologies, and social revolutions : a comparative analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 134.

¹⁶ Misagh Parsa. *Social Origins*, p 193.

¹⁷ Parviz Daneshvar. *Revolution in Iran*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996, p. 24.

¹⁸ Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, p. 74.

British. In order to reveal the political atmosphere of the era, Dr. Baqai, one of the leaders of the National Front, asserted that “it would be better for the Iranian oil industry to be destroyed by an atom bomb than to remain in the hands of the Anglo-Iranian Oil company”¹⁹. It is clear that, during this period, Iranian masses could mobilize and oppose to Shah without ulama’s approval. Ervand Abrahamian, an eminent scholar of the history of modern Iran, goes further and claims that “in effect, what inspired the discontented masses during 1941-1953 was not Islam but socialism and secular nationalism”²⁰.

Hence, the era of Musaddiq can be regarded as a particular example to the dynamic nature of both the ulama and the middle-class politics, which kept on shifting in the 1960’s and 1970’s. But in the 1950’s the situation was such that a high-ranking clergy, Ayatollah Burujerdi could send a message to the Shah, who was scared after the first unsuccessful coup attempt and left the country, saying “Return because Shi’ism and Islam need you. You are the Shi’ite King”²¹.

The Ulama and the White Revolution

The Shah initiated his famous White Revolution in 1960s which included a land reform and modernizing measures such as expansion of suffrage to women. Until then, the state-ulama relations were rather stable. But the land reform was a threatening factor to the ulama’s establishment or at least they perceived to be so. “Historically, some of the ulama constituted an important component of the landowning class”²². Hence, this reform was putting the most crucial feature of the ulama in danger, namely its financial independence through the waqf lands²³. It had immediate effects on the

¹⁹ Homa Katouzian, “Oil boycott and the political economy: Musaddiq and the strategy of non-oil economics.” In *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil*. Eds. James A. Bill and WM. Roger Louis, 203-227. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1988, p. 203.

²⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press., 1982, p. 531.

²¹ Misagh Parsa. *Social Origins*, p. 193.

²² Moaddel, Mansoor. *Class, Politics and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 140.

²³ Roy Mottahadeh cited from Isa Sadik that these religious endowments produced a 40-50 million qran revenue by that time. One of the biggest of these waqfs was the

ulama: “Land reform from above in the 1960’s disposed many individual clerics and also religious institutions, and served to cut clergy’s ties with the landed upper class”²⁴. Moreover, the expanding of women’s role in the public sphere was also disturbing for the pro-Khomeini faction of the ulama. “He [Khomeini] rejected women’s suffrage and equality as heretical Bahai principles”²⁵. These modern policies of the Shah, together with his ambition of undermining the power of the ulama alienated them and gave Khomeini an opportunity to pressure him from this point onwards. As a result of his opposition to White Revolution, Khomeini was sent to exile, first to Turkey then to Iraq from where he continued to guide his followers inside the country. Indeed, this was the beginning of the emergence of Khomeini as an uncompromising opposition leader and “in June 1963, Khomeini’s charismatic potential was already apparent”²⁶. However, the development of his ideology was not completed. Abrahamian, in his prominent work *Khomeinism: essays on the Islamic republic* claims that even when Khomeini emerged as the charismatic leader due to his stand in the 1963 events, he was not challenging the monarchy itself. Even when he emerged as a clearly anti-regime Ayatollah in 1963, he did not demand a revolution or the abolishment of monarchy. He continued to tell his followers that Imam Ali had obeyed even the worst caliphs²⁷. This supports the argument developed in the first section of this paper. The ulama’s policies have always been dynamic, responding to the threats and opportunities of the period. The ulama in itself was not revolutionary; they pursued their own interests, which may or may not contradict with other classes’ interests.

land and other forms of property attached to the Shrine of Imam Reza, in Mashad. In 1890, the income derived from just property waqfs attached to the shrine of Imam Reza totalled at 60 000 tomans waqfs were, historically, one of the most profitable areas of business in Iran. See Roy Mottahadeh, *Peygamberin Hırkası İran’da Din ve Politika, Bilgi ve Güç*. İstanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2003, p. 221. and Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran: 1785-1906*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, p. 14.

²⁴ Skocpol, Theda. “Rentier State and Shi’a Islam”, p. 274.

²⁵ Misagh Parsa, *States, ideologies, and social*, p. 134. It is worthy of noting that Khomeini must have changed his ideas on this subject, since Iranian women had preserved their rights to vote, and they even extended their representative and elective rights under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Today in Iran, there are much more women in the public sphere than many Middle Eastern countries.

²⁶ Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, p. 76.

²⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p.20.

Politics, Masses and the Ulama During the Iranian Revolution

This section will address the events of the revolutionary period between 1977 and 1979 by focusing on the gradual evolution of the conflict between the Pahlavi state and the masses. This section will explore two subtopics: non-religious actors who played a part in the revolution and the heterogeneity of the ulama as an actor in this event. Reza Shah and his son Muhammad Reza Shah were critical towards the ulama and from time to time they tried to undermine their power. However, this was not enough for the ulama, including Khomeini, to rebel against the monarchy in the previous periods. The revolutionary struggles in 1977-1979 also did not begin as the struggle of the ulama. But at the end of the day, “Khomeini is to the Islamic Revolution what Lenin was to the Bolshevik, Mao to Chinese and Castro to the Cuban Revolutions”²⁸. This part will show how Khomeini emerged as a nonconventional member of the ulama during this process.

Non-religious Actors of the Iranian Revolution

One must bear in mind that, Iran, not only experienced the most successful Islamic movement in the Middle East, but also one of the most powerful leftist movements as well. In the 1940's and 1950's until the coup in 1953, Tudeh Party was enormously popular among the labor force in Iran.²⁹ However, the Shah, after consolidating his power by American support, was very harsh on Tudeh and National Front, whom he saw as a threat to his rule. “Whereas the clergy were permitted to go to the poor, the opposition parties were constantly prevented from establishing any form of labor unions, local clubs, or neighborhood organizations”³⁰. Tudeh and National Front were successful in mobilizing the masses against the Shah and foreign powers in the 1940's and 1950's. The former was strong among the industrial workers, who were crucial because of their place in the production process. The latter was successful among the middle class, both the traditional and modern segments of it. But the repressive policies of the

²⁸ Ervand Abrahamian. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982, p.531.

²⁹ For a brief history of Iranian left See Maziar Behrooz. *Rebels With A Cause: The Failure of Left in Iran*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2000.

³⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 533.

period were so cruel that they never really recovered. This was a deliberate state policy and the state “by doing so, left a void in the realm of ideological production and dissemination”³¹. This void was fulfilled by the newly developed ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini, but only after the masses were mobilized already, almost all by themselves.

This lack of a secular and a leftist alternative was a significant factor behind the success of Khomeini. Leftists were effectively barred from reaching the people and addressing Iranian masses whereas the ulama had a ready-made network at their disposal. Having been established since 1900s, their network was vast and influential. *Maktab Islam*, the unofficial monthly periodical of the ulama in Qum seminaries shows the vastness of this network as such:

Today those trained by Qom’s seminaries are scattered all over in this country. They are in cities, districts and villages guiding and leading the people, they are active in publicity and propaganda. Seminaries trained many of the first rank provincial ulama.

Seminaries [not only] have been able to send propogandist to the most remote parts of this country [but also] have sent them to several foreign countries such as Germany and the USA.³²

It is also important to note that, no new organization emerged before or after the revolutionary struggles despite the destruction of the old secular ones. This is because not only the professional revolutionaries of Tudeh or the leaders of the National Front but also the masses they stood for were under severe attack. This included the destruction of the labor unions, outlawing of merchants’ guilds, and tyrannizing government employees. As Said Amir Arjomand expresses, “the sad truth of the matter was that because of twenty-five years of systematic political sterilization, the new middle class had produced no notable figure with a sense of political vocation and the requisite political experience”³³.

Yet, even under these circumstances where the secular and/or leftist ideolo-

³¹ Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics and Ideology*, p. 143.

³² Quoted in Behrooz Moazami, *The Making of State, Religion and the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1796-1979)*, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation submitted to the New School University, 2003, p. 287.

³³ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 113.

gies were experiencing the weakest phase of their history in Iran, they were still powerful enough to prevent the ulama from taking the full control. That is perhaps the reason why, “contrary to the popular understanding, the Shi’ite clergy were not the obvious choice to lead the popular struggle against the Shah”³⁴. It is also worth mentioning that the population’s commitment declined throughout the 1970’s, despite the weakening of seculars. Khomeini himself acknowledged a decline in ulama’s social prestige in the political domain. He famously pleaded with intellectuals not to reject the ulama and noted that: ‘If they (ulama) do not have political education, you should embrace them and give them political education’³⁵.

Hence, what fueled the mobilization of the masses was the anti-Shah and anti-US character of the revolutionary conflicts, which was the culmination of years of repression and a perception of the Shah as a puppet of American politics. The people were united under their hatred for the Shah, whose policies affected different classes adversely. The revolution occurred because a broad coalition of different classes came together to overthrow a despotic regime. The denunciation of the Shah and his rule was more important than the exaltation of Khomeini. For every slogan for Khomeini, there were probably more than two slogans against the Shah”³⁶. Thus, although there was not one unified strong secular opposition, the revolutionary conflicts were not initiated by the ulama, but by the bazaaris, who had supported Musaddiq despite the opposition of the ulama. Consequently, the primary aim and the motivation of the revolution was not the establishment of an Islamic theocracy, but a willingness to get rid of the dictatorial rule of the Shah.

The Heterogeneity of the Ulama

Like any other social group, ulama has not been a homogenous political entity. It was divided throughout the modern history of Iran, including the period of 1977-1979. As mentioned above, Khomeini had already begun

³⁴ Edmund Burke, & Lubeck, Paul. “Explaining Social Movements in Two Oil Exporting States: Divergent Outcomes in Nigeria and Iran”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (29).4, pp. 643-665.

³⁵ Misagh Parsa. *States, ideologies, and social*, p. 138.

³⁶ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 103.

to oppose the Shah, if not the monarchy but the monarch in the 1960's. However, Khomeini was not among the highest echelon of the ulama, and most of the Marja'a Taqlids³⁷ were thinking differently. During the revolutionary process, unlike Khomeini, most segments the ulama remained apolitical. This nonactivist faction was led by quietest Marja'a Taqlids in Qom who advocated the correct implementation of the constitution, rather than the formation of an Islamic Republic³⁸.

This division emerged simply because religion has never been a coherent political entity in the modern history of Iran. If it had been so, the ulama would have been much more united at a time when they were attacked by the White Revolution of the Shah. The reactions of different factions of the ulama were diverse and revolutionary Islamic identity was only one of these different responses. Mansoor Moaddel's suggests that this ideology was not something inherited from the past. He claimed that Islamism in Iran was produced by diverse ideologues such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali-Ahmad, and Ali-Shariati³⁹. This diversity was reflected in the politics of other groups, such as the bazaaris. Although some of them supported Khomeini, a majority tried to push the grand Ayatollahs to join their collective action instead of asking for its end. Hence, it was the pressure coming from the Iranian masses that prompted the higher echelons of the ulama, to take a political stand against the Shah. But even in the context of such pressure, the ulama was not unified. For example, Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari preferred a quietest attitude towards politics and tried to disseminate his passive messages to the community since 1960s. When Khomeini called for rivers of blood, he advised calmness to the population. It was not only a difference in attitude, but a debate with a serious conflict and confrontation potential. "It should be noted that Khomeini's militant party did face immediate competition for mass audience from other religious leaders. After Khomeini's exile, the Ayatollah Shariatmadari set up a Dar-al Tabliq in Qom to pursue traditional apolitical missionary activities by using modern communications media"⁴⁰.

³⁷ Sources of Emulation. The highest position among the Shi'a clergy.

³⁸ Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, p. 201.

³⁹ Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics and Ideology*, p. 144.

⁴⁰ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 96.

These facts are again in line with the argument presented above, suggesting that the religion in Iranian history has not been an essentially oppositional ideology. There hasn't been a historical, sacred alliance with the masses and the ulama. Just like the oil nationalization period between 1951-1953, the bazaaris and urban population were mobilizing without the consent of the ulama during 1970's. This passive attitude of the ulama was noticed by Ayatollah Khomeini in exile, who made the following statement to his followers in Iran: "Other parties have been writing and signing petitions and we notice that nothing has happened to them. This is a unique opportunity that, if it is lost and this man's [Reza Shah] position is somewhat stabilized, he would cause serious damage that would hurt the clergy first"⁴¹.

Khomeini's statement obviously shows his discontent with the ulama's attitude. Khomeini indicated that if the ulama would not become politicized and pursue collective action, the Shah will give harm to organizational structure of them. Khomeini's words also shows that, on the contrary to the accounts that put the ulama as the driving force of the revolution, they have organized in the later stages of the revolutionary conflicts. This alone proves that it was not the ulama who initiated the demonstrations and who set the stage for a revolution. Rather, it was the professionals, university students, and most importantly the bazaaris, none of which acted in the name of Islam. They are mobilized in the name of democracy, and to put an end to repression⁴². However, no matter how unified their front was, it did not help to relieve repression which kept on getting more intensified. Consequently, "to insulate themselves from repression, bazaaris needed a space, and mosques were the only safe spaces"⁴³. In the context of harsh state repression and the absence of political organizations or parties, there was one institution which was immune from government's intrusions; the mosque. The mosque was not a choice but a refuge for those who wanted to oppose the government in the late 1970's without getting exposed at the very first day of a collective action.

⁴¹ Misagh Parsa. *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, p.209.

⁴² This repression of bazaaris by the government was the main cause of their mobilization, together with Shah's price controls and anti-profiteering campaign. The following quotations reveal the size of the repression: "In the month of April 1977 alone, the state imposed 600 millions rials in fines mostly against bazaar shopkeepers (...) 20,000 shopkeepers had been jailed by the end of 1977." Misagh Parsa, *States, ideologies, and social revolutions*, p. 206.

⁴³ Misagh Parsa, *States, ideologies, and social revolutions*, pp. 209-210.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory examined in this paper has demonstrated how a lack of alternatives in ideologies, political parties and institutions led to the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini. To challenge the arguments assigning a critical leading role to ulama in mobilizing the masses, it unpacked the heterogeneous character of the ulama as a social group devoid of necessary means to launch an organized attack to government. Moreover, evidence also has shown that many members of the ulama was indeed apolitical and quietest.

The paper showed the extent to which political orientation of the ulama are tied to social-political and historical contexts. It also demonstrated that the ulama, like all other classes, do not represent a coherent social unity. No identity, whether it is religious or secular, can emerge autonomously and remain stable. No ideology can be seen as essentially revolutionary. Abrahamian's words, in the introduction of his book on Iranian Mujahedeen, best describes this fact: "most religions, including Shiism, are inherently neither 'public opiates', as some have claimed, nor 'revolutionary calls against injustice', as religious radicals would like to believe, but rather changing ideologies which sometimes strengthen and at other times weaken the established order."⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Reformers: The Iranian Mujahedeen*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 1989, p. 3.

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